

Conspiracy Theory

by ubiquirk

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Much thanks to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77. Written for mundungus42 for the SSHG Exchange to her prompt: A bureaucratic thriller and/or noir parody involving Hermione or Severus as a paper-pusher of some sort with access to shelves and shelves of confidential information. He/she discovers a dirty institutional secret and is determined to bring it to light, no matter what the cost. The institution can be anything.

Chapter 1

The eleven o'clock warning bell chimes, and Hermione jerks back to make room for the humongous piles of parchment that appear in midair to drop with a crash upon her desk, papers from the tops of the stacks fluttering to the floor.

What irony, she thinks, that the Ministry makes sure to deliver right at eleven and four when everyone takes their tea breaks. Almost as if to guilt employees into returning to work quickly, quickly, quickly.

She avoids the deluge by a precisely calculated few inches, six months as the Ministry of Magic's Keeper of Records having honed her reflexes more than years of skirmishes with Death Eaters ever did. Amazing the amount of motivation multiple paper cuts on one's face can bring to bear.

With a sigh, she gathers the parchments off the floor and glances through them: the Hodgekins filed a permit to add a magical extension onto their popular 'Muggle food' restaurant in Diagon Alley, Celus Wally reported selling five mooncalves to Maggie Pruce, Bea Dooley requested funding to develop a primer school to prepare students for Hogwarts when their parents cannot home school, Thurner Dackery lodged a complaint that his neighbor Edward Puce keeps attacking his begonias with a Wilting Spell, ...

If she read all of this, she'd be what Sherlock Holmes warned Watson about: someone with a mind too full of meaningless facts to do any crucial thinking. A huff of laughter escapes her at the thought that she's quoting a fictional character to herself as a source of wisdom, but mooncalves and magically large buildings? Her world now is far stranger than anything 'fictional' in Holmes's.

Although this bit's a mite dull.

She looks around at the filing cabinets that fade into the distance on all sides of her, growing smaller and smaller, trains of information receding, and can't help but feel once again that anything good, anything *juicy*, slips from her grasp. Working as head clerk for the Wizengamot may have been a lower rank, but it was at least interesting. This promotion seems anything but. She sighs again, even more loudly.

"That is the sound of a person desperately in need of tea." Amusement colors the deep voice.

"Severus!" She turns to find him smirking behind her, a tray of tea things hovering at his side. "Circe, yes. Give us a cuppa."

A quick flick of his wand, and the brown betty hovers to pour two cups, spoons rising to stir milk into hers and lemon with sugar into his.

The cup floats to settle warm and solid in her hands. She breathes in, bergamot wrapping her senses, and the first sip is a bit too hot, but only just a bit, a pleasant tingle of burn across her tongue that warms throughout as it slides down to her stomach. It's perfect.

Severus settles across from her, tea cup well in hand.

"So what brings you to the depths of the Ministry?" She waves a hand at the dark, cavernous space.

He cocks an eyebrow at her. "You do realize, do you not, that my laboratory is only one level above yours, which places it squarely quite a ways below ground."

"Yes, but that still doesn't explain the tea not that I'm complaining, mind. Your blend is superb." She takes another sip to prove her point.

"And why could this not just be a social call?"

She tries an eyebrow raise of her own in answer. He's much less prickly with fellow Order members now that the War is over, but 'social butterfly' will never be high on the list of phrases that define Severus Snape. Actually, she's fairly certain it wouldn't make the list at all.

"Point taken." He clears his throat. "Well then, I will admit that I was hoping I could persuade you to prioritize some records research I need for "

"Done."

"But I have not even outlined the importance of the project and "

"Severus," Hermione holds up a hand to interrupt him again, "as I told you last time, I don't care what it is. If it's something you're working on, it's going to be a good sight more interesting than any of this lot." She points to the parchments on her desk.

"Yet you seem to have quite the task before you." He moves a hand to push one teetering stack back into vertical alignment.

"Please." She snorts disdainfully. "Within a month, I'd retooled all the Filing Charms used, and even created some new ones, so that now all of this takes almost no time and less than no thought."

"It took you an entire month?" The smirk twitches his lips upwards.

"Ha bloody ha. But really, I had to stretch it out a bit to have something to do. It's not as though I have tea with researchers with special projects every day, now is it? You're really the only one who comes down here, and even that's only about once a fortnight."

"But would you not like to hear at least a little about said project?"

His face and voice are impassive, perhaps a little too impassive. She thinks yet again of how the Atrium, usually hellishly loud with everyone trying to get home at the end of the day, quiets when he walks through. If there's one person at the Ministry people talk to even less frequently than they do her, it's him.

"Of course I want to hear about it. Don't I always? Especially if there's more tea in the pot." She grins and holds out her cup. Let the Slytherin assume her motives are more self-serving than they really are.

Although, considering how dull her week's been, even though it's only Wednesday, maybe they are purely selfish after all.

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Tea stretches into a working lunch with them ordering in sandwiches from the shop the Ministry has a contract with. His chicken tikka is a bit dry, and her tuna with sweet corn a bit moist, leading both to make a moue of faint distaste before barreling right back into a discussion of where best to find information on which the uses of bubotuber pus and scarab beetles have been patented.

One o'clock comes too soon, and the Records Room feels unwelcomingly quiet once the sound of his footsteps fades. It's true no one else comes to see her the occasional requests for records always seem to come via owl or the Ministry's interdepartmental flying post. If Severus didn't visit occasionally and have such interesting projects, then ...

Hermione stands, pushing the piece of parchment he gave her into the top desk drawer so that it doesn't get mixed in with the rest. Wand firmly in hand, she says, "*Consurgo Pro Genus!*"

The mass of parchment rises into a swirling ball of paper, and the sound of a hundred birds taking to wing fills the large space, even as the movement stirs her hair around her face.

Using a separate wand movement for each, Hermione begins a series of incantations: "*Genus Pactum! Genus Venditio! Genus Animadverto! Genus Permissum! Genus Faeneror! ...*"

With every spell, the mass of fluttering paper grows smaller, pieces dashing off to file themselves in the appropriate drawers, which snick open and slam closed in percussive counterpoint, as she stands at the center, a musical conductor of an unusual sort.

It takes a good fifteen minutes to complete her list, and Hermione collapses into the chair, knackered from the massive outpouring of energy, yet pleased by the sheer organized beauty of it all.

She's still trying to catch her breath when something taps at her shoulder, and she turns to see a piece of parchment hovering beside her. Pulling it out of the air, she says, "All right, what's up with you then?"

It shivers, and she steadies it with her other hand to read.

"Hmmm. Nothing that unusual." It's a list of more supplies ordered for Hogwarts's new term, which starts in a few months. Nothing peculiar about it just the things the teaching staff forgot to put in the large order done two months ago magical chalk, three new basic brooms for flying practice, some lacewings, which need to be fresh, etc.

"Well, since the spell to sort orders seems to have worked on everything else, I'd say something else must be going on. Let's take a look at your cabinet, shall we?"

The parchment trembles in reply.

Grabbing her map of the Records Room, Hermione takes a quick look at it to get her initial direction and sets off. Filing cabinets are arranged by a method she's never been able to suss out. It's not alphabetical that would assuredly be far too logical for the Wizarding world and it's not by making associations between like things either. No, orders of dragonheart string, say, are placed in cabinets next to ones containing permits for building, which are flanked on the other side by records of arrests for petty crimes.

She thought she'd hate that and on some level, a part of her still does but Hermione's come to enjoy the little bits of chaos this arrangement brings to her life. Once when looking for a bill of sale for strangle weed, she'd found a fat file recording the century-long feud between the Haversniffs and the Bolts, one laced with tales of inept cursing that read like a farce and culminated in the funniest exchange of all: a plague of boils cast by Reginald Haversniff instead cleared up Clara Bolt's spottiness for life so that she became the most beautiful debutant of the year; Clara's retaliation, an attempt to literalize the 'large stick he had up his bum,' backfired and just gave him a large *stick*, which he developed a reputation for using well; after making each other, well, perfect for each other, they fell in love and married, ending the feud even as they ensured their magical ineptitude would be reinforced in their progeny for generations to come.

Laughing to herself, she consults the map again. It seems the Hogwarts cabinets are even farther away than she thought. She swishes her wand at her feet, changing her work-appropriate shoes into trainers, and sets off again.

Sconces flare to life as she approaches and fade into darkness once she's passed. After walking for ten more minutes, she turns once to see the other source of light, the station around her desk, shrunk to a faint glow in the distance.

It should feel spooky, like the setting of one of those bad Muggle horror movies where you yell at the blond on the screen not to go *there*, yet it's got nothing on the Forbidden Forest or the Shrieking Shack, so she just shrugs and continues on.

Eventually, once she thinks she's done her fitness quota for the week, she reaches the right area, the parchment in her hand fluttering violently enough to break free to tap at the front of a cabinet a few feet ahead of her.

"All right, all right." She laughs at it. "Let's see what the problem is, shall we?"

A few tugs prove the drawer is stuck. She puts her back into it, bracing a leg on the cabinet in front of her and pushing back with it. Nothing. Make that well and truly stuck.

After pulling the paper out of the way, she casts spell after spell, from *Alohomora* to insane made-up-on-the-spot bad-Latin ones, colors flying from her wand to strike sparks of yellow and red and teal. But none work.

The cabinet sits there, perfectly impervious, handles forming mouths that seem to smirk slightly.

Wiping an annoying tickle of hair back behind her ear, Hermione leans against the cabinet behind her to catch her breath.

She's not strong enough to open it as she is, and magic directed at it doesn't work, so ...

She bolts upright as the idea strikes, turning her wand on herself and saying, "*Invalesco!*"

Wisps of fatigue dissipate like fog struck suddenly by hot sun as power floods her limbs. This time when Hermione grabs the handle, the metal creaks in protest, and she can hear the crackling of wood beginning to splinter as she pulls.

Then *bang!* it gives.

She tips over backwards to land on her bum, a flurry of paper shooting from the cabinet to fall like alien-large snow around her even as the supplies order she'd been carrying arcs out of her left hand to bury itself in the drawer.

The magicked power fades, leaving her hands a little shaky as she stays on the floor, gathering parchments and sorting them into small piles around her. Everything's fairly routine, and she's thinking of needing to pop 'round the shops for cat food, when the top of a sheet catches her eye.

Hogwarts Induction List for the First of September, 1991.

Her fingers tremble as they brush over the names, so many lost, so many almost forgotten, she's ashamed to admit. Hermione sets it aside and stands to begin placing everything else back in the drawer.

She holds the parchment lightly, carefully, all the long way back to her desk, and tucks it into the top drawer without really looking at it as she draws Severus's request out and sets to work.

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It takes two days to find all the information he needs, and as Hermione reaches into her desk drawer for a quill to add a concluding paragraph to the report on Friday, her fingers brush over the Hogwarts Induction List.

The press of work no longer giving her as much excuse to avoid it, she pulls it from the drawer and begins to read.

"That's ... odd." She scans the first column again. Yes, Elizabeth Martin, Steven Gibson ... there are people here she's never heard of. She spells her quill to make an exact copy of the document and, once it's done, underlines on the new sheet every person she never saw at Hogwarts. The total comes to five, which, when she thinks about it, seems quite high out of a total of forty-two. Statistically significant, Muggle scientists would say.

The date says First of September, 1980, making this the original list recorded magically upon each baby's birth.

Hermione's still worrying it over as she completes her report and climbs the stairs to Severus's lab. She finds him crouched down, watching a distillation apparatus drip thick red fluid into a waiting flask while his wand constantly adjusts the level of the flames under the originating mixture, which is a seething dark green.

Smiling, she thinks Hollywood might finally get something right if they got to film a lab such as this, where highly colored material is accurate, unlike real Muggle chemistry, which her cousin always says tends to run to medium-yellows at the most.

After a few minutes, the last bit of red threads its way through the condenser coil to plop purified into the receiving flask, and he whisks it aside to stopper it immediately.

"Severus."

He turns to her, head inclined in greeting. "Hermione."

Holding up the report, she says, "I've got good news. The short of it is you should be fine to use both ingredients for a brand-new potion. Bubotuber pus has never been patented, so no worries there. Scarab beetles were patented in 1746 by Elisina Mandrake, creator of the Wit-Sharpener Potion. However, they were only patented for that

particular use no other."

He smiles, a twitch of lips that's smaller than his smirks, if more pleasant. "Excellent." He steps forward to take the parchment from her, glancing over it before looking back up, eyebrow raised. "Although I must admit that interdepartmental mail could have delivered such to me fairly easily. So it is my turn to ask to what do I owe this visit."

"Well ..." She turns to the side, picking up a jar of mugwort and setting it back down, suddenly feeling a bit silly, even though the issue niggles at her still. "I found something quite by accident, as it turns out and wanted to ask. Are there usually discrepancies between the list of students who are to attend Hogwarts and those that do?"

"Discrepancies?"

"You know more names on the list than actual students."

"You must remember that the one year I was Headmaster was not the most ... typical of years, shall we say." His tone sounds even more sardonic than usual. "Is that the year you're referring to?"

"No, I mean a more ... a more regular year."

"Well, then, I'm not quite sure. It occasionally happens that some families, even if still living in England, choose to send their children to one of the European schools or have a parent knowledgeable enough to provide home schooling."

She smiles up at him. "I'm sure that's it. Thank you."

"No, thank you, Hermione." He gestures with the report. "This is just what I needed to take the next step in my studies. After all, there is no point in pursuing a long course of work if nothing can come of it in the end."

"Too right."

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Yet her unease doesn't fade, and it's exactly just such a possibly fruitless endeavor that she undertakes when she summons the file of Hogwarts Induction Lists for the past twenty years and copies them to take home with her for the weekend.

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It turns out that each class year has two lists the ones made as the babies are born and the ones actually used by Hogwarts, which were compiled a year before each set of students was set to start.

Severus is right the last year of the War did have the highest number of discrepancies of any, but she assumes a quick check of the Beauxbatons registry will clear up much of it.

It's all the other years she's worried about because certain numbers that can't be so easily explained away hold true for every incoming class, around four to six names on the list created at the end of the birth year don't show up on the list of students actually inducted.

Hermione sits back in her chair and pushes the pile of sheets away from her to pull in a fresh piece of parchment.

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Minerva's response owl comes quickly. Tea on Sunday it is.

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Small talk predominates as Minerva pours tea, and Hermione settles a selection of biscuits onto her plate.

Gossip on Order members predominates how Teddy's getting along, Harry and Ginny expecting their second, things of that sort.

Then, after finishing a funny tale of learning that a certain fifth year had discovered a way to determine her password every time she reset the gargoyle, Minerva cuts straight to the point. "As much as I enjoy seeing you again, Hermione, I can't help but wonder what brought about such a precipitous visit."

"I apologize, Minerva. I've begun working on something I'd like to ask you about a little research project I'm doing on the side."

The other woman smiles. "And it's completely consumed you, I can tell. You have that glow to your eyes you'd get whenever I set a particularly challenging essay."

"Well, it's nothing official, you know." Smiling back, Hermione taps the side of her nose, an Order signal that she still wonders if Dumbledore got from watching a few too many episodes of *The Avengers* at some point.

Minerva taps hers as well before raising her wand and casting a series of cloaking spells. "Always willing to be of assistance, my dear."

"I'm wondering how the system works for you knowing which students are going to come to Hogwarts. I know there's something about a list of names gathered at birth, but do you get that list then?"

"Oh, no. The Ministry keeps all of that until a few months before we send the letters out. Makes it easier, see. The Ministry doesn't have to send the list twice, and we can't get the old list mixed up with the new one. It solves the problem of us accidentally sending a letter to a family that had lost a child during those ten years."

"And if a student goes to another school, are they still on both lists?"

"Yes. We send the letters out to every child in Britain who qualifies. Whether they then come to Hogwarts or not is decided by them."

"Right. Makes perfect sense." It also conveniently keeps anyone at Hogwarts from noticing the discrepancies, which she now knows can't be due to students choosing other schools as she'd originally thought. Hermione takes one last sip of tea as she mulls this over. "And who is it that sends you this updated list?"

"The Head of the Department of Magical Education or at least their office. Old Humbert never really fooled with it when he was in place always seemed to delegate it to an underling." Minerva's brow hunches in thought. "In fact, if I recall correctly, I've seen the same name on the document for years now, no matter what her position at the Ministry. Let me check."

Rising to rummage through her desk, Minerva pulls out a stack of parchments and flips through them. "Yes. Yes. And again, yes. All the same person."

"Really? Who?"

Minerva's mouth tightens as if she's bitten into something sour, and her eyes narrow. "Why, Umbridge of course. It seems she's maintained a position in the Department of Education as the Junior Undersecretary of Educational Admissions."

Hermione feels her own expression harden. "How interesting."

"Indeed." After holding her gaze for a few moments, Minerva slides the sheets closer to Hermione, nodding towards them. "I'm afraid that, as lovely as this has been, I have to make sure a few things are in order before dinner tonight. The Hufflepuffs were using the Great Hall for a Gobstones challenge, and the elves always get a bit flustered when things are moved about."

"Thank you again." Hermione stands to look around the Head Professor's office, at once familiar and new with touches of Minerva showing. "I find myself missing Hogwarts. I think I might need to visit *much* more often." She taps her nose.

"It will always be a pleasure to see you, Hermione. Do come back for tea again soon." The glint in the other woman's eye reminds Hermione of how strong of an Order leader she's proved since Dumbledore's death.

Left alone, Hermione hurries over to make exact copies of the parchments, and even without her versions to compare them to, she can see one distinct difference. The lists filed at the Ministry were unsigned. The Hogwarts ones have not only Umbridge's name, but also a rather gaudy seal of office an office Hermione didn't even know existed let alone that it was held quietly by Umbridge.

She thinks of Minerva's determined stare, an echo of her expression from when she stood up to Umbridge in Trelawney's defense. It feels good to have such steel at her back.

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Monday finds Hermione scowling at the lists spread across her desk, trying to sort out what that little niggle in the back of her brain means. Her concentration breaks when a tea cup levitates into view.

"Severus!"

"Hermione." He tips his head towards the cup and takes a seat.

She gulps the warm liquid, suddenly recognizing her body's signals for thirst and hunger. "Circe, that's good. Thanks. What time is it?"

"It is going on two."

"Oh." She's missed lunch. Her stomach grumbles at the thought.

A plate of biscuits, hearty chocolate-coated digestives in fact, settles in front of her. Her mother always warned of talking with her mouth full, so she's silent for the next few minutes as one, two biscuits disappear in one prolonged crunch.

Severus cocks an eyebrow. "Perhaps you spent too many of the impressionable years of your youth with a certain Mr. Weasley?"

Swallowing, she says, "Or I skipped elevenses and lunch."

"Or that." He nods consent.

"So what brings you down so soon? Another project?"

"Not exactly. Or at least, not a project of my own." He takes a sip of tea. "I received an interesting owl from Minerva, who seemed of the mind that you might like the aid of another member of our organization."

"And you're ..."

"And I am quite literally the closest in physical proximity, as well as the fact that my actions are much less scrutinized than, shall we say, Potter's."

She picks up another biscuit and nibbles at it slowly, mind whirling. If her idea turns out to be nothing, she could lose his respect. On the other hand, if she's on to something, someone as intelligent as Severus would be quite a boon to the project. Her brain makes another leap, and she suddenly says, "You're also quite a dab hand at spying."

Smirking, he pulls a miniature Sneakoscope from his pocket to show it sitting quietly in his palm. "There is that as well, yes."

"All right. You can start by seeing if you see anything odd about these lists." Hermione hands over the stack.

He hmms a reply because his attention's already on the papers.

Pulling open a desk drawer, Hermione retrieves her emergency apple and removes the Preservation Spell by muttering a quick *Finite Incantatum!* over it before taking a large bite. In her head, her father gives his infamous mini-lecture on the wonders of eating apples after sweets, and she shushes him to pay better attention to Snape.

Pages flutter and dance in his hands, and his brow cycles through various levels of ... of furrowment. She wonders for a second if that's even a word, but watching Severus for any period of time makes her realize it should be.

She's finished her apple and a second cup of tea by the time he looks up. "I can see what has you concerned. The number of discrepancies each year appears significantly high for such a small total number of students."

"Exactly!"

"But I must admit that I cannot yet see anything else unusual about the names."

"Right. I mean, they're all bog standard. Smith's and Willis's and what have you. Nothing strange there."

Severus stares at the parchments again, shuffling them slowly and shaking his head slightly.

"Nothing strange," Hermione says. "Nothing strange. Wait! That's strange!"

"Nothing strange is strange?"

"Yes! Wizarding names tend to be a bit odd, or at least a good half of them are." She grabs hold to pull the parchments closer so that they bend over the sheets, heads together. "See here." She points. "None of the names that are missing from the Hogwarts lists sound strange to me at all."

When he looks up, they almost bump noses, and Hermione suddenly and sharply realizes how close they are ... and that he smells nice, somewhat herby over musk.

Flushing slightly, she shifts in her chair and tells herself to focus.

"So if they are not wizards ..." Severus's voice trails off.

"They're Muggles." Her heart stutters to a halt, then races double-speed. "Something's been happening to Muggle-born."

Muggle-born like me, she thinks.

Latin to English: Consurgo Pro Genus rise up for sorting; Genus Pactum sort contracts; Genus Venditio sort sales receipts; Genus Animadverto sort notices; Genus Permissum sort permits; Genus Faeneror sort loans; Invalesco make stronger.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Thanks go to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77!

Chapter 2

A Ministry Records search confirms it only two of the many missing names have Wizarding birth certificates.

The quiet yet official channels between the Ministry and the Muggle government would allow Hermione to order copies of any records she needs, but such activity could easily be tracked. Severus argues for a weekend attempt, but impatience and a growing feeling of wrongness won't allow her to wait that long. Besides, who in their right mind expects government officials to work late? Especially when Man U is playing Arsenal?

So come Wednesday night, she finds her Disillusioned self facing something much more frustrating than filing cabinets: computers.

If asked, she would say that the Births and Deaths Section of the General Register Office in Southport might have been using microfiche at best. But no, they're 'Ready for the Twenty-first Century!' as a poster in the lobby proclaims rather obnoxiously in hideous neon orange.

Too bad Hermione's been living in the Nineteenth.

She sighs, causing Severus to rustle beside her, and then his breath is warm on her ear as he leans towards her in what must be a miscalculation of their respective, albeit invisible, positions. "Do you know how to work one of these infernal contraptions?"

She shakes her head, hitting his nose lightly with her cheekbone, then stills to say, "Not really. Mum and Dad keep one at the office but don't have one at home since I never needed one for schoolwork. And Muggle Studies never got to the calculator, let alone the computer, so ..."

"And while I could procure undetected entry into the building for us, that is the extent of my expertise."

He's even closer, lips brushing her ear with every third sound, and a quick rush shivers through her at the sensation.

"So ..." Voice cracking, she stops to clear her throat. "What do we do?"

"Magic, I daresay."

Even his voice has the ability to smirk.

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Ten minutes later, there's no smirking of any kind. But there is a fair amount of smoke and a computer that's sparking and ... shivering?

Having given up on being Disillusioned, Severus raises his wand, and Hermione swears that the computer cringes backwards like a small animal cornered by its traditional predator.

"*Agua*"

"No!" She turns to clap her left hand across his mouth, steadying herself on his shoulder with the other. "You can't use water on this unless you want to short out the electrics for the entire building."

He mumbles something against her palm in a warm tickle, and she jerks it away. "Um, sorry. What?"

"What do you propose then?"

"Well, *Reparo* didn't work, but if we could exactly reverse everything we did ..."

"That does not seem likely." He gestures towards the quivering machine with his wand hand.

The computer sends up a shower of red sparks that fountain above it like a distress signal.

"Right," Hermione says, looking around the room. "What if we use one of the other computers as ... as a sort of template for this computer? Force it to adopt the status of the good one?"

"Feasible."

"But then we leave. We obviously can't magic information out of these." In frustration, she prods a normal computer with her wand. "We'll have to ask for help."

He raises a skeptical eyebrow.

"Don't worry. I have someone in mind."

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"Hermione!" Harry's smile beams as he draws her in for a hug. "I thought you said you couldn't make it." He pulls back and holds out a hand to Severus. "Good to see you."

Shaking the proffered hand, Snape simply nods.

"Well, you've missed the first half," Harry says, waving them into the house and towards the lounge, which echoes with the sound of Ginny and Ron cheering over the voice of a football announcer. "Man U's up three goals, but I think Arsenal might rally."

"Harry." Hermione lays a hand on his arm. "We didn't come for the game."

He takes in her serious expression and says, "Right. Why don't we go into the study?"

A computer still takes up half the desk, and Hermione feels a flush of relief as they all sit.

"So what can I help you with?"

"We're taking a look into something that might be dodgy or could be nothing, but we need to make sure."

Harry sits forward, elbows on knees, the gleam of adventure in his eye. "So you want an Auror to look into it?"

"No," Severus replies. "It is imperative that this be handled discreetly as it appears that certain ... elements, shall we say, at the Ministry are involved."

Looking back and forth between the two of them, Harry's smile fades, and he sits back in his chair.

She continues. "To take things further, we need someone who knows a bit about Muggle computers and can ..." She glances over to Severus, who's wearing a slightly-smirky expression, his lip curled just a bit in what Hermione now reads as amusement due to mild Shadenfruede. Turning back to Harry, she says all in a rush, "Well, we'd need you to do something that's not exactly ... legal, and I know you're an Auror now, but trust me when I say this isn't to hurt anyone, and "

"Hermione." Harry holds up a hand to stop her. "It's alright. There may only be a handful of people I trust completely, but you're one of them." He looks over at Snape. "You're both one of them."

She glances over to see Severus's eyes widen slightly in what she assumes is surprise, then smiles at Harry. "Thanks, Harry. So how are you with computers?"

"Not as good as Ginny. She got that tinkering gene from Arthur, you know, though she's a good sight better at it than he is. Uh, don't tell him I said that. Anyways, she's always sussing out all those things to hook to the telly and messing about with the internet. Still, I'm decent enough."

"You'd need to be able to get into a government computer and find specific files."

He runs a hand over his hair, making it stand up even more. "I'll try, but that might be beyond me."

Hermione frowns. There's no way to have Ginny come along she's due any day now. Water breaking in the middle of breaking and entering doesn't seem quite the brightest idea. Then she thinks of something. "I know. What if we used something that would allow us to communicate with Ginny to ask her advice? Like the DA coins, only bigger? I think I remember the spell."

"Those were quite a clever use of the Protean Charm. I remember Albus raving about them," Severus says. "And I could aid you in making something appropriate if necessary."

"Good that's sorted. Now all we need is to pick the night to do it. Tomorrow?"

Harry shakes his head. "That's no good. We've dinner with Molly and Arthur. How about Friday?"

Severus nods, so Hermione says, "Friday it is. You'll fill Ginny in without telling her what it's about?"

Harry laughs. "How could I? You haven't even told me."

"Right. Well, that's ..."

"Hopefully only a temporary measure to ensure security," Severus adds.

"I get it. Now, let's go watch some footy. I made that chocolate log you like, Hermione, and Luna probably kept Ron from eating all the crisps."

Snape's lips pinch inwards just a bit, and Hermione laughs to herself. "Come on." She takes his arm and pulls him towards the lounge after Harry. "A little football won't hurt you."

"It will if Arsenal wins."

"A Man U fan? I should have known, you Northerner you."

She grins up at him, and he returns her expression with the first real smile she's ever seen on him.

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Work the next day drags, routine filing not nearly enough to distract Hermione's thoughts from what she'd rather be researching.

And who she'd rather be discussing it with.

But going through the lists again without any additional information would be a waste of time. She should know she already did it twice last night instead of sleeping.

Lunch is quiet, her soggy sandwich much less appetizing without someone to make fun of it to.

She takes a sip of tea that also doesn't taste as good, although this time it's due to the fact that the Ministry doesn't use as nice of a blend as the one Severus makes.

Hermione sighs. Anytime she's not thinking about her project, she catches her mind wandering ... elsewhere.

Is it simply loneliness, or is it him?

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The computers of the General Register Office stretch before them on desk after desk, a sea of bouncing balls on black mocking, so mocking. Hermione never realized it was possible to hate a screensaver.

When she sees the chair in front of the first computer move, she says, "Not that one, Harry."

"Why not?"

She pictures it trembling before Severus. "That's the one we messed about with. It might not be one-hundred percent."

"Which one then?"

"How about that one?" She points to one a few desks over, then realizes he can't see her, and says, "The one three to the left. It should be far enough away that we didn't affect it."

"Right."

The chair moves, and then the mouse, causing the password prompt to appear. A glow forms above the monitor.

"What are you doing? I thought I mentioned that they don't respond well to magic." She reaches out to grab his shoulder and mistakenly gets his ear. "Sorry."

"Relax, Hermione. This spell doesn't work directly on the computer, just the area around it. Ginny created it when we left George alone with our computer for five minutes and he changed the password and refused to tell us what it was. Said it should be obvious, but 'imatosser' wasn't exactly anything that came to mind. After a day, Ginny gave up guessing and created the spell, which just sort of ... pulls the information out of the air around the computer."

The glow intensifies, and a word starts to form, floating black in the middle.

"Hmm. Bickyboo. I hope that's a nickname for a dog and not a boyfriend."

Severus snickers quietly to her left.

Harry types it in, and a new screen appears. "I'm in."

"Can you suss it?"

"Um ... not really. There are a lot of icons on the desktop, and I don't want to click them all. Time to give Ginny a ring or a message or whatever you call it."

Harry, who's using his Invisibility Cloak instead of being Disillusioned, allows the material to slide back so that his hands become visible, the stone tablet Hermione and Severus spelled resting in his left. Tapping the stone with his wand, he murmurs a phrase, and words appear on the surface before sinking into it.

A few moments later, new words appear, floating up from inside.

"She's on. I'm just going to ask her if she can suggest what to look for."

As he 'talks' to Ginny, Severus reaches out to place a hand on her arm and leans in close to her ear, breath swirling her hair so that it tickles her skin. "I say she should consider him carrying the next one. Mrs. Potter is much more useful to have on hand."

Laughing quietly, Hermione says, "Hush. You know Harry's smashing as an Auror. Just because Ginny's better at Charms and computers "

"And Potions."

"*And* Potions doesn't mean he's not a dab hand at other things like Defense."

"True." But his voice is doing that audible-smirk thing again.

When she looks back over, Harry's in the middle of reading a long message from Ginny, and once the last set of words fade to not be replaced with more, he reaches for the mouse and begins clicking madly.

Then stops suddenly. "Right. That's not it." He starts talking with Ginny again, and they send a few short exchanges back and forth.

Hermione thinks about moving closer to read what they're saying, but Severus's hand has slid down to rest against hers. It could merely be a convenience, a way to keep track of each other while invisible, or it could be something else. The hypersensitivity of her skin votes for something else.

A series of screens flash across the monitor as Harry opens and closes various programs before stopping and saying, "Score!"

Hermione moves forward for a better look, and Severus moves with.

The top of the screen says something about Birth and Death Records Database.

"Do you have the list?"

"Yeah." It emerges from beneath the cloak. "I'll just type in the first name and see what we get."

Marvin Gerard Jones fits into little squares, and with a click of the mouse, disappears into the machine, which shows a blank face. After long moments, a new page comes up on the monitor.

"It's a positive," Harry says, raising a finger to point at a phrase that stands out because it's underlined and in blue. "This will show his birth certificate." His hands wavers a little before dropping to another piece of underlined blue text. "And this his death certificate."

Drawing in a breath, Hermione reminds herself that, if completely honest, this is something she always knew could be a possibility, but her heart doesn't listen and speeds up in shock. "Can you ..." She pauses to clear her throat, which has come over all scratchy. "Can you print both of them?"

"Yeah. Why don't I do that for any of them I can find?"

"All right."

A printer comes humming to life.

The lump of lead in her stomach grows as Harry types in name after name and they all come up positive doubly positive.

Severus's hand runs up her arm to rest on her shoulder, and he gives a little squeeze. "Would you care to look at the first of the documents now?"

"No." Circe, she sounds like she's going to cry. "Not just yet."

The constant whine of the printer sounds hollow and alien in the large room.

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Bizarre pieces of paper chase her down dark cobblestones streets that turn her ankle time and time again as she runs, tripping, and Hermione wakes to the echo of a remembered sound of ... of ...

She rubs at her face, but the sensory impressions grow neither clearer nor fade. They haunt the quietness of her morning routine, and for once, she wishes Crookshanks were one of those cats who mewed and rubbed at her ankles constantly until she fed him.

An hour after waking, it's a relief to tap the Portkey Severus made her and be tugged away in a whirl, no matter how it upsets her stomach.

When he answers the door, the skin of Severus's face looks almost as grey and the surroundings of Spinner's End, the flesh beneath his eyes a bruised purple that matches the sleepless appearance she presented in the mirror this morning.

A voice whispers in her mind that she never expected Snape to be this visibly upset, but she squashes her inner-Ron with a reminder that the man's previous life as a double spy allowed no freedom of expression. That he's able to do so now might still be a little surprising, but it also makes him seem much more human.

"Hermione, won't you come in? The papers are in the sitting room. As you requested, I waited for you to look at them."

"Thank you." The electric shock of wards buzzes across her skin, strong and varied the repeated snap of multiple layers. Severus's assertion that the documentation for the project would be much safer at his home than hers proving more than true. In fact, she'd wager this house might be the safest place in all Britain.

She enters the room, which is small, but the books covering every wall give it a feel that's not exactly cozy but not bad either. Multiple candles light the room, and the sofa looks new and comfortable.

He gestures her over to it and sits beside her.

Pulling a stack of Reducioed parchments from her pocket, she waves her wand over them with an *Engorgio!* The bundle expands to a stack a good foot high. "This is everything from my flat. I've been leaving nothing at the Ministry."

"Good." Severus palms his own wand and enlarges his coffee table until it's multiple times its normal size. The papers from the Muggle General Register Office, which had taken the entire top, now cover only a third.

"So how do you want to do this?"

"I had thought that perhaps I would look over all of your previous work, both to fully familiarize myself and to determine if there are any additional clues I can find."

"Right. I'll start in on the Muggle paperwork then."

Severus flicks his wand, and a tea service floats into the room to settle into the middle of the table. Another flick, and it begins pouring and preparing their cups.

Hermione raises her cup in salute and takes a fortifying sip or three before diving into the certificates.

She picks up the first set, the birth and death of Marvin Gerard Jones, and jots a few notes, not sure what she's looking for just yet. By the time she's read about the third person, a Brenda Anne Barrett, she's noticed something odd.

Looking over, she sees Severus already absorbed in reading, eyes flickering quickly across the page, face set in concentration.

She'll do what any researcher should do make sure it's an overall trend before making announcements.

The papers rattle in her hand.

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Two hours later, the tea's gone and they've both spread various piles of paper across the table.

And Hermione's no longer uncertain of her findings. "Have you got anything?"

"Nothing new." He looks up. "Although I do fully agree that it appears someone at the Ministry, either Umbridge or someone using her as a front, is involved in concealing whatever this turns out to be."

"And that something just got a lot more serious." She takes a deep breath. "Severus, only three babies died of known causes. All of the remaining ones on this list died unexpectedly. The coroners reported that they had no previous known medical conditions."

"And?"

"All of those who died unexpectedly also died when they were exactly three months old to the day."

"How ... odd."

She shuffles certificates and pulls out her notes. "I mean, we've got ones all the way from 1990 to 2004 with exactly the same pattern. That can't be coincidence."

"Indeed it cannot. If, for example, one intended to simply kill Muggle-born when they are at their most vulnerable to keep them from joining the Wizarding population, then, as Voldemort showed, it would not be necessary to be so precise."

"It seems ... well, it seems that whatever it is must rely on the three-months of age thing. And that implies that it's ritualistic."

"Yes, the timing must be necessary for a specific spell. It would be Dark Magic, of course, but I cannot recall hearing of anything of this nature."

"A spell that kills little babies." Her stomach twists as sourness burns the back of her throat. "Why would anyone do such a thing? *Who* would do such a thing?"

"I imagine that when we can answer one of those questions, the other will fall into place."

His words sound somewhat clinical, but the hand he places on her forearm feels warm and comforting.

She covers it with one of her own, and they sit quietly for a time.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Thanks go to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77!

Chapter 3

Her work desk feels cool against her cheek as Hermione lies with her head on it. Filing cabinets stretch into the hazy distance, taunting with the idea of a bounty of knowledge that doesn't hold true.

The discovery the day before was significant they're definitely on to something. But it's quickly grown frustrating as well. What does it all mean?

A search of the texts in Severus's personal library turned up no spells that used a three-month-old baby. Even his darkest book, titled simply *Grimoire*, an imposing old tome of human-skin paper tattooed with blood ink, had only a few spells that mentioned the use of infants, and all of those used newborn blood. And unless they've purchased something new in recent years, Severus is certain that Hogwarts's Restricted Section has nothing either.

She rubs at the faint headache lurking behind her forehead.

They need something more specific to go on, and Circe they need it now.

Banging on the desk in frustration, she sits up and pushes her hair off her face.

There has to be something.

Picking up her quill, she begins scribbling across a fresh piece of parchment. The information is the same, but perhaps going over it again will show a clue she's missed.

A quarter hour later, she's staring at the sheet with an intensity bordering on ferocity nothing, nothing, and more nothing! She begins looking again, eyes skimming from the top down, when a cup of tea floats into view in front of the page.

"Severus!" She looks up. "You startled me."

"And with what you are currently working on, such is not comforting."

"Yes, but according to what you told me, if anyone tries to spy on me, even from a distance, the modified Sneakoscope you gave me would spin like mad." She takes it briefly out of her pocket to show him, then grabs for the cuppa.

Smirking, he nods at her in approval, then pulls out his wand to cast a series of cloaking spells. "Still, now that your fears are confirmed that something untoward is occurring and that Ministry officials must in some way be involved, we should be more careful."

"I know. I was just caught up in trying to suss out what to do next. But I've got nothing. You?"

He shakes his head. "Minerva owled back to say that Hogwarts has not purchased any new reference texts for the Restricted Section all extra monies have gone to reconstruction, as you can well imagine but that I was more than welcome to look at what they do have."

"Right. When should we go?"

He sets down his cup and looks even more serious than usual. "We should not go."

"What?"

"Hermione." He clears his throat. "We have been spending an inordinate amount of time together. If our actions have caught the attention of any of the parties concerned in this ...," he waves a hand at the parchment she's been working on, "then the fact that we appear suddenly inseparable will only incite further scrutiny."

"But we've got to work on the project together! I suppose I could Portkey directly into your house in the future, but what if we need to investigate something together?"

"We could ... arrange a cover story as to why we are spending so much time in each other's company."

"All right, yes, good idea."

They sit in silence for a few minutes, Hermione thinking, and Severus shifting slightly in his chair.

"Well?" she asks. "You've obviously got an idea, and I don't, so spill."

"Since you are a woman, and I am a man," he shifts in his seat, "and a great deal of the population tends to accept heterosexuality as the predominant mode of sexual orientation ..."

"Circe, Severus! Just spit it out."

"We could pretend to be romantically involved."

"Huh." She picks up her cup and drains it. Damn fine tea the man makes. Setting the cup back into the saucer with a resounding clink, she leans forward. "All right, it's a good idea. But if we're going to do this, we need to do it well. I expect you to take me to dinner and such."

His eyes widen slightly his shocked look, she now knows.

"Come on, Severus. Is the thought of having to talk to me about things not project related so horrible?"

"No, not at all." He raises an index finger. "But no flowers."

She nods with a little laugh. "No flowers check."

"And I am still visiting Hogwarts alone. I have some work on my research I can do to obscure the fact that I am going for any other reason. You, on the other hand, have to stay here." He points at her desk.

She whacks the offending piece of wood. "I'm really starting to hate this job."

"I agree that your abilities could be better used elsewhere, but we might never have discovered the issue with the Muggle-born otherwise."

"True. And I have dinner plans to look forward to at least." She smiles at him. "Where are you taking me?"

That startled look again, so subtle it would be unnoticeable on anyone else. Instead of answering immediately, he pulls out his wand and cancels all the cloaking spells. Only once the tea set has been cleared away does he clear his throat and say, "I am not sure, but I will find something appropriate by this evening. Seven o'clock?"

"It's a date." She grins, even as she wonders why her words make the normally unflappable Severus Snape walk away with the barest hint of nervousness in his step.

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Interlude is a posher restaurant than she expected also much more romantic.

Tiny candles float in the air around them, pretty yet never close enough to be a distraction. The food is good, her pestoed gnocchi quite good in fact, the red wine complex and dense. She takes another sip. "What is this again?"

"A 1994 Borolo."

Another sip. "Well, it's fabulous."

He smiles and tips his glass to her. "Yes, it is."

Pushing her almost-empty plate away, she says, "It's all fabulous, and I don't think I left room for afters."

"We shall just have to finish off the wine then." He pours the remainder into their glasses and signals the waiter to clear the plates.

Hermione settles back into her seat, glass in hand. They filled dinner with talk of Severus's research project and what he found at Hogwarts today to aid it a rare instance of bubotuber pus being used to cure shingles in 1794. Now she wishes they could talk about their project.

"There is another reason I picked this restaurant than simply the wine list."

"Really? The candles?" She can't help a spot of mild teasing the wine's made her a bit silly.

Affecting a mock glare, he replies, "No. The privacy screen." Severus waves his wand at a plaque set into the wall beside their table, and suddenly the rest of the room fades into a blur, sound completely muffled. "And in case Interlude's Charms caster is not exactly all the advertisements claim he is ..." He adds a few additional cloaking spells. "There. We can talk freely now."

He greets the look of surprise she can feel pulling at her face with a smirk, saying, "Lean in towards me," which causes her to feel even more surprised.

"What?"

"People can still see our outlines, so we should make it appear as if we are having a tryst of some sort."

"Oh, right." She leans forward to match him until they stop with their faces side by side.

"Minerva was correct. There were no new texts. And as I thought, there was nothing that matched the parameters of the spell we are looking for."

Her shoulders slump with disappointment. "What are we going to do?"

"We must find another avenue of approach."

They sit, his breath sounding in her ear, warmth from his skin radiating out to hers, and she can taste his scent on the back of her tongue, mingling with the wine.

It's been too long since she dated, and this is ... nice better than nice.

But very not on topic.

She shifts a little, and Severus moves too.

"What if ..."

"Yes?"

"What if we were to determine when the phenomenon first began?" Severus says. "Perhaps that would provide a lead of some sort."

"All right." Her mood lifts immediately at the thought of something to try. "I can go back through the lists tomorrow morning both before and after the eleven o'clock filing. As long as it hasn't gone on for centuries, I should have something by the time you come for lunch at one."

"Lunch?"

"Lunch." She grins. "After all, it's my turn to ask you out. I *am* a modern woman."

He huffs the faintest of chuckles, and perhaps it's the candle light, perhaps the wine, but for whatever reason, Hermione turns her head and kisses his cheek.

Severus jerks back and looks at her with his patented look of not-quite-surprise. "What was that for?"

Settling back into her seat, she says, "I suppose it was a thank you for helping me with the project. And it was also for authenticity." She waves a hand towards the rest of the restaurant.

"Authenticity, yes." His expression remains somewhat distracted and thoughtful as they finish their wine.

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Severus Apparates them to her door and stands waiting while she lets herself in. When she turns to say goodnight, he leans in and busses her cheek with his lips. Remaining close, he breathes into her ear, "Authenticity indeed. One never knows when one is being observed." Meeting her startled look with a small smirk, he pulls back and waits for her to enter her flat before disappearing with a pop.

Hermione leans against the inside of her door, heart racing, hand pressed to her flushed cheek.

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At noon the next day, they make small talk in the appearance of a social visit until reception delivers the sandwiches, dropping out of thin air to land with a thud and a plop.

Hermione picks them up and hands the firm one to Severus. "Looks like mine's gone all squishy as usual while yours seems a bit dry."

"Also as usual." Upon unwrapping it, he lifts a corner of the bread and pokes at a red-stained piece of chicken tikka. "No butter. Why would they make me a sandwich without butter?"

"I think it all ends up on mine, and then that's done it. Butter quota all used up." The bread won't even hold as she tries to take a bite and instead sags away as if trying to escape her teeth.

They eat quickly in silence, him finishing first, and she gets in one last bite of tuna and sweet corn before pointing at him and waving her hand all around them.

Nodding, he pulls out his wand and creates a bubble of cloaking spells around them.

Hermione wipes her gooey hands on a serviette. "The good news is we have a stopping point, and it's not centuries in the past." All trace of lightness has gone from her voice. "It sounds so wrong to say this, but at least the babies have only been dying for ... for a few decades instead of longer."

Severus cocks an eyebrow in query.

She swallows in an attempt to get her throat to work. "1976, that's the first year it began, or the first year with a good four discrepancies on the list. We could go and double-check everything again with the Muggle records to make sure, but the pattern is exactly the same."

"I trust your judgment and think that we should move forward with the investigation instead of having Mr. Potter hack away at one of those infernal contraptions again." His brow creases, and he sits tapping the sandwich wrapper before him for long minutes. "I am afraid the date means nothing to me."

"Me neither. It's too hidden, too ... too subtle to be Voldemort, and the dates don't match up."

"I agree that this does not feel like something he would do."

"Maybe if we can suss out what was going on at that time in the Wizarding world it might be a clue."

He nods. "The best initial resource would be the *Daily Prophet*."

"And I have copies of every one that's been printed." She walks over to place her hand on a particular row of filing cabinets that are a bit larger than most. It stretches into the distance, growing smaller but not stopping.

His eyes follow the trail, and his lips twist into something half smile, half grimace. "I suppose we should begin then."

As he walks beside her down the long aisle, he bobs his hand along, keeping the bubble of cloaking spells surrounding them.

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"Circe!" She throws down the paper she's been reading for the last five minutes. What a pity that abusing parchment doesn't make any satisfyingly loud noises. She could do with a good crash or clang about now.

"You found something?"

"No. Not unless you count another run of that stupid article on someone called Atrémia Arcklebeck. I mean, how many times do they need to say that she grew the best variation of fluxweed known?"

"What?"

"Not that there's anything wrong with fluxweed, mind, it's just that "

"No. What was her name again?"

"Atremia Arcklebuck."

"That cannot be correct. Fluxweed was last perfected in 1874 by a woman named Glendida Glossauer. I have never heard of an Atremia Arcklebuck."

"Which means?"

"How many times have you seen this article?"

"Two or three at least. Hold on." She taps her wand against the nearest copy of the Arcklebuck piece and murmurs one of her searching spells.

Drawers snick open along the row, and papers pull themselves from the stacks they'd already made. Soon, the air is a whirl of fluttering *Prophets* so thick they begin to pat against her. Hermione flicks her wrist to the right and directs the swarm to an empty spot of floor.

The pile is a good five feet high.

"Circe! How many times did they run that article?"

"It is a Fictum Spell."

"A what?"

"An artificially created piece of writing that has been used to replace what was originally printed. I've heard of them being used upon occasion by a corrupt politician in a cover-up, but never anything to this degree."

Walking over to the stack, Hermione sees the fake Arcklebuck article on the front page. She waves her wand over it, trying a few simple diagnostic spells. "Nothing!" She drops the paper, this time *really* wishing for a satisfying crash.

"No. It is undetectable by magic."

"Kind of sloppy then to have used it so many times though."

"Not necessarily." Severus walks over to the pile and pulls papers from various parts of the stack. "These date from the mid-1950s through to 1978, so it's only an instance or two per year. Most people would never notice."

"Well, can we get back what was originally printed?"

"Not with these. The charm for doing this is quite powerful it changes every paper printed everywhere magic can reach. We would need to find a set that had been locked away behind a magical shield."

"And wherever could we find that? I've never heard of any collection that's taken those precautions."

He's quiet for a few moments before saying, "I know of such a collection."

"Really, where?"

"At my house."

His face holds the careful expressionlessness of years ago.

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The sitting room in Spinner's End feels even smaller that evening, a little greyer, with Severus subdued and staring at the wall as he speaks.

"It turns out that much of the reason my father despised magic was due to the fact that he was something of a ... a sensitive, I suppose it could be called. He could tell when magic was being done or when magical artifacts were near. I actually believe that is what drew him originally to my mother. But feeling power and having none of it himself ... it did not sit so well with him, and he grew to hate it."

Still not looking at her, he continues. "My mother, ever the clever type, created a chest in the attic that she extended the interior of and shielded so that he could not detect that magical items were stored inside. She would receive the *Daily Prophet* while he was out of the house and hide it before his return."

He shoots a quick glance her way. "I have never opened it since her death."

"Why not?" she asks softly.

"Before I began school, she read the newspaper to me every day and told me how I was a wizard and this was my world. I ..."

After a moment, Hermione lays her hand on his arm. "You wanted to leave it all intact as a ... a sort of tribute to those times. I understand."

He nods once and stands abruptly. Flicking his wand towards the kitchen, he levitates a large brown steam trunk into the room. "It seemed prudent to retrieve it myself. My mother had set a series of Muggle booby traps on the ladder that only she and myself knew how to pass. It was, one might say, overkill my father was rarely sober enough by the time he came home to climb a ladder." He gives a sardonic twist of lips. "Although tripping the first was enough to keep Wormtail's curiosity in check."

She gives him a small smile. Hermione can tell he's using a spot of humor to overcome his discomfort, but it's fairly amazing that he's shared this much, so she goes along with the mood shift.

The hinges creak as he lifts the lid, and a puff of air that smells faintly of rosewater spreads into the room.

On top lies a series of Parchments, all topped by the Hogwarts crest Severus's grade reports.

He pulls them out with careful hands, saying, "She somehow talked him into accepting that I would need my wand and magical texts over the summers to study, but she never tried for herself."

Hermione wants to say that it's because his mother loved him, but he knows that, must know that on some level, and this is already quite personal for him.

Next comes a handful of photos, both Muggle and Wizarding. Hermione only gets a glimpse as he flips quickly through them, but almost all are of a young Severus, sometimes alone, sometimes with a dark-haired woman a grown version of Eileen Prince.

Then, another set of Hogwarts papers, these yellowed with age, Eileen's.

The top tray of the trunk is left filled with the small mementoes of a life: a preserved rose bud, an ancient and battered Potions text, a handful of colorful Gobstones polished smooth by long use, a small music box, the bottle of rosewater. How small, how weightless, how easily Severus is able to lift it and set it aside.

Yet how important.

His hand ghosts across the items, touching each one briefly, before he returns his attention to the trunk.

The expanded area begins beneath where the tray rested, and Severus uses his wand to levitate stack after stack of newspapers from the space until the sitting room fills.

"It appears that we have 1958 through 1976 here. I imagine that even without the earliest years of the Arckleluck use, we should still be able to discern a topic or pattern." He clears his throat. "If you use one of your sorting spells to remove the issues we are interested in, will you be able to return them to their correct locations as easily?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Holding the list she made earlier that day in her left hand, she taps at it with her wand, summoning only the issues on it. They slip out of stacks and rise into the air to hover over her, and once they're all there, she flicks her wand and sends them to the table.

Already picking up the top *Prophet* and flipping through the pages for the one indicated on her list, Hermione takes a few moments to realize he hasn't joined her. She looks up.

"I need tea. Would you care for some?"

"Yes, thank you."

He leaves for the kitchen, and she hears the sound of water running and the clang of a pre-electric kettle set on the hob.

He's gone a long time.

He makes it the Muggle way.

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Hermione immerses herself in reading. Here is what she'd always hoped her job would be researching a fascinating topic. There are only two problems: babies dying, and her actual job never entails work like this. She vows to consider the second once she's done with the first.

Starting from the earliest instance, Hermione reads five articles quickly, looking for major ideas. Something tugs at the back of her brain, a correlation that she can't quite grasp yet, and she keeps going. After skimming ten, she has an idea of what she wants to focus on, so she starts from the beginning, reading carefully and taking notes.

When Severus returns with tea, she waves the latter half of the newspapers over to his side of the table and places the list of what pages the articles are on between them on the sofa. "Look for trends," she says distractedly.

He hmms a reply and starts in on his own stack.

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A little over two hours later, Hermione breaks the near-silence of rustling parchment and scratching quills by tossing hers down to stand and stretch. "Circe! I think I've done my back in. Toilet?"

"There is one located off of the kitchen."

She takes a few steps, then thinks to say, "You almost done?"

"I will be by the time you get back."

That sounded almost snarky, she thinks. He must be feeling better or at least normal.

And indeed, he was right. By the time she returns, he sits reading over his notes.

Once she settles back beside him, she says, "So I can sum up most of what I found using these two headlines: 'Rising Number of Squib Births Continues!' and 'Another Successful Fundraiser.'" She holds up the corresponding *Prophets* from the early 1960s. "You?"

"My results are similar."

"Which means we have two sets of correlations here: the first being that pure-bloods were giving birth to ever greater numbers of Squib babies. Most articles say it began around 1954."

"And it continued through 1975. Then the articles changed slightly and began to discuss that the incidences of Squib-births had lowered and that it appeared to have been a self-correcting phenomenon."

"Hmm. I wonder." She looks at her notes again. "And the second thing appears to be a set of articles outlining the social activities of a group calling themselves the Pure-blood Sanctimonia. I couldn't see anything unusual about what they were doing fundraisers, luncheons, etc. but someone must have suppressed it for a reason."

"Their functions were reported very early in the 1970s, but less and less as the decade wore on. Either they were fading as a vital club ..."

"Or they decided to become something more secret. So many names were listed in the early articles that it seems half of the Wizarding world must have been involved." She holds her list out for him to see.

"Then that is another thing that changed over time. By 1973, it appears the Pure-blood Sanctimonia had shrunk in size. Only one new member was admitted."

"Really? Who?"

Severus holds up a *Daily Prophet*. On the front, a beaming Umbridge pins a small badge onto the front of Lucius Malfoy's robes. He then turns and offers the camera a younger version of his superior smile. A small group of indistinct figures stand in the strangely shadowed background, only their hands fully visible as they raise them to clap, flashing into and out of the light.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Thanks go to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77!

Chapter 4

Wednesdays. Stuck dead center in the middle of her work week, they're lost in a limbo of being neither a beginning nor an ending. And they're terribly dull for it.

As the last of the parchments delivered at four o'clock wing away from her desk to snick shut in the appropriate cabinets, Hermione scowls down at the paper she's just pulled from her top desk drawer.

She tucks it inside her robe and heads for the stairs. Severus didn't pop 'round today, not that they had plans for him to, so she figures it's her turn.

His lab smells ... well, it smells absolutely foul. The sulfurous stench of rotted eggs mixes with a sourness that's like the worst-smelling feet ever, and after camping with Harry and Ron for months, that's saying something. Above it all runs a top note of something sickeningly sweet, as cloying as too much candy floss on the back of her tongue.

Severus stands over a small silver cauldron stirring vigorously. There's something in his posture, a stiffness, that indicates he knows he's being watched, but he doesn't look up, so this must be a delicate step in the brewing.

Not that anything associated with *that* smell deserves to be called delicate, mind.

The potion splutters and pops, and as he reverses the direction of stirring, it begins to hiss steam that glows a sickly yellow-green. Even near the door, the smell grows much, much worse.

Gagging a little, Hermione edges back into the fresh air of the hall and casts a Bubble-head Charm on herself.

Now she can get much closer, so she's able to watch when he transfers his stirrer to his left hand, leaving him free to use his wand with his right. This is advanced work, and she's fascinated to see a master at it, his wand weaving a complex pattern over the simpler circular movements of his left hand.

What a lot of dexterity, she thinks, then grins at where her mind goes.

The potion chooses that moment to make one last push of obstinacy. Huge bubbles roil from the surface to float a good foot about the cauldron before Severus's vicious wand stabs burst them. His voice rises to audibility, a long chant in a language she doesn't recognize. Three more stirs and a flash of red light showers from his wand down over the mixture, which settles immediately as the sparks touch it.

After filling a small vial with a sample of the potion, now a murky yellow, he straightens and holds it up to the light. He adds a few lines of text to the parchment on the workbench beside him, then turns to her. "Hermione. You used a Bubble-head Charm. Good."

"Why didn't you? The smell was ..." Her nose curls at the thought.

"Smell is one of the ways a Potions master can detect subtle changes in the brewing process." He smirks. "Although I'm sure the students at Hogwarts thought I made them breathe in all those vapors because I was, quote, an obnoxious git, end quote. Shall we go into my office? I have shielded its airflow from that of the laboratory."

Nodding, she precedes him into the smaller room, struck once again by the thought that it's not so different from his one at Hogwarts. Then again, he's the same person, so why should it be? There are more books though two walls are lined with them, leaving only the remaining two for jars of mysterious and often grotesque Potions ingredients.

Severus shuts the door. "I should make sure the office is well sealed before you remove your charm." No matter his words, she recognizes the series of spells he performs non-verbally as cloaking shields. Settling beside her, he says, "Good, now we can talk, and you really can remove that charm."

A quick *Finite Incantatem!* and she's saying, "What was that language you were using on the potion? It certainly wasn't Latin."

"It was Old English."

"Funny that I didn't recognize it at all."

"Neither should you expect to. There is almost no linguistic connection between Old English and Modern English due to the Norman Invasion."

"Ah."

"But it has its uses, I have come to discover. That last trip to Hogwarts may not have provided any additional information for our project, but a text attracted my attention that may prove quite useful in my own research. I did not mention it when we had dinner because I had not yet ascertained its value." He leans forwards to pick a slim book off of his desk and hands it to her. "Gristletow's *Arcana Albion*. He proposes that, for some magics, performing them in one of the earliest tongues of the land can tap into a greater potential. Old English is not the earliest language of this island, but it is the earliest that we have enough knowledge of to prove useful."

Flipping through the pages, Hermione remembers the foul and recalcitrant concoction just brewed. "I hope it works for you."

"It already has. The potion I was just working on exploded in under a minute whenever I attempted it using Latin. This may be the very thing that will allow me to develop a cure for spell-inflicted nerve damage."

"That's fantastic!"

He smiles his real smile, she notes. "Indeed it is. I only wish I had found this text years ago. There is no telling what else might have been possible with it in hand." A small frown crosses his face.

"What is it?"

"It is odd. I could have sworn I had read every book in The Restricted Section ... or at least skimmed them. And yet ... well, it is no matter. I have it now, and the language itself is fascinating to study. And you how goes your research?"

She hands him the book with a sigh and pulls out the piece of parchment. "Not so good, dismal in fact. I have nothing."

When it unrolls for a good few feet, Severus cocks an eyebrow, saying, "Tea?"

"Circe, yes, I could kill for a cuppa. I worked through my four o'clock so I'd have time to come and see you."

His wand sets his tea set dancing. "Or I have so spoiled you that you will never again be able to drink that swill the Ministry passes off as tea."

She grins over the rim of the cup he hands her. "Or that."

He looks over her work, humming every so often.

Fidgeting a bit, she finishes off half her tea, then can't contain herself any longer. "I do want you to look it over, Severus. But I'm fairly sure there's nothing there. Just ... nothing! I mean, I looked everywhere and couldn't find anything on the Squib situation not even St. Mungo's had records of any such births."

"Nor would I expect them to. For some children, it can take a good few months for their magical ability to manifest to the point that diagnostic spells can detect it. Birth records would rarely be accurate in terms of magical ability, so it tends to not be recorded. Besides which, many pure-blooded families still deliver at home, attended only by a Midwifery Witch."

"Well, I suppose it's somewhat comforting that this conspiracy doesn't extend quite that far at least."

"Conspiracy?"

"Yes! So many records hidden, newspapers changed all of this seems too much for only one person, even if they are magical." She takes a sip of tea. "Speaking of groups of people doing things in secret, the Pure-blood Sanctimonia sure are a cagey lot. They registered their creation with the Ministry in 1953 without providing a full roster of members beyond their president."

"Umbridge?"

"Got it in one. I suppose I can't say it's exactly surprising to think that Umbridge would be involved with something to do with promoting pure-bloods, not with the decrees and hateful investigations she ran the year the Death Eater's controlled the Ministry. In fact, I'm still amazed she got away with it all."

"Are you?" Severus's smirk edged towards sardonic. "The Umbridge family may not be wealthy, but that does not mean they are not well connected within pure-blood circles."

"Maybe that explains this too. There's not a single other record on file for the Pure-blood Sanctimonia nothing. That in and of itself is as dodgy as dodgy can be."

"Why is that?"

"Because, in a bureaucracy, everything leaves a paper trail, and I do mean everything. I can tell you exactly how much Arthur's Muggle Technocrazia Club has spent on tea and biccies for every meeting these last five years."

He snorts into his cup.

"So she started it as a public society and then decided to go secret for some reason and couldn't wipe every single record the protection charms on the Records Room files do kick in for certain categories of documents. And having her involved confirms that the two things could be related. Umbridge creates and signs off on the student lists Hogwarts receives and she runs a dodgy pure-blood club."

"And pure-bloods were having trouble with Squib births."

"It's all connected I feel it. But how?" She gestures towards the bottom half of the parchment. "I researched her too. Again, everything on her is perfect. All of her obvious positions at the Ministry are well documented, though it took a fair amount of digging to find that she does indeed still hold the role of Junior Undersecretary of Educational Admissions. There was nothing on her trouble at Hogwarts, nothing on her harassment of Muggle-born. And Malfoy it's very similar. Any records of his arrest and imprisonment have been downplayed, and there's very little else other than a long list of contributions made to various Ministry causes. There's just ... nothing." Hermione's shoulders slump.

"Then, if I may suggest ..."

"Yes?"

He slides a scroll across the desk towards her.

The cream linen parchment lies weighty in her hand, and her mouth drops open, gobsmacked, as she reads. "How did you ... how did you get this?"

"Lucius likes to maintain the illusion that he and I were both unwilling followers of Voldemort, that he was simply Imperioed into being a Death Eater. He takes special care to invite me, Dumbledore's double-spy, to his public functions."

"A party at the Manor this Friday this is fantastic! You definitely have to go. You can back him into a corner and drop hints about babies to see if he squirms."

"We should both attend, for if we are truly to appear involved, it is only natural for you to accompany me. Although there will be no Gryffindor foolishness of the kind you propose, absolutely nothing that blatantly exposes that we have suspicions of any kind."

"It's a party celebrating the birth of his grandson. I was kind of hoping you could slip babies into the conversation as a matter of course."

"Hermione." His voice holds a note of warning.

"All right. You're the master spy after all."

"Yes, I am." His smirk looks quite self-satisfied.

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Of course agreeing not to do anything 'foolish and Gryffindor' isn't quite the same as not actually doing anything 'foolish and Gryffindor.'

"Whatever do you think you are doing?" he whispers.

She shuts the library door behind them and turns to survey the room. "Looking for clues."

"And here I thought we agreed we would do nothing to tip our hand."

"Come on, Severus." Shelf after shelf of books line the walls, but she heads for the one section that's fronted by glass doors locked glass doors, damn it. "The party is boring, and you won't let me talk to anyone who might be in the Sanctimonia. Therefore, a little snooping is called for, so help."

"Help how?"

"Well, we could try to get this open." She rattles the latch.

"Hermione." It's almost a groan.

"Or we could look for suspicious titles. Perhaps the spell we want is in one of these, and if we could suss out what book it is, we could find another copy." She starts skimming title after title of ancient texts that would normally have her fingers itching to open them, but none of them sound like what they're interested in.

Severus remains quiet at her side, so she assumes he's capitulated. Or at least until he says, "I have it: *The Expert's Guide to Killing Mudblood Infants*."

She swats him on the arm with the back of her hand. "Oh, now you're just taking the piss."

He grins.

"You're right." She offers a wry little smile in return. "Lucius may be many things many bad things, that is but he's not stupid enough to leave anything incriminating out in plain sight." Glancing around the room again, she asks, "So where do you think he'd hide "

The library door opens.

Instinct, it must be pure instinct. Hermione throws her arms around Severus and pulls herself into his body with enough force that he rocks backwards slightly and clutches at her in reflex. Adrenaline spikes her heart rate, and she can feel her cheeks flush as she opens her mouth to gasp in a few panicked breaths.

Severus, while nothing as extreme, also appears flustered.

It should look, she thinks, like an interrupted lover's clench as she buries her face in Severus's neck, breathing in the smell of him, running her hands down his back.

A throat clears behind her, and Severus steps abruptly away from her as if startled. He really is quite good at this, she realizes, watching as his face morphs from slight shock, through irritation, and settles on amusement.

"Draco." He gives the name a sardonic edge.

"Severus and ... Hermione."

She turns, smoothing a hand over the front of her dress in a nervous gesture that hopefully seems like embarrassment. "Draco."

The man in front of her watches them closely, eyes slightly narrowed and mouth pursed into a thin line.

But if he's suspicious, it's obviously not enough for him to act upon, or his wand would already be out, so she relaxes and links her arm through Severus's. "Congratulations on the birth of Scorpius. He's beautiful." And he was earlier when presented to the room, all smiles and cooing with pink arms waving as his mother held him and not needing Hermione to touch his nappy *ever*.

"Yes," Severus says, "congratulations."

"Thank you." Draco's face softens. "Astoria and I are very pleased."

They stand in awkward silence for prolonged moments, and Draco looks at the cabinet behind them and then back to them with a sharp expression overcoming his face, his mouth opening as if to say something. Then he shakes his head slightly and points to the fireplace on the other side of the room. "If you will excuse me, I would like to Floo call Astoria to make sure she and Scorpius arrived home safely. The party was running a bit late for a two-month old."

Severus tugs her gently towards the door. "Of course."

"Give her our regards," Hermione says just before the door clicks shut.

She wants to collapse against it, laughing at their narrow escape, but there are too many eyes, so she allows Severus to escort her back to the drawing room, which still elicits a shiver of revulsion, even though it's been redecorated at some point in the past eight years. Delicate new furniture and a different color scheme, ice-blue and crystal-white, do little to wash it clean in her eyes.

Severus glances at her, concern hovering about his bearing just as it had when they first entered the room earlier that night. She realizes that one day she'll tell him about Bellatrix, even though she rarely speaks of it with anyone.

Giving his arm a little squeeze, she puts on a bright smile, saying, "I could use a drink."

When Severus turns to catch the eye of a serving elf, Lucius's voice sounds from her left. "Ah, Miss Granger, such a surprise to have the honor of your company this evening."

She extends her hand and waits for him to be fully bent over it before saying, "I can well imagine since I seem to be the only Muggle-born here."

"Yes." He straightens, expression mocking. "It is sad that so many are unable to understand my plight at being forced to serve Voldemort. If only more Muggle-born were able to look past their prejudices, then ..." He waves a hand airily at the gathering.

The very nerve of him! Grinding her teeth to keep from saying as much, she turns a brittle smile upon a returning Severus and hides behind the champagne flute as soon as it's in her hand. The wine is rather the nicest thing about the place after all.

"Severus, how good to see you and that you brought the delightful Miss Granger."

"Lucius." Severus's face remains carefully neutral.

"I was just telling her "

"Lucius, oh, Lucius," a high voice simpers, and people part to let a pink-ruffled monstrosity through. "There you are. Why, whatever are you doing over here? I thought we were going to talk to ..." Umbridge trails off as she notices Hermione and Severus, her eyes narrowing and her mouth twisting as if she's smelled something particularly foul.

"Dolores," Lucius says, a hard edge to his voice, "I was just on my way back over. Why don't you assemble everyone we wanted to speak with?"

Giving one last look down her nose, which is amazing since she's shorter than either of them, Umbridge snorts before spinning abruptly enough that the abundant flounces on her robes rise and move as if suddenly overcome with independent life. She cleaves the crowd, gathering various people behind her like goslings imprinted upon a fuchsia mother goose.

Lucius pulls Hermione's attention back to him by taking her hand. "It appears I must attend to my other guests, but I hope that one day you'll do me the honor of visiting my home for a third time."

Which only calls to mind her first visit. A threat?

Anger rises in her, strengthening her resolve, and she refuses to let this man see he bothers her. Practicing Severus's unflappable expression, she shades her voice with mockery. "Yes, the Manor always has such ... interesting entertainments to offer."

His eyebrow raise has nothing on Severus's, and she stares at him for a stretched time until suddenly he nods once at Severus and turns to move off in the same direction as Umbridge.

"Would you like to go?" Severus's voice sounds soft and concerned in her ear.

She nods, but only starts forward once she's catalogued every person surrounding Malfoy and Umbridge: Cassius Cadwallader, Lizbet Umfraville, Evergud Entwhistle, Mafalda Hopkirk, and Stamford Jorkins all names from the early Pure-blood Sanctimonia days.

All Ministry officials.

Perhaps the evening isn't a complete loss after all.

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When Severus leans in to kiss her cheek goodnight, she pulls him solid and warm against her.

"Will you tell me what has upset you, Hermione?"

Keeping her face pressed to his shoulder, she nods. "During that last year of the war, we were captured, Harry, Ron, and I, and taken to Malfoy Manor. Bellatrix picked one of us to torture to try to get the others to talk ... or ... or maybe just because she liked it." Her voice grows quiet. "She picked me."

His arms tighten around her, and his hand strokes her back.

"It was in the drawing room, and Lucius watched. I ..." And she's crying, softly but unstopably crying.

He pulls back a bit and uses a hand to tip her chin up to meet his eyes. "Bellatrix Lestrange was one of the most powerful and vicious people I have ever had the misfortune to know. That you are here and whole speaks volumes about your strength." He presses a kiss to her temple and ushers her into her flat and onto the sofa.

A few moments later, Severus places a damp flannel in her hand and a glass of water on the table in front of her.

Once she's a bit more together, she leans against him.

He says nothing more, just stays for an hour, a solid and comforting presence at her side.

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Searching Ministry Records on the new list of names proves just as fruitless as it did for Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy, so when Severus comes with tea the Tuesday after the party, Hermione's ready to pull out her hair in frustration.

As soon as the privacy spells go up, she says, "I almost don't know why we bother. I've got nothing new to say. Cadwallader, Umfraville, Entwhistle, Hopkirk, and Jorkins all have records as clean as clean can be."

"So purposefully purged then."

"Yes. Not that I can prove it, mind."

Severus reaches over to lay his hand on hers. "You will find something, Hermione. You only need an untampered source. We could go through my mother's *Daily Prophets* again."

"You're right maybe there's something in the Squib articles we overlooked. And we should track all the names of the Pure-blood Sanctimonia this time to see if ..." His words echo in her mind, bouncing off of ideas half formed, and suddenly she turns her hand over to give his a squeeze. "And I could also go to another untampered source, as you say. Someone old enough to remember what went on during that time."

"Minerva." He really is frightfully clever.

She nods. "Minerva."

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That Friday, Hermione pushes back from a still-laden table and dabs at her lips with a serviette. "Oh, the food is just as lovely as always, Minerva, especially the treacle tart. Thank you for having me to lunch."

"How could I resist when you practically invited yourself?" Minerva's eyes almost twinkle.

"Yes, well, my earlier visit made me realize just how much I miss this place." Her finger taps at her nose.

"I see." Wand out, Minerva makes short work of forming a protective layer of cloaking spells. "What can I do for you, my dear?"

"I came across some old clippings from the *Prophet* that discussed the fact that, for a time, many pure-bloods were giving birth to a high proportion of Squibs. The thing is, there's not really a lot of detail, and I can't find any other sources of information on it. So I'd hoped ..."

"You'd hoped an old bat like me might remember something." Minerva's lips twitch slightly.

Hermione grins. "Yes, though more because I thought your connection to Hogwarts would give you insight. It's not all about your advanced age, you know."

Minerva's small smile disappears to be replaced by a more thoughtful look. "Oh, I haven't thought about this for years, but now that you mention it, yes, there was something like that around the time I first began teaching at Hogwarts that would have been in the mid to late 1950s. Many of the pure-blood families began giving birth to Squib after Squib. That is, when they could have children at all. Some weren't having any babies, and others had quite a few stillborn or ones who died in their first year. It was a sad, sad time."

"Did anyone propose doing anything about it?"

"Well, there was talk of something to address it around 1972, which was when the number of Muggle-born and half-blood children with superior power began grow large enough to really be recognized. A Marriage Law act of some sort was proposed. It was going to force Muggle-born to marry pure-bloods so as to hopefully make children with stronger magic."

"Really? That's ... that's ..." She shudders at the thought of being decreed by law to marry someone.

"Precisely."

"So they realized it was a violation of basic human rights, and that was that?"

"Violation of basic human rights?" Laughter overwhelms her, and she waves her hand helplessly for a bit.

Minerva's loosened up a bit since the War, but Hermione's never seen the older woman quite this tickled before, so she grins into her cup, enjoying the sight no matter the circumstances.

Once she's gained her composure, Minerva continues. "Oh, no, my dear. The staunchest faction of pure-bloods, the oldest of the old families, was up in arms about it immediately. Word is they were horrified at the thought of having to touch 'filthy Mudbloods' if you'll pardon me using the expression let alone diluting their 'precious' bloodlines with them. They killed the notion before it ever went up for a vote."

Hermione feels her teeth grind, but continues. "And did what instead?"

"Why nothing. Not long after that speaking in Wizarding world terms, my dear, where everything moves a bit more slowly the first war with Voldemort occurred, and everyone had other things to think about. By the time that died down, the problem seemed to have sorted itself out. What pure-blood children were born were once again reasonably magical, and talk of a problem faded away."

"Hmm. And can you think of any way for any of that to have a connection to the Pure-blood Sanctimonia?"

"Oh, now there's a name I haven't heard in years." She takes a long drink of tea and stares into the distance. After long moments, she turns back to Hermione. "Besides the fact that it was pure-bloods having the Squibs, and these same pure-bloods tended to be in the Sanctimonia, I can't think of anything."

"What about its president, Umbridge?"

"Oh, well, there's one who definitely liked her bit of time in the limelight. Why every chance she got, there was a reporter at the events snapping off photos of her with one pure-blood aristocrat after another. Always mugging for the camera, she was." Minerva sniffed in disdain.

"But is that all she did, all the Sanctimonia did? Hold fundraising parties and such?"

"I can't be completely sure because, while I went to some of the charity events, I never joined. There was talk for a while that it was actually just a publicly acceptable front for something else, and people later surmised that such meant the Death Eaters." She pauses, brow creasing. "But now that I think about it, the Sanctimonia always had a much larger membership than the Death Eaters, so I'm not sure they were necessarily one and the same."

"And do you remember when it was disbanded?"

"Hmm." She taps a finger against her cup while looking into it, brow furrowed. "I don't recall ever hearing that it formally disbanded. It just seems that the events grew rarer and then ... and then I didn't hear about it anymore."

"I see." Hermione takes another sip of tea, giving herself a bit of time to digest both the hot liquid and the information. "There's one more thing, if you don't mind, though it's on a different subject."

Minerva sets down her empty cup. "Of course, my dear."

"It's ... it's, well, it's quite horrific, and I hate to bring it up." She takes a deep breath and continues in a rush. "Have you ever heard of a spell that requires ... requires killing a baby who's exactly three-months-old?"

Minerva blanches and raises her serviette to cover her mouth. After a bit, she says softly, "After all the atrocities of the war, I'd thought myself somewhat immune to shocks of this sort, but using an infant ..."

The horror of it hits Hermione afresh upon seeing how someone not used to the information reacts. "I wouldn't have burdened you with it, but I'm at a loss as to where to go from here."

"No, I've not heard of the like." Minerva's face hardens, lips and eyes thinning. "But when you find who's been doing this, you make sure I'm there I and the entire Order are at your disposal."

"Thank you, Minerva. Your support means a lot, and I'll make sure to take you up on that." She pauses, voice dropping. "I only hope it can be soon."

This time when she leaves, she makes sure to give the older woman a quick hug.

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Hermione steps out of a Floo in the Atrium to find Severus waiting for her.

"My dear," he says, taking her arm in his, "how I missed you. May I escort you back to the Records Room?"

A bit shocked, she nods her head instead of replying verbally.

"I know it is somewhat presumptuous of me this early in our relationship, but I had hoped that, tonight being Friday, you would do me the honor of dinner?"

He's laying it on a bit thick, she thinks, then notices that they have quite the audience.

Person after person passes by with the most gobsmacked expression mouth gaping open, eyes about to pop from their sockets. They stop and turn to watch Hermione and Severus walk by, not noticing or caring how obvious their behavior is. One even drops the parcel he's carrying as his fingers seemingly give out in shock. Fizzlebees

emerge from the crack in the box and buzz around the room, adding another note of chaos as multi-colored bubbles stream from their stingers in a series of pops.

Laughing, Hermione looks up at Severus, who smirks his nicest smirk, and replies, "I'd love to, Severus."

"Wonderful." He presses the button for the lift and gives her arm a little squeeze. "And how is Minerva?"

She takes the hint to keep up the small talk. "She's doing quite well. The renovations will be completed soon, and there's to be a ceremony in a month or so. She's asked us to come."

They step into the lift going down with five or six people Hermione knows work in Magical Law Enforcement on Level Two, which happens to be above the Atrium level.

Severus tilts his head towards their fellow passengers and ratchets up the level of his smirk.

She fights to keep from bursting out laughing.

"Of course, I would be happy to attend," he says. "Although I had hoped to see Minerva and some of my other colleagues sooner than that." Smirk gone, he looks at her meaningfully.

She nods. "I'm sure we could arrange a more ... personal get together with all of them soon."

The lift arrives at her floor, and they get out.

Hermione suppresses the desire to wave to the people watching them with avid eyes as the doors shut.

He escorts her to her desk. "Would six o'clock at my house be all right with you? I know it is a bit early for dinner, but I find myself wanting to cook and thought you might keep me company while I do so."

"Six o'clock would be fine."

"I will leave you to it then. I am afraid there is something pressing I must research. Until this evening." He bends briefly over her hand and turns with a flourish of robes.

The Sneakoscope in her robes spins for a good ten minutes after he's gone. Irritated that the close scrutiny gave no chance to discuss what he was up to for he was definitely up to something Hermione nonetheless smiles, certain that Ministry gossip will speak of nothing else for the next fortnight.

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The second she Apparates onto the doorstep of Severus's house, the Sneakoscope in her pocket whirls to life yet again.

Severus opens to her knock and winks quickly before pulling her into a hug, the length of his body a firm, warm pressure against her.

Let's make this good, she thinks and stretches up so that her mouth is near his ear. "Oh, Severus," she breathes as a wistful sigh like the distillation of every bad romance novel she's never read.

His fingers clench, pulling her momentarily closer. Then he pulls back and turns his head to kiss her cheek.

Rationalizations about 'authenticity' bounce through her brain, and she turns as well, pressing her lips to his.

In an instant, it's no longer a game.

The kiss remains light, exploring, the brush of lips playing over lips without anything more than the barest tip of tongue.

Yet she almost moans into his mouth. Her fingers clutch, fisting the material of his frock coat, and she pulls him closer as a flush of heat flashes across her body, pooling wherever they touch.

Untold moments later, they break apart, both panting slightly, and if Severus's face is anything to go by, both looking a bit dazed.

He smooths a hand slowly down the front of his coat, eyes still a bit unfocused, but the movement seems enough to break the spell holding them in place, and he waves her into the house and shuts the door.

The frantic motion in her pocket ceases immediately like a switch flipped to off.

If only her heart were as easy to calm.

She falls back against the hallway wall, breathing more quickly than normal, and tells herself to focus. Pulling out the Sneakoscope, she finds it still warm from all the spinning. "Can you believe that? They weren't even trying to hide that they were watching!"

"While I applaud your attempts to add an even greater level of authenticity to our ...," he clears his throat, "charade, I can only hope that those who have been observing us for longer, and with a greater level of stealth, have been equally as fooled."

She wonders how he can still see this as nothing more than an act after that kiss. What could she do ... No, wait ... "What was that second part?"

"I received a message today that leads me to believe that at least one person knows what we have been looking into with the project."

"Oh, no." Her heart's already been racing, even if for pleasanter reasons, but now her stomach twists.

"Indeed." He gestures her into the sitting room and, once they're seated, continues. "At a quarter past twelve today, someone tried to force their way past my wards here at the house. When I arrived a few moments after, there was nothing but a note left on the back doorstep."

"So they did it on purpose to get your attention in a way that kept you from having any idea who they are."

"It would seem so." He holds out a small piece of paper. "They were equally careful in crafting the note. The parchment and ink are the most commonly available brands Scrivenshaft's carries, and even the Quick-Quotes Quill used is the least expensive one favored all across the Wizarding world."

She hmms in reply and reads.

On the flanks of that misty mount,

Where kings of old go to their rest,

There lies the lake that holds the sword.

And when full-dark next descends,

No moon shining on those still waters,

The secret many shall gather in horror.

"Well," Hermione says, "it's obvious that no one would go to all of this trouble just to send you a poem." She looks up to see his eyebrow rise somewhat sardonically. "I mean, not a poem like this kind of poem, so it must be in code."

"Not precisely. It is instead a riddle. The first stanza tells of a location, the second a time."

She looks at it again. "Well ... swords and kings and all ... I'd say Arthur."

He nods. "Yes."

"But I don't know enough about him to suss this out. In History of Magic, Binns focused more on Merlin and Nimue."

"Then allow me. I took the liberty of researching the topic this afternoon. Llyn Llydaw is a lake that lies halfway up Mount Snowdon, which tends to be shrouded in fog for a majority of the year. In ancient times, this lake was the site of the Portkey to Avalon. Both Arthur and Excalibur were taken away there."

"Avalon, really? It exists? Where's that then?"

"Destroyed in 1408 during the first battle between the newly Christianized Muggles and Wizard-kind."

"Oh." She fidgets with the parchment, reading the verse over a few times. "I think you must be right about Llyn Llydaw. And if the second stanza means time, then 'no moon shining' would be the new moon, which is ..."

"Which is tomorrow night."

"Right. Making this either a tip or a trap."

"Yes."

"And we have no other real leads."

"Correct."

She sets the slip of paper down and turns to look at him dead on. "So we go."

He nods, something warm flashing through his eyes that looks a lot like approval.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Thanks go to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77!

Chapter 5

If all of her years at Hogwarts taught Hermione anything, it's that walking into a potential trap is best done with friends, especially when one's friends happen to be some of the most talented witches and wizards she's ever met.

The drawing room at Grimmauld hums with the sound of multiple conversations. Order members catch up with one another, forming and dissolving and reforming different groups of talk and laughter.

Once George and Lee arrive in an explosion of hugs and hellos a little after nine, everyone's there, and Minerva raises her hands and calls for order. "Dear fellow Order members, while it is lovely to see you all, I have called you together this evening for something dreadfully serious. Hermione, if you would."

"Thank you, Minerva." Hermione, who's been huddled with Severus, Harry, and Ron in a bit of final planning, moves to the center of the room. "A few weeks ago, a strange discrepancy in the Hogwarts Induction Lists caught my eye. After long hours spent researching the phenomenon with Severus, we don't yet know the full situation, but we've discovered some shocking things. Muggle-born babies appear to be dying in a magical ritual of some sort, and while we've found no direct connection, signs seem to indicate that a secret society lead by Dolores Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy called the Pure-blood Sanctimonia may in some way be involved." She nods to Severus.

He joins her in three long strides and picks up where she left off with only a few seconds pause. "Yesterday, an unknown agent sent us a riddle informing us that a gathering we would be interested in is taking place tonight. The authorities cannot be brought in at this time because, if our suspicions hold true, the Ministry itself has been infiltrated by this conspiracy. Minerva has therefore agreed that this calls for the attention of the Order. We have no way of knowing if this is an actual tip or a trap, and injuries could be serious." He pauses to look around the room. "No one will be forced to participate."

Voices call out, Katie's rising above the rest. "Are you lot mental? If they're killing babies, of course we're going to be there!"

"What she said," Hagrid booms.

Echoes of consent fill the room.

"Alright, everyone," Harry yells above the din. "Gather 'round over here." He and Ron move aside to show a map on the wall. "This is Llyn Llydaw, which is a lake on the side of Mount Snowdon. I scouted out the location today, and there are only a couple of places flat enough for a group of people to stand about easily that aren't right near where Muggle tourists go. Here and here." He points out the positions on the map. "This one has a set of stones in it that might match up to an ancient Avalon Portkey Snape's researched, so that will be our initial focus." He flicks his wand so that the main location glows with a golden star while the secondary one shows a smaller black one.

Ron steps forward on the other side. "After Harry got the lay of the land, we were able to determine the best places to put our people. We've made Portkeys for here, here, here, and here, flanking the main site." A tap of his wand, and four locations are marked and numbered. "If your position ends up being too far from where the action is, make your way over as quietly as you can. There's almost no cover, so everyone needs to be Disillusioned at first, and you'll need to work out ahead of time what order you'll move in so you don't trip each other up. Then once the group leaders have cast Anti-Apparition Jinxes over the area, they'll fire off the first Stunners. Make yourselves visible as soon as the spells start flying so we don't hit each other."

Harry turns to face them. "We have no way of knowing how many there are or what exactly they'll be doing. The only thing we have going for us is that, if this is a valid tip, we should catch them by surprise. Other than that, about the only strategy we can have is to watch out for each other, Stun anyone else, and if there's a baby there, get it to safety as soon as possible." He nods to Minerva.

"Molly and Arthur will wait for word from us and then contact Kingsley in secret to make him aware of the situation. Also, Aberforth and Ginny will remain here at headquarters to help with any minor injuries and to call in the Aurors if it becomes necessary. If additional aid is needed, and I am unable to send a Patronus to either of them, I ask that one of you do so." Minerva pauses to look from face to face. "For those of you going to Llyn Llydaw, I've divided everyone into four groups. Hagrid and I will lead one, Harry and Neville have group two, Ron and Luna take three, and Hermione and Severus will head up group four." Waving her wand above her head in a rallying gesture, Minerva calls out, "Leaders, gather your teams."

People swirl around the room, and Hermione takes a moment to speak to Harry. "You did a smashing job."

"Thanks. But that still doesn't let you off the hook that I had to go around Polyjuiced as Dudley all day." He gives an exaggerated shudder.

She laughs. "I'm sure *that* didn't taste good. You could have tried the cloak."

"Nah, too hard to keep it in place with the wind. Besides, the ground was boggy in spots. Footprints would have given me dead away." His expression grows serious, and he gives her a hug. "Be extra careful, alright?"

"You too."

Ron comes over and throws an arm over each of their shoulders. "Haven't you heard? Aberforth's going to have a lock-in for us at the Hog's Head tonight. So we're all coming back fine and going down the pub after, and don't you forget it." He looks over to where Severus stands a bit behind her. "Even you, Snape."

Severus nods once before turning to stride into the middle of a knot of people, calling, "Mr. Macmillan."

Hermione watches as the milling chaos of multiple people slowly sorts itself into groups: Minerva, Hagrid, Dean, Hestia, and Seamus; Harry, Neville, Hannah, George, and Lee; and Ron, Luna, Bill, Fleur, and Katie.

Then Severus returns, Susan, Ernie, and Dennis in tow, and the rest of the briefing begins.

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Sunset falls around a quarter to ten in northern Wales in June with full dark by half past, when the moon, even if unseen in its new phase, rises.

At ten twenty-five, Hermione looks around the drawing room at the wavering shapes crouched around the four stone Portkeys set on the floor.

Ginny counts down the time, yet even so, the room's the quietest it's been all evening, boisterous talking having morphed into the tensely silent crackle of nerves sparking with anticipation.

The last minute upon them, Severus's hand suddenly touches her arm, sliding down until he clasps her fingers. She squeezes in return, then releases.

"Five, four, three, two, one, go!"

Ginny's shout echoes in her ears as Hermione's wrenched sideways and backwards and forwards all at once, her stomach lurching at the disorienting effect.

Stumbling a little as her feet touch down on uneven ground, Hermione hears someone to her left give a quiet grunt. Darkness surrounds her, heavy and thick, and she worries for half a second that they're wrong about the place or the time or it's a trap or ...

Then she spins to see that they were right after all.

Even as she raises her wand to point above the group standing twenty feet in front of her, performing a non-verbal Anti-Apparition Jinx, the rest of her mind fights to make sense of what she's seeing.

A robed circle of figures, around a dozen all told, stand in a circle. The only light comes from something glowing at their center that she can't see, and large hoods obscure their faces, but the voice of the one performing the ritual is unmistakable.

Lucius Malfoy chants a long string of consonants linked by strange and liquid vowels, a haunting language that teases the edge of her brain with almost-comprehension. "Gebryidan æt twyhynde and giefan tó twelfhynde!"

She'd have no idea what it was if she hadn't heard Severus use it recently.

He confirms as much by leaning over to whisper into her ear, "Old English."

She turns her head towards him. "Do you understand it?"

"It is something along the lines of 'take that which should not belong to the lesser people and give it to the greater people.'"

She shakes her head in frustration. She's behind him, so she can't see what Malfoy's doing, and the phrase could mean many things. Pulling Severus down to her with a hand on his shoulder, she whispers, "I've got the Anti-Apparition Jinx up, and I imagine everyone else has as well, so "

Before she finishes, a blast of red flashes from the far right, hitting the person beside Malfoy so that they drop like a lead weight.

Severus straightens to quickly follow suit, throwing a bolt of red light that veers slightly to Stun the person on Malfoy's other side.

A series of Light Spells are cast, Susan performing the incantation for their group, and the balls of flame fly up to hover above the area, bathing it in a flickering glow.

As hooded figures fall or move suddenly away from their circle, much of the large stone in front of Malfoy becomes visible. Hermione stares, unable to move. A pair of

babies lies on either side of the center of the flat surface, and even from a distance, she can see how their little faces are screwed up in expressions of horror, eyes squinched shut by mouths wide open to scream, though no sound emerges. Tiny fists rage against the air, lashing out in syncopated time with the furious kicks of their feet.

And a golden mist streams from the one on the left to engulf the one of the right.

In an instant, it all becomes clear, the thing she'd known on some level but had found too horrible to admit, even to herself: they're taking the magic from Muggle-born babies and transferring it to pure-blood Squibs. And they obviously don't care that it kills the Muggle-born in the process.

Order Members blink into visibility all around, and multiple spells fly in all directions, splashing against Malfoy in a rainbow of colors, yet none of them affecting him.

Hermione snaps out of her daze when Severus grabs her shoulder and gives her a small shake. Flicking her wand to remove her Disillusionment Charm, she runs forwards, casting a series of spells at Malfoy. "*Stupefy! Expelliarmus!*"

Not even flinching, Lucius continues uninterrupted, raising his hands high to gesture with his wand in large sweeping motions again and again.

"*Incarcerous!*" Ropes fly out the end of her wand towards the man, and she thinks for a moment she's done it, but about a foot short, they stop abruptly and drop to the ground, as if hitting a brick wall.

The golden glow around the baby on the left appears fainter. Its little arms wave sluggishly.

With a groan of frustration, Hermione continues forwards, deflecting a Slicing Spell with a sharp twist of her wrist, while her eyes dart about, seeing Lee get hit by *Crucio*, and Luna toppling a man three times her size with a Leg-Locker Curse.

At the very center, only three of the robed figures still stand, but the other two have moved close enough to Malfoy to also fall under whatever spell protects him. Even if the number of Order members still standing outnumbers them three-to-one, the Sanctimonia can pick them off one by one.

A high voice yells, "*Crucio!*" and Hermione ducks, tries a "*Protego!*", but it's not enough the edge catches her left arm. She screams, fire slashing along her limb for stretched seconds that feel endless. Her heart pounds under the strain, and she drops to her knees, gasping.

When the pain subsides to a dull throb, she shakes the tears from her eyes to see Severus standing beside her, deflecting spells.

Fewer Order members remain on their feet Hermione quickly scans and sees Hagrid, Minerva, Katie, Harry, and Ron all casting spell after spell at Malfoy but the three Sanctimonia members hold strong.

Standing, she says to Severus, "We've got to break that shield. Any ideas?"

"None that I have not already tried." He nods across the area even as he blocks a bolt of blue flung at him. "And the same holds true for both Minerva and Potter. It appears neither finesse nor brute strength will work."

"Damn it!" She deflects another spell from the shorter figure, sending it spiraling off to the earth, where it gouges chunks of peat, sending them flying. "That's a right nasty piece of work."

"Yes, she is."

Umbridge. Hermione should have known.

Barely any glow surrounds the baby on the left, only enough to show that it's stopped crying, almost stopped moving altogether. In contrast, the thin line of mist connecting the two infants blossoms out into a globe around the baby on the right, who struggles with vigor.

"If we don't do something soon, that baby's going to die," Hermione says. "Let's rush them."

"What?"

"Spells can't make it through that shield, but what if we can? So let's try it. One, two, three!" She leaps forwards, shouting Shielding Spell after Shielding Spell, Severus a solid presence at her side.

Ron catches on, as does Hagrid, and she sees them running out of the corner of her eye.

BANG!

A blast of light, and something massive hits her, knocking her arse over teakettle, air whooshing from her lungs. She lies on the ground gasping for breath. Shifting her head, she can see Severus similarly sprawled beside her.

Malfoy's voice suddenly increases in volume, and his wand sends out bright yellow sparks that shower over the infants before him. "Gebryidan æt twyhynde and giefan tó twelfhynde!" He yells it to the vault of sky, arms raised above his head. "Gebryidan æt twyhynde and giefan tó twelfhynde! Gebryidan æt "

A bolt of red hits him from only a foot away, and Lucius's words cut off abruptly. The hooded figure on Lucius's left then spins and drops the third Sanctimonia member with another Stunner.

Throwing back his hood, Draco yells, "The shield is down. Get over here now!"

Scrambling to her feet, Hermione runs to the large stone, Severus only half a step behind her.

The baby on the left still breathes, the rise and fall of its little chest its only motion, the line of glowing mist moving away from it little more than a faint wisp.

She shouts, "*Finite Incantatem!*" and the Silencing Charm ends, filling the air with the loud cries of the baby on the right. The mist, however, continues to move. "Damn it! What do we do?"

"Use Old English!" Draco yells.

"Severus!"

Kicking Lucius's legs out of the way, Severus steps into place in front of the stone, and his deep voice rings across the night. "Ástyntan Galdorcwide!" He slashes his wand to the right. "Ástyntan Galdorcwide!" Then to the left. "Ástyntan Galdorcwide!" With that final call, he cleaves the air in between the two infants.

The golden globe of energy rises from the baby on the right, who gives a piercing shriek. It swoops to plunge into the other infant with a pop that sends light shivering across its exposed skin. The baby lies still, arms and legs out-flung, eyes wide with shock.

Ice knots Hermione's stomach as she watches its still form.

Then a shudder runs through the infant, and it opens its mouth to draw in a large breath, which it lets out in an enraged yell as it begins to hit and kick the air around it.

A sound emerges from Hermione, half laugh, half sob, and she leans forwards to rub at its belly.

"Budge over." Ron reaches out and picks up the baby, leaning it against one shoulder and patting its back lightly. "There, there, little one," he says softly. "Uncle Ron's got you. Bet you were scared, huh? Well, don't you worry none. Auntie Hermione's going to make sure these bad people never hurt you ever again."

"Uncle Ron? Auntie Hermione?" She strokes the fine hair on its head as it starts to pause for a few seconds between yells.

"There, there, you're winding down a bit," Ron says to the baby before looking at Hermione. "I had to tell the little one something, now didn't I? Wanted it to know it's safe with people who care, and I figure after this the entire Order is their new family. Do you have any idea who it is?"

"None whatsoever, though it must be a Muggle-born. I'm hoping Draco can tell us."

She looks around. Draco holds the other baby tightly to his chest. Kingsley must have arrived at some point because he stands talking to Minerva. Severus and Harry walk from one Sanctimonia member to another, binding them with ropes as they go. Luna and Dennis move among the downed Order members, Portkeying anyone seriously hurt to St. Mungo's. Hagrid lumbers towards the center stone with a limp, and Hermione moves over so he can touch the little head.

"I should go and help," Hermione says, gesturing around.

Ron nods over to where Kingsley gestures for him. "Wait a minute. I'm the one that's got to go."

Taking the baby, she says, "Oh, yes. Important Aurors always swan off once the glory of the fight is over."

Ron backs away, giving her a two-fingered salute, and she lets out a little laugh, jiggling the baby, who continues to cry softly.

Hagrid sits on the stone and reaches towards her. "Why don't I take the wee one, Hermione? Then you can go and help out." Cradling the infant in one large hand, he starts to hum a nonsense tune, and the baby quiets even more, cries fading into little hiccups.

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It seems to take forever. Even with additional help from Molly and Arthur, there's much to be done. Draco gives the name and address of the Muggle-born baby, and after a quick medical check, Molly and Arthur take Elizabeth Murray home, coming back to say her parents won't notice anything amiss because they were still unconscious from being Stunned while in bed.

The other baby, who turns out to be Scorpius, also seems fine, and Luna whisks him away to his mother with orders to stay with them until things are sorted.

Half the Order seems to need some sort of medical help, from Hagrid's sprained ankle to a nasty cut on Katie's torso to the lingering effects of the Cruciatus Curse on Lee. So once Minerva lifts the Anti-Apparition Jinx, various people take the injured to St. Mungo's or Order Headquarters with triumphant calls that they'll all be at the Hog's Head as soon as can be. Back for one final trip, Dennis holds up a teetering Ernie, and they disappear with a pop, leaving behind only a handful to help with the Stunned pure-bloods.

Most members of the Sanctimonia turn out to be just what Hermione thought Ministry officials. The likes of Umbridge, Cadwallader, Umfraville, Entwhistle, Hopkirk, and Jorkins are joined by Cuthbert Mockridge, Celia Bragge, and Rufus Fudge. The rest consist of both Malfoy men, Betty Braithwhite, and Marietta Edgecombe, who all come from the most affluent pure-blood families. All of which leads Kingsley to decide that Harry and Ron are the only Aurors he trusts with this case.

Hermione and Severus both offer to help escort the captives to Ministry holding cells.

"Alright then, let's get them up and on their feet." Ron casts *Rennervate!* on Lucius, and the man jerks against his bonds for a few seconds before lying quietly.

Brought to standing none-too-gently by Ron, Malfoy sneers as Severus positions himself at his other side. "Why, Severus, you must be loving this, seeing your old *friend* brought so low."

"No, Lucius. I have no love of this, and any thought of friendship between us died a long time ago. I am sorry."

"As well you should be, though you're only a half-blood, so what did I expect?" Lucius, able only to move his head, nods towards Hermione. "And you've gone and got yourself a Mudblood doxy to boot. Tell me, does she scream like that one you and I "

"*Silencio!*" Severus's features appear a harsh mask all angles and hard lines as he stands with jaw clenched and eyes flashing cold fire.

Breaking the tension, Harry shifts at her side and says, "Right. We'd best get started with our lot then." With a flick of his wand, he revives Umbridge.

Trying to move, she only rocks back-and-forth on the ground for a few seconds like a bug trapped on its back.

With a hand on her ropes, Harry tugs Umbridge to her feet, where she stands, listing slightly.

Then her small eyes focus on Hermione and narrow. "You filthy Mudblood!" she shrills. "I told Goyle he made a mistake in choosing that male Mudblood to sort out his Greg. Why, it should have been you all along. Then we wouldn't be having this problem!"

Harry blanches before going bright red, and his wand flies up.

But this time, Hermione's faster. The hot rush of anger-fueled adrenaline twangs along her muscles, and she yells, "*Stupefy!*"

No one flinches as Umbridge's bound body thuds to the ground.

"Sod it! We're doing this the impersonal way. Back in a bit." Harry nods to Ron and Apparates away.

Hermione's head feels a little woozy, what with the thought that she could easily have died at three months caroming through her brain. "I think I need to sit."

Severus's arm wraps around her waist, and he leads her to over to a small stone away from all the bustle. "You know that what that foul toad said may not even be true."

"No? I mean, they definitely killed five babies that year, and there weren't that many Muggle-born who made it to Hogwarts in my class. It could easily have been me instead." Her gut lurches. "It's just ... up till now it's all been a bit ... abstract. Babies I knew they were killing babies, and that's horrible. But thinking about it is different than actually seeing it." She waves a hand towards the center stone. "And then thinking of it happening to myself."

After a few moments, Severus says quietly, "I am glad it was not you, Hermione."

"Me too, and Circe that sounds selfish."

"It sounds human."

They sit, looking out over the quiet lake, the sky inky above it so far from the Light Spells.

After a few minutes, he says, "I ... during the war ... I did things, but I never forced a woman or ..."

She places a hand on his arm. "Severus, I can't imagine what you must have had to do to maintain your cover."

He looks up at the moonless sky. "Yet there are things I did before I became Dumbledore's spy, Hermione. Things I did because I ..." His voice trails off.

"You were wrong."

He looks at her, face so carefully expressionless.

She continues. "But you sussed that out and worked hard for years to rectify all that. We're all allowed our mistakes, Severus. It's part of that human thing you were just telling me about."

With a loud pop, Harry's back with a fistful of beer mats. He hands half to Ron, and they begin walking among the Sanctimonia members, tossing a coaster onto their chests and tapping it with their wands. The bodies disappear five seconds later.

Hermione gives Severus's arm one last squeeze and walks over to Harry, who stands over Umbridge. "Can I help?"

"Hmm, what? Oh, no. These are keyed for Auror use only." He holds up a handful of Ugg's Unctuous Brew beer mats. "Each goes with a different cell at the Ministry. We'll still have to sort the paperwork later, but we won't have to listen to anything more from this lot for now." He prods Umbridge with a toe.

"Good."

He throws the Portkey down and activates it.

Ron walks over. "That's the last of them. Now, how about that pint?"

"Circe, yes! I could use a drink," Hermione replies before looking around to see a dark form walking away. "Severus? I thought you were coming with us."

He turns, his face unreadable. "I ... Yes, of course."

"I'll see you there in a few." Harry points to where Minerva and Kingsley stand with Draco. "I've got one last suspect to take care of."

Hermione nods and waits until the pops of everyone else leaving fade, Severus the last to go. She glances at the trampled ground and the large slab of stone lying at its center before turning to look out over the still waters of Llyn Llydaw. As she stares at its calm surface, the visual memory that rises before her isn't Umbridge's twisted features but instead a tiny baby with its hands wrapped halfway around one huge finger of Hagrid's, laughing up at that dear, giant face as it morphs through a series of ever sillier expressions.

Smiling, she cancels the Light Spells and goes to be with her friends.

AN: Old English to Modern English: Ástyntan Galdorwíde! stop the magical incantation; Gebrydan æt twyhynde and giefan tó twelfhynde - seize property improperly held from the lesser (people) and give to the greater (people)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 6

Working as the Ministry's new Keeper of Records turns out to be not quite what Hermione Granger had in mind. It's ... well, dull, dull, boring, and possibly – no, very definitely – dull. She has a mountain of information at her fingertips – a log of everything officially recorded in the Wizarding world – and most of it's, yes, dull. Then one day, a filing cabinet sticks, and her busy brain notices the smallest clue, one that will have her and Severus Snape struggling to uncover a conspiracy that, if true, will tarnish the Wizarding world's golden post-war view of itself forever.

AN: Thanks go to my beta firefly_124 and my Brit-picker saracen77!

Chapter 6

It's obviously been too long since she's had as much fun as last night because there's no Hangover Potion to be found in her cupboards.

With a groan, Hermione downs a couple of Muggle paracetamol her mum left. The smell of cat food makes her gag, so after feeding Crookshanks, she flees the kitchen for the morning.

At least it's well worth it, she thinks, remembering how the lock-in had gone to the small hours of morning, Order member after Order member Apparating in as they were healed or at least healed enough to raise a pint. They had another round with each addition to their numbers, Ron, Harry, Hermione, Severus, and Minerva all crammed into one booth. Minerva, it turns out, can truly hold her drink, her only signs of inebriation being that Severus was able to tease more and more examples of her sharp wit from her. It's all one big, joyful whirl of laughter and talk and good friends.

She presses a hand to her stomach. If only it weren't still whirling.

And Harry's head yelling from her fireplace isn't helping matters either. "Hermione! Hello, Hermione!"

She staggers into the room, holding her head. "Harry?"

He quiets immediately. "No Hangover Potion? Sorry. I'll get some for you by the time you get here."

"Get there?"

"Yes, you've got to come down to Auror Headquarters. We need you to help with the Pure-blood Sanctimonia."

She groans. "All right."

"Apparate," Harry says. "Trust me, as bad as that is, it's better than Flooing. See you in ten?"

Waving a hand at him in answer, she goes back into her bedroom. A series of Cleansing Charms later, she shrugs into fresh clothes and concentrates on the reception area of Level Two, praying she doesn't splinch.

She arrives with a lurch of her stomach that has her swallowing and taking deep breaths to quell the tide of nausea.

A small green vial appears before her, and Severus's voice says, "Drink it."

The taste bitter on her tongue, relief nonetheless comes instantly, her head clearing and stomach quieting. "Circe, that's brilliant!"

"It should be. I brewed it myself."

"Thanks." She smiles up at him, and he nods.

"Hermione. Snape." Ron emerges from the corridor, Harry just behind him.

"Thanks for coming so quickly." Harry takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose tiredly. "We could do with your help we haven't got much of anything yet."

"Yeah." Ron says. "Except for Umbridge going absolutely mental and screaming her bloody head off that 'Mudblood filth' was going to steal all the magic."

Harry grins. "That was a sight! Too bad she's come over all catatonic and stopped talking. And Lucius has been a cagey one from the start, the bastard. He just sits there, looking all superior and asking for his solicitor."

"None of the others will say anything either," Ron says, leaning tiredly against the wall. "A few Cadwallader, Hopkirk, and Edgcombe have been pissing about like they might give us something, but they've been keeping their gobs shut so far."

"Which leaves us with only one real informant Draco. But he says he won't talk unless you lot are in the room."

Hermione looks over to Severus with an eyebrow raise.

He shakes his head slightly.

The interrogation room is stark a wooden table flanked by five chairs, the one off by itself already holding Draco.

Once they're seated, Harry starts a Quick-Quotes Quill going and says, "Alright, Malfoy. Everyone you asked for is here now, so talk."

"Not so fast, Potter. I want a promise of immunity for the role I played in exposing all of this."

Hermione leans forward. "You stopped your father, yes, and I'm sure that will be taken into account, but *you're* not the one who did all the work to uncover this conspiracy."

"Come on, Granger. You were always supposed to be the smart one, remember?" His lips curl into a sneer that looks no better now than that time she hit him.

Her hand starts to tingle, imagining the impact of it.

"Just who do you think it is that spelled the cabinet to stick and made sure you'd find the list of Hogwarts students for our year so interesting?"

"An Attraction Spell," Severus says.

Draco nods before looking back to her. "You only sussed out that there even was a problem because of me."

Severus snaps his fingers. "And Gristletow's book on Old English spellcasting I knew I had never seen it before."

"Yes, I planted that a few weeks ago and keyed the Attraction Spell on it specifically to you as soon as I knew you were working with Granger."

"How did you know we were working together?" Hermione asks. "We were supposedly dating."

"Please!" He laughs.

Not sure who's being insulted, her or Severus, Hermione feels her cheeks flush with anger. Mouth opening for a sharp retort, she feels Severus's hand on her arm and looks up at him to see a tiny head shake. He's right Draco's just trying to get her back up, and she needs to not play his game.

"So, Draco," Severus says, "why all this subterfuge? Take for instance the note you sent. Why was it in riddles?"

"Do you really think that the most powerful pure-blood families would conspire in this way and *not* protect their secret?" Draco's lost none of his annoying ability to talk and sneer at the same time.

"They used the Sodalitas Charm."

"Exactly."

"The what?" Hermione asks.

"The Sodalitas Charm is an older and somewhat broader form of Fidelius," Severus replies. "One may only speak on the subject protected with people who already know it as well." He turns to Draco. "So you set us a trail of clues and waited until we had followed far enough along that you could contact us."

Draco nods. "And even then, the spell still wouldn't allow me to be direct. But I hoped you'd sussed out enough to take the note seriously."

"But why, Malfoy?" Harry says, voice firm. "Why did you do all of this?"

"Do you really have to ask? Is that what you think of me, Potter?" Draco's sneer holds as he looks from face to face. Yet whatever he sees there makes him slump forwards like a popped balloon deflating, all pretense gone his face softens, and his shoulders droop. "Look, I've heard the whole pure-blood superiority thing my entire life, but killing ... especially babies ... Once I'd held Scorpius, I just ..."

After a few moments, Ron breaks the silence. "Let's all have a cuppa, shall we?" With a flick of his wand, a Ministry brown Betty appears on the table with five cups.

Severus aims his own wand at the pot.

Taking a cup and breathing in the now familiar smell, Hermione can't decide which strikes her as more amusing: Severus's insistence on not drinking Ministry tea or Ron playing good cop to Harry's bad.

It works though. After a few sips, Draco starts talking again. "I only found out about it all a couple of months ago. Right before Scorpius was born, Father had me inducted into the Pure-blood Sanctimonia. I thought it was just a club, but then ..." He clears his throat. "Well, then Father told me about the Gebryidan Galdorléoð and how it was

the only way to get back the magic the Muggle-born were stealing from the pure-bloods. He told me because he wanted to do the ritual on Scorpius, just as he'd ... just as he'd done it on me." His voice emerges as a harsh whisper, and even though he's turned his face away, Hermione can see how his mouth twists with pain.

"You did not make that decision, Draco. Lucius did," Severus says. "Do not forget that."

"And Voldemort must have pushed it too." Harry's voice is grim.

Draco shakes his head. "No, this was kept separate from Voldemort. While some Death Eaters were involved, there were also quite a few people in the Sanctimonia who didn't follow Voldemort. No, Father and Umbridge thought up the entire thing. She was in some low-rung job in the Ministry's Department of Education and kept reading all of these reports that Muggle-born and half-bloods were some of the best students at Hogwarts."

"Was that in the early 1970s?" Hermione asks.

"Yes. Interestingly, the two students who originally caught her attention were Lily Evans and, well, you, Severus."

Snape cocks an eyebrow.

"Then Father comes along with the personal spell book of one of my ancestors, a Bertwald Melred "

"Just a minute." Ron interrupts. "I thought you lot were French."

"With hair like this?" Draco snorts. "Hardly. No, my Anglo-Saxon ancestors were merely smart enough to change their surname to French to increase their odds of surviving the Norman Invasion."

"You were saying," Harry says pointedly, shooting a look at Ron, who shrugs sheepishly.

"Father found quite a few spells in the diary, including that enhanced shield spell and the Gebryidan Galdorléoð. They tried the latter on an orphaned Squib, it worked, and the rest went from there."

Severus shifts in his chair, eyes intent. "And this spell book?"

"Hidden. Father never lets anyone see it or any of the spells it contains. Half of Gebryidan Galdorléoð is non-verbal, and all of the shield spell is, so ..." Draco shrugs.

Numbers flash through her brain, and the magnitude of it all washes over Hermione again, ice water through her veins. "They've been doing this for thirty years. Even at only four rituals a year, that's one hundred and twenty Muggle-born babies killed."

"And there isn't even that much trouble with Squib births these days. There hasn't been for a good five or six years. No, now they just do the ritual 'in case' and because 'it can't hurt anything, can it?'" His voice changes from its high sing-song imitation of Umbridge and grows hoarse. "As if they weren't killing a baby every time. I look ... I look at Scorpius and think of someone hurting him for something like this and ..."

After a pause, Hermione asks softly, "So Scorpius is a Squib?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. The diagnostic spells don't show anything conclusive yet." He rubs at his face, looking suddenly more drawn than can be accounted for by one night's missed sleep. "I looked into it, and not every baby immediately manifests a magical signature that's strong enough to differentiate from the mother's only the most powerful tend to do so. Most can take up to six months to register with the Detection Spells."

"Then why do the ritual so early if it may not even be necessary?" Severus asks.

"That's what I wondered about. It turns out the spell requires the donor to be exactly three months old, but the other baby could be older. However, three months is also the last time the Hogwarts Induction Lists will automatically update with a child's name. Anything after that and the parents have to fill out multiple forms."

"And that much paperwork could attract attention," Hermione says.

Draco nods. "The Keeper of Records before you, old Stephan Molescue, was in on all of it, but even so, the papers would have had to be processed by two people in the Ministry the Sanctimonia couldn't influence before they made it to him."

It's quiet while everyone finishes off their tea, digesting information along with the caffeine.

Everything falls into place in her mind: the timing of the ritual, the expunged documents for the Sanctimonia, the manipulation of the Induction Lists, the reason it all began in 1976. Eventually, Hermione says, "I've got one more question, Draco. I understand that the Sodalitas Charm kept you from telling us anything specific ahead of time. But once the ritual began and we showed up to stop it, why did you wait so long to help? The Muggle-born baby was almost completely drained."

"Have you ever had to turn on your father, Granger? Turn on a father who, no matter what he's done to others, has always loved you, always done what he thought best for you?"

She can't answer him.

His mouth twists. "I thought not. Lecture me all you want on something else, but this you know nothing about."

After a few tense, awkward moments, Harry rustles the parchments before him. "I think we've got enough to go on for now. I'll talk to Kingsley about getting you released to house arrest, and I'll do whatever I can do make sure you're not charged in this."

"Me too." Ron stands and offers his hand. "Thanks, Malfoy."

"Yes, thank you," Hermione says, pouring sincerity into her voice.

Severus places a hand on Draco's shoulder. "I am proud of you."

Draco gives him a small smile, but when Hermione looks back at Draco from the door, he sits, head bowed, shoulders shaking.

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While Harry and Ron use the remainder of the weekend to round up the rest of the Sanctimonia suspects, Hermione spends it catching up on sleep and writing her official report for the Ministry on everything she discovered about the Sanctimonia. Not hearing from him, she assumes Severus finds himself similarly occupied and doesn't Floocall. Besides, Crookshanks lies on her lap or sits on her feet constantly, his furry weight a subtle rebuke for how much she's been away lately, so she spends any free time making much of him.

All of which means she feels quite rested and energetic Monday morning, and that only makes the empty desk and silent vault of the Records Room that much harder to

face. Whatever will she do with her time now?

Storing a copy of her report in her desk drawer, she sighs. Maybe the more pertinent question is: whatever will she do with her mind?

She sits, head propped on one hand, doodling at the *Prophet* crossword, which she finished within five minutes, when a flying parchment hits her cheek.

Kingsley would like to see her.

The lift picks up two people from Magical Transportation in the Atrium and deposits them on Level Six but, other than that, drops her at Level One quite quickly, where the secretary whisks her straight into Kingsley's office.

Griselda Marchbanks, High Inquisitor of the Wizengamot, and Gawain Robards, Head of the Auror Office, sit with Kingsley on a collection of comfortable wingback chairs gathered in front of the fireplace.

"Hermione, won't you join us?" Kingsley gestures to an empty seat, then looks behind her. "And Severus, you as well."

She glances over as Severus settles into the chair beside her. He appears well, skin pale, but only a normal pale instead of the grey of fatigue. He does not, however, look her way.

"We've all read the reports both you and Messrs Potter and Weasley submitted on the Sanctimonia issue, and we want to commend you for capital work, just capital!" Kingsley beams at them.

They both murmur their thanks.

"Young Malfoy may be trying to take the credit for much of what you found," Robards says, "but it's clear that this was a top-notch piece of investigating on your part."

"Which is why we've asked you to come and see us," Marchbanks says. "I've always regretted that we lost you over at the Wizengamot, Hermione, though I also agree that you need to be something other than a clerk. Although I will say that I can no longer regret it, for it is clear that your work history has given you a unique skill set that we'd prefer to put to better use."

"The situation is a little different for you, Severus." Kingsley gives a nod in his direction. "While you're able to do whatever Potions research you desire in your current position, I must ask if you found this recent adventure interesting."

"It has been somewhat ... stimulating in a fashion that Potions research does not afford."

"Good, good." Kingsley rubs his hands together. "We're proposing to create new positions for each of you."

"My Aurors do a bang up job of taking care of the day-to-day things that occur, but it leaves them little time to dig into anything that doesn't directly affect their case. And trust me, they hear a lot of dodgy business."

"Things are similar for Wizengamot barristers. They might come across an interesting or out-of-place piece of information, but their case load is so heavy that they have no chance to look into anything else."

"Which is why we need you," Kingsley says. "You two would form a new section of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement charged with investigating anything brought to you by anyone in the entire department or let's make that anyone in the entire Ministry. All those little bits of oddities that may end up being nothing a good deal of the time or may turn out to be something serious. With all the personnel shifts we're going to have due to the Sanctimonia issue, it's the perfect time for this. Besides, we'll also be able to tell reporters that we're taking special steps to ensure such a conspiracy never takes root in the Ministry again." He grins. "That special step would be you."

"Us? Our own section?" She's gobsmacked, able to do little more than parrot key phrases.

"Hermione, you bring a fair knowledge of the Wizengamot and the Records Room. Severus, you have a great deal of experience as a spy. You've just uncovered the most scandalous infiltration of the Ministry since Voldemort's Death Eaters gained power in 1997, and to top it all off, you're two of our brightest employees."

And she wants it, wants it so. Her heart pounds, and excitement tingles along her limbs, wanting to burst from her in a shout of yes, yes, yes!

Shifting, unable to sit still, she turns to look at Severus.

His face expressionless, he holds his body perfectly immobile, shoulders high, back straight and stiff.

Her mood dulls a bit as she wonders if he doesn't want this.

"Or there's another option." Kingsley's voice pulls her attention to him again. "Hermione will head up the new section and be devoted to it full time. I doubt you'll have a problem leaving the Records Room, will you?" He chuckles at her vigorous headshake. "And Severus can divide his time between his Potions research and this new endeavor."

That has to do it, she thinks, Potions and spy work. How can he refuse?

Yet even under the combined pressure of their four gazes, he doesn't move.

And a small voice in the back of her head, one she's tried to ignore these past weeks, whispers that maybe he doesn't want it because he doesn't want to have to spend so much time with her. Maybe that's why he ignored the kiss, why he tried to leave without going down the pub.

"Yes."

"What?" It emerges in shock she's convinced herself he'd say no.

He arches a brow at her. "I said yes."

She can't stop smiling, heart skipping happily. "That's brilliant!"

"Yes, it is," Kingsley says. "All right. I'm going to send Walter Buggles down to the Records Room today. He's Muggle-born, so there shouldn't be any worries about him and that Sanctimonia crowd. Show him that new set of spells, if you will, Hermione." His smile turns mischievous. "After all, I fully expect you to have him digging through the cabinets for you instead of bogged down by routine filing."

Robards says, "We'll also have everything formalized by tomorrow with a new office for you on Level Two, Hermione."

"And I already have your first assignment," Marchbanks says. "Find out why the pure-bloods were having problems with increased Squib births. That, out of all of this, is still something to be addressed."

They stand.

Through the entire round of handshakes, congratulations, and thank yous, Hermione feels she's never smiled so much, and as she walks out the door, she almost laughs out loud at hearing Kingsley say, "No, Gawain, we're not naming it the Bits and Bobs Section. Doesn't send the right message, see."

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Severus remains quiet, so quiet, the entire ride back in the lift, not looking at her.

The other people more than make up for it though, giving each other pointed looks and nodding their heads to where she stands beside Snape. Hermione even sees one of them mouth "Trouble in paradise, what?" to another with a giggle.

She grits her teeth, hands balling, and smirks at them with an expression that must be fairly daunting because they look away. Chalk it up to another thing she's picked up from Severus.

He leaves the lift at Level Nine without a look back, and with a hump of frustration, she follows him into his lab and closes the door.

Time, once again, to be Gryffindor.

"Severus, talk to me. I thought if nothing else we were friends."

He turns abruptly. "Yes, *friends*." The word sounds anything but.

"What? What is this?" She reaches out and clasps his hand, which wrestles to escape, making her only squeeze harder.

He looks down at their joined hands, then up to meet her eyes. A haunting look of pain crosses his face. "Hermione, the investigation is done. There is no need to pretend any longer."

"Pretend? That's what you think this is?" She'll show him where he can stuff his *pretend*. With a growl, she tugs on his hand, reaching out with her other to catch his shoulder and pull him to her.

Their lips hit with a clack of teeth that should hurt but which instead only makes her fiercer. Tongues, hot and insistent, tangle and release, dancing against one another as her body struggles to get closer. Fire flashes through her, leaving her wanting more, more, more, and she moans into his mouth as his teeth tug on her lower lip. Then they're kissing again, lost in the slide of tongues and lips, hands scrabbling in the confusing desire to both touch and cling.

Breaking apart, they stand panting and dazed, and it's a few moments before she clears her throat to say, "Did that seem like pretend to you?"

"No."

"Good. Because it isn't for me, and if it is for you, you need to tell me right now."

"Hermione." He reaches to stroke her cheek. "I thought you were only doing your best for the case, over achieving as usual." A faint smirk. "I did not think ..."

Placing her fingers over his mouth, she smirks right back. "Well, then, that's your problem right there. This doesn't require a lot of thinking if you do it right, so come over here, and I'll show you just how much I can 'over achieve.'" She pulls him to her.

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12 December 2006

Conclusion of the Office for Unusual Investigations report on anomalous Squib births:

Therefore, in light of the corroborance of dates and relative proximity of the parties involved, we can only find that the higher number of Squib births seen from 1953 to 1998 were due to Thomas Riddle, a.k.a. Voldemort. Although the spell itself is not known, it appears that Riddle constantly absorbed a small portion of magical energy from those in close physical proximity to him. Even when not physically present, his numerous Horcruxes seem to have continued the drain, and it is thought that this leaching of magical energy might actually be directly related to maintaining multiple Horcruxes, though further research into this area to ascertain this theory will not be undertaken. While not enough to affect the parties involved in a direct fashion, the drain of magic appears to have been adequate to interfere with their ability to invest their genetic material with magical potential.

In short, by attempting to ensure what they saw as their rightful place in the Wizarding world, pure-bloods only jeopardized it.

Hermione Granger

Severus Snape

AN: Latin to English: Sodalitas secret society. Old English to Modern English: Gebryidan Galdorléoð take property improperly held incantation.