

Harbinger

by Bambu

Severus Snape has been pardoned by Ministry decree, but not everyone is pleased that he has returned to teaching at Hogwarts.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 12

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Disclaimer and Author's Note: The Harry Potter universe is the brainchild of J.K. Rowling, and any and all of her legal assignees; I'm merely playing in the sandbox. This story is complete and was written for Foxestacado in the SS/HG Exchange on Live Journal. I owe much gratitude to my intrepid beta team of SnarkyWench, who checks everything, Talesofsnape, who checks for congruity, and Lifeasanamazon, who joined the team to Brit-pick for me. All three held my hand through the process.

Warnings: Some graphic imagery, some violence, and a possible erotic moment or two. There will be spoilers for the entire seven-book series, including judicious application of elements from *Deathly Hallows'* epilogue. I've employed a couple of conjectures which have been bandied about the fandom post-*Deathly Hallows*. Although I've read only one story using any of these gimmicks, it seems naïve to think it and the others haven't been used elsewhere. If there is any similarity between this work and any other, it's entirely unintentional, I assure you.

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Prologue: In which Hermione Granger and Harry Potter take matters into their own hands.

Harsh sunlight shone through the windowpanes, both broken and unblemished, casting blotchy patterns throughout the Great Hall of Hogwarts where the lingering miasma of horror was buoyed by the relief of triumph. The Weasley family clustered together in the barely contained chaos, its two dark-haired satellites hovering at the edge of the familial solar system. In the center of this small universe, George Weasley's head bowed against the inescapable reality of his twin's death while his siblings and parents offered comfort through their presence and shared grief. Standing adjacent to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger clung to Harry Potter, her fingers wrapped around his as if they were Devil's Snare. Ron's attention was turned wholly inward as he and his elder brother, Percy, bonded over the traumatic moments of Fred's death.

In the broader expanse of the great room, Aurors, mediwizards and other Ministry personnel dodged like so many comets through the living and the dead, intent upon their own tasks: diagnosing and healing the wounded; cataloguing and verifying the loyalties of the dead; or interrogating the survivors.

When Hermione, Harry, and Ron had returned to the Great Hall two hours before, they had been dragged to a swift, but concise, debriefing with Kingsley Shacklebolt and three Aurors who were never introduced. Harry never did get the sandwich he'd hoped to find, and the three friends had been unceremoniously placed under Percy Weasley's care. Hermione's only consolations were in Dolores Umbridge's absence and in watching Percy ignore his own battle-inspired resignation and seize his authority. Under his direction sections of the Great Hall had been cordoned off, including one area for his family and those who had fought so bravely against the Death Eaters and Voldemort's army.

At the edge of the cordoned-off area, Luna Lovegood sat with unfazed equanimity on a cracked bench, holding a dressing to Cho Chang's arm. Dean Thomas sat on the floor with his back against the wall, a broken leg held in place by a neatly braced contraption of tree limbs and strips of cloth. His body was angled in such a manner that the foot of his undamaged leg rested against one of Luna's shoes while he patiently waited for medical assistance. They didn't speak, but there was no need.

Nearby, in a rough-hewn triage area, a Healer applied sticky salve to Lavender Brown's ruined face while the blonde lay barely conscious upon a makeshift bed. Fenrir Greyback had severely wounded the seventh year Gryffindor before finally falling under the dual onslaught of Neville Longbottom's and Ron Weasley's wands. Fortunately, Hermione's and Sybil Trelawney's earlier efforts including the unorthodox use of crystal balls to defend Lavender from the werewolf had severely weakened him. Although he had later fought with the feral viciousness of a cornered beast, Greyback had been quickly dispatched.

While Hermione had grown used to the sight and stench of death over the past hours, the noise remained a harsh buzzing in her skull; if she'd been thinking clearly, she would have recognized symptoms of shock. Indeed, a full five seconds passed before she realized Arthur Weasley was speaking to her.

"... back to the Burrow with us?"

As she had so often in the past, Hermione sought out Ron's reaction to his dad's invitation, only to find him staring in morbid fascination at Lavender. Hermione's benumbed heart twinged painfully at the sight, but she understood his fascination and distress. All the Weasleys knew what it was like to live with the repercussions of Greyback's violations, regardless of whether the victim was ex-lover or brother.

"Hermione?" Harry's question interrupted her train of thought.

She swung her head in his direction, absently noting the dark circles under his eyes and his gaunt cheeks, attesting to their months' of privation. "What?"

"We've been invited to the Burrow. Do you want to go?"

"I'm sorry." She blinked, attempting to focus. "I wasn't paying attention."

Arthur squeezed her shoulder. "Quite understandable given the circumstances."

Hermione looked up at the man she considered her surrogate father. His grime-smeared face bore the signs of his loss, and he looked every second of his fifty-plus years, but there was no gainsaying his generous nature.

"Thank you for thinking of me," she said. Her eyes inadvertently strayed to the long line of tables where the dead had been laid out, unerringly finding Fred's body, where it was covered by his mother's tatty cloak. Hermione swallowed hard, ignoring the tight ball of nausea in her stomach and the burning in her eyes. "I don't want to intrude."

At her side, Harry nodded his head and his fingers tightened their grip on hers. "Hermione's right, Mr. Weasley. Professor McGonagall said we could stay with her for a couple of days. It might be better if we remained here."

"Are you certain, Harry?"

"We'd like to come over later to the house if we may?" Hermione phrased it as a question.

"You're always welcome. You're like family, you two." The older wizard managed a smile; it wavered, but it was fueled by genuine affection. Taking Harry's free hand, Arthur shook it, man-to-man. "Thank you for everything you've done to save our world." He then patted Hermione's shoulder before ushering his family out of the Hall and to the daunting task of reclaiming their fractured lives.

Ron and Ginny were the last to leave. Ron, characteristically tongue-tied in the face of overwhelming emotion, merely said, "See you, Harry, Hermione," before following his brothers.

Ginny stared at Harry and Hermione's clasped hands for a long moment. She glared at the older witch but spoke to Harry. "Will you come and see us tomorrow?"

To his credit, Harry didn't relinquish Hermione's hand, but his shoulders straightened. "I'd like that, Ginny. I'd like to spend some time with you."

The hard line of Ginny's mouth softened. "I'd like that, too. It's going to be horrible ... these next few days." Her hazel eyes filled with renewed tears.

"Ginny, I'm so sorry," Hermione said, dropping Harry's hand to hug the redhead as tightly as she had two hours before. They clung to one another for a brief, lung-squashing moment, whatever unresolved issues might lie between them immaterial in the face of such devastation.

Finally, Ginny released Hermione and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Right. Well, I'd better go or they'll send Charlie to get me." Before she reconsidered, Ginny stepped past Hermione and kissed Harry on the lips. "Come tomorrow, Harry. We have a lot to talk about." Then, with a fierce look over his shoulder at an openly staring Cho Chang, she spun on her heel and followed her family out through the hex-ravaged doors.

Seeing Harry's heightened color, Hermione asked, "Are you all right?"

His fingers touched his lips, his eyes focused on the door. "Yeah. Maybe."

With the departure of the Weasleys, Hermione felt as if a suffocating layer of cotton wool had been lifted from her. She scrubbed her face with her hands and glanced around the Great Hall. In one corner, the bedraggled Malfoy family was being questioned individually by Aurors whose official robes were embellished by a bright yellow armband.

In what would remain a vivid memory for the rest of her life, Hermione recalled Lucius Malfoy shouting his son's name with desperate fear while standing, defenseless and battered, in the midst of the Great Hall, backlit by red, green, and yellow curse trails. The man had never seen the virulent red jinx which knocked him off his feet, but his agony was such that she would never forget. He'd struggled to his feet, continuing his quest to find Draco, limping and bleeding onto the filthy floor. The irony of it being a zealous pureblood leaving a trail of muddy blood wasn't lost on Hermione, but there had been no time for further contemplation as she'd raced to engage Bellatrix Lestrange who had just attempted to kill Ginny.

That had been then.

Hermione would never like them, and her worst nightmares were associated with the terrifying and painful moments in their home, but the Malfoys' love for one another was something she could admire. Even though it was tragically unfair that Fred had died, she was generous enough to be glad the Malfoys had found each other.

Deliberately turning her head from the white-haired family, Hermione assessed the rest of the room. The walls were scorched and large blast holes dotted the giant stones. Up above, the ceiling's enchantment had been broken, and for the first time, plain wooden rafters could be seen. The sight saddened her, and she chose to look at people instead of the drastically altered but familiar surroundings. There were yellow-armed Aurors stationed in key locations, including a cluster surrounding Kingsley Shacklebolt who was holding an animated discussion with Minerva McGonagall and four very old members of the Wizengamot (whose clean robes stood out like a splash of blood on a pristine snow-blanketed field.) Hermione correctly guessed the yellow bands marked Kingsley's hand-picked team, and if she'd needed proof, she only had to look at the Aurors in her immediate vicinity. They all wore the distinctive armbands.

Her visual circuit ended with her best friend. He was watching her.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Dunno," Harry replied. Then he waved his hand in a broad arc. "It's probably too much to hope for a sandwich in all this."

"It seems disrespectful to be hungry, but it's most likely why I've been feeling a trifle woozy."

"Are you all right?" His voice changed, grew sharper. "Do you have any cuts? Are you bleeding?"

"I have some bruises and my clothes are singed, but I don't think I'm bleeding." Suddenly, she gasped. "Harry!"

"Hermione?" He grabbed her and one of the nearby Aurors came to abrupt attention. "Where are you hurt?"

"I'm all right. I'm fine." But her eyes were huge in her pale face. "Really."

With obvious reluctance, and much patting of her arms, he released her. The Auror relaxed, but his gaze passed over them more frequently than before.

Hermione slipped her wand into her hand and cast a nonverbal *Muffliato* in the Aurors' direction. Using the spell reminded her again of the detail they'd neglected. Harry's nostrils flared as he felt the anti-eavesdropping spell's distorting wave wash over him. Nonetheless, Hermione pitched her voice so only he could hear. "I've just remembered Professor Snape. We have to do something."

Green eyes flicked in the direction of the Aurors and Harry pinched his lips so tightly they were outlined in bloodless white. He waited until he had himself under control, and then said, "Yeah, we can't leave him like that. We owe him too much."

"We all do."

"Let's go."

He would've turned, but Hermione's hand on his arm stayed his departure. Then she stepped closer, right against him, as if overwrought by the events of the day.

"Hermione?" questioned Harry uncertainly, but his arms encircled her.

She ignored him and leaned her forehead on his shoulder, allowing her tangle of hair to screen her face as she surreptitiously looked to see who was watching. Some attention was to be expected, and numerous people glanced in their direction before continuing with their responsibilities, but only Cho remained avidly fixated on Harry. Hermione's lip curled in derision at the opportunistic witch; as far as she was concerned, the former Ravenclaw had squandered her chance.

Using the white noise created by Snape's spell, Hermione said quietly, "I think we should go alone. The professor wouldn't want to be found like that. You know, on the floor."

Harry closed his eyes tightly, his face a grim mask, and she could feel the tension in his arms. "He hated that place."

"It's too cruel that he died there. I don't want anyone else to see that." She released him and stepped back. "How do we go without, you know, an escort?"

Harry smirked, and then, for a fleeting second, he looked like the neglected little boy she'd first met, the one entranced by the reality of magic. "I have my dad's cloak," he said, "and I have an idea."

Despite the grisly past few hours, Hermione almost laughed. They had learned a lot about gallows humor, these two young veterans. "I know all about your ideas," she said, "and I'm not sure"

"You'll like this one. Trust me?"

"With my life."

Her response straightened his spine, and he subtly cancelled Snape's spell, and then, with a final piercing look, he seized her hand, pulling her toward the nearest Auror, a hard-faced woman of indeterminate years. He said, "My friend and I haven't eaten for a couple of days."

The Auror gave Harry and Hermione a glint-eyed once-over. "You may not wander off, Mr. Potter. We have our orders."

Hermione gave it a try. "We understand, but maybe someone could go with us to the kitchens while we find something to eat."

The hard-faced witch crossed her arms in denial, and Hermione's quixotic temper, stretched beyond breaking, snapped. "Look," she said angrily, "Harry died today. And then he faced off against Voldemort." She ignored the sharp gasps of those within hearing range. "I'd say he deserves a damn sandwich if he wants one!"

The Auror straightened to her full height, her face a mottled red. "You little "

"Bones!" A senior Auror's sharp commanding tone brooked no refusal. "Shut it! Escort them to the kitchen. If Potter and his friend are hungry, then let them eat. I, for one, don't want to explain to Shackebolt, our provisional Minister of Magic, why you've denied The Boy Who Lived Twice a bit of nosh."

The muscles of the woman's jaw bunched in anger, but she stepped aside, waving Hermione and Harry ahead of her in an exaggerated flourish of courtesy.

It took them ten minutes to reach the kitchens. They were forced to step around suits of armor and statues, piles of jagged metal and pulverized stone from where they had been demolished defending the castle. The damage was extensive and heartbreaking. Harry swore when he saw the shattered remains of the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

Once they reached the broken kitchen door, it had taken several minutes to persuade the Auror to wait at the entrance. Harry and Hermione stood quietly just out of Bones' line of sight, waiting for a house-elf to pause in the middle of meal preparation. The kitchen appeared to have been bypassed during the conflict while its denizens had bravely ventured into the melee outside, and from appearances, there had been few casualties amongst the diminutive squad's ranks. Once Harry and Hermione had been spotted, it was the work of a moment before the two friends held chip butties in their hands. They thanked the house-elves profusely, and then Harry draped his father's hand-me-down around his and Hermione's shoulders. Together, in long-practiced synchronization and without a shred of remorse, they invisibly slipped past Auror Bones guarding the door.

By the time they reached the site of the Whomping Willow, Hermione was licking the grease from the last chip off her fingers, but she cried out at the sight which greeted them. The Whomping Willow, planted the year Remus Lupin arrived at Hogwarts as a were-pup, had been uprooted by one of Voldemort's giants and tossed aside as if it were nothing more than a toothpick.

The tunnel to the Shrieking Shack had collapsed.

"Bollocks!" Harry swore vehemently.

"I don't think they've got round to resetting the Anti-Apparition wards yet. If you're willing to try, we could give it a go," she suggested.

The corner of his mouth quirked. "You've certainly had a rapid descent into rule-breaking, Hermione."

She giggled. "At least this won't get us expelled. Splinched maybe but not expelled."

In the distance, they could hear people shouting their names. Apparently Auror Bones had discovered that her charges were missing.

"I'd rather take a chance on splinching." Harry anchored his arm to her waist, and said, "You lead the Side-Along."

Hermione bit her lip in consternation. "Are *you* all right, Harry?"

"Fine," he said impatiently. "Let's go."

"Are you sure? I mean, you died."

He shifted his feet. "I'm just tired. It's nothing to go on about."

She sniffed but let the subject drop. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

Placing her left hand on Harry's shoulder, she grabbed a fold of the Invisibility Cloak; then holding her wand in her right hand, Hermione shifted her weight onto her right foot, pulling Harry into the spin of Apparition. They squeezed through time, space, and beyond the confines of Muggle physics to arrive with a small *pop* at the fence post where Harry had once thrown snowballs at Draco Malfoy.

The Shrieking Shack was as she remembered; no amount of lush spring foliage in the perpetually neglected garden could disguise its weathered and dilapidated state. The front door and one set of broken windows had been unblocked, and the overgrown walkway showed signs of recent trespass. Death Eaters, her mind automatically supplied. There were no Aurors in sight, nor were there sounds of any human activity, yet the preceding months had been a harsh taskmaster for the young fugitives and they were alert.

Together, they held their wands at the ready and cautiously passed through the perimeter fencing and up the front steps. This time Harry led while Hermione made certain they weren't followed; she obscured their tracks with a silent spell and a wave of her wand. She would never forget their near-fatal experience in Godric's Hollow, and at the top step, she jabbed and hooked the slender length of vinewood in the shape of the letter 'j', whispering, "*Hominum revelio!*"

After a long beat, she whispered, "Nothing."

He leaned in close. "Shouldn't Snape show up on the scan?"

"It only reveals living humans." Privately, she thought, *nothing's waiting for us except the body of a man clever enough to dupe us all and save our lives in the process.*

The front door squeaked when Harry opened it. He and Hermione stood to one side, just in case, allowing sunlight to fill the doorway, spilling into the room where they'd so recently been. However, when Harry and Hermione peeked around the frame, there was a significant difference from the tableau they remembered.

There was no corpse.

The puddle of blood thick, coagulated, and dried brown in some spots remained, but it had been disturbed, almost as if someone had dragged Snape's body through it, or taken a shoddy stab at siphoning off the liquid.

There was no need to cast *Lumos* as, in addition to the doorway, sunlight streamed through the unboarded window. The room was quite bare, the peeling paper still curled in yellowed strips, the walls remained grimy, and the crate Harry had moved to enter from the underground tunnel was exactly where they'd left it.

Harry took one cautious step into the room followed closely by Hermione. They were supposedly undetectable, but the sun cast their shadows onto the floor. Harry groaned. "Bugger!" he said, and pulled the cloak off before stepping fully into the building.

Hermione didn't answer; instead she whirled at a rustling noise, something scrabbling on the floorboards beyond the far side of the crate. "Professor?" she said softly, moving toward the noise.

Harry avoided the blood as if it were Snape's actual body. "Hermione," he said in an indecipherable tone.

"What is it? Oh! Oh, my." There, hidden by the crate and staring at them through yellow eyes, blood coating its beak, neck, and chest feathers, was a large gray and white owl. For one long moment, Hermione was completely baffled. "What is it doing here? Is it one of the school's owls? Is it hurt? Where's the professor?"

The owl seemed disinclined to move, and Hermione kept staring at the blood coating the front of its chest and beak. She knew very little about owls, only bits she'd gleaned from her interaction with Hedwig whose loss still rankled and Pigwidgeon.

Harry had turned his attention from the bird and was examining the room. There were no footprints, nor other signs that Snape's body had been dragged into another part of the building. "It must've come in through the window." He pointed, saying, "Look, there are claw marks in the middle of the blood. That must be where it landed. Maybe it's hurt. It could've been hit by a deflected spell."

Hermione nodded in agreement, and stepped closer to the bird, her tender heart hating to see anything in pain, but the owl shifted on its claws, its wings unfurling awkwardly in alarm. "Shhhh, shhhh," she said soothingly. "I don't want to hurt you." At her next step, though, the owl clacked its beak, and Hermione paused. "Harry, I don't think it wants me to come any closer."

"We'll tell Hagrid. He'll know what to do for it. But Snape isn't here, Hermione. I think someone"

"What are you two doing?" Sharp, strident tones shattered the quiet.

Instantly, Harry and Hermione crouched, spinning toward the front door and the origin of the voice. They raised their wands to defend themselves, and Hermione automatically cast, "*Protego*". Her Shield Charm flared brightly in the small room, protecting them against their adversary.

However, there was no adversary at the front door. Instead, they were confronted with none other than Hogwarts' librarian. Madam Pince was clearly the worse for her staunch defense of the school; her gray-streaked hair tumbled around her face in lank strands, and her dressing gown was torn and scorched, but she held her wand steadily in one hand. "Shacklebolt has people searching everywhere for you."

"We ... er ... we wanted to help Professor Snape," Hermione explained, her singed robes hiding the owl from the librarian's sight.

"Professor Snape?" Madam Pince said in startled surprise, and then stared at the spilled blood. "So much blood," she whispered, and her chin wobbled before it firmed. Her black eyes darted about the room. "Where is he?" she demanded.

The conditioning of years drew immediate answers from the two friends. "We don't know," Harry replied.

Hermione silently cancelled her Shielding Spell then answered the question. "He was here earlier."

"We didn't want anyone to find him here ... like this." Harry rolled his hand, palm up, indicating the interior.

"That isn't your concern." The librarian's stare remained fixed on the large pool of blood.

"He should be everyone's concern, Madam Pince," Hermione said staunchly, earning her an indecipherable look.

Harry added an accolade. "He was a hero."

"Let the Aurors handle it." Pince's hand had wrapped around the doorknob, her knuckles white from her grip. "You should return to the castle where you belong. Go straight back, Mr. Potter. They need to see you. It reminds them it's all over."

Harry carefully skirted the perimeter of Snape's body print. "All right."

When Hermione stepped away from the crate, Pince saw the owl. Her face paled until she resembled nothing more than an alabaster statue. "Strige," she whispered, her voice cracking on the word.

"Madam Pince?" Hermione asked. "Are you all right?"

The older woman shook her head, her eyes never leaving the large owl. "I'm tired, Miss Granger. I'll wait for the Aurors to arrive."

There was nothing more to be said, and Harry left the building first, his shoulders slumped in sorrow.

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Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 12

In which Hermione Granger gives Minerva McGonagall a gift and commits a faux pas in front of a former professor.

Chapter One: In which Hermione Granger gives Minerva McGonagall a gift and commits a faux pas in front of a former professor.

"I'm certain the Board of Governors will be more than satisfied with your qualifications, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Headmistress. As I mentioned, I'm investigating my options. I have no idea what sort of teacher I would make, but I appreciate your meeting with me." Hermione smoothed the skirt of her sober navy robes and glanced around the circular office. An infrequent visitor while she'd been a student and a nonexistent one in the eight years since, she was nevertheless surprised at how elegant a stone-walled room could appear. A tasteful geometric-designed tapestry hung on the wall directly behind the headmistress, and a semblance of order had rendered the multitude of bookcases as much a decorative statement as they were practical. There was surprisingly little clutter.

The gallery of portraits had been rearranged artistically according to the frames' style, color, and substance. High on the wall, in the far corner, was a blank canvas framed by a thin silver band. Hermione could only surmise it had been intended for former Headmaster Snape, but she didn't really know. The last time she'd been in the office the portraits had hung higgledy-piggledy, and their occupants had been enthusiastically applauding Harry's survival. Now several portraits were unoccupied, leaving a scattered handful of the past headmistresses and headmasters paying attention to the meeting.

"Surely you don't live at the Ministry, Miss Granger?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked, her attention pulled sharply back to the witch seated behind the desk.

"Your address," said Septima Vector, indicating the curriculum vitae she held in her hand.

Hermione shifted her posture, leaning forward to explain. "It's standard protocol implemented since the war. All Magical Law Enforcement personnel use the Ministry's address for professional correspondence."

"A prudent decision." The headmistress inscribed a note on the parchment while the subject of that note appraised her would-be employer. When she was little more than thirteen, Hermione's attention had been captured by Vector because the witch was an excellent instructor and her subject had been fascinating. But Hermione had been too focused on her studies and Harry's survival to have perceived her former teacher as anything other than a repository of knowledge. Now, however, she noticed the intricately coiffed black hair and stylish, pearl gray robes which instilled a desire to check whether she had stains on her own robes. The slender woman had always moved gracefully, but there was stateliness in Vector's manners Hermione had been too inexperienced to recognize. It was very easy to see why she'd been named Headmistress over other candidates.

While her former student adjusted her paradigm, Vector completed her thought and placed her owl feather quill in a crystal tray. "If you teach Arithmancy with as much enthusiasm as you had for the subject when you were a student, I expect you to be an exemplary teacher."

Hermione flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, Professor."

"How soon will you know whether you're interested in the position?"

"Frankly, yours is the first possibility I've realistically entertained. I have several other appointments over the next few weeks. My understanding was that you were interviewing for the next school year. Is there a deadline, or are there other candidates for the position?"

Vector smiled. It was closed-mouth and perfectly proportioned. It was the sort of smile which would look dignified on the front page of a newspaper or women's magazine, and Hermione wondered if the older woman had practiced it before or after she'd been appointed headmistress.

"Professor Banneker has accepted an appointment to the International Confederation of Wizards and will be leaving for Brussels after the summer term," Vector said. "Fortunately, the advance notice gives the school a great deal of flexibility in choosing her successor. At present, besides you, there are two other candidates. Hogwarts has had to struggle to regain its former prestige, Miss Granger, and we live in something of a cloistered community. Thus, any addition to our small circle is carefully vetted."

"I imagine you've found Arithmancy helpful in the culling process," Hermione remarked, crossing one leg over the other and dangling her foot.

"An astute supposition. No prospective candidate is offered an in-person interview if their inclusion does not balance a series of Arithmantic equations. While I've attempted to fill our vacancies with exemplary teachers, I won't deny that having a hero or" she arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow, "heroine on the staff is an extremely good advert for rebuilding the school's reputation."

"If I hadn't learned not to stereotype, I would say that's quite Slytherin of you, Headmistress."

Vector actually laughed. "Yes, well, I would most likely have been in Ravenclaw had I been a student here."

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Ravenclaw, but" Hermione shrugged.

Vector arranged the bottles of colored ink in a row next to the crystal quill tray. "Not that you didn't have the intelligence to make an excellent addition to Ravenclaw House, but it seems the wizarding world owes the hat a debt of gratitude for its perspicacity in placing you as it did."

"If that's what you'd like to call it. Harry and Ron decided I was too bossy to be sorted anywhere other than Gryffindor."

Both women laughed, and Hermione relaxed for the first time since entering the room. Interviews had always made her nervous, her subconscious equating them with N.E.W.T. exams.

When she finished laughing, Vector said, "Arithmancy isn't the only vacancy I'll be facing in the near future. Professor Slughorn has decided to go back into retirement."

"I had heard he purchased a house in Majorca." At the headmistress' expression of surprise, Hermione elaborated. "He still has a number of contacts within the Ministry."

"Does he correspond with you or Mr. Potter?"

"Not in particular although Harry and I send him candied pineapple for Christmas."

"Harry and you?" The eyebrow rose. "Have you and Mr. Potter become a couple?"

"No." Hermione stifled her mirth. "There's been a lot of speculation, but don't believe everything you read in *Witch Weekly* or *The Daily Prophet*. Harry's like a brother to me, and besides, he's quite happily married."

Vector nodded. "And Mr. Weasley?"

Hermione bit her lip, a remnant of childish uncertainty, and her ease of a moment before evaporated as quickly as a Patronus with no happy thought to sustain it. "He's actually the reason I'm looking into a career change. It's rather awkward at the Aurory now that "

Raising a hand, Vector said, "You need say no more, Miss Granger. On occasion, I can balance an equation before the end calculations."

"I appreciate your understanding, Professor."

"Call me Seven, please. Even if you don't accept the position we've certainly known one another long enough to dispense with such formality ... Hermione."

"Thank you, Seven." Then she asked, "Forgive my asking, but who was so bold as to give you the nickname?"

Vector leaned back in her chair. "I acquired it during my very first staff meeting. The Muggle Studies professor had only been teaching for a year. She was young and American, and had studied at the Salem Academy. When we were introduced she had the audacity to ask, '*Septima? What sort of name is that? What does it mean anyway?*'"

"She didn't!"

"She was remarkably brash. I was taken aback, but Severus Snape looked down his nose at her and said, '*How fortunate for the students that your subject is Muggle Studies. Your education in the classics is woefully inadequate.*'"

Hermione's amusement was cut short when a deep, vaguely familiar voice chimed into the conversation. "Then, in order to educate her further, Severus said, '*Septima, Madam Smith, means Seven in Latin.*'" She looked for the newcomer, but no one had entered the office, and Hermione finally located the source in a gilt-framed portrait hanging amongst its brethren, but her former headmaster merely nodded when their eyes met.

Vector smiled her perfect smile. "And she was far too dense to understand he was insulting her, because her response was, '*How silly some parents are. My dorm mate was named Poppy of all ridiculous things.*' By the time she married and returned to the States at the end of that year Mary Smith had managed to offend most of the staff. However, I've been called Seven ever since."

"Shall I confess my relief that she was too intimidated by my reputation to call me anything other than headmaster?" Dumbledore's oil-based eyes had been magically enhanced to twinkle when he was amused.

"I shudder to think," Vector replied. "In any event, Hermione, you are welcome to use the name if you like."

"Thank you. I can imagine Professor Snape confronting Madam Smith. He must have been fairly young at the time."

"In his early twenties if I recall correctly," Dumbledore answered. "It was the same year Seven and Madam Pince came to us. A most distinguished year indeed."

"Thank you, Albus." Vector gave the former headmaster a stern look. "Now if you will be good enough to let me finish the interview. You may speak with her afterward, but I have a Board of Governors meeting later and I must be prepared."

"Don't let me interrupt. Miss Granger, it was delightful to see you again."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore." She wiggled her dangling foot, but very few would know it was a sign of restrained irritation.

"Be sure to give my regards to Harry. If he would move that blasted portrait of the Kraken from his office, I could come for a real chat."

"I'm afraid it's a Department-wide policy, but I shall pass on the message."

"I think I'll go and find Severus and reminisce a little." Dumbledore rose from the throne-like chair he'd been sitting in and moved to the edge of his portrait, then with a wave of his hand, he slipped from the frame.

The meeting concluded shortly thereafter, and Hermione promised to let the headmistress know her decision as soon as she'd investigated her other opportunities. Vector agreed, in turn, to advise Hermione if either of the other candidates proved more suitable for the position.

They parted cordially, and Hermione rode the circular stone staircase down to the gargoyle while thanking her luck that her interaction with her former headmaster had been short. Her opinion of Dumbledore had deteriorated over the years, especially after having seen Severus Snape's memories, suffered the rigors of the Aurory after she'd passed her N.E.W.T.s, and specialized in investigative techniques and Dark wizardry profiling. In her more educated opinion, Albus Dumbledore was responsible for almost as much misery as Tom Riddle, but she was very careful with whom she shared that opinion.

Several staircases and one brush with fame later (a small group of Ravenclaw first years whispered her name excitedly amongst themselves as she passed them), Hermione was comfortably seated in an overstuffed chair, upholstered in the McGonagall family tartan, with a cup of piping hot tea balanced on her lap and a piece of

Highland shortbread held between her fingers. She sipped the strong lapsang souchong and watched as her former teacher and recent friend opened her birthday present with the same fastidious attention to detail she showed in her Animagus form.

Minerva McGonagall was in the waning years of her middle age, brought on precipitously by Dolores Umbridge's unwarranted attack a decade before. Her hair had more gray in it, and the bun she habitually wore was looser, fuller, as if the strictures of wartime were truly a thing of the past and she contemplated letting her hair down. While her friend had poured her own tea, Hermione had noticed more wrinkles on the faded porcelain skin, but McGonagall's eyes behind her square-framed glasses were as clear and knowing as ever.

Carefully peeling the Spellotape from the metallic red paper, the Transfiguration professor said, "This is unexpected."

"I know we haven't exchanged gifts before, Minerva, and I used your birthday as an excuse really. I stumbled over it and immediately thought of you."

"Oh!" The wrapping paper fell to the floor, unnoticed, as McGonagall traced the raised letters of the book's title with her thin fingers.

Hermione said, "I couldn't find a first edition, but this is "

"I've never seen anything better than a third rate translation before. Where did you find this? You can't have just stumbled over it."

Caught in the polite fiction, Hermione confessed. "I may have put it on my wish list at Dots and Dashes last year, but the timing was perfect."

"Minerva" a voice Hermione should but didn't recognize announced a visitor's arrival " must you give Bedford detention Oh, good god! Look what the cat dragged in!"

The door opened fully and Hermione's jaw dropped at the sight of the newcomer: Severus Snape dressed in ubiquitous black wool and white cotton. Astonished by his appearance, she was speechless.

"Severus, behave yourself! You knew Hermione was coming today." McGonagall held out her gift. "Look what she gave me. It's *An Al-Iskandariyyan Cat in Mauretania* by Ubasti. This is the Edward Fitzgerald translation. It was done in the early 1800's before Fitzgerald discovered his passion for Persia and Khayyam. Look at its condition, Severus."

Snape accepted the slim volume from his colleague's hand, and while he examined the book, Hermione examined him. It had been several years since she had seen him in person seated in the witness chair in front of the entire Wizengamot but she had been deeply moved by his quiet dignity as he struggled with his injuries. Not only had they inhibited his ability to speak, but she remembered how heavily he had leaned on the stout walking stick he had needed to use.

The last time they had spoken was the night he had been forced against his better judgment to kill Albus Dumbledore. Hermione could still recall, in graphic detail, pacing the cold dungeon corridors outside Snape's office, Luna posted at the opposite end of the long hallway. It had been late, around midnight, when Professor Flitwick raced down the corridor. He hadn't even noticed Hermione or Luna as he sprinted into Snape's office shouting about Death Eaters in the castle. She remembered the sound of the small wizard's barely contained panic, and then the thump of a body falling to the ground, followed immediately by Snape's explosive exodus. He'd been taken aback by her and Luna's presence, but had directed them to care for the ailing Charms master.

For months Hermione had believed Remus Lupin's statement that Snape would've killed her had she attempted to stop or question him, but when the truth had finally come out, she had never been more ashamed. She, who had told herself Snape wasn't evil, and furthermore, that he balanced at the very edge of a steep precipice, should have looked harder at the circumstantial evidence. Severus Snape had been protecting her that night; protecting her and Luna from Death Eaters and a vicious, lethal fight.

There had never been an opportunity to apologize or thank him for what he'd done for her and now certainly wasn't the time. Not to mention that he was so very different than she remembered.

Snape was as tall as ever and quite lean. His nose was still large and hooked, and appeared to have been broken and healed improperly. His teeth were still crooked, but perhaps less yellow than before. There were deep furrows between his thick eyebrows, and she imagined the lines around his eyes were a result of pain rather than laughter. However, the most dramatic differences between Snape then and Snape now were in his posture and his hair. Where he used to hold his body like a highly strung predator, moving with stealthy exactitude as he ambushed unsuspecting students and victims, he now leaned against the door frame with indolent grace, his long fingers reverently exploring the second edition memoirs he held. There was something compelling about his focus and the way his dark eyes devoured the text.

And yet none of the changes wrought by eight years of relative peace were as dramatic as the change in his hair. It had been shaped by a professional and was shorter than Hermione had ever seen it. He obviously made an effort to keep it clean, although this late in the day its oily tendencies had begun to show. She had never known he had a high forehead; his black hair had hung like oil-soaked curtains, hiding the broad expanse of brow leading to a slightly receding hairline. Now that his entire face could be seen, his nose was proportional to the rest of his features.

As if aware of her scrutiny, Snape looked up from the *Al-Iskandariyyan* memoir. His eyes met hers and heat flooded her face, but Hermione was distracted by his scar. When he had looked up, the puckered bite marks on his neck became visible.

Abruptly, she remembered how he had acquired them. As if a Time Turner had spun wildly on its spindle, sending her back to the moment of the scars' acquisition, she recalled being in the Shrieking Shack, huddled in the dirt tunnel peeking over Harry's shoulder as Voldemort screamed, "*Kill!*" to his monstrous snake.

In the here and now, Hermione's eyes filled with tears and her breath became a ragged wheeze.

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

McGonagall's sharp tone pierced Hermione's abstraction, jerking her back from the quagmire of nightmare, and she realized she was staring directly into Snape's all-too-knowing eyes. Forcing herself to look elsewhere, McGonagall's worried expression pulled words from her mouth. "Yes! Sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Minerva, Professor Snape. I'm fine. Really." She avoided looking at Snape, the world's premiere devotee of sarcasm.

Instead of abrading her with the rough side of his tongue, Snape merely returned the book to its new owner. "Professor McGonagall, we'll discuss Bedford's situation later. Miss Granger, enjoy your trip down memory lane."

And then he was gone.

Hermione stared at the naked door frame, relief and unexpected disappointment warring within her breast, and McGonagall, after an understanding appraisal of her former student, opened her book. Several minutes later, Hermione apologized.

"It's not necessary, dear girl."

"It's just "

"The first time you've seen him?"

"To speak to, yes."

"Most people stare at him, but very few have more right than you. You knew him. You were there that night."

"Both nights." Hermione clarified, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, and then after a beat, she said, "He's quite different."

"He is at that." McGonagall shut the book, and picked up her tea. "I er we've become good friends, he and I."

"Minerva!" Hermione's mouth dropped open. "You and and Professor Snape?"

"Of course." It took fully half a minute for the penny to drop, and when it did, the elder witch dropped her tea cup when she realized the conclusion Hermione had come to. McGonagall's face flushed to the tips of her slightly pointed ears. "No! Not that. I meant that we've become friends. I had always trusted him because Dumbledore's faith was so strong, but I'd never liked him. After ... that night on the tower ... well, I hated him."

"I never did." Hermione pulled her wand from the sleeve of her robes and, with a swish, repaired the broken tea cup. "I was hurt and confused," she said, "but I never hated him. That was such a dreadful year. And afterward ... after we knew I felt so guilty for not realizing he wasn't dead right away."

"You were very young." Hermione shook her head and McGonagall elaborated. "No matter how much you'd already faced or how precocious you were, you three were much too young to carry the fate of our world on your shoulders."

"I don't disagree with you. Aside from Bellatrix Lestrange, if there was anyone I hated it was Professor Dumbledore."

McGonagall patted her hair as if discomfited, but nodded. "I quite understand. He's the only one I hated more than myself for a time. Although the Carrow siblings vied for prominence. You might have felt guilty for not knowing Severus was still alive, but if I hadn't attacked him earlier that night, then he might not have gone to Voldemort in the first place."

Hermione was gobsmacked. "You attacked him? I had no idea."

"I'm not terribly proud of it." She shifted in her chair, her hands gripping the arms while her mouth thinned. Then, as if Hermione had passed some sort of test, she spoke. "There we were having just left the Carrows trussed up and hovering in the Ravenclaw common room; Potter and Lovegood were following me under that invisibility cloak, and Severus startled me. He used to do that, suddenly appear in the corridors at night. I once thought he'd learned how to Apparate within the school's grounds. In any event, he confronted me, asking if I'd seen Potter. I thought he knew something so I hexed him."

"I'd no idea."

"It isn't something I'm eager to tell people, and you and I have never discussed the war."

"It's not easy to talk about, especially with people who weren't there." Hermione crossed and re-crossed her legs, her hands playing with a fold of her robes. "Actually, I try not to think about it anymore."

"It isn't a topic for casual dinner conversation. Perhaps in another thirty years, but it's far too soon to discuss with strangers."

"For some of us, I think it will always be too soon." Hermione's eyes strayed to the empty doorway where Snape had leaned not ten minutes before.

"A good point." Minerva refilled her teacup, added a splash of milk, and then took a long sip. She noticed the direction of Hermione's attention. "After that last fight when I knew Dumbledore's faith hadn't been misplaced, I was furious. With myself, with Dumbledore, and with Severus."

"I completely understand," Hermione said.

For the next few minutes McGonagall and Hermione learned the truth of the motto *confession is good for the soul*. Then, after a brief pause while details were assimilated, the elder said tartly, "Dumbledore's lucky to have a portrait. I do have claws." Hermione snorted, which, in turn, elicited McGonagall's laughter, and then their mirth overflowed until they were teary-eyed. McGonagall dabbed at her eyes with an instantly conjured handkerchief. "Great heavens! It wasn't that funny."

"No," Hermione agreed, pressing a hand against the stitch in her side, "but it was cathartic."

"I suppose so." McGonagall swiped the last of the chocolate biscuits in the way a cat pounces on an especially tasty morsel. "The worst of it was ... I was furious for not having figured it out. I've known Severus since he was a boy, and worked with him for more than a decade. I had watched him protect his students you three in particular. The year he was headmaster he did his best to shield Longbottom and the other students while maintaining his reputation as a Death Eater, but I was blinded by misdirection. I expected better of myself."

"That's exactly how I felt." Hermione set her cup and saucer on the small table. "I can't tell you how relieved I was when I heard he was in St. Mungo's."

"It was a long recovery, and he was right to leave the wizarding world during his convalescence."

"I've always wondered who saved him."

McGonagall lifted the lid on the pot, checking how much tea remained. "That's his story to tell."

Hermione bit her lower lip and considered the statement. Then she said, "I never expected to hear that he was teaching again."

"Severus always wanted to teach Defense."

"He's certainly an authority on the subject. I'm surprised, though, that the Board of Governors allowed him back."

McGonagall's expression was very smug. "Many of the staff petitioned for his reinstatement. The Board wouldn't go for headmaster, of course, but after two years, and Kingsley's endorsement, they were willing to be reasonable."

"How long has it been since his return? I'm afraid I haven't kept track. I saw the article in the *Prophet*, muckraking rag that it is, but I don't remember if it was last year or the year before."

"Last year. This is his second as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He's a demanding taskmaster, but his students learn."

"I know I did."

McGonagall snorted indelicately. "Hermione, you didn't need instruction. All we had to do was point you in the right direction and cast *Enervate*."

"What a flattering picture," Hermione replied wryly, and received a pointed look in return.

"None of us were surprised you petitioned to take your N.E.W.T.s independently of your peers, nor that you passed with distinction. You were alternately the sort of student every teacher covets and every teacher dreads. Terribly eager and frighteningly bright, but inclined to arrogance."

Hermione flushed. "I was a horrid know-it-all. According to the boys, I'm still bossy."

"I've long suspected, and, in fact, it was Filius' hypothesis that those boys were your saving grace. As a result of your tempering experiences with Potter and Weasley you avoided the pitfalls which would have made you a female Percy Weasley."

"Eeeew! Minerva, could you be any more heartless?" McGonagall snickered. "I know he's better than he was," Hermione continued, "and he's returned to his family, but he can be a punctilious, officious arse." Hermione grimaced. "Let's change the subject."

"By all means."

"How is Professor Snape now?"

McGonagall's eyebrows rose and she directed a rather shrewd look at her former student, but she accepted the detour easily enough. "That first term was quite a challenge. He'd just returned to England, and that first week it was as if the castle was besieged by Howlers. They came from everywhere: parents, strangers, Rita Skeeter fans. By the third day, students placed bets on which house generated the most negative mail. The furor died down by Halloween, and fortunately, this year, the most blatant criticism comes from students playing the occasional practical joke. Some are rather cruel, and Filius refers to it as Snape-baiting, but Severus ignores the taunts for the most part."

"I remember the year Rita Skeeter targeted me. Some of the letters I received were truly vicious." Unconsciously, Hermione's fingers twisted together, sensory memory recalling the painful blisters she'd received after opening one particular letter. Then she said, "I hadn't realized he left England."

"He was at one of those rest cure places in Germany. Somewhere in the Black Forest. At least Dumbledore did something right. There was a bequest to Severus in the will the provisions were Secret Kept until Potter prevailed which provided sufficient funds for his medical care. Apparently, Severus turned to the Muggle world for physiotherapy when the St. Mungo's treatment ran its course."

"Really?" Hermione leaned forward, brushing a stray curl from where it had fallen into her face. "I didn't realize he straddled both worlds."

"I don't believe he did." She paused to lift her tea cup, but stared at its empty state while she formulated her next comment. "For years he disdained all things Muggle, but he was determined to walk again instead of suffering that shuffle he had at the beginning."

"So he was gone for six years?"

"Five. He remained in England until he was exonerated." McGonagall set her empty cup down and asked, "More tea?"

"No, thank you." Hermione watched the brewing ritual: the generous measure of tea leaves, next a silent *Aguamenti* to fill the pot, then the swirl of a heating charm, and, finally, the replacement of the top so the tea could brew. "I know I didn't see him for very long, but he isn't the same as I remember."

"Living in the Muggle world forced him to adapt."

Unconsciously, Hermione pulled a curl the one which had fallen into her face earlier to its full length. "And his hair?"

McGonagall watched the straightened curl spring back when it escaped Hermione's fingers, and she replied, "He told me it got in the way of his healing so he had it cut. He liked the change well enough to keep."

"It really alters his appearance," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"It's more than just his appearance."

"I hope so, for his sake."

McGonagall's reply was smug. "Enough that he danced with the headmistress and Madam Hooch at last year's Valentine's Day dance."

Hermione sat bolt upright. "He danced?"

"In front of the students." A feline smile stretched McGonagall's lips.

The younger witch shook her head in disbelief. "I can hardly believe he's the same man."

"He isn't. He's been set free."

"I'm very happy for him." Hermione watched her hostess pour freshly brewed tea, and the conversation turned to other topics.

"Wasn't Ubasti one of Cleopatra's handmaidens?" McGonagall asked, referring to her birthday present. "I thought they all died with her."

"No. She was nursemaid to the children until they were taken to Rome after their parents' suicides. I believe she remained with the daughter, Cleopatra Selene, who later married the king of Mauritania. Ubasti followed her from Italy."

"I've often wondered if Ubasti wasn't the reason the Egyptians created Bastet as a goddess. Ubasti's Animagus form was a black cat. I only know about her from my general history, and I've always been curious."

"I thought you'd enjoy the book." Then, Hermione said wistfully, "I always wanted to be an Animagus."

McGonagall leaned forward and patted her hand. "You can't have every magical advantage. Leave some for the rest of us."

Hermione grinned, and the remainder of her visit was spent discussing the success of early witches and wizards to blend in with their Muggle counterparts. She left McGonagall happily perusing her new acquisition when she finally took her leave.

When Hermione descended the main staircase, Snape was in the entrance hall, an isthmus obstructing the current of students following the ebb and flow of their daily lives. He was a slash of black against gray stone, yet his was no longer a sinister presence. She was surprised when he silently followed her through the double doors and out into the chilly autumn evening. The weather had delivered on its earlier promise of rain, but the squall had blown itself out, leaving the verdant grounds wet and sparkling as daylight waned.

Startled by his apparent readiness to see her off the school's premises, Hermione said nothing, but allowed him to accompany her. Surreptitiously she admired his gait; such a contrast to the last time she'd seen him. Nonetheless, she bit her tongue lest she blurt any of the inappropriately personal things fighting for prominence in her brain.

They walked in companionable silence until they reached the groundskeeper's hut. Seeing the sprawling pumpkin patch, its gigantic gourds competing for space and awaiting culling for the upcoming Halloween feast, she smiled. The hut with its vegetable garden had been Hagrid's home for many a year, and some of Hermione's happiest times as a student had taken place under the magically thatched roof. It was where she, Harry, and Ron had spent countless hours pretending to drink the tannic acid their half-giant friend stewed, and it was where Hermione had sought solace that painful winter when she had helped Hagrid prepare for Buckbeak's defense even though her best friends had ostracized her. As far as she knew, the hippogriff had traveled with Hagrid when he'd moved to France four years before.

Initially, when arriving for her meeting with Vector, Hermione had thought the hut abandoned, but now a thin swirl of smoke rose from the chimney, lazily snaking into the darkening sky. "I thought Charlie Weasley had rooms in the castle," she said.

"He does. Unlike his predecessor, Mr. Weasley has made Care of Magical Creatures one of the more *popular* courses."

"I'm not surprised; he's as enthusiastic as he is knowledgeable. I thought he took over all Hagrid's responsibilities."

"Only his first year. Mellors," Snape said, indicating the hut, "took over him, and has been here for three years now. I believe the headmistress is quite pleased with his addition to the staff."

"I look forward to meeting him." They lapsed back into silence. Just before they resumed their walk in the direction of the front gates, Hermione glanced up at him and gestured toward the school. "I'm sorry for what happened."

Snape's lips twitched, possibly suppressing a smile. "Is that a blanket statement to cover the gross misdeeds of your youth, or does it have more specific intent? I, for one, can think of a number of reasons you might owe me an apology."

Her forward progress halted so abruptly Hermione practically skidded on the gravel path and she turned to face him directly. Relieved not to see a sneer marring his features, she said bluntly, "If we were to do an accounting between us, I'm certain it would be in your favor. Regardless, I am sorry for staring at you so rudely in Minerva's office. I hadn't expected to see you at all. It isn't as if "

"We were friends?" He cocked his head, his dark eyes boring into hers.

She actually laughed a little. "No, Professor Snape, I would never be so presumptuous."

"What a pity." He spun on his booted heel, his long strides carrying him swiftly from her side, leaving her to stare after his retreating back until it disappeared over the crest of the hill.

"Hermione?"

Whirling, she found Septima Vector standing a couple meters distant. "Hello again, Professor."

"This isn't the first time you've been to Hogwarts since the war's end, is it?"

"No. I was here for the first memorial service, but since they've been moved to the Ministry I've had no reason to return. Minerva and I usually meet in London."

"I see." The older witch looked toward the castle, her eyes following the direction Snape had taken. "Many things are the same."

"And some are quite different."

"That's true enough." Vector pulled her dark cloak about her. "If you'll excuse me, I must be getting back. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Thank you. I'm just reminiscing."

"Completely understandable. It was nice to see you, Hermione."

"It's been a pleasure ... Seven."

The headmistress made her way to the castle, following the same route her colleague had taken moments before.

When Vector was out of sight, Hermione resumed her scrutiny of the hut. Shades of happier times blurred her sight three small children hiding beneath an invisibility cloak, the sounds of laughter, Fang announcing their presence, Hagrid's gruff gentleness in offering his rock cakes until she realized it was unshed tears which obscured her vision.

With a final look behind her, she turned toward Hogsmeade. Motion in her peripheral vision drew her attention to the Forbidden Forest. Half expecting to see a Thestral winging above the canopy, she saw instead a gray owl soaring over the woods, its wingspan easily as wide as she was tall. A faded image tickled her memory, but it remained a nebulous, unformed thought. When the large predator dove beyond her sight, she knew it was time for her to go.

As she passed through the gates, Hermione was entirely unaware that she was being observed.

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Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 12

In which Severus Snape receives an unexpected and unwanted tribute.

Chapter Two: In which Severus Snape receives an unexpected and unwanted tribute.

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The lifeless body had been placed at the exact center of the desk. No more than a scant handful in size, the vole's winter coat matched the color of the aged wood upon which it lay, but the tips of its fur glowed an iridescent greenish light, a result of the charm placed by the security-conscious Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Rigor mortis would set in before the creature's discovery. In the meantime, the security spell's warning radiated outward, finding the imperfect seal along the frame of the door and leaking into the Defense classroom beyond, announcing to any who entered that Professor Snape's office had been breached.

Snape returned to the castle shortly before curfew. He adjusted the set of his cloak and ran his fingers through his windblown hair, combing it roughly into shape. The Muggle stylist had known what to do with baby fine, oily hair and it layered neatly enough these days. As he entered the castle, he met the head of Ravenclaw as planned, and, without comment, the two wizards began their nightly circuit, speeding students to their common rooms before the docking of house points began.

"Rumor has it you received a Howler this afternoon." Filius Flitwick introduced the topic when the swinging staircase joined the second floor landing. For all his diminutive size, the Charms master had little trouble keeping up with his taller colleague.

"A less frequent bounty this year than last," Snape responded. "Brocklehurst has taken offense at his recent marks. His mother thought it best to inform me her son is a dear, sweet boy, and I must have been mistaken in my judgment." Snape's tone was as dry as a winter wind skimming the Sahara desert. "She suggested, in the warmest

terms imaginable, that I should reconsider."

Flitwick's indelicate snort emerged as something like a squeak. He cleared his throat and fingered his Ravenclaw-blue braces before speaking. "I expect to be next on her list then."

"You," said the Defense master, "are an optimist."

"Perhaps," his companion replied, taking two steps for every one of Snape's as they traversed the upper halls. "Brocklehurst isn't living up to expectations, not the least of those being his parents'. Do you think he's your prankster?"

Before Snape answered, he turned into the corridor leading to his classroom and the office he had spurned a decade before; there would be no more dungeons for him. His eyes narrowed, his stride lengthened, and he drew his wand when he saw the telltale sign of the security breach leaking from beneath the door. When he reached his classroom, green light shone off the toe of his highly polished boot. "Brocklehurst hasn't the native intelligence for *this*."

Flitwick reached his side, his own wand in his hand, just in case. "Student?" he asked.

"Most likely, and considering the perpetrator's cleverness, I suspect a Ravenclaw," Snape said blandly as, with a twist and a nonverbal spell, the door silently swung open. "*Aperio!*"

Fluorescent blue light shot from the end of his wand and zipped into the room, rocketing from corner-to-corner and floor-to-ceiling at an ever quickening pace until it spun around the wrought iron chandelier at a dizzying rate before fizzling out of existence.

"It's empty," Flitwick commented needlessly, then deflected his colleague's scorn by stepping into the room first, his wand held in the Cockburn dueling position. Snape entered behind him, and both wizards' eyes were drawn to the lurid outline surrounding the office door. "None of the students in my house would do such a thing." Snape merely stared at Flitwick until he flushed and said defensively, "Pendergast left last year."

The Defense master snapped, "There will always be those eager to demonstrate their willful ignorance." Closing his eyes, Snape took a deep, cleansing breath as he had been taught while recovering in the Black Forest. "My apologies. I meant no offense."

"None taken, Severus."

"It was foolish to believe my return wouldn't engender some form of entrenched protest; however, outright intrusion is a more serious matter. Shall we see what has been done to my office?"

Flitwick stepped past Snape, coattails flaring as he moved, and he snapped his wrist with such force the tip of his wand vibrated in his hand. A small, noiseless explosion flared against the closed office door, golden sparks shooting in all directions. "There's nothing harmful within, other than the boggart, the Cornish pixie, and the hinkypunk." Flitwick glanced at his friend. "It might have been wishful thinking, but I did hope for a lessening of the Snape-baiting this year."

Snape sighed deeply even as he took the circular stairs leading to his office two-at-a-time. "They're children, Filius. They reflect the opinions of their parents and their peers. Some have as little inclination for independent thought as lemmings while others will learn tolerance as they mature. On rare occasions, I seem to be the privileged recipient of a seventh-year epiphany."

He pressed his wand to the doorknob and the door silently swung open upon his nonverbal command. The green light was bright and Snape squinted against its glare. Nothing save the desk had been touched. Swiftly crossing the room, he stared at the dead rodent.

Flitwick moved to the other side of the desk. "I don't expect this is the result of a broader world view."

Snape snorted. "Unlikely." Then, with a lithe series of wand movements, he successively canceled the security spell, lit the room, and levitated the specimen into the air for a better look.

His colleague cast a diagnostic charm on the rodent. A verdant mist in a different hue than Snape's security spell settled over the small, furry creature, but instantly turned red and then black. Flitwick frowned and cast the spell again. "How extraordinary."

Snape gripped the edge of the desk, his knuckles appearing as bloodless as the dead vole. "This is more than a mere prank."

"So it would seem."

Conjuring a clear bag, Snape held it open for Flitwick to save the evidence for future examination. Next, Flitwick cast a preservative charm on the rodent before adding a series of similar charms on the bag to protect its contents from decontamination and decay.

"It seems someone has learned the truth," Snape said heavily.

"How is that possible, Severus? None of us would ever"

Flitwick flinched under the weight of Snape's cold stare. "Someone knows, Filius."

"You might have had reason to doubt in the past, but use Legilimency." His tone raced up the octave. "Right here, right now. I want you to *know!* I would never do this to you! Never!" The excitable wizard was so upset sparks flew from his wand.

Surprisingly, Flitwick's loss of control calmed Snape; he laid his hand on the smaller wizard's shoulder in a rare gesture of affection. "I believe you."

"Minerva wouldn't either! You know she wouldn't." When Snape said nothing, Flitwick pivoted on his highly polished boots and raised his wand. "*Expecto patronum!*" A fully articulated, silver seal gamboled out of the office and down the stairs. "Just wait," Flitwick said. "They'll be here as quickly as they can. I know none of us did this. Nor have they said anything."

Disappointment hid in the timbre of his voice as Snape said, "Before this evening, I would have agreed with you."

"I want to know how this was accomplished. There is no transom window above the door and the Floo access has been restricted in all offices since that hag Umbridge was here." Flitwick accompanied chatter with action, his wand moving so fast it was a blur. Trails of light red, blue, yellow left retinal traces as he cast spell after spell in an attempt to determine who, what, when and how the prankster had broken through the pre-existing layers of protection.

Snape didn't reply, but he returned to the small buttress at the top of the stairs outside his office. From that position he was able to cast a similar set of revealing spells. However, his choices dipped into a Darker range of magic; magic never fully eradicated once embraced. The colors crisscrossing the classroom were orchid, persimmon, and the virulent green he'd used when he had been a Death Eater.

Ghost images of students, staff members and magical creatures appeared as a result of the detection spells, some sitting, some standing, and others like the revenant of the Cornish pixie flying. Regrettably, none were engaged in anything other than everyday activities.

Returning to his office, Snape shook his head in response to his friend's query, and the two settled uneasily into the guest chairs. "I don't know whether to resign and offer my position to whoever has evaded my security, or make use of more questionable methods to keep them out."

It was a testament to Flitwick's frustration that he didn't chastise Snape for suggesting the use of quasi-ethical magic. The sudden *SNAP* of his braces smacking against his starched shirt was so unexpected and loud that Snape aborted a defensive hex. He glared at his colleague for succumbing to his unusual nervous habit of plucking and releasing the elastic material securing his trousers. Instead, Snape settled back into his chair without comment on Flitwick's rigorous conformity to a style of dress which would have suited a Muggle dandy of the eighteen hundreds.

Provisionally, they hadn't long to wait as the first of those summoned raced through the door.

Minerva McGonagall appeared in the doorway, clad in a tartan dressing gown while her hair streamed down her back, but her wand was held firmly in one hand even as the other pressed to her chest when she caught her breath. "What what's happened?"

Flitwick would have explained, but Snape cut him off. "Let's wait for the others to arrive. That way we can tell the story once."

She glared at Flitwick. "I thought it was an emergency! You could have let me put up my hair. What if a student saw?"

"I'm sorry, Minerva," Flitwick replied in a small voice. "There is some degree of urgency, but ..."

At that moment Irma Pince entered the office, Argus Filch following immediately behind her. "What Severus?" She, too, was breathing fast. "Is everything all right?"

Filch was the first to notice the bagged vole hovering above Snape's desk. "A new addition to your collection?"

It only took Snape seven short sentences to explain the situation.

Filch blurted, "Bloodless?"

"You can't think" McGonagall spoke over Hogwarts' caretaker before pinching her mouth shut. Her eyes blazed with wounded fury. "Of course you can. How could you not?"

Madam Pince simply asked, "What will ease your mind, Severus?"

He leaned back in his chair, elbows resting on its wooden arms, and then steepled his hands. His bleak expression was more expressive than if he'd delivered a monograph on the subject.

After a worrisome beat, McGonagall stepped in front of him, drawing his attention to her careworn but honest face. "Wait here. I won't be longer than ten minutes."

For the first two minutes a superficial calm descended on those remaining in the office. Then Snape moved. He stood to offer his chair to the librarian which she accepted gracefully. Unlike McGonagall, she still wore her day robes, the black material did nothing for her complexion, washing all the color from her pale skin. Her movements were sharp and adrenaline-fueled, and she breathed deeply to regain her composure.

Filch, dressed, as usual, in his sturdy, worn clothes, leaned over the desk, inspecting the vole. His arthritic hands curled into fists, their knuckles swollen and red. He broke the quiet to ask, "How was it done?"

"Puncture wound directly over the heart," Snape replied dispassionately.

Pince gasped, covered her mouth with one hand, and gripped the chair as if to keep from falling out of it. She looked at Snape fearfully.

"Someone knows something they ought not," he said ominously.

Filch moved to stand behind the librarian as if protecting her.

They heard McGonagall's return before they saw her. She stopped in the classroom to close, lock, and ward the outer door. When she entered Snape's office she performed the same ritual with the inner door, adding a *Muffliato* for good measure. When she turned to face the others, she noticed Snape's surprise. "Did you think Potter the only one who could take advantage of a clever idea? I've been using that spell for years now."

During her absence, she had hastily changed into everyday robes and managed to twist her long hair into a haphazard bun, and when she pulled her left hand from the deep pocket of her robes, it held a small, dark vial. "Veritaserum."

Filch gurgled and swallowed hard. As a Squib, Veritaserum would affect him much as an entire bottle of Firewhisky.

"I'm sorry, Argus," McGonagall said sincerely. "I'll find someone to take your duties tomorrow, but Severus' peace of mind is worth a hangover, don't you think?" Without asking permission, she transfigured four small glasses the size Muggle pubs used to serve shots of spirits from the student essays piled on the side of Snape's desk. There was enough red ink on the parchment to tint the glasses pink. Then, with a nonverbal *Aguamenti*, she filled each glass half full before opening the small phial she'd pilfered from Horace Slughorn's private stores.

"Stop!" Snape reached for her hand. "You don't have to do this, Minerva."

Her tired blue eyes were guileless behind the clear lenses of her spectacles and her expression was solemn. "Yes, Severus, I think we do. I want you to *know* I haven't betrayed you. I think you need to know that none of us has."

"No," he replied, but she laid her hand on his arm.

"Give it up, man," Flitwick said, stepping to McGonagall's side and removing the dark blue vial from her fingers. He carefully measured three drops of the controlled substance into one of the shot glasses and then set the Veritaserum on the desk. Before Snape could articulate a rebuttal, Flitwick downed the potion in one swallow.

"Flitwick! Have you lost your mind?" Snape goggled at his colleague and friend. "It's unnecessary."

"I beg to differ." Irma Pince took her turn, carefully measuring three drops of Veritaserum and then taking her own drink of the potion-tainted water. "If it will ease your mind, Severus, there is every necessity to do this."

"I trust you," Snape protested, his dark eyes surprisingly vulnerable for a man who had been betrayed and wronged so frequently in his life.

When Filch held his shot glass to his mouth, McGonagall said, "And now you will have something more than faith to base that trust on."

Filch shuddered when he swallowed. The potion's effects were immediate: he became loose-limbed and his pale eyes fogged over; within seconds his mouth grew slack. Pince helped him to the teacher's chair behind the desk. Squibs and Muggles had been known to suffer memory loss after the truth serum's application.

Snape gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. On one hand, he was deeply moved by his friends' willingness to take this step for him, and on the other, he was livid the circumstances called for it.

"I'll start as I have the most to atone for." McGonagall swallowed her dose in a single mouthful. "I could cheerfully send Albus Dumbledore to his death all over again for putting me in this position although I would have to push past Hermione Granger to do so." She turned to face Snape. "Let me assure you that I have spoken to no one other than those of us in this room about your *condition*, nor did I have anything to do with bringing that vermin into your office."

Snape nodded, and she smiled before wobbling over to a chair to sit down.

Flitwick had barely waited for her to stop speaking before he said, "I wouldn't and haven't betrayed your trust, Severus."

Again Snape nodded, but his eyes were bright. He turned to his remaining confidantes. Filch's head lolled against the back of the desk chair while Pince managed to keep him from sliding to the floor. Pulling his wand, Snape transfigured the chair into something more conformable. Once the caretaker was secured, Snape asked, "Well, Argus?"

"Wha-?"

Had Filch overindulged in Firewhisky he would have been a laughingstock; however, he'd volunteered to prove a point and no one smiled at his intoxicated state. Snape asked patiently, maybe enunciating a little too precisely, "Did you have anything to do with putting the dead rodent in my office?"

Filch wiped his wispy hair over his balding pate. "No, but when I catch the sorry little sod who did, I'll have a set of thumbscrews ready."

A smile tugged at the corner of Snape's mouth. He faced the last person in the room, his chest was tight. "And?" he asked.

The librarian remained in her position at Filch's side. "No, Severus, I would never endanger you."

Snape's relief softened his mouth and smoothed the tension around his eyes; amusement colored his comment. "Now the quota of melodrama has been met..." His hands had been busy while he'd spoken, and before any of the others could intervene, he tipped his head back and dripped three truth-coercing drops of liquid into his open mouth.

"Severus!" The exclamation came simultaneously from three mouths, while the fourth snored in a dissonant counterpoint.

"For too long I was forced to exploit others' benevolence. I'll be buggered if I put myself in a position to lord it over any of you. We remain equals."

Flitwick conjured a chair perfectly proportioned for him, then sat sweeping his coattails to the side in a manner not seen in Muggle England since the Regency era and more recently in any number of pureblood enclaves as if he hadn't been as startled as the others by Snape's gesture. "Now we've sorted the minor detail of our mutual loyalty and trustworthiness, we need to discuss our next steps." He pointed his wand at the dead vole, setting the clear bag into a slow spin.

"First we need to determine who is threatening to implicate Severus as a Sanguinarian," McGonagall stated in a take-no-prisoners manner.

"Forgive me for asking, Severus" Flitwick replaced his wand in its sheath, "but is it possible you left it yourself without being aware?"

"As possible as you forgetting to Charm the height of your chair at the high table," Snape replied with a bite in his words. "I will, however, concede your right to ask. As you recall, when I first required additional nourishment I was less fastidious about carcass disposal, but I haven't lost control in some time. Certainly not since I left Germany, and after my return to teaching I have been exceedingly careful."

McGonagall leaned toward Flitwick. "While he's driven by innate imperative he is not without his mental faculties. Severus wouldn't leave evidence behind."

"Not to mention," Snape added, pointing at the dead rodent hovering above his desk, "the security spells wouldn't have been tripped if it had been me leaving *the tribute*."

Flitwick flushed in embarrassment. "Ah. I hadn't considered that aspect of the evening's entertainment."

Filch snorted, sat upright and stared wildly around the room for approximately three seconds before his pale eyes rolled back in their sockets and he sagged against the chair. The others hid their sympathetic amusement, but Pince transfigured a blanket from another student essay and draped it over his lean frame. "Poor Argus. I think he might have to take the headmistress up on her offer of retirement next year. He's no longer young, and the students grow more rambunctious each year, particularly since the war has ended. Not," she added with emphasis, "that I wish for a return to those wretched days."

Snape asked, "What will he do? What will you do?"

"We've already made plans. I'll continue here for another few years and Argus will work with Aberforth at the Hogs Head. It's a sty, and we've considered buying it from him outright, but for a couple of years, at least, Argus wants to learn the business."

"I had no idea," Snape said, sitting heavily in the chair McGonagall had recently vacated.

"You've had other, more pressing, matters to contend with."

Flitwick cleared his throat, recalling them to one of those more pressing matters. "Someone has violated your office, Severus. I'm inclined to still think it a student prank." He held up his hand when Snape opened his mouth. "With your leave, I shall explain. You've been the recipient of a number of practical jokes since your return to teaching, some of which have been crude, a few of which have been clever. *All* have been based on fallacious information."

"Not all, Filius. I was a Death Eater and I did murder Dumbledore."

"Assisted suicide is *not* murder!" Flitwick stated crisply. "We've discussed this point before."

"No doubt there are idylls in the Black Forest still echoing with your indignation," Snape retorted. "You were moderately eloquent on that, and other, occasions."

"And he was quite correct," Pince asserted. "There are medical professionals who euthanize their patients at the request of those patients. It's considered an act of mercy, Severus."

"Filius has a point," McGonagall spoke up, harkening back to the original topic. "How many toy bats have been left for you at the high table, and didn't you receive a stuffed one in your classroom last year? What was the name of that boy?"

"Pendegast," Snape supplied, shooting a sly glance in Flitwick's direction. "It was an animated, tabletop diorama depicting a bat, complete with billowing cape, flying over Hogwarts."

"Yes!" she said, the light from the nearest lamp glinting off her spectacles. "You gave him a month's worth of detentions and a clandestine fifty house points. He was one of yours, Filius, but that's neither here nor there. What is pertinent, Severus, is that you've been called the *bat of the dungeons* for years, and jokesters make use of these sorts of things. In this case" she took her turn pointing at the bagged carcass, "while a grisly sort of prank, it goes hand-in-hand with the rumors of your being a vampire." When Snape's head jerked sharply in her direction, she said quietly, "Those rumors have been around just as long as the others. By reacting to this now, you would lend them credence."

Snape hands clenched, but he spoke evenly. "Especially as there is now some foundation to those rumors."

"But not entirely," Pince demurred. "Not entirely."

"Aside from our notoriously close-mouthed Minister," Flitwick said, "we are the only ones who know."

"All right." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose as if to ward off a particularly determined migraine. "I will treat this as if it were a higher level prank, along the lines of

something the Weasley twins might have pulled when they were still at school ... and both alive."

After a reflective moment during which Flitwick cancelled the levitation and rotation spells on the vole, he said softly, "I still pass their vestigial swamp several times a week, but I think the floral tributes have begun to diminish this year. This term I can see the water through the flowers."

"I've noticed the same phenomenon at Dumbledore's tomb," Pince said. "The tributes have been tapering off over the past couple of years."

Flitwick straightened his robes. "Speaking of Dumbledore ... Minerva, what did you mean by saying you'd have to push Hermione Granger out of the way?"

"Oh, that." McGonagall smirked. "As you know, she was here yesterday."

"No!" Flitwick exclaimed. "Why didn't she come see me?"

"Perhaps she hadn't the time. She interviewed with the headmistress about the Arithmancy post."

The Charms master smiled happily. "She would be an excellent addition to the staff, although I heard she was doing well in her position at the Ministry."

"She is." As she spoke, McGonagall transfigured one of the ink pots on Snape's desk into a rocking chair and took a seat. "It seems she and Ron Weasley have reached a parting of the ways. Hermione is exploring her career options."

Pince crossed her legs and then folded her hands in her lap. "I always liked the girl. Even though she sneaked into the library too often, she was respectful and diligent in her studies."

Snape snorted. "She was an attention-seeking over-achiever."

"She was a misfit," the librarian refuted sharply. "The girl did everything she could to be accepted."

McGonagall added, "She reminded me of you that first year, Severus."

"She was nothing like me." He sneered. "Potter and Weasley followed her like imprinted Horntails. She was a golden Gryffindor. Her place was "

"Precarious," Pince interrupted. "Those boys were her only real friends, and their friendship carried a price. Every time they had a row, Potter and Weasley ostracized her. Sometimes, when she'd been crying, I let her stay after hours and I'd give her tea." Seeing the expressions on the others' faces, she asked, "What?"

"You ... she ... you gave her tea?" Snape spluttered.

McGonagall bristled like a cat whose fur had been back-brushed. "How many times did this happen, and why didn't I know about this, Irma?"

"I handled it," Pince replied. "They were boys, Minerva. It happened every year, but Weasley was the worst. He could be downright cruel. Insecurity, I imagine."

"It's a good thing they've called it off." McGonagall fingered a loosened strand of hair and then patted it into place. It was a gesture the others had seen her make hundreds of times over the years. "They didn't suit."

"Now that you mention it," Flitwick said, absorbed by the idea, "Hermione did remind me of Severus that first year."

"I'll thank you not to compare me to an overeager know-it-all," Snape said, sounding more like a sulky teenager than an erudite man in his forties, "and I'll thank you to refrain from talking about me as if I'm not present."

His colleagues shared a knowing look, although none intended to speak.

"She was intelligent and isolated and bullied," McGonagall said finally, goaded into honesty by the waning Veritaserum in her body.

"She hid in the library" Pince leaned forward for emphasis, "and poured her unhappiness into her work. Had she been raised with magic, Severus, she might have turned to creating her own spells as you once did. Instead, she was handicapped by being Muggle-born, and she spent much of her time compensating for it."

Discomfited by such a comparison, Snape strode to the wall of books which was his personalizing touch to the office. Once, the walls had worn pink and had been decorated with an assortment of china plates adorned with saccharine kittens, but Snape had made several changes since those days. Even with Filch's snoring form lying in a transfigured desk-chair there was room for Snape to pace. He was so agitated he absently trailed his fingers along the spines of his favorite books.

Unwilling to think further about the exsanguinated rodent and unable to merge his mental image of Hermione Granger as a schoolgirl with the one Pince and McGonagall remembered, or even with his more recent impressions of her as a woman, he searched for a safer topic. "What about Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore?" Pince asked, bewildered by the apparent *non sequitur*. "What about him?"

"Minerva, you said Granger would have shoved you out of the way to get to Dumbledore."

"Ah. Yes, she told me when she gave me Ubasti's memoirs. Did you still wish to borrow the book? I read it through last night. It's an excellent first-person account of an Animagus in hiding."

He made an impatient gesture with his hand. "I wish to hear how the sainted Miss Granger wanted to kill the even saintlier Albus Dumbledore."

The head of Gryffindor snorted, and rocked gently in her transfigured chair. "Hermione isn't saintly, as well you know, and Dumbledore even less so."

"Minerva!" he growled.

"Go on, Minerva," Flitwick urged. "I, too, am interested."

"Very well," she said primly. "Shortly after the war ended, probably concurrently with Severus' leaving St Mungo's to stay with you, Filius, Hermione and Potter lived at Grimmauld Place. Irma, that was the house Potter inherited from his godfather, Sirius Black. It was also the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix."

"If you're going to give a history lesson, perhaps we should invite Binns to join us," Snape said impatiently.

She ignored his interruption. "They spent those early weeks recovering from their ordeal. And keep a civil tongue in your head, Severus. No matter how dreadful that year was for us, it was abysmal for them. They were isolated, half-trained, and they practically starved. It's a testament to their friendship and Hermione's ingenuity they managed as well as they did."

"Yes, yes, she is a paragon among witches," he said sarcastically.

McGonagall narrowed her eyes until they were slits. "She is indeed, and if she decides to accept Vector's offer you will be civil to her."

"My behavior has been above reproach."

"You're well aware it was the first time she had seen you," McGonagall chided.

Stung, he replied defensively, "She stared as if I were a dementor sucking all the joy from her world!"

McGonagall leapt to her feet, her chair rocking in a counterpoint to her emotion. "She had a flashback to that horrible night! Severus, you're being unfair."

"Am I?" He leaned against one of the bookcases, the wood biting into his back. "I'll have you know I allowed her to apologize and walked her toward Hogsmeade when she left yesterday."

Madam Pince pounced on his statement. "You did?"

"I was even civil. Now, Minerva, will you tell me what I wish to know?"

"Very well." McGonagall resumed her seat and her tale. "She and Potter spent much of their time sleeping, eating, and filling in the blanks. It was then Potter told Hermione what happened with you, how he saw his parents again, and about his afterlife experience. He met and talked to Dumbledore and demanded answers, some of which he received. During their conversation Albus asked Harry's forgiveness "

"I wish he'd asked mine," Snape growled.

"As do I." She glared at him. "Don't interrupt. One of the things Potter told Hermione was that Dumbledore had counted on her to slow Harry's quest down."

"That bastard!" Filch cried, rising in his chair. Pince swept to his side and patted his cheek soothingly. His hand clasped hers, mumbled, "Love you, ol' girl," and settled to sleep once more.

Flitwick had covered his mouth to contain his mirth at Filch's untimely but appropriate interruption, but chirps of laughter escaped through his fingers.

Snape, however, barely registered the interruption. "Dumbledore deliberately impeded their progress?"

"I'm afraid so," McGonagall replied, "and Hermione has rather strong feelings about it even after all these years."

"It is never easy to learn you've been manipulated." Snape resumed pacing.

"No, Severus, it isn't. I know I loathed it and I'm a woman grown. They were children. I realize they were nearly of age, and Hermione already eighteen that last year, but they were used from their first year here, and Potter long before then." Her expression hardened. "It's a wonder they didn't repudiate us altogether and return to the Muggle world."

As was his wont, Flitwick calmed the waters before they came to a boil. "But it's in the past. Granted much of it has been tragic, but we have survived. How lucky we are to have become friends after everything that has happened."

"As I have said before, Filius, you are an optimist," Snape remarked, but the tension eased from his shoulders and there was an affectionate undertone to his statement. "Irma, would you like me to assist you back to your quarters?"

"I would prefer a drink, if you don't mind. That Veritaserum leaves a dreadful aftertaste. Argus is comfortable enough for now."

"Tea would be lovely," McGonagall agreed. "Severus?"

"If we must," he replied, but he dismantled his security spells while she cancelled her warding on the office and classroom doors. Flitwick summoned the night duty house-elf, ordering tea and an assortment of whatever cakes were available, and Snape then *Accio'd* the Port and Firewhisky. McGonagall *Scourgified* the four shot glasses, and transfigured additional student essays into appropriate stemware wine glasses and snifters while Pince ascertained that Filch was as comfortable as could be expected.

Then the librarian cleaned Snape's desk before producing a small purple sack from her pocket. When she placed it on the desktop Snape moaned. "Not Gobstones. We're having drinks and nibbles, not playing that infernal game."

"Now, Severus," Flitwick said as he maneuvered his chair closer to the desk, "you're just narked because you and Minerva lost last time."

"Narked?" Snape said, entering into the familiar banter of many a convivial evening. "You cheated!"

"We did not!" squeaked Flitwick.

"Did so." McGonagall added fuel to the good-natured rillery.

Fortunately two house-elves popped into the room, laden with a tea service and two trays of edibles. Squabbling was foregone for three fingers of Port, a shot of Firewhisky, tea and a taste of fresh scones with a dollop of clotted cream and a dab of strawberry jam.

By the time the last morsel was eaten, everyone was willing to play a round of Gobstones, save Filch who snored softly in his chair.

It was past midnight when Snape escorted Pince and Filch to their quarters, a snug apartment hidden behind the Restricted Section. Fortunately, it was Saturday and they could all have a lie in next morning.

Unfortunately, Snape was too disturbed to settle.

He returned to his formerly inviolate office. Using his wand, he tapped a sequence of specially placed books on the middle shelf of the farthest bookcase. When activated, the set of books formed a false front, swinging open to reveal a small space in the wall behind them, undetectable and hidden from most. Snape doubted Lockhart or Umbridge had ever discovered it, and he knew Carrow had not. Inside the abditory was a small Pensieve, hand-carved from a single block of marble, with protective and activating runes cut into the bowl's rim. Additionally, in a neatly labeled row, stood a series of bottles, all pilfered from the Potions store room, all filled with the viscous silvery stuff of memory. His memories.

Snape scowled. Some of his private memories had been put on public display, both during Voldemort's fall and later, during the trial which had exonerated him from his crimes. However, there were other moments contained in the collection before him. Several of those would be damning if taken out of context, and for the first time since his return to England, Snape felt insecure.

The five bottles labeled in blue represented those memories he had given to Potter when he lay dying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, but they accounted for less than a third of the total. Another five bore black labels; they represented the worst of his Death Eater days and revealed depredations he would as soon commit to the flames of Tartarus than place permanently back into his mind.

None of the memories were safe in his office now. Only McGonagall and Flitwick knew of the hiding place, but with the break-in and his inability to take more effective measures to keep the culprit out, Snape had to deal with his cache.

He stared at the row of bottles before plucking one from amongst its brethren. Remembering his first day at the Muggle rest cure facility, he smiled fleetingly. The initial meeting with the senior therapist, Frieda Holmes, who had reminded him strongly of Hogwarts' mediwitch, had been unsettling. Holmes had informed him that in addition to his physical recuperation she was committed to healing his emotional trauma. Snape had scoffed and delivered a suitably scathing set-down.

He would never forget her reaction.

"Mr. Snape," she had said calmly, "I do not believe in soft-pedaling a patient's diagnosis, and I will be blunt. In addition to your physical injuries, you are suffering the untreated effects of Survivor's Guilt, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Combat Stress Reaction, all of which have taken a heavy toll upon you." He had merely curled his lip, but she had continued as if his reaction were commonplace. "They are all treatable. And the success of that treatment depends on you."

Despite his initial resistance, Snape had ultimately participated in his recovery, but he had cheated. He had used magical methods to accelerate a positive outcome by the removal of carefully selected memory strands. He had been cautious not to remove too many, as he had done in the Shrieking Shack when he believed it was his final opportunity to give Lily Potter's son the information he would need to defeat Voldemort.

The simultaneous loss of so many significant memories had left Snape befuddled for more than two weeks when he fought for his life in St. Mungo's following Nagini's attack. Healer Nightingale, an authority on memory depletion, had been most helpful but had also offered a caution. "Removal of too many memories negatively impacts socialization, and if they remain discrete for too long the brain compensates and there is no room to replace them. You would lose your recollections permanently. Yes, a shadow image of the events remain, but there is no immediacy, no emotion attached to the information. For example, you might know that you caught the Snitch in a Quidditch match, but you wouldn't remember how it felt or the specific details of the victory."

At the time Snape rebuffed Nightingale's suggestion; however, later, when he'd gone to the Muggle world for treatment, he had remembered the conversation and used the information judiciously.

As a result of trial and error, Snape had learned that he could bear the re-integration of up to three memories without succumbing to soul-shriveling guilt. He cycled through all of them, not wanting to lose sight of what had brought him to his current circumstances, but he never left the memories in place.

It had taken several years, but he had regained his health and found some measure of peace. He wasn't willing to compromise either. Among the long-term results of that peace was the fact he no longer loathed Harry Potter for having lived when Lily had died and the hope that one day he might forgive Albus Dumbledore.

Now, however, his hard-won peace and security had been threatened. Snape couldn't afford to leave his memories in an office which had proved so easily accessible, and yet, he was not ready to destroy them outright. Having the decision forced upon him was discomposing.

With sharp but precise movements, Snape pulled the Pensieve and labeled bottles from the hole in the wall, packing them in a specimen crate he kept in his office. Then, he levitated it back to his private rooms. The castle was quiet, but he heard the occasional muffled snore from a portrait, or a soft murmur of voices from those portraits on duty. Unexpectedly, the omnipresent noise soothed his fraught nerves.

He entered his quarters in the South Tower, a chamber as different from his previous, tenured quarters as he could achieve with institutional furnishings. The accommodations had been designed for short-term visitors rather than staff members, being smaller and not conveniently located to the rest of the school. However, Snape had chosen them and no one gainsaid his right. The small sitting room housed a narrow desk and ladder-backed chair something one might have found in a lady's parlor during the Victorian era two overstuffed chairs with a low round table between them, haphazardly piled with books. The comfortable chairs faced a large fireplace situated between two windows complete with cushion-strewn window seats where a well-tended fire crackled merrily in welcome.

There was barely room for the single, floor-to-ceiling bookcase; however, a set of tall French doors led to the rooms' saving grace: a balcony. It was as large as the adjacent inner room, and Snape had spent weeks perfecting its privacy. The balcony and windows were the recipients of numerous Disillusionment and security spells, not to mention additional layers of questionable protection, some of which were capable of repelling a small invasion. He had spent many a night since his return to Hogwarts reclining on the single chaise he'd placed in one corner.

His accommodations had one additional, unacknowledged, benefit. They were the only rooms available which didn't have a window facing the Astronomy Tower.

Snape removed his heavy outer robe even as he directed the crate to pass through the open door leading to his bedchamber and settle at the foot of his wide, double bed. He absently noted that the house-elves had turned his bedding down for the night before he hung his outer robe on a hook of the coat-rack which had waddled from its corner to claim its prize. Snape then crossed the sitting room in three strides.

Seen through the glass panes of the French doors, the moon was obscured behind thick cloud cover, but enough of its radiance shone through, like pale fingers laid in a benediction over the Forbidden Forest. Opening the double doors, he closed his eyes against the chill caress of early winter and drew a deep, cleansing breath. The fresh, loamy scent of nearby forest was something he'd taken for granted in his early years, and it was one Snape had missed sorely while he'd lain in a small white room in St. Mungo's, and then later, at Flitwick's summer home in London.

During the war, he'd lived on sheer nerve and anxiety. He had eaten poorly and slept rarely. As far as he was concerned, Voldemort's teaching him to fly had been the only benefit to that last, hellacious year of the war, and he had taken to the air as often as possible.

When he had gone to Germany for his long-term convalescence, Snape had found the Black Forest, with its secrets and virgin depths, incredibly enticing. There had been sufficient space for him to come to terms with his evolved state, and he had learned to control his flight during many a late night excursion.

Since his return to Hogwarts, Snape had fewer opportunities to fly, especially during term time, but it was sufficiently late, or early depending on one's perspective, and he shouldn't be seen. Slipping off his frock coat, he draped it over the back of one chair before stepping into the night.

He was airborne before reaching the end of the balcony, a natural downdraft carrying him a full floor-length before he righted his angle of ascent. His heart rate accelerated and the sheer sportiveness of being airborne allowed him to shed his disordered emotions as easily as he had his coat.

As he stretched to the full extent of his limbs, Snape's keen eyes picked out the differences between human habitation, animal habitat, and the half-civilized cluster of centaur lodgings.

Here in the crisp night air, he refused to think about his students' opinions, his Death Eater days, that nerve-wracking year he spent as headmaster or the succeeding fight for his physical and mental health. Instead, he focused on the exhilarating feel of the air and the quietude of the surrounding countryside. It was a balm for his weary soul.

As he soared over the groundskeeper's hut, however, Snape couldn't quell the memory of eager brown eyes and a sincere apology. He had been dismissive of Hermione Granger when Pince and McGonagall had defended her, but in the privacy of his own thoughts, it wasn't as easy to ignore their meeting in McGonagall's office, or how ridiculously transparent her eyes had been when she remembered the horror of watching him die. He had other memories of her from that long ago day, but he'd shunted them aside as immaterial, not even important enough to add to the collection of bottles in the crate in his bedroom. Nonetheless, the sincerity of her apology buoyed him unaccountably.

Movement on the forest floor drew his attention and bloodlust dried his mouth. Hermione Granger was forgotten in an instant of genetic imperative, and with a fierce cry, Severus plunged through the canopy to close in upon his prey a small creature with a stubby tail and a beating heart.

One quick grab and the furry thing was clutched within his grasp.

Allowing his craven side its due, Snape settled on a broad branch of an ancient tree and stabbed the squirming creature in the chest, directly into the heart. The vole's lifeblood flooded his mouth, quenching his thirst.

When he drained the small carcass, Snape leapt into the air, flapping awkwardly to gain height, keeping the dead rodent firmly in his mouth. He knew better than to leave evidence behind, especially now, and if for this one thing alone, he was grateful to Hagrid. The thriving community of acromantulae was always hungry for a fresh kill.

Bloodlust satisfied, Snape returned to his rooms.

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 12

In which Hermione Granger has lunch with friends, and Minerva McGonagall sends unsettling news from Scotland.

Chapter Three: In which Hermione Granger has lunch with friends, and Minerva McGonagall sends unsettling news from Scotland.

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Bang!

Enchanted mistletoe exploded midair and Hermione quickly *Evanescio'd* the remains, brushing nonexistent grains of the opportunistic parasite from the letter she had been reading. A masculine chuckle drew her attention and Hermione looked up to see her sometime partner and longtime friend grinning at her from the hallway outside her office-cum-lab.

"Not in the holiday spirit?" he asked, the skin around his green eyes crinkling with good humor.

"I have sufficient holiday spirit, thank you." She pointed to the corner where a miniature fir was decorated in green and gold, a silver aura shimmering scant millimeters beyond every ornament, needle, and smidgeon of bark of the small tree. "I've put a *Protego totalum* on it to enclose any contaminants which could taint my work." Rising from her wooden desk chair, new at the turn of the previous century, Hermione crossed to her friend, tugged him inside her office, then pushed him toward her desk. "You can read the spectral analysis while I set up a containment field around my doorway. That should keep out any more botanical intrusions. How did it get in past the pollutant barricades at the department's entrances?"

"I suspect it came from Dawlish's Floo." Harry's grin would have gratified his father's and godfather's mischievous souls.

"Really?" she asked with malicious glee. "Does Percy know?"

"Not yet, but I'm not one to tell tales," he said piously, but ruined the effect by smirking. Harry settled easily at her desk, plucking the correct scroll from a color-coded pyramid. After all their years of friendship, he understood Hermione's organization better than anyone. "Romilda is on her way to report Dawlish's infraction as we speak."

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke."

Hermione set to work as Harry chuckled and unrolled the report. Whipping her wand in a complicated pattern two runes shot from its tip to hover midpoint in her doorway: *Thurisaz* for defense and cleansing, and *Algiz* for its shielding properties. They burned fiery yellow until the passage beyond Hermione's small but well-guarded domain was obscured, then the runes pulsed once, twice, and dissipated without a trace.

When she turned to face Harry he was immersed in her most recent findings. His perennially messy hair, longer now that he was an adult, hung like a screen hiding his expression and, more importantly, his famous scar. She smiled, knowing he would be pleased with the results of her analyses, and when she sat in her guest chair across from him, he paused and glanced up at her.

"I didn't much care for Romilda in school," she said dryly, "but she's grown on me this past year."

He snickered. "Yeah, she and Percy make an excellent team."

When he turned his attention back to the report, Hermione let her thoughts dwell on departmental matters. After the Battle for Hogwarts the entire Ministry had been in an uproar. Every department had housed Death Eaters and their sympathizers. Dolores Umbridge had been a perfect example. She had never taken the Dark Mark, but her sadism had found a satisfying outlet during the Voldemort-controlled year. Fortunately, the most egregious offenders had been removed from their positions, including Umbridge and her entire staff at Muggle-born Registration. More than two dozen former Ministry employees now lived in Azkaban accommodations.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement hadn't escaped; almost by default, John Dawlish advanced more rapidly than he would have otherwise. Five years before, he had been promoted to Deputy Head of the division, and three years after that he had been elevated to the top spot. None of the famous Gryffindor trio particularly liked working with him. While his credentials were impeccable seven Outstanding N.E.W.T.s and an impressive conviction rate he was nevertheless unimaginative and held grudges with as much tenacity as Severus Snape had clung to his boyhood love for Lily Evans.

Dawlish had never forgiven Harry's presence that night in Dumbledore's office when Fawkes had aided the headmaster's escape; it colored every interaction the Auror had with the trio of friends, all of whom had felt it their duty to enter Magical Law Enforcement after the war's end. He hadn't welcomed Harry or Hermione or Ron into the Aurory, but Dawlish was politically astute and said nothing publicly against them.

As he had risen within the department, he had worked to separate the friends. Harry was too well-known to be relegated to secondary cases and publicity junkets, but he was never lead on a case. The trajectory of Hermione's rising star had been deviated into a less populated solar system, but she had tackled her behind-the-scenes duties with customary fervor. Ron, whose Ministry connections were generations-deep, received the best treatment of the three, but he was also the least ambitious.

Keeping meticulous records of each infringement of the rules any of the trio made, from tardiness to too-long Incident Reports, Dawlish met with Percy Weasley, Shacklebolt's Deputy Minister, quarterly. Grievances against the trio's competence were consistently among the top five agenda points. After eighteen months, however, Percy's patience had been exhausted, and he'd appropriated Romilda Vane from the Department of Magical Statistics to act as a liaison between Magical Law Enforcement and the Minister's office.

None of the trio had embraced her resurgence in their lives, remembering all too well that it had been her love-potion-filled chocolate cauldrons which had led to Ron's drinking poisoned mead during their sixth year at school. However, Romilda had proved to be very different as an adult than as a zealous teenaged Harry Potter fan. She had taken an instant dislike to Dawlish, who had sneered at her Outstanding in Divination as if she were nothing more than a tea-leaf reading hack at a Muggle fair. As a result of that encounter, any time Dawlish contravened regulations, Romilda happily reported it to Percy, who in turn, hauled Dawlish on the carpet. Just thinking of how sour Dawlish's expression would be after discovering he'd been the vector for the numerous specimens of enchanted mistletoe currently plaguing the department lifted Hermione's spirits considerably.

At last, Harry finished reading her report, and when he raised his head his green eyes shone like gemstones. "We've got that bastard Reynolds!"

"I expect we have." Hermione grinned back at him.

He stood abruptly, his Auror robes swirling about his legs. "Get your coat."

"What?"

He rounded her desk, towering over her. "Get your coat. I'm taking you to lunch."

"Harry!" she exclaimed, but she reached for her coat. "It's only eleven, and I still have to run"

"Then it's an early lunch. C'mon, let's go. I want to celebrate."

She bit her lip. "What about Ron?"

They had always celebrated their victories together, but she had only seen the redhead twice since their break-up.

"You wouldn't mind?" Harry asked, angling his head as if weighing the truth of her answer.

"Not at all."

He accepted her agreement at face value, slipped his wand from the thin pocket of his trousers, and with a practiced flourish, his Patronus, Prongs, leapt from the end of his much loved wand and bounded from the room. For a brief moment, the silvery stag seemed caught by Hermione's newly erected containment field, but staggered through it, reforming beyond the magical barricade, before disappearing from sight.

Harry stared, but then looked down at Hermione. "Have I ever told you you're brilliant!"

"But scary?" she asked. "Only dozens of times."

"Ron said it first, but he was right." Harry crossed to the door.

"Do you mind if I bring this?" she asked, plucking a letter from the desk. "It's from Minerva and I haven't had a chance to read it yet."

"The way she tells gossip, it's the funniest thing ever. Besides, it might take Ron awhile to break away from the shop."

"Do you think he'll come?"

As he watched her slide her arms into her coat-sleeves, Harry said obliquely, "I think Ron's happier now than I've ever seen him."

For all that the break-up had been her idea, the comment hurt, and she averted her eyes, knowing that sometimes he picked up her surface thoughts with inadvertent Legilimency. "I hope so," she said. "He deserves every happiness."

Harry led Hermione further down the dingy hallway in which her office was situated, passing the always-closed door leading to the Hit Wizards' offices.

"Why are we going this way?" she asked, looking up at him. He'd grown three inches during that first post-war year, but he would never match Ron's height.

"Ginny and I found this Indian place in Mayfair; it has brilliant somosas. I've wanted to take you for ages."

"Still going Muggle for your Friday nights?"

He grinned, but it turned into a grimace. "Yeah. That bloody *Witch Weekly!* It's been eight years! Honestly, it's a miracle I'm able to do my job let alone have a private life. Gin's a good sport about it though."

"At least Kingsley put an end to the paparazzi camping out in the atrium."

"True enough, but" He smirked. "Why do you think we're using the back door?"

The 'back door' had been converted from a storage cupboard when Hermione, Harry, and Ron had joined the Aurory. It remained one of three active Apparition points in the Ministry of Magic, and knowledge of its existence was as tightly guarded as the true location of the Minister's office. After the first three years following Voldemort's unlamented demise, excitement over the famous trio's choice of professions had died down. Now, the only people who cared about their being Aurors were John Dawlish and a handful of rabid journalists still assiduously dogging the famous trio's footsteps.

Within minutes, the two friends arrived at Chaudhury's. Hermione slid into the deeply cushioned booth across from Harry, eyeing the elaborate wall hangings and enjoying the neighborhood ambiance of the restaurant. Surreptitiously, he cast *Muffliato* on the patrons in the adjoining booths.

Nibbling on poppadoms while they waited for Ron, the longtime friends discussed Hermione's report.

"This is the third time in a row, Hermione," Harry said enthusiastically. "Can you explain it to me now?"

"Since Dawlish has disapproved my most recent proposal, it isn't as if I'll have any chance to use my 'Muggle innovations' after this quarter."

"Dawlish turned you down again?" Harry's expression darkened. "What a prick!"

"Yes, well, he doesn't trust Muggle forensics, regardless of how many times I explain that I'm not using Muggle science. I adapted some of the basic investigative principles." She sighed heavily, and opened the stiff menu without looking at it. "It's disheartening, Harry."

"How can he dispute your success?" He paused long enough to order drinks while they waited for Ron's arrival.

The waiter shook his head as if to clear a nearly inaudible buzz from his ears, and Hermione gave Harry an appraising look. Maturity suited him, she thought, as he discussed the types of available beer. He was older than either of his parents had been at the time of their deaths, and, in Hermione's opinion, he had not only surpassed them in terms of age, but in substance. Harry Potter was a better man than James, and a more devoted friend than Lily.

After ordering a Kingfisher for himself and a mango lassi for her, Harry returned to the topic of their discussion. "I can't believe Dawlish denied your request. You've been working on this synthesis for a long time."

"Since Ron and I went to New York," she said, laying the menu on the lacquered surface of the table, and snagging a poppadom from the plate their waiter had left. "He was fascinated by the big screen telly, and the Yanks have a lot of police procedural shows."

Harry snickered. "You realize you'll have to thank Ron for the inspiration when you receive your next Order of Merlin."

"Prat!" Hermione broke off a piece of the crisp bread and tossed it at him. "Do you want to know about my breakthrough or not?"

He brushed the poppadom off his shirt and nodded.

"You were the one to explain wand allegiance to me. I used that as my starting point: the individual peculiarities of wands and their wielders. There is an unquantifiable connection between a wizard or witch and the focus they use to channel their inherent power. Each paired wand has a unique magical signature, but that signature is altered when the allegiance of the wand changes. Thus, while a wand may have more than one wielder, it will also have more than one signature, but each signature will be unique to the specific bonding." Harry crumbled a poppadom between his fingers as she spoke. "For example, the magical signature of Lucius Malfoy's wand was entirely different in his care than when it was used by Voldemort; same wand, different bonding, different magical residue. At a stretch, it's similar to Muggle DNA testing. Each spell leaves a distinctive residue behind, something like fingerprints or hair or fingernails ..."

"Or bodily fluids?" he asked.

"Exactly." She paused as their drinks arrived and the waiter poured Harry's beer into a chilled glass. When they were alone again, she resumed her explanation. "Match the residue at a crime scene or on a piece of evidence to one of the suspects, and as Fleur would say, *voilà!* It's a bit like reading auras." Suddenly she groaned. "Please don't ever tell Professor Trelawney I said that."

Harry laughed. "This is brilliant, Hermione."

"Thanks." She flushed with pleasure and took a sip of her drink.

"Go on."

"Of course, because it's such a new technique and Dawlish won't support it, the Wizengamot doesn't recognize its validity, so my findings aren't admissible in our court system." She sighed dispiritedly. "Essentially, I narrow the field of suspects by matching the paired-wand residue, and then find some other way of proving the suspect's guilt. It's double the amount of work."

"The problem with Dawlish is he's jealous."

"What? I've never given him reason"

"You don't have to," Harry said, fingering his glass. "We outshine him just by being us. If he weren't such a git, he'd see we're all on the same side, but he's like Percy before Percy saw the light. Just wait a quarter and present your proposal again. And do it every quarter until you either wear him down with your persistence, or he recognizes the value of your work, especially as your results are so accurate."

"I wish I had your faith, Harry. I'm just not so sure any more."

"Are you still considering Parkinson's offer?" he asked, referring to her second interview in late October.

"No. I hadn't realized Horatio Parkinson was on Compassion's board of directors. I know the war is over and I shouldn't still hold their prejudices against them, but he's Pansy's father, and she tried to turn you over to the Death Eaters! I just couldn't work for them." She shuddered, delicately. "Although I would give it serious consideration if Ron wanted to come back to the department"

"And miss out on an actual Christmas bonus? Nah! I'm not going back," Ron said, interrupting Hermione's comment, his lanky frame casting odd shadows over the table. "Budge up, Harry."

The third member of their childhood trio slid next to his best friend where once he would've chosen her side of the booth. Hermione stared at him; his copper hair was neatly trimmed and his robes were cut in the latest fashion. Improbably, Ron sported a beard. Clipped close to this face, it accentuated the strong line of his jaw and framed his mouth. Hermione had never seen him look so prosperous, nor so self-satisfied, and she wondered who he had become and whether she would recognize or even like him.

"Mione?" he asked, with only a hint of underlying feeling. "How are you?"

She bit back a retort at his use of a nickname she hated. "All right, thanks. You?"

"All right. The shop's crowded, but we've extra help over the holidays. Otherwise, I couldn't have come. George sends his love, and Harry, I've got tickets to the Cannons next week. Want to go?"

"Love to."

When Ron let Hermione order for him, she grinned with some degree of relief. She knew his preferences better than anyone, and it was a sign that he was still the man she'd known for so many years. After the waiter had departed with their order, Harry and Ron entered a spirited discussion about Quidditch and the British National team. Hermione listened for a few minutes, noticing that Ron kept fingering his beard, but Harry said nothing, and Hermione surmised that while it was a recent affectation, it wasn't a new one. After another minute, she pulled out her letter from McGonagall.

She smiled when McGonagall spent three paragraphs describing the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch game, but her smile fell when she read what followed.

"Listen," she interrupted Harry and Ron. "Sorry. But, listen to this: *"I recall telling you about the pranks Filius refers to as Snape-baiting. I'm sorry to say they've taken a more grisly turn these past few weeks. Someone has begun leaving dead vermin in Severus' office and classroom. Oddly enough, it began shortly after your last visit. At first, we thought it was a student prank, or that one of the castle's cats had decided to adopt him, but I've done some investigating in the latter arena and eliminated the feline contingent from suspicion. Furthermore, we haven't found a trace of a guilty student."*

Ron snorted. "It serves the old bat right. It's probably someone's parents egging their kid on. Loads of people hate him."

"Ron!"

He shrugged. "He was a right bastard to us, Hermione, and you know it. Remember when Malfoy hexed your teeth? Snape made you cry."

"If making me cry was an Unforgivable, Ron, you'd be in Azkaban," she replied tartly, and then paled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

His cheeks were ruddy and his eyes narrowed until the sandy lashes all but obscured the blue irises, but he said calmly enough, "I know you didn't. It's why we don't work."

Hermione blinked rapidly against an unexpected upwelling of tears.

Harry, more perceptive than in his youth, cleared his throat. "Still," he said, "I don't like it that people have been scapegoating Snape. He's sacrificed enough."

"He wasn't rude to me when I saw him." Hermione idly traced runes onto the shiny surface of the table and didn't meet Ron's eyes.

"You saw him?" Ron asked, one hand pausing in the midst of bringing his drink to his mouth. "When?"

"When I met with Professor Vector " she refused to look up, " for the Arithmancy opening next year."

"When was this?" Ron demanded, setting his glass back on the tablecloth. He might have moved on with his life, but his insecurities appeared at the oddest and most inconvenient times. "Were you thinking about leaving MLE last time we saw each other?"

Harry set his beer glass onto the table with more force than necessary, interrupting what might have developed into an ugly scene between the former lovers. "Tell me about this Snape-baiting."

Hermione grasped the conversational lifeline as if it would keep her from being pulled beneath the surface of the Black Lake by grindylows. "I don't know much, just that when he returned to teaching last year, the school was inundated with Howlers." Ron snorted, and she ignored him. "Apparently the abuse tapered off mid-term and it's been intermittent since then."

"But frequent enough for Flitwick to categorize it," Harry pointed out.

"Perhaps he's privy to more information than Minerva's imparted. In any event, she said Professor Snape ignored them, declaring they were student pranks. But this" she waved her letter, "...seems as if it's become more personal. I mean someone's broken into his office. We never even managed that."

"Just his private storage cupboard," Ron said, grinning at the memory. "Maybe he's gone soft."

Harry's expression was grim. "Ask her to keep you informed, Hermione. This sort of thing can escalate, and I don't want to be called in after the event."

Hermione finished taking a drink of her lassi, then said, "I will, and thanks."

"Thanks?" Harry cocked his head in a query.

"For being you. Professor Snape was never particularly nice to you, but every time you do something like this you justify my faith in you."

Harry's blush was as becoming as it was widespread, even the tips of his ears were burnished a deep red. "Er, thanks."

"Oi!" Ron crossed his arms. "What about me?"

"You? Well" She bit her lower lip in contemplation for a moment. "Ron, you've always lived up to my expectations."

He puffed out his chest smugly, but Harry gave her a pointed look. Their food arrived at that moment, and the three were too busy sharing somosas and chicken vindaloo for Ron to realize she hadn't been complimenting him.

"Excellent nosh," Ron said around a large bite of vegetable biryani. "So what was he like?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked. They had moved four topics beyond Hogwarts and she didn't follow his question.

"Snape. What was he like when you saw him?"

Hermione laid her fork down, shifted to a more comfortable position on the padded banquette and answered thoughtfully, "He was quite different."

Harry leaned forward, his eyes curious. "How so?"

"Well, he looks better for one thing."

"Anything would be an improvement," Ron said uncharitably.

"Ron!" Hermione said in a tone that delivered a scolding.

Unfazed, the redhead replied, "It's true. He was an ugly git."

"I never thought he was ugly," she said, "unhealthy perhaps, but never really ugly."

"That's our Hermione, Ron, patron saint to underdogs everywhere." Harry smiled at her affectionately.

Hermione flushed. "It has nothing to do with his being an underdog. Imagine his situation. It was awful. He was heart-broken and a spy. No one trusted him, and he was forced to be biased as a teacher, favoring Death Eater children over others." She waved her fork the skewered piece of chicken clinging to the prongs as if by magic or luck to forestall Ron's immediate rebuttal. "I'll grant he was quite horrid to Harry and us by extension, but that's not what I was talking about. He'll never be handsome in a Gilderoy Lockhart sort of way, but he's a striking man, especially now. He looks rested and his hair's shorter" She looked at her friends' shocked expressions. "What?"

The two men exchanged looks, and Harry said in a mocking manner, "Our Hermione's growing up."

Ron grinned, and there was a devilish glint in his blue eyes. In that moment, it was easy to believe he was Fred and George Weasley's brother. "Yeah," he agreed, "she's acting all girly and everything."

"Will you two stop?" Hermione ate the bite of chicken.

"Yeah, instead of being all dark and brooding Hey!" Ron exclaimed, sitting upright from his slouching position against the banquette. He accused, "You fancy him."

"What?!" She stared at him, gobsmacked.

"He's just like ol' Vicky!"

Her spine stiffened and she swallowed her bite hastily. "He's nothing like Viktor. I can't believe you'd bring him up after all this"

Harry interjected, "Ron's got a point. Snape and Krum do have superficial similarities. They're tall, lean, and dark-haired." He smirked. "They both fly and have a tendency to glower. Merlin's saggy pouch! You *do* fancy Snape!"

"This is absolutely pathetic!" she exclaimed, tossing her napkin to the tabletop. "I'm simply trying to tell you that he was so different I stared at him like a Muggle-born entering Diagon Alley for the first time. And then I had a flashback to the night Nagini bit him."

The mood shifted as quickly as Harry could cast a Patronus, and neither man mocked Hermione's statement. Nightmares, flashbacks, and other terrors had plagued all three for the first several years after Voldemort fell.

"It was quite awful," she said. "I was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack in Minerva's office, and it could have been horribly embarrassing, but he was quite nice about it." Ron covered one of her hands with his, squeezing sympathetically. She smiled at him; there were times when he was surprisingly compassionate. "And then later," she said, "when I apologized, he didn't twit me about it at all."

Ron removed his hand and his smirk reappeared. "If we're following Harry's theory that Snape's an older version of ol' Vicky, then, I suppose he fancies you as well."

"Ronald!"

They all laughed at the absurdity, but as Hermione took a hasty drink she remembered the last words Snape had said to her, and she felt a little guilty.

Later that night, Hermione stared into the darkness of her bedroom, unable to sleep. There were too many thoughts crowding her brain for her to be able to rest. During the time she and Ron had been together, she'd eased her occasional bouts of insomnia by initiating foreplay. What he lacked in finesse Ron made up for in sheer bawdy abandon. It had been the one area of their relationship which had worked. It had been several months since they had been together, and Hermione missed the exhilaration sexual release with a partner granted.

She considered manual stimulation, but even though she could bring herself off within minutes, she craved an exhausting encounter. In her lingerie drawer sat a small box filled with six cubes of a prototype concoction George had created following the success of the Patented Daydream Charms. Its development had been shelved for several years, but when Hermione and Ron had called it quits George had pulled her aside and given her the box. "I'm not saying anything, and I swear on every hair on Angelina's head this is straight up. One of these nights when you're lonely, crumple one of these over your sheet." He'd wagged his eyebrows in a ludicrous manner, but Hermione had accepted the gift. She believed he was sincere, and after casting a series of comprehensive diagnostic spells, she knew there was nothing inimical in the invention.

For the first time, she considered using one of the purple cubes. She was single. She was awake at ... three in the morning. She was lonely, and she was desperate for an orgasm.

Having made up her mind, Hermione threw off her covers and slid from her bed. She opened her lingerie drawer by feel and retrieved the small box. Slipping off the lid, she removed a corner cube and then returned to her bed. Nervous anticipation sped her heart.

Perhaps this was an idiotic idea, she thought. But her nipples had tightened with excitement and she hoped for relief. Groping for her wand on her nightstand, she then lit a candle before casting a spell to separate her leaf-patterned duvet from the sheet beneath. Then Hermione peeled off the wrapping around the ensorcelled cube of ... bath salts? It looked and crumbled like her favorite bath salts, yet the fragrance was anything but floral.

Briefly questioning her sanity, she staked her next few minutes on trust and broke the cube, scattering it across her pale blue sheet. Her pulse quickened as she pointed her wand to trigger the activating spells.

"Engage," she whispered.

For several beats of her heart nothing happened, but then, to her astonishment, her sheet began to rise from a point in its center, levitating off the bed, twisting and tangling and bunching in a rapid conversion. Simultaneously, the sheet's color redistributed itself, concentrating in the general location of eyes and hair which sprouted from the central head and dotted a treasure trail from the scant navel indentation to its rising, cloth erection.

Hermione wasn't sure whether to be amused, aroused, or horrified. Her damn sheet was turning into a wizarding version of a plastic blow-up doll. Arms and legs extruded from a slender torso, and flexed their ersatz muscles. Hands with long fingers stretched wide, and the simulacrum turned its head in her direction.

Its eyes, so dark blue they appeared black in the dim light of her bedroom, focused on her. She stared. They were familiar, but she couldn't identify them without the rest of the features. A bump of a nose formed next and then a mouth with thin but well-shaped lips. The manikin reached for her and opened its mouth. It whispered in a deep timbre which she could feel vibrate in her abdomen. "Feel, Hermione, don't think. This is about feeling."

Air hissed through her teeth when its hand wrapped around hers, and it felt nothing like three-hundred-count sheets. But then the candle guttered and she was in the dark with an artificially created lover.

"I I can't do this," she stuttered.

"You can." A long-fingered hand, which felt entirely human, pulled her closer to the bed, and she reluctantly complied.

"What are you?" she asked, taking small, undecided steps.

"Whatever you want me to be. I am the construct of your imagination, the idealized version of your needs."

She halted at the bed's edge, attempting to see in the dark, but she could only make out the general shape of a masculine figure. "Would you talk to me?"

"If that is your wish," the simulacrum said softly. "I am temporarily imbued with your knowledge."

"Isn't that a bit narcissistic?"

"Only if your masculine ideal is a version of yourself."

She snorted, unexpectedly feeling more at ease. "What happens if I light the candle again?"

"The fantasy state is enhanced by allowing your imagination free rein. Considering your initial reaction, I don't think you will achieve orgasm if you can see me for the construct I truly am."

She shifted from foot-to-foot. "Excellent point."

The voice dropped into a husky drawl. "What do you want, Hermione?"

Anticipation dripped down her spine, pooling in her groin, and she made her decision. "Too many things to enumerate, but I will be content with an orgasm and a good night's sleep."

It ... he ... laughed; the sound was mellifluous and arresting. "Then allow me."

And Hermione relinquished practicality for high fantasy. "My pleasure," she murmured.

His last words were, "It will be."

And it was.

The kiss was an amalgam of the best kisses of her life: the night of the Yule Ball when Viktor sought to erase her memory of Ron's callousness; the first time she and Ron had kissed in the Room of Requirement; the day Ron had first told her he loved her; and the idealized image she held in her mind of the perfect kiss.

She allowed her fantasy construct to pull her onto the bed where he proceeded to acquaint himself with her favorite places to be touched. A feather-light caress here, a nip there, and within a very short time, they were joined, flesh to pseudo-flesh. He rocked his hips in humankind's most universal affirmation and kissed her once again.

Her orgasm was explosive.

When the simulacrum withdrew from her, he spooned against her back, arms wrapped around her waist with one leg tucked between hers. She fell asleep quickly; her last thought that she had a whole new meaning for the concept of being entangled in the sheets.

The next morning she returned the five remaining cubes to George with a message.

Dear George,

These are very dangerous. While not coercive, I suspect they might be addicting and verging on the Dark Arts.

Be very careful if you choose to proceed with production. They will certainly make you rich, but they might negate the next generation of little witches and wizards entirely.

Love,

Hermione

Several weeks later, Hermione stood in a long queue at Flourish and Blotts, waiting to purchase a pile of last-minute Christmas gifts, when she was jostled. "Harry!"

"Do you have a minute?" he asked without preamble. He wore jeans and a rumpled shirt beneath a heavy navy blue cloak, but his expression revealed nothing about his mental state. He had learned to mask his thoughts and feelings very well over the many years he had been in the spotlight.

"Uh ... now?" The shops would only grow more crowded the closer it came to Christmas. Usually all her shopping was done before the fifteenth, but this year she was working on two active investigations and her personal time was practically non-existent.

"Yes, now," he said impatiently.

"Is it work-related?" she asked, edging closer to the front. Only five people were between her and the counter. "Can't it wait?"

Exasperated, Harry removed the books from her arms, and pulled her from the line, the customer behind her immediately taking up the slack.

"Hey!" Hermione poked Harry's bicep. "I've been waiting twenty minutes."

Setting the books onto the nearest display table, he guided her out of the shop and into the cold winter afternoon amidst the bustle of holiday shoppers in Diagon Alley. "It's not official, but I don't want that to happen."

Her irritation cooled immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Have you heard from Minerva?"

"Not since" Hermione's brain caught up with her mouth, "she wrote to you?"

He dropped his hand from between her shoulder blades, nodded tersely, and took off across the cobblestone street in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione followed. Several teenagers clustered outside Bon Mots, Gabrielle Delacour's new truffle shop, gossiped while they tasted the delicate confectionery; their conversation broke off as Harry and Hermione passed, and then resumed at a higher pitch. Hermione ducked her head into a flurry of snowflakes as they began to fall.

"Has something happened?" she asked, panting to keep up with Harry's longer strides.

"Yes and no," he said, passing Quality Quidditch Supplies without even a glance in the window. "C'mon, I don't want to talk about this here."

"Not the office, please! I just left for the first time in three days."

Harry paused, giving her a once-over, a smile playing about his mouth. "You do have an office pong about you. What about your flat? You can take a shower and I'll explain before we go." He resumed his quick pace, dodging around a couple who were oblivious to their surroundings, and leaving Hermione flat-footed.

"Go? Go where?" She caught up as they reached the public Apparition point.

He replied as he spun with determination toward his destination, "Scotland."

She was so tired she stumbled upon arrival in her flat's small entrance, catching her balance on the tiny table against one wall. "Harry James Potter! Don't do that! I could've splinched."

He ignored her complaint and crossed her comfortably furnished lounge, ignoring the overstuffed, wall-to-wall bookcases. "Have a shower and get dressed. I want to be at the school before dark. I've sent a Patronus."

Hermione braced one hand on her hip, brandishing her wand with the other. "If you don't tell me what's going on this moment, I'm going to tie you to that chair until you do!"

Standing in front of the leather chair Hermione had been given by her parents, he replied, "It's Snape."

Her ire deflated even as Harry sank into the chair and stretched his legs. "Oh, no!" Distress thinned her voice. "Has he been hurt?"

"Not as yet, but Minerva sent me an owl. Apparently the Snape-baiting has escalated and she's asked if I could come to tea this afternoon."

Lured by the comfort of her sofa, Hermione moved in its direction, saying, "That doesn't sound ominous, Harry. Certainly not enough to drag me from my shopping."

"Please, Hermione," he said, fingering the edge of the chair's arm. "I want an extra set of eyes on this. I can't ask Ron in case it turns into something MLE has to handle. Besides, you know it's no longer a simple matter of pranks. This is stalking, and you know what can happen when people become obsessed ... especially magical people."

Choosing not to take a seat, Hermione shuddered. She didn't want to contemplate the results if Snape had become someone's fixation. "All right. Let me go take that shower."

She kicked off her shoes, scooped them up, and padded across the floor, enjoying the slight gliding action her tights caused on the smooth wood. Then pulling off her jumper before she reached the short hallway and the row of Muggle and Wizarding photographs waiting to greet her, Hermione considered whether she had any clean clothes to wear.

Harry's "Fine," followed her into the bathroom.

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Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 12

In which Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall request assistance, and Hermione Granger learns Severus Snape can be witty.

Chapter Four: In which Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall request assistance, and Hermione Granger learns Severus Snape can be witty.

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"Hermione, I didn't expect to see you." McGonagall greeted the Aurors as she unlocked the school's gates.

"Harry asked me to join him. I hope you don't mind." Her breath fogged as the words left her mouth, and Hermione pulled her heavy woolen cloak tighter about her body. London hadn't been nearly as cold as Scotland. At least it wasn't snowing. Yet, she thought. An ominous blanket of clouds stretching across the horizon presaged a coming storm.

"Certainly not." McGonagall led the way up the freshly cleared path toward the school. "Mr. Potter, thank you for coming. Thank you both. I hadn't anticipated such a prompt reply."

"Of course, Professor." Harry's glasses fogged almost immediately when his hot breath met the cold air, but it had been many years since he'd needed Hermione's assistance, and with a tap of his wand, the lenses cleared. "I want to help if I can," he said. "I have one favor to ask first."

"Yes?"

"If you can call Hermione Hermione, then do you think you could call me Harry?"

McGonagall smiled and pulled her scarf, knitted in Gryffindor colors, tighter around her neck. "If you will call me Minerva."

"With pleasure," he replied, but he exchanged a worried look with Hermione. She, too, had noticed the strain behind the smile of their former head of house.

They were quiet during the rest of the trek up the hill, and by the time they arrived at the castle, the impending storm announced its presence with a reverent hush of snowfall. When Harry held the great oak doors for his companions to pass through, McGonagall informed him, "We're meeting in Professor Flitwick's study. I hope you don't mind, but I thought his account would be useful."

Hermione waited until they were halfway up the marble staircase and she had ascertained no one was near enough to overhear her question. "Will Professor Snape be joining us?"

"No." McGonagall, too, checked their surroundings—no portraits, no students, no ghosts, and no poltergeists—before answering. "He's rather fatalistic. Severus believes this sort of treatment is to be expected, and aside from taking additional precautions, he won't initiate any official steps." When they reached the second floor landing, the three turned toward Ravenclaw's domain in the West Tower.

Harry leaned against one balustrade. "I can understand his position."

None of the three spoke as they transferred to another staircase which swung wide, bypassing two floors and conveniently swinging to the landing leading directly to Flitwick's study. As Hermione strode to the top, she asked, "If Professor Snape thinks these incidents are nothing more than student mischief, then why are you so concerned?"

"They've continued into the holidays." McGonagall's mouth was pinched with disquiet. "Whoever is perpetrating these ... I can't call them pranks any longer ... is still in the castle. Filius thinks the holiday break is our best chance to identify him or her." She stopped outside an open door and gestured for her guests to enter. "Very few students remained for the holidays this year and with a skeletal staff"

"It's an excellent idea." Harry paused while Hermione stepped ahead of him into the Charms' professor's private domain.

Awaiting their arrival, Filius Flitwick was dressed to impress. His hair had been brushed until it gleamed, and his smile was wide and welcoming. His deep brown suit was spotless, its tails hanging to the mid-point of the backs of his knees. His shoes had been the recipients of house-elf tender care and shone until their surroundings reflected off their surfaces.

"Professor," Hermione greeted, "it's very good to see you again."

Initial pleasantries were exchanged in short order. Seating and tea were administered as an antidote to the chill and their journey, and once the biscuits had been passed, the two professors launched into their subject as if they'd rehearsed a presentation. Briefly, Hermione glanced at Harry to see whether he was as amused as she by the easy camaraderie of the two teachers. It was clear they were good friends. Harry dipped his head in acknowledgement, but then Flitwick's retelling garnered their full attention. "One of the oddest and most recent developments has been the flowers."

"Flowers?" Hermione asked.

"In Severus' classroom," McGonagall confirmed.

Harry leaned forward in his seat, placing his cup and saucer on the hovering tray. "I thought the tributes were vermin and only found in his office."

"Not any longer." Flitwick wriggled his fingers and his chair dropped by several inches, so he could slip to the ground easily. With quick steps he crossed the room to a corner cupboard. Opening the right-hand door, he withdrew a see-through bag containing what appeared to be a botanical specimen. "In the last two weeks, there have been several floral offerings and one vial of a poorly brewed love potion." He handed the bag to Harry. Inside was a slender stalk of late season heather.

"May I?" Hermione reached for the bag which Harry easily relinquished. She peered at the perfectly preserved bells of the local flower and bit her lip in thought.

"We don't know whether it's one or two people leaving these things for Severus, but enough is enough." McGonagall's teacup rattled as she placed it in its saucer.

"Forgive me, but the obvious answer is that Professor Snape should apply better security spells on his rooms," Harry said blandly and watched the teachers bristle at his implied criticism.

Flitwick stretched his spine, lengthening his stature by a full inch. "Mr. Potter, the security spells and wards on Severus Snape's office are barely legal as it is. I, personally, have adapted three charms for those exact purposes."

Pausing in her scrutiny of the heather, Hermione slanted a look at her friend through an unruly fringe of curls. He was using one of his favorite interrogation techniques; it was especially useful with highly intelligent people. They disliked being thought ignorant or incapable and usually divulged more information than intended. She smiled privately while fingering the translucent bag in her hands. It felt nothing like plastic, but appeared to function in a similar manner. A thought occurred to her, and she asked, "How often do these events occur?"

"The incidents have no discernable pattern, but we're none of us an Arithmancer. They never occur two days in a row." Flitwick resumed his seat and the chair rose to acceptable conversation height.

"It happens two to three times a week," McGonagall supplemented Flitwick's answer. "Severus refuses to bring the situation to the headmistress' attention, which is understandable if exasperating. His circumstances are precarious enough as it is."

"Precarious?" Harry brushed crumbs from his jeans. "How so?"

McGonagall shifted uncomfortably and it was Flitwick who replied. "As you may know, the Board of Directors resisted employing Severus, and for a time, he like you, Miss Granger explored other potential career avenues. I'm sure you can imagine the obstacles he faced, and while he wasn't a popular teacher during his tenure, he was an effective one. His demonstrable results and the Minister's endorsement were what ultimately persuaded the Board to offer him a position. However, he has a number of restrictions written into his contract, and those decrease in number and severity over a period of years. Following that he will be treated as if he were any other member of the staff."

Hermione was outraged. "How unjust!"

"But not surprising," Harry said.

"No," she agreed, with regret, "it isn't surprising. Has anyone considered that one of the Governors might be the instigator?"

SNAP! The strap of Flitwick's braces slipped through his fingers, and the sound of its impact with his crisp, white shirt was as loud as a Muggle rifle in the highlands. While no one jumped, Hermione and Harry carefully avoided looking at each other; they would laugh about the nervous habit later.

"How utterly despicable," McGonagall said tightly, and she crossed and re-crossed her ankles.

"No, no. It's highly improbable." Flitwick fingered his braces again. "It is a possibility we hadn't considered, Hermione, and you've quite startled us. However, none of the Governors were on the school's grounds when the first vole was delivered. The revealing spells Severus and I used were comprehensive and no, Harry, I shan't be more forthcoming about which ones we performed."

"An accomplice? A child, a nephew?" Hermione asked.

"None who are at present in the castle have ties to the Board. While I wouldn't put this sort of harassment past several members, I don't believe it would be to their advantage to pursue that course of action. Inexplicable as it may be, since Severus has returned to teaching our enrollment has gone up. People may dislike what he did, but it's common knowledge that he protected students to the point of his own death."

Harry jotted another note on the parchment he'd removed from his coat pocket, scribbling on it with a Self-Inking, Quick-Notes Quill. "To recap, if I may: Professor Snape doesn't want to draw attention to himself if it isn't necessary as that could trigger one of the restrictive clauses in his employment contract, and you believe the perpetrator isn't a member of the Board of Governors, nor one of their offspring or relations."

Flitwick pursed his lips, his head tilted as if re-appraising his one-time, indifferent student, but it was the deputy headmistress who answered Harry's question. "Exactly. We don't want our investigation to be detrimental to him in any way, and to put it bluntly, Harry, you're our solution."

Unable to hide his reaction to the implicit compliment, Harry's cheeks grew ruddy with pleasure. "Thanks."

However McGonagall hadn't finished. "I realize Severus wasn't particularly generous to you while you were a student, but we trust you."

"He's the bravest man I've ever known, Professor. I owe him my life." Despite his embarrassment, Harry's response moved Hermione deeply.

"Yes. Well." Flitwick cleared his throat, blowing his nose into a capacious handkerchief. "As you see, we have preserved the evidence. Would you like to inspect the rest?"

"Unfortunately," Hermione said, as she removed her wand from the bag containing the heather, "without seeing these specimens *in situ* there is very little my specialty can add to the investigation. Whoever put the flowers on the professor's desk didn't use a wand. Although, I do have a question." She held up the preserved heather. "Is this lavender?"

McGonagall frowned. "You should know better, Hermione. It's heather."

Hermione shot Harry a nasty look when he chuckled. "I'm sorry, Minerva," she said. "I was unclear. I'm referring to the color. Would you call this lavender?"

"Why?" Flitwick asked, stepping down from his chair and scurrying closer to study the specimen Hermione held. "It's certainly a pale purple."

"I'd say it was lavender," McGonagall assured her, "but I, too would like to know why you ask."

"I imagine Professor Sprout would know immediately." Hermione raised the specimen for all to see. "In the language of flowers, lavender heather expresses the sentiment of admiration."

McGonagall sucked in her breath sharply, and Harry nodded, rising to his feet, pocketing quill and parchment. He said, "I'd like to take a look at the rest of the evidence."

"We've kept everything except this item in my classroom rather than Severus' office. We thought it wouldn't be quite as obvious a hiding place." Flitwick led the way to the door.

"Brilliant idea." Harry followed his former teacher. "Hermione, I suspect our theory is correct."

"I'm afraid so. Do you need me to come with you?"

"No need." Harry retrieved his cloak from the obliging coat rack. "I'll catalogue the flowers so you can tell me if there are any other hidden messages."

Hermione, too, rose to her feet, addressing Harry as if they were in her office at the Ministry. "And the potion, please. I'd like a sample for analysis."

"Don't you think Snape's already analyzed it?"

"I'm sure he has." She handed the bagged flowers to her friend. "Although a second opinion never hurts."

McGonagall cleared her throat, her spine straight and shoulders rigid. Hermione found it amusing that her former teacher was no longer the towering authority figure she'd once been as seen through the eyes of an enchanted eleven-year old. Now their eyes were at a level. "Just a minute, please. What theory?" the older witch asked pointedly.

Harry's response was so immediate it was obvious he had expected the question. "We were concerned that these pranks might be the signs of a stalker."

"A stalker? Is that some type of game hunter?" Flitwick asked.

"Sorry." Harry flushed while draping his cloak over his arm. "It's a Muggle term, and in this case it could easily mean that whoever is leaving these presents for Professor Snape has become obsessed with him." What Harry did not say was that they all had first-hand experience with obsessive wizards.

Hermione then retrieved her cloak. "Please let me know when it happens again and, if at all possible, I'll come immediately. I would very much like to see the evidence as it presents."

"I'd cover for you if necessary, 'Mione."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, touching the sleeve of his robes lightly, "but don't call me 'Mione. You know how much I dislike it." He smirked and she knew he'd done it on purpose. "While you go with Professor Flitwick, I'd like to say hello to Professor Vector and then stop by the library." She explained, "I haven't seen Madam Pince in a very long time, and I'd like to wish her Happy Christmas."

McGonagall rose from her chair and made her way to the door. "Irma recently told us that you and she were friendly."

Hermione's eyes darted to Harry, to whom the revelation was news. His interested green eyes rested upon her face. "I spent a lot of time in the library while I was a student," Hermione explained, "and Madam Pince was very kind to me on occasion. I had planned to see her the last time I was here, and you too, Filius, but it got too late."

"Which is why I had to learn of your visit from Minerva." Flitwick crossed his arms. He then waved his hands when she apologized. "No need; you're here now." A small clock on his wall chimed the setting of the sun, and he said, "Dinner will be served in an hour. You're most welcome to stay, although I imagine you both have plans this evening." He followed his guests into the hallway.

"My only plans are to find my bed." A jaw-popping yawn finally overcame Hermione.

"She's been working in her lab for the past thirty-six hours." Harry watched with professional interest as Flitwick locked and warded his door.

"You'll work yourself into an early grave if you're not careful," McGonagall admonished as they waited in the draughty hall.

Hermione just shrugged. "There's no one else who does what I do."

"No one?" her former head of house inquired when they reached the landing. "Is the Aurory so understaffed, then?"

"I "

Harry stepped between the two women, his expression proud. "What Hermione won't say is that she's a pioneer in forensics analysis. It isn't a standard area of MLE investigation, and neither the Wizengamot nor the Department recognizes it as legally admissible. That means she ends up working harder than anyone else, but there are some of us who appreciate and rely on her expertise. At least no one can argue her results."

Flitwick beamed at his former student and led the way down the hall. "I would expect nothing less from a witch of your intelligence. It's really too bad you weren't sorted into Ravenclaw."

McGonagall snorted as her skirts swished. "She's a Gryffindor to the core, Filius."

"Actually," Hermione said, diplomatically, "the Sorting Hat did want to put me in Ravenclaw, but it decided Gryffindor at the last minute."

"Ha!" Flitwick crowed, and then gestured for Harry to precede him. "How fortunate it's a Friday. The left hand staircase will align straight to the second floor. After you, ladies, Harry." Gallantly, he brought up the rear, and at the second floor landing, he said, "We part ways here. If either of you, Harry or Hermione, wish to remain for the night, I'm sure there are guest quarters available."

"That's very kind, but after I see the headmistress and Madam Pince, I'll probably go straight home."

Harry paused before taking the left-hand corridor. "I'll come find you in the library when I finish with Professor ... er ... Filius. I don't want you splinching on your way home."

She touched his sleeve. "Thanks, Harry. I'll meet you there. Goodbye, Filius."

The wizards retreated down the corridor, wall sconces flaring brightly as they passed. Hermione and McGonagall chose the corridor toward the stone gargoyle guarding the headmistress' office. An occasional scorch mark could be seen, the result of a magical spell which hadn't been scoured clean in the intervening years between the last battle and the present day.

"Have you had a chance to read the Ubasti?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yes, it's excellent. Her anecdotes of Cleopatra Selene's mother were so fascinating I've begun to read about her and Mark Antony. History was never one of my interests, outside personal recollections, but this has become something of a holiday project."

"A break from student essays?" Hermione's face alit with amusement.

"Yes! I doubt the students look forward to their holidays with as much enthusiasm as the staff." McGonagall's smile curved her lips as she moved on to the topic of her newfound interest. "Since I've read the Ubasti, I've taken to haunting poor Irma's library more than the Grey Lady."

"And you used to chide me about the numbers of hours I spent revising."

"I doubt anyone could have prevented you." The smile turned affectionate.

"When I first learned I was a witch, the Ministry gave my family two books. One was about the Statute of Secrecy and the other was *Hogwarts, A History*. As you can imagine, I read them both in a week."

"You've always been a diligent pupil."

Hermione explained simply, "I wanted to fit in."

The Transfigurations professor stopped in the empty corridor and faced the young Muggle-born woman. "You are an asset to this world, Hermione Granger, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

The unexpected comment practically stole Hermione's breath. "Minerva," she said, softly, "thank you."

McGonagall nodded, uncomfortable with her own outburst. "Yes, well." Resuming their walk, she cleared her throat and said, "One of the things which drew my notice to the history of Ubasti's time was the short Muggle lifespan. It's no wonder witches and wizards were sought-after counselors; their experiences spanned several generations."

"What an excellent point. I've always been shocked by how young girls were when they were forced into marriage. For all that some were queens and ruled their own lands women weren't much more than chattel." As they rounded a corner a sprightly witch in a livid purple hat waved from a nearby portrait; Hermione smiled in passing.

"It's an enormous departure from the wizarding world. I'm not certain which disturbed me more, Muggle women treated as possessions or the commonplace acceptance of arranged marriages. Although some of the older pureblooded families follow that practice, I've always thought it barbaric. Did you know Cleopatra was married to her brother at the age of eighteen?"

The sound of Hermione's footsteps stuttered. "That's revolting! I can't believe it was anything other than politically expedient?"

"I'm sure it was. He was twelve and sent her into exile shortly thereafter. Ubasti first joined her household when Cleopatra was in Alexandria."

"Is that when she met Mark Antony?"

"No, that was later, after she bore Caesar a child." Minerva pursed her lips to recall the information. "I believe she was in her early twenties and Caesar in his fifties."

"At least that's similar to wizarding culture. Age difference between couples isn't an issue like it is in the Muggle world."

"I wasn't aware it was an issue at all."

"It is." Hermione nodded her head in emphasis. "Not a ten-year age difference, mind, but anything greater and people tend to look down their noses. You should have seen my parents' faces when I brought Kingsley to dinner."

"Hermione!" McGonagall's astonishment was so great she stopped in the middle of the corridor. Flickering light from a nearby torch, nestled in its metal sconce, highlighted the strands of gray in her tightly knotted hair.

Hermione's laugh bounced off the stone walls. "We were very circumspect, and it was a good thing because it never would've worked. You didn't know?"

"I had no idea."

"It started right after he became Minister. He attended every debriefing session the boys and I had. One night when Dawlish had kept us there for hours, Kingsley offered to take us to dinner. Harry and Ron had made plans with George you know how unstable he was during that time so Kingsley took me alone. One dinner led to another, and then to something more."

"I you I had been under the impression Ron Weasley was your only ... er ... love interest." McGonagall patted her hair, her fingers nervously tucking in stray hairs.

"No. Kingsley and I dated for three months, and they were wonderful, but he wanted a wife, and I wanted to take my N.E.W.T.s. He's quite lovely though."

"I've always liked him." McGonagall's voice was faint.

"Ron and I didn't get together for another couple of years. I was barely on speaking terms with him until after Professor Snape left England."

"I see."

"Now" Hermione said briskly, "what were you saying about Cleopatra?"

Back on firm academic ground, McGonagall resumed their course toward the headmistress' office, and the cadence of her comments was so like her teaching style Hermione's fingers itched for a quill with which to take notes. "She met Antony in her mid-twenties, so it was probably a more equal relationship than the one she had with Caesar, and they had three children. Ubasti became young Cleopatra Selene's handmaid, and when young Selene was held captive in Rome, Ubasti went with her.

"It was there Ubasti had her daughter, Fulvia. The father was a young Libyan wizard of good family, and he later hid the child amongst his household. In the latter pages of the journal, Ubasti wrote how proud she was that Fulvia achieved a marriage of some note."

Neither witch noticed they had reached the stone gargoyle, too immersed in their conversation to pause. Intrigued, Hermione asked, "Any idea who?"

"That's the interesting part. Fulvia's great-grandson was Publius Septimius Macer, and when he lived in Rome he became an equestrian. *His* grandson became the emperor."

Hermione's eyes widened. "So there was wizarding blood amongst the Roman emperors. That is interesting."

"Before the Statute of Secrecy, mixed marriages weren't unusual, but that's not the interesting fact."

"Oh?"

"The Roman Emperor was Septimius Severus." McGonagall's eyes gleamed as if she'd just pounced on a mouse in her Animagus form.

Chills shuddered down Hermione's arms, and if she'd believed in Divination, she might have paid attention. "Really?"

McGonagall nodded. "I have no idea whether there's any connection to our Severus, but I do know there's Roman ancestry in the Prince family."

"That would be quite remarkable. Does he know?"

"I've lent him the book, but as we've all been marking end-of-term exams, I doubt he's had time to read it yet."

Off to their left the massive gargoyle leapt to the side as the great circular stair descended, carrying the headmistress. As always, Septima Vector's poise was enviable. "Hermione, Minerva, good evening. What a delightful surprise."

"I'll see you at dinner, Headmistress. Hermione, it's been enlightening. I'll look forward to seeing you again soon." McGonagall nodded to the women and retraced her path.

"What brings you to my door?" Vector asked curiously.

Rather than discuss the real reason for her visit, Hermione prevaricated. "Harry and I came to wish some of our former teachers a happy holiday. He's seeing Professor Flitwick, and I took the chance you might be here before I go to the library to wait for Harry."

"How thoughtful of you. I'll walk with you if I may. I trust you've been well."

"Yes, thank you. Busy at work, of course, and I'll confess to a slightly ulterior motive for wishing to see you. I wanted to ask about the Arithmancy post."

Vector's eyebrows rose. "It remains unfilled. Have you reached a decision?"

"I don't want to mislead you; I am strongly considering it. I'm sure all careers have their positive and negative aspects, but ..."

"Teaching," said a voice designed to curl a woman's toes, "is five parts exasperation, three parts sheer drudgery, and two parts exultation."

Hermione whirled to face Snape, her eyes wide, and her lips parted. His eyes strayed to her mouth for a moment, and he inclined his head in a greeting. "Miss Granger."

"Professor, how nice to see you again."

"Is it?"

"Yes," she replied. "Would you care to elaborate on your evaluation?"

Vector insinuated herself between Snape and Hermione as they traversed the school. "He thinks to scare you off, Hermione, but I shan't allow it. If you want the position, it's yours. I'm scheduled to meet the Beauxbatons junior Arithmancy professor at the end of January, but she is very young and Madame Hagrid has reservations about her stamina."

Snape snorted, coming from him it was a surprisingly elegant sound. "Headmistress, it is less than adroit to imply that Miss Granger has the staying power of an ox."

"Severus!" Vector cried. "That was not my intention. Miss Granger Hermione, I hope you weren't offended."

The curly-haired witch laughed, and it was the second time her gaiety had filled the empty corridor. "Not at all. I've known Professor Snape long enough to know he occasionally says things he doesn't mean."

Dark eyes, enhanced by thick sooty eyelashes she had never noticed before, met hers. "What are you suggesting, Miss Granger?"

"There have been times when you've had to act in a certain way so as not to reveal your true loyalties." *How gauche*, she thought, and flushed at being wrong-footed with this man again.

"Times change. Lately, I have been fortunate enough to match desire and necessity."

Grateful he hadn't whetted his sharp wit on her Hermione lengthened her stride to keep up with the pair of teachers. Vector and Snape were both taller than she, and by the time they reached the stairs, she was panting and attempting not to let it show.

Vector asked Snape a question about his seventh year class, and Hermione was content to let them talk over her head while she climbed two flights of stairs. In fact, she was so focused on keeping pace she didn't notice Vector skipping a vanishing step. Completely unprepared, Hermione's foot slipped right through the missing riser, her hands flaring out to grasp at anything to prevent her fall

Snape grabbed her roughly from behind, and lifted her to safety beyond the empty space. "Careful," he murmured in her ear.

"Thanks," she whispered in reply, her cheeks suffused with color.

She had never realized how strong he was, and gave him a sideways glance, only to discover him looking at her. He said nothing further, but when they reached the fourth floor, Snape, without uttering a word, modulated his pace, subtly slowing Vector to match the stride of the shortest member of their trio. Hermione smiled gratefully, vowing to start an exercise regime in the coming year; although had she not been exhausted from thirty-six hours of work, her stamina would have been better.

"If you are to consider teaching a career, Miss Granger, I strongly recommend you prepare yourself for vexation and futility with rare moments of true satisfaction," Snape commented as they passed a row of gleaming suits of armor. Fleeting, Hermione remembered the remnants of more than one battered cuirass lying on the stone floors. "Alternatively," he said, "you might check yourself into the Janus Thickey ward for a long weekend to cure yourself of the foolish impulse."

"Severus!" Vector scolded, but her tone was indulgent. "Don't listen to him, Hermione. He's known to despise his students."

"I do not despise them." His expression was stern as he peered down his nose at the headmistress. "I merely accept that the vast majority have mediocre intellects and are uninterested in learning anything other than that which will allow them to pass their exams or bed their most recent hormonally driven fancy." He raised a hand when Vector opened her mouth to demur. "Those who stand out do so at either end of a bell-shaped curve, isolated by their scant number, and where failures are more spectacular than those who achieve brilliance."

"It's not the same in every discipline, surely?" Hermione asked.

"Perhaps not. However, it has been my experience that destruction is easier and more noticeable than perfection. I'm certain you remember Longbottom's potions."

"Of course I remember Neville. He was utterly pathetic at Potions. And you're quite right about his successes. Very few people have any idea that he's a brilliant herbologist. He's teaching at Beauxbatons now."

Snape's expression could best be described as a suppressed smirk, but Hermione was too busy chasing a thought to notice. She stopped walking just as they arrived at the library, but she didn't reach for the door handle. She turned to face the former spy. "Are you suggesting Voldemort was a failure? He was certainly a travesty."

Snape's expression hardened, but he considered the question rather than eviscerate her for impertinence, even as Vector sharply inhaled at Hermione's brash use of the former Dark wizard's name. Tension coiled about them, but it was the faded remnant of a serpentine monster whose time had passed.

"I was not referring to him," Snape finally replied. "Yet given my own criteria, the answer would be yes. He was a failure of astounding proportions."

"Which is why," Hermione said, continuing the through-line of her thoughts, "your contributions have been all but ignored. You were at the cutting edge of perfection."

Expecting mockery, he stiffened. "It was a very sharp edge, Miss Granger, and one tends to bleed when one is cut."

Taken aback, Hermione blinked in surprise, only then realizing how insensitive her comments could have been perceived. "Forgive me," she implored, wide-eyed. "My friends despair of my ever learning to keep my mouth shut."

As once before, Snape's gaze dropped to her mouth. He inclined his head as he answered, "You were young to have so much thrust upon your shoulders, and there is nothing wrong with learning from the past. Those who refuse to do so ..."

"Are doomed to repeat it," Hermione finished his thought, realizing that while he had said she was young, he hadn't said she was incompetent. A compliment from Severus Snape, no matter how sideways the delivery, was a thing to be cherished.

"A sound precept."

His mouth twitched, Hermione grinned at him, and Professor Vector said, rather abruptly, "I believe the library was among your favorite places at Hogwarts."

Snape held the door for his companions to enter. Several students, none of whom Hermione knew, were situated at a number of tables in the large room. Without fail, they all stopped working to look at the newcomers, but most quickly returned to their tasks. A pair of Gryffindors, sharing a table, bent their heads in a fierce *tête-a-tête*, casting

furtive looks in their direction.

"I'll take my leave now, Miss Granger. I have a few matters to discuss with Madam Pince," Vector said while her eyes skimmed over the nearest students before settling on Snape. "Professor Snape, you'll be at dinner this evening?"

"It's certain to be the highlight of my day."

Hermione bit back a desire to laugh at his caustic delivery, and managed to wish the headmistress a Happy Christmas before Vector slipped between two tables toward Madam Pince's office. Prior to entering the librarian's inner sanctum, however, the elegant headmistress turned to bestow the unlikely couple she'd left with a final glancing assessment and graceful arch of her neck in farewell.

With her plan to see the librarian thwarted, Hermione looked at the familiar nooks and crannies of the enormous library. It was like a homecoming, slightly bittersweet but nostalgic and familiar.

"And you, Miss Granger, what are your plans?"

"I had wanted to see Madam Pince, but I won't interrupt her now, of course." She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of a table tucked between the stacks in the Arithmancy section where a student, a Ravenclaw, had spread his research materials to take up the entire tabletop. "I had thought to sit at my old table."

"I'm surprised you would consider it."

"Why is that?"

"Surely you know the adage *you can never go home again*"

She faced him, biting her tongue on the most obvious reply, *you did*, but said, cautiously, instead, "I imagine it would be awkward."

He snorted. "If that's your attempt at being tactful, I would prefer the uncensored version."

She opened her mouth, but then snapped it shut, and settled for following him to a table nearest the circulation desk. She sank onto the wooden seat of the chair he held for her and then sighed suddenly. "I must've been mad to consider the Arithmancy position. I have so many memories in this castle, a number of them quite horrifying; they're why this is only my third visit." She angled her head to look at him, her eyes seeking the dark shadows lurking within the depths of his, and then spoke in her blunt but not unsympathetic fashion. "It must've been hell for you to return."

"In comparison to my previous tenure it has been Utopia."

Her heart practically seized in sympathy and stilled her tongue. She followed his movements as he choose an adjacent seat, his long frame folding into the chair, her eyes riveted to the movement of his hands as they smoothed the length of his frock coat and then settled, one in a loose fist upon his lap, and the other to trace the grain of the table.

When she looked up, he was watching her.

Fully aware that he was a Legilimens of some note, she stared back. After several long seconds, his mouth twitched, and the corners of her mouth tilted upward.

It was impossible to know where their conversation might have led if they weren't interrupted at that moment. She, who had only three female friends, was blessed with a legion of putative brothers. "Hermione?" asked one of their number.

She didn't rise to welcome the ruddily handsome Charlie Weasley, but she greeted him affectionately, "Hi, Charlie. How are you?" He bent to kiss her cheek, balancing a grubby hand against the table. She crinkled her nose in distaste. "Where have you been? You reek!"

He smiled broadly. "I was on my way to get cleaned up when I ran into Harry. He said you weren't here for long, so I seized my opportunity." He rocked back on his heels and stuck his hands in his pockets. His dragonhide trousers were heavily soiled and his suede shirt bore the evidence of recent physical labor. The shirt's russet color matched the generous portion of freckles he'd inherited from both sides of his family. "It's good to see you, Brat."

She rolled her eyes. "You know I loathe that name."

His eyes glinted mischievously, but he let the subject drop. "You coming to Mum and Dad's for Christmas?"

"Boxing Day. I'll be with my parents at Christmas."

At that moment, Charlie noticed her companion. His easy smile changed. "Professor Snape."

"Professor Weasley." Snape's posture had become as rigid as the back of his chair. "What a rare pleasure to see you in the library."

Charlie broadened his stance and crossed his arms. "I certainly didn't come to see you."

"However will I bear the slight?"

Before Charlie could respond, Professor Sprout, dressed in a mustard yellow set of work robes, complete with an odd hat festooned with a bouquet of overblown cabbage roses, bustled up to him. "Weasley!" she said in a rush. "I've been looking for you. I thought you were going to deliver that Thestral dung to Greenhouse Five."

The heightened color which had so recently tinted Charlie's cheeks deepened into embarrassment. "Mellors and I collected it for you, Professor. I had planned on telling you after I cleaned up, only I was saying hello to an old friend."

The gray-haired Herbology professor took notice of Hermione for the first time, and what began as a welcoming smile froze in a grim mockery when she recognized the Defense master. "Miss Granger, how are you?" she asked stiffly, and then, without waiting for an answer, she addressed Charlie once more, "Hurry up with that delivery, I need it immediately after dinner."

"I've already made the arrangements, Professor Sprout. It should be happening as we speak."

"Good, good. Thank you, Weasley. I'll have to transplant those seedlings tonight or the entire crop of Abyssinian shrivelfigs will be lost, and it would mean re-arranging my syllabus for the spring term." Dismissively, her eyes brushed past her black-haired colleague. "Miss Granger, you might want to reconsider the company you keep." With her parting shot, the dumpy Herbology mistress left the library.

Snape's chair scraped against the floor as he stood, his expression darkening into a livid scowl, but Hermione didn't notice as she stared after the Herbology professor. Indignantly, she said, "Well, that was rude."

"You have to expect it," Charlie replied. "It's the way most people feel, Hermione." He forestalled any response, by adding, "I have to go. See you Boxing Day."

In the silent wake Charlie left behind, Hermione brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face and stared up at Snape. He was looking in the direction of the exit, a sneer curling his upper lip. In the past, she had championed those who were treated unkindly. Where Sirius Black's conduct toward Kreacher had angered her, Charlie's and Sprout's reactions to Snape hurt. When the scowling man's attention returned to her, he straightened to his full height. Swallowing her distress, her pity, and her outrage in

the certainty they would be unwelcome, Hermione nonetheless gave Snape the compliment of not avoiding his eyes as they evaluated her. She spoke before he had an opportunity. "I can't believe ... I ... that's just"

His rigidity eased as she stumbled over her words, but he turned from her to survey the library, scowling at the Gryffindors revising nearby, and only when the fifth years returned to their work did he regain his seat.

Hermione said earnestly, "There's much I would say right at this moment, but perhaps that censorship I do so poorly would be better put to use this time."

"And yet the unexpurgated version falls in Perrault-worthy fashion like lumps of coal from your enchanted lips."

Hermione opened her mouth to snap at him as she might have Harry or Ron, but then shut her mouth abruptly. He arched an eyebrow.

A swoosh from the library's double doors announced another arrival, and the instant hush followed by frenzied whispers revealed the newcomer's identity. Ignoring her friend's incipient arrival, Hermione grinned at Snape, and said, "I suppose I should thank you. No one's ever called me a diamond in the rough before."

The fine lines around his eyes crinkled as if he was holding his mirth in check.

At that moment, Harry arrived in a whirl of black wool, carrying Hermione's winter cloak looped over his arm. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Madam Pince is meeting with the headmistress so I haven't seen her, but Professor Snape has kindly kept me company."

Harry faced his one-time nemesis without a trace of his former enmity. "How are you, Professor? Thank you for waiting with her."

Snape's demeanor shifted again; this time an entirely neutral expression masked his face, and Hermione thought he might be part-chameleon. When he stood, she rose to her feet also. He nodded his head, and brushed nonexistent lint from the left sleeve of his coat. "The pleasure has been mine, Mr. Potter. Miss Granger."

"I've enjoyed it," she said truthfully. Then, as he started toward Madam Pince's office, she asked, "Are you sure about Utopia?"

His eyes met hers for a moment. "As sure as coal turns to diamonds under sufficient pressure."

Hermione watched him walk away, noticing the absence of billowing robes for the first time, and then accepted her heavy cloak from Harry.

"What's Utopia?" he asked.

"Hogwarts," she replied. "Shall we go? I'm all in."

"Absolutely. Let's get you sorted."

They saw no one as they made their way through the halls of the school, but Hermione didn't say anything until they left the building. "You were very nice to Professor Snape."

He tucked his thick scarf around his neck. "I saw Charlie on the stairs so I knew he was with you. Besides, I don't hate him anymore."

"I'm very glad. There are entirely too many who do." She quickened her pace, thankful for her heavy coat, although the cold was an effective stimulant.

"Yeah," Harry replied, lengthening his stride, "and one of them is stalking him."

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah, mostly." He pulled his hand from his pocket and offered her a small vial enclosed within another clear bag. The vial was only filled halfway.

Hermione accepted it from Harry. "What was the preliminary analysis?"

"According to Filius, Snape says it's a Class Three love potion, one found in Horace's *Epodes*."

"Horace?"

"Some Squib who died centuries ago." Harry's boots crunched on the ground as they headed down the hill toward the front gates. "He said it wasn't as coercive as what Vane dosed Ron with back in school and nothing like Amortentia."

"I see. So, having the professor ingest a portion of it in the hope he will lead us to the brewer isn't a viable option?"

"Unfortunately, no," Harry said, holding his wand higher to light their way.

"Its presence does give weight to your theory of a stalker, though." She stepped carefully along the frozen path, peering out into the early darkness of the Scottish highlands.

Their thoughts were so consuming that neither spoke again until Harry bade her goodnight in her flat's small entrance, snow melting from his boots onto her tiled floor.

She didn't bother to light any of her lamps, instead making her way through her flat by ingrained Pavlovian repetition, although the candle on her nightstand flared to life as she unfastened her bra. In its yellow light Hermione saw four parallel bruises on her bicep. She stared at them with exhausted incomprehension until she remembered they were where Snape had grabbed her when he'd saved her from a nasty fall through the trick stair. Unaware of doing so, her mouth softened into a smile, one which remained until she fell asleep.

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Chapter Five

Chapter 6 of 12

In which Christmas comes to Hogwarts, Severus Snape stumbles over his most recent tribute, and Hermione Granger investigates.

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Christmas showed the castle at its most festive, and while it bore the distinctive stamp of each tenured headmaster or headmistress, Hogwarts was still a school for children and young adults. Under Vector's headship decorations were more Victorian than her most recent predecessor and significantly more restrained than during Dumbledore's tenure. Nonetheless, pine-scented garlands hung in looping strands along balustrades, swaying in pendulous arcs as stone staircases swiveled on their pivots. Christmas trees were festively decorated and lit by enchanted candles in each of the four house common rooms, and in the Great Hall a veritable woodland was situated upon the dais where the high table was normally found. A small community of fairies flitted from tree-to-tree, illuminating silver, gold, bronze, or pewter ornaments.

Severus Snape, long assumed by Muggle-borns and half-bloods to be a descendent of Ebenezer Scrooge, had decorated his quarters for the season. He had succumbed to McGonagall and Flitwick's wheedling, and together the friends had hiked to a finger of forest where they had acquired three moderately small trees. Snape's tree was located in his sitting room, blocking one of the French doors. It was decorated with pine cones and winter berries, and he had used a Beguiling Charm to coax a nest of fairies into defecting from the woodland in the Great Hall.

On Christmas Eve, Snape returned to his rooms following the post-curfew party for those staff members remaining at Hogwarts over the holidays. Many stopped by Pince and Filch's quarters for a glass of mulled wine and holiday cheer, and while Poppy Pomfrey only remained for a quarter of an hour, her excuse was a Hufflepuff stricken with influenza and tucked up in the hospital wing. She wasn't on speaking terms with the Defense professor, but she didn't treat Snape as something unclean. Sprout and Hooch departed as soon as they realized he was present, although Snape had sat quietly in a snug corner playing chess with Filch. Charlie Weasley and the Astronomy professor, Sinistra, remained for the longest time. They left shortly before midnight, weaving their merry way out of the door, one to return to the school's highest tower, the other to give the creatures under his care a last check before retiring to bed.

Snape was the last to leave the party, and when he entered his quarters he lit no lamps, settling instead into his favorite chair and staring into the fire smoldering in his grate. He considered destroying his memory vials as a gift to himself, but by the time he finished the last of his drink, his muscles were almost too relaxed to support his body as he found his bed.

When he woke Christmas morning, it was to the stirring of his loins. During the last years of the war, an erection had been as rare as a worry-free day. Then throughout his long and oft-times frustrating convalescence, sexual gratification had been infrequent at best; even more recently, the unease of having an unknown persecutor had dampened his libido significantly. Thus, any erection was a gift to be celebrated.

Before Snape opened his eyes, he had tucked his hand into his pants. The familiar tug and pull as he stretched his foreskin stimulated a fresh surge of arousal into his rigid appendage. He grabbed for his wand and wordlessly cast a Lubricating Charm. The wet sound of friction accompanied Snape's harsh, panting breath, and he summoned a well-worn image of Lily Evans to the forefront of his mind. Only this time, it didn't cause the expected reaction. There was no tingling in his spine, no elevated pulse at the thought of the alluring young woman he had once loved to the exclusion of all else. Stroking himself tighter and faster didn't work, although release hovered at the edge of consciousness. Snape rifled through his memories for a sexual encounter to stimulate the final spark. There had been women in his past, not many and not often, yet none came to mind.

Within seconds the lack of mental stimulation wouldn't matter as his hips flexed and he used both hands to speed his release.

There.

He groaned and shuddered, and in the second of blinding white light, an image of slightly parted lips and earnest brown eyes snapped into mental focus, but it was quickly forgotten in the short, sharp ecstasy of orgasm.

It was difficult to wipe the grin off his face as he climbed into the shower and thought about breakfast.

As in Dumbledore's time, the long house tables would be banished in favor of a single oval table large enough to seat all who had remained during the break. Meals during the holidays tended toward the exotic, as house-elves catered to the whims of their small audience. Extravagant puddings were prohibitively expensive during term time, but for a score of students and staff, Crepes Suzette or Baked Alaska wasn't unusual.

Breakfast on Christmas morning was one of the few meals Snape anticipated with pleasure. On his plate he would find delicately poached eggs layered atop a thick rasher or two of Wiltshire dry-cured bacon perched on two perfectly toasted crumpets. He didn't particularly like English muffins and sneered at anyone who said crumpets were the same thing really. Next to his plate a small gravy boat of hollandaise sauce would be kept at the perfect non-curdling, non-skin-forming temperature. His love of Eggs Benedict was the one thing Snape had picked up from his late and unlamented father. He had never learned where Tobias Snape first encountered the indulgent meal, but it was the only time he would remember his sperm-donor with anything approaching fondness.

Thus, bathed and dressed, and bending to the frivolity of the day to come, Snape, the younger, ignored the small pile of presents on his hearth which he would open with McGonagall, Flitwick, Pince and Filch later, and crossed his sitting room to leave his quarters.

When he opened his door, his transitory contentment shattered and his breakfast was forgotten.

There, lying in a massive heap across the threshold was a two-meter long wild boar ... undeniably dead.

Snape's wand was in his hand within a fraction of a second. "*Hominum revelio!*" He cast the spell in each direction of the hallway before he stepped over the body and into the corridor. A recasting of the spell on the staircase confirmed that he was the only human on his and the nearest levels of the tower.

As Flitwick had done so many weeks before, Snape tried a basic diagnostic spell on the bristly corpse, expecting and yet dreading the results. They were as he thought. The body had been sucked dry.

A further spell revealed two wound sites, one at the beast's heart and another at the jugular vein in its neck.

"Scheiss!" he hissed viciously.

None of the harassment thus far had been significant, but the consistency of the negative attention and its present escalation had succeeded in making Snape feel exposed. He hated it.

Whipping his wand in a pattern Harry Potter had taught his study group their fifth year at school, Snape summoned a silver Patronus. The great winged creature unfurled from his ebony wand, its wingspan brushing opposite sides of the corridor as its wings took their first down-stroke.

While he waited for McGonagall, Snape considered his options. He regretted being unable to use the spells he'd cast when discovering that first vole. Since his rooms were located in an open-ended hallway with adjoining stairs the results would be unreliable. Alternatively, he reinforced the protective warding on his chambers. The only reason the spell he chose wasn't classified as Dark magic was that the Wizengamot had never seen it before. It was one Snape had invented during his short tenure as headmaster, when the school had been home to the predations of the Death Eaters.

As he completed the added layer of security, he sucked in an unexpectedly frigid breath of air. Only one of the castle's ghosts ever sought out his company. "Baron," he said in a clipped greeting before facing the shimmering outline of the Slytherins' mascot which had materialized at his elbow.

"S'teeth!" the Baron exclaimed in heavily accented English. His native tongue, spoken in the days of Chaucer and *Le Morte d'Arthur*, had suffered the lingual shift of

centuries. Essentially a vain man, the Baron had disliked being the butt of jokes by other Houses, and had made the effort to update his colloquialisms and pronunciation, yet the accent and occasional anachronistic phrase remained. "What a fine beast. Been hunting again, Snape?" Then he said reminiscently, "There's nothing finer than the taste of a fresh-killed beast, sliced from the carcass as it roasts on the spit. If I could but sup and sip, I should be content. As it is, I shall envy you this fine meal."

"Indeed." Snape inclined his head. "My pardon, Baron, I have other duties this morning."

The ghost sketched a bow before phasing into the nearest wall. Without pause, Snape summoned his ladder-back chair and transfigured it into a small, but sturdy, bridge over the boar's body. Next he called for a house-elf. "Coffee, tea, and some breakfast, Flossy. Professors Flitwick and McGonagall should arrive shortly, and unless I'm mistaken, they will ensure Mr. Potter's attendance as well."

The tiny green elf disappeared with a faint *pop*.

With no task left to perform Snape stormed from one end of his sitting room to the other, his anger seeking escape like a pocket of methane beneath a lake of tar. Abruptly, he spun on his heel and sighted his wand at a Chinese vase on his desk. With a snap of his wrist, a spark of virulent green shot from the ebony tip of the wand.

BANG!

The vase exploded into a cloud of china shards and porcelain dust.

"Really, Severus, there's no need to be so dramatic." McGonagall's tone was crisp as she climbed into his quarters. With a discreet wave of her wand the vase pieced itself back together.

"No need?" he asked, his glare fulminating.

Curling her lip fastidiously, she remarked, "None. It is not your fault one of our students has shown extremely poor judgment." Having quite clearly dressed in a hurry, she finished pulling the cuff of one blouse sleeve from her fitted jacket to cover her wrist. "Not to mention such poor taste in Christmas gifts."

"Christmas gift?" Snape's laughter was a harsh bark. "Minerva, you know what this means."

She crossed the room to his side, her sincere expression belying her initial dampening response. "Yes, Severus, I do. You'll have to report this incident."

His jaw tightened as he paced the perimeter of his sitting room, pausing to flick one of the silver ornaments hanging on the limb of his tree. "When I discover the perpetrator..."

"You'll let us handle it," she said sharply. And when his eyes narrowed and his mouth turned down, she huffed in exasperation before placing her hands on her hips in a universally understood stance. "You can't possibly think I believe you mean the student harm."

"You would have ten years ago," he snarled, storming across the room to confront her.

Her hand flew to her chest, as if to protect her heart, and her eyes gleamed wetly behind her square glasses. "That remark doesn't become you."

"It would have once."

"You are no longer that man."

His posture changed and his expression softened. "You're quite right. Forgive me." Then he resumed pacing, his one-armed gesticulation fueled by his emotions. "But this...! These ... they're insidious. None of the incidents are threatening when taken singly, but when you look at it all together, it's as if..."

"You're being stalked, Professor." Snape spun on his heel toward the door, his forward momentum carrying him in the direction of Hermione Granger as she followed Flitwick over the bridge. It was she who had spoken, and she paused at the apogee of the transfigured arc, her eyes fixed on him.

"Stalked, Hermione?" Flitwick asked, prompting the explanation for his colleague's ears as he made a beeline for the tray of beverages. Flossy had come and gone with none the wiser, but Flitwick was never terribly coherent with less than three cups of coffee equalizing his blood-to-caffeine ratio.

"Stalker is a Muggle term, but Harry and I think it might apply in this situation. I'll save you the lecture, and give you the expurgated version." She entered Snape's domain and met him at the base of the short bridge. He inclined his head, his dark hair falling forward, but she could see his eyes and the memory of an earlier discussion lurking in their depths. "In short," she continued, speaking directly to him, "it means someone has fixated on you, Professor, for whatever reason. The expression of that obsession can be as mild as sending you flowers or a Class Three love philtre. More exaggerated cases may subject the recipient of their desires to something more noteworthy..." she waved her hand at the boar beneath the bridge, "...and in other, less pleasant, circumstances, a stalker might resort to vandalism, property damage, or even become violent."

"My word!" Flitwick exclaimed, adding three lumps of sugar to his coffee cup and pouring the hot brew into the delicate china. He seemed to have taken the morning's events in stride, except those who knew him well would notice he was wearing his jacket from the day before.

"I tend to provoke strong reactions in people."

Snape's dry remark drew Hermione's attention from the bristle-tufted peccary, and her appeal was earnest. "Please don't take this lightly."

"As inconceivable as it may seem," he said sardonically, "I have been the unwilling focus of student fancy in the past. Some of whom have resorted to poorly brewed love potions."

Hermione shook her head, her undulant hair emphasizing her vehemence. "It isn't inconceivable at all. You're a heroic figure." When he sneered, she pressed on, "Professor, there have been cases with very unhappy endings, and I don't want to see that happen here."

"How do we find the culprit?" McGonagall asked from her position on Snape's sofa. To ease her anxiety she had begun to sort and rearrange the biscuits on the serving plate.

"And where is Potter?" Snape inquired with an underlying bite to his question.

Hermione ignored his tone, and walked around the edge of the bridge to where she could see more of the massive beast obstructing his doorway. She bent over to have a closer look, and didn't look at Snape when she replied. "Harry is at the Burrow this morning with his wife and son. Unless you want several Weasleys to accompany him, you will have to make do with me. Besides, I promised Minerva and Filius I would come if at all possible."

Snape glared at his colleagues, his anger spilling into his comment. "I wasn't aware you had been consulted, Miss Granger."

Her head came up and she looked over her shoulder at him. "Is that a problem?"

He strode to his French door, skirting the festive tree, and instinctively positioning himself for an escape. "It was my understanding your last jaunt to these hallowed halls was in search of a career change. I had no idea I was also subject to your scrutiny."

A seasoned Auror, Hermione understood the underlying significance of his relocation within the room, and her heart lurched. "My last visit was both personal and

professional, and if you'll excuse me, I would like to examine the feral pig."

"Boar," he corrected.

"Really? I thought boars were extinct in Britain."

He had turned to look out the window, one hand fingering the short needles of his fir tree, and McGonagall answered the question. "They're not extinct any longer, Hermione. There's been a resurgence of the species these past fifteen years. Some cultivated varieties have escaped to flourish in less populated areas."

"I thought it was rather large, but then again, I've never seen one in person, so to speak." Hermione crossed the bridge into the hallway, and then levitated Snape's handiwork off the boar and into the professor's chambers. "If you'll give me a few minutes?"

At her question, Snape shook off his unpleasant reverie. Without waiting for permission, Hermione initiated a series of spells on the dead animal before attending to the corridor beyond. An enchanted mesh, sparkling in a variegated range of blue hues, settled atop the coarse hair of the boar. Leaving that magical field in place, Hermione roamed beyond Snape's line of sight, and he finally accepted a cup of tea from McGonagall before positioning himself at the door for a better vantage point. He was familiar the first spell she cast on the stairs at the end of the hall; her wand-work was unsurprisingly textbook. However, as he watched her in action, Snape recognized very little of what she was doing. He traced his lips thoughtfully, his attention unwavering, his tea forgotten.

While Hermione worked and Snape watched, McGonagall, in her official capacity as the deputy headmistress, used the discretionary override to activate his Floo connection and report to the headmistress. Flitwick settled onto one of the window seats and drank his coffee. He appeared perfectly calm, but he fingered his holly-patterned braces, and every couple of minutes, his anxiety was relieved when he released the elastic. *SNAP!*

No one was more surprised than Snape when Vector's reaction to McGonagall's report was to step through the Floo into his sitting room, and he left the doorway, taking several steps in the headmistress' direction.

"Seven?" squeaked Flitwick.

"Filius? Whatever brought you here?" she asked, dusting Floo powder from her elegant crimson robes. Without waiting for a reply she chided her Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. "Severus, you could have told me the news yourself. There was no need to involve the others." Her eyes focused beyond Snape, taking in the massive tribute lying across the doorway. Neither head nor hindquarters were visible. "What a magnificent specimen."

"Sorry?" McGonagall involuntarily asked.

Vector smoothed a nonexistent, wayward hair into her coiffure. "It's an impressive display, don't you think? One rarely sees this sort of homage in this day and age, but I believe there is a time-honored precedent for it on the continent."

Quick footsteps sounded in the hall. "There is?"

"Miss Granger! I hardly expected to see you here this morning."

"It wasn't a problem. My parents sleep late on Christmas Day, and I was already awake when Minerva Floo'd." Hermione, too, smoothed hair out of her face, but unlike Vector's, hers was all too real. Hermione's hair was a wild confection of curls which was quite flattering. Unaware of its becoming effect, she was only conscious that she was dressed in jeans, a ratty jumper, and hadn't bothered to pull a brush through her hair since she'd padded barefoot into her parents' kitchen to put the kettle on.

"But I fail to see why there was a need to call you in the first place. Surely you don't think there is cause for alarm?"

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Snape was quicker. "Considering the Board of Governors' stance regarding my employment, Miss Granger's presence is best categorized as precautionary."

Flitwick hopped to his feet, thus standing on the window seat so his head was at a level with his peers. "It seemed the most prudent course of action."

Vector's expression softened and she smiled at her diminutive colleague. "I quite understand, but I have no intention of allowing the Board of Directors to interfere with my choice of teachers, and nothing as immaterial as an overly enthusiastic schoolboy prank or out-moded gesture of gratitude is going to interfere."

McGonagall straightened to her full height. "Severus was understandably concerned with his contractual obligations."

"I'm fully aware of the terms of his contract, Minerva." Vector nodded thoughtfully. "I will not be bullied by the Board. I insisted on the phrase, '*at the discretion of the headmistress*,' and know full well when to exercise that right."

"How comforting," Snape said into the silence that fell after her pronouncement.

Hermione bit her lip to hide her reaction to the snide undertones of his comment, but no one commented on it.

With the poise gained over many years of dealing with unexpected situations, McGonagall offered Vector a cup of tea and a muffin.

"Thank you, no," she said. "Breakfast is being served in the Great Hall, and it would not do for me to be absent on this festive occasion. Minerva, I trust you will file an appropriately worded report regarding this mischief?"

"You'll have it by noon, Seven."

"Very good. Then I will bid you all a Happy Christmas." She dipped one hand into the pewter box on the mantelpiece and threw the Floo powder into the flames. Before she stepped into the green fire, she said, "Filius, I'm certain you can leave the others to tidy up. While Minerva has a report to write, I would like the other heads of house to be present at breakfast."

"I'll be with you as soon as I complete my toilette." The Charms professor lightly jumped to the floor in an accompaniment to his statement.

Vector stepped into the flames as Hermione crossed the bridge, re-entering Snape's sitting room. "Would someone care to explain?" she asked.

"Not particularly," Snape replied, but he wasn't looking at her; he was glowering at the fireplace.

"Surely you understand the necessity of keeping these events low-profile," Flitwick said, placing his coffee cup on the tea tray, and crossing the room toward Hermione.

Her cheeks flushed as if she'd been scolded like a first year. "Yes and no."

"Searching for another front page? Been out of the limelight too long, Miss Granger?" Snape asked nastily from his resumed position at the French doors. "Shall we summon Rita Skeeter and her Quick Quotes Quill?"

"Severus!" McGonagall snapped.

"I expected better of you, *Professor* Snape," Hermione said, her heightened color reflecting irritation rather than embarrassment, "...than to make assumptions based on too little information."

He turned from staring out at the snow-covered grounds and crossed his arms. "Then by all means, *Miss Granger*, regale us with your astounding intellect."

Instead, she faced McGonagall and Flitwick, each of whom was shooting admonishing glares at their colleague. "While I loathed Dumbledore's policy of sending soldiers to fight a war for which they were woefully unprepared a position with which you, Professor Snape, might empathize - I understand why you don't wish to draw attention to these pranks, to use the headmistress' word. The school can ill-afford another scandal. Aside from that, it's the prudent course of action to take where a potential stalker is concerned. What I don't understand is why you didn't want to discuss it with Professor Vector, unless she is unaware of the other incidents and you want her to remain ignorant."

Snape sneered. "With a quick mind like that it's astonishing you haven't become Minister."

Hermione crossed the room like an Unforgivable. She stood toe-to-toe with him, her head tilted back to look directly in his face. "And with a mouth like yours, it's a wonder you remained out of Azkaban."

"Hermione!"

The situation might have become ugly if Snape hadn't chuckled with unexpected mirth. Hermione's eyes flew wide as he drawled, "That lump of coal would produce a diamond the size of a pygmy puff."

Flitwick and McGonagall stared at the two as if they'd been struck by a Confundus Charm.

The sound Hermione made as she shook her head would be described by the uncharitable as a snort. "Is that your idea of an apology?"

"Was one called for?"

"None whatsoever, and I'll thank you for saving me the trouble as well. Look," she said, poking him in the chest, "I hate that someone is eroding your peace, and I want to help."

The expression in Snape's eyes was indecipherable, but he stared at her finger as if transfixed. He cleared his throat. "Then tell me what your investigation uncovered."

"You're not going to like the answer."

"As there have been few things in my life that I have actually liked, I can bear the strain."

Hermione backed off a pace and faced all three teachers. She slipped her wand back in the narrow pocket along the outer seam of her jeans. "While I found magical residue on both wound sites, it wasn't delivered through the use of a focus. No one used a wand on the boar either to kill it or to place the carcass outside Professor Snape's door. Whoever or whatever killed the animal was disturbingly strong." Brown eyes visually raked their audience, and Hermione rested a hand on her hip and tapped her toe. "What aren't you telling me?" she asked. "It isn't yours, former Master of Espionage, but your co-conspirators' expressions make it abundantly clear there is more here than meets the eye."

Flitwick stepped onto the bridge. "I must be going if I'm to appear in the Great Hall for breakfast."

"And I have to write that report for the headmistress," McGonagall said, fingering her hair before she became aware of the nervous habit and dropped her hand, "not to mention arranging with Argus to have the carcass removed."

With hurried holiday wishes, the two teachers disappeared in less than a minute, leaving behind a bemused Hermione and a clenched-jawed Snape.

"I take it the story is yours to tell, and you aren't inclined to elaborate." She stepped closer to the warmth of the fire.

He moved away from the French doors. "If there were such a story it would have no bearing on these events."

"How can you be certain?"

"I was a Death Eater, Miss Granger. I murdered the most beloved wizard in a century. Aren't those sufficient reasons for my persecution?"

She shook her head emphatically. "No." An unguarded expression crossed his features, but she didn't know him well enough to read its meaning. After a moment, she said, "I won't press you for an answer now, but I would appreciate it if you would consider confiding in me." It pleased her when he didn't interject a derisive comment, and she pressed on. "I've removed small sections of skin from each of the wound sites as well as additional hair and tissue samples. I cannot trace the perpetrator at this juncture, and none of the standard Blood Tracking spells revealed anything of significance. Wherever the boar was killed, that's where it was bled dry. Harry will be here later this afternoon, and I'll ask him to do a fly by. He's very good at finding anything there is to be found."

He grimaced. "I have to suffer Potter as well?"

"It could be worse."

His tone was peevish. "I cannot fathom how."

Unexpectedly, she found it endearing, but her response was mischievous. "I could come back with him."

"Tempting," he said, his mood lightening, "but I think I'll forego the honor."

"Pity." She smiled, and then sobered. "I'd like a list of everyone remaining in the castle over the holidays, including students. After Malfoy *Imperio'd* Madam Rosmerta, we can't rule out any possibility."

He agreed by walking to his writing desk, plucking a piece of parchment from a neat pile and picking up a silver-tipped quill. When he finished the short list, Snape discovered Hermione had succumbed to the enticement of his small library. Gently, she brushed one finger down the spine of a book, tilting her head to read the titles.

Snape interrupted her, his hand offering her the list. "As you requested."

"Thank you." Their fingers touched briefly when she accepted the scroll and it drew her attention from his collection. "I'll let you know if I find anything. In the meantime, you might want to dismantle the outermost layer of wards on your rooms. They're worth a mandatory three-month sentence in Azkaban. Since I'm here on my own time, I can fudge the requirement of reporting them, and I imagine Harry will, too, but please don't put him in that position."

He straightened to his full height. "I will take care of it."

"I could replace them with an Auror-equivalent."

"That's unnecessary, but I appreciate your offer," he said stiffly.

"None of us like feeling defenseless." She knew how to school her expressions, and didn't bother to hide her empathy. Then she shoved the list he'd given her into her back pocket and took her leave. "Happy Christmas, Professor, and please call me the next time don't wait for someone else to do it. Call me..." she paused suddenly, and then dug into her pockets, "...here, take this." Offering him a golden galleon, she explained, "They're how we communicated with the D.A., and there are still a few of us who carry them. I modified it from the standard Protean Charm, but you need to say my name before activating it. Otherwise, it broadcasts to everyone in the link."

His fingers closed around hers. "I wouldn't particularly enjoy the entire Weasley family knowing my business."

She laughed and released the golden coin. "Nor Kingsley Shacklebolt, I'd wager."

"Shacklebolt?" His voice rose in surprise.

"He's been on the list since *Potterwatch*."

"Of course. I believe he was Royal."

"Yes, he was." She smiled at the memory. "That first time we heard a broadcast," she said, then cleared her throat, shifting her weight from foot-to-foot, "shall we say it was more welcome than I can express."

"I can imagine," he replied.

She looked into his eyes and said frankly, "I expect you can." They were silent for a long beat, both recalling a more dangerous time. Her voice dropped to a soft murmur, but he heard her. "I'm quite surprised you knew about it at all."

He took a step back, distancing himself from the dark reminder. "I was an Order member. I helped Dumbledore with the initial idea before..."

"It was brilliant."

His pale cheeks flushed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And now I really must go."

He walked with her to the doorway and watched her cross the bridge. "Good-bye, Miss Granger."

"Professor."

By the time she reached the Entrance Hall, Hermione's mind raced with ideas, possibilities, and suspicions. Enticing aromas came from behind the doors to the Great Hall and her stomach growled. She was hungry for her mum's Full English breakfast, something her family enjoyed only at Christmas Day.

When she retrieved her winter coat from the cloak room, she discovered it had been soiled by what appeared to be owl droppings, and one arm had been shredded, most likely by the bird's claws. Dismayed, Hermione nearly tripped over an open owl cage shoved haphazardly into a corner. She thought someone deserved to lose massive numbers of house points for their irresponsibility. Taking the time to clean and mend her coat, she then collected her broom, and pressed out into the cold winter morning. She still didn't like to fly, but she had grown proficient at it during her training.

~o0o~

Boxing Day was the first opportunity Hermione had to speak with Harry, but finding a quiet moment, or indeed location, during the boisterous festivities at the Burrow wasn't particularly easy. Shortly after dinner, while Fleur accepted congratulations on the announcement of her second pregnancy, Harry told Hermione he wanted to talk to her outside. She excused herself from a conversation with Angelina Johnson, now Weasley, and bumped into Charlie on the way to the kitchen.

"I know you're careful," he said, picking up their earlier conversation which had been interrupted by Molly's sumptuous feast, "but Snape was a Death Eater for a long time."

"He was a double-agent." She bit her tongue on a sharper retort.

"He fooled some canny people..."

She interrupted him. "Charlie."

He held up his hand. "Just be on your guard, Hermione. You're like family to me." Charlie quickly kissed her cheek before escaping into a clutch of redheads. He passed Harry sitting on the arm of the sofa, but said nothing to his brother-in-law.

Hermione hovered in the doorway waiting for Harry to catch up.

Her dark-haired friend bent to whisper something in Ginny's ear which caused her to roll her eyes, but then she caught his hand and squeezed it. The couple shared a brief, wordless conversation.

Hermione watched their interaction with an affectionate smile, but then someone bumped into her from behind. "Sorry, Hermione."

"It's all right, Bill. Congratulations, by the way."

His scarred face crinkled as he grinned. "Thanks. It's good news."

"Fleur looks happier than I've ever seen her."

Across the room, the part-Veela was radiant while she chatted amiably with her mother-in-law "She is. We are." Then he gave Hermione a one-armed hug. "We're sorry you and Ron didn't work out not surprised, mind but sorry."

"I am, too, but I hope we'll stay friends."

"There's no question." He kissed her on the cheek and returned to his wife's side.

It was then Harry grabbed her hand and led her through the kitchen and out into the overcast afternoon. It was cold, and she stamped her feet to keep from freezing.

"Are you a witch or not?" he teased before casting a localized Warming Charm about them.

"You're stealing Ron's best lines."

Twigs cracked and popped as they veered off the path, and Harry replied, "I have special dispensation when they're directed at you."

"He won't be coming up with any new ones either, especially now."

Concerned green eyes peered through foggy lenses. "Ron told you, then?"

Before she replied, Hermione snapped her wrist, dropping her wand into her hand. She tapped his glasses, nonverbally casting an *Impervius*, and then grinned at him. "Are you a wizard or not?" Harry's smile was sheepish. It was a spell he rarely forgot, and it reminded her that even after all this time they both occasionally thought Muggle before magical. Then she answered his question, "He did. I miss him." Hermione held up her hand quickly before Harry jumped to any conclusions. "Not as a lover, just as

a friend. He's my best friend."

Harry clutched his chest as if he'd been mortally wounded. "What am I, then? Pumpkin juice?"

"You're different. You're ... you're my brother."

"Yeah." He suddenly stopped clowning around. "You'll always be part of the family, you know, regardless of whether you marry into it."

"It can't be the same, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit it's part of why it took me so long to break it off. It's not that Ron isn't right for me, Harry. It's that we're not right for each other. Look how long it took for us to get together. We waited and waited for the time to be right, only it never was and we finally said sod that and started sleeping together.

"Oh, we could have a perfectly pleasant life. In someone's demented imagination we'd be married for nineteen years, have a couple of kids a girl and a boy, of course and it would be fine. Ron would make fun of me behind my back and I'd nag at him to follow the rules. But deep down I would be hurt that he didn't respect me, and it would cripple him that I wouldn't look up to him as my hero."

They had passed through the garden while they talked, nearing the far end, where the individual trees in the orchard rose out of the fog in darkly spectral shapes. Harry paused while she crossed the narrow stile, leaving the garden proper.

"Once I started to look at us Ron and me more objectively, I remembered a lot of the things he did and said while we were at school."

Harry clambered over the stile, jumping the last two feet onto the soft dirt. "That's not fair, Hermione. He was just a kid."

"I know. There were many things I was willing to forgive and forget because I wanted a life with him. And when I started to question our future, I couldn't help but remember all the times he had ostracized me if he didn't like what I had to say or when he simply disagreed with me.

"You can't douse him with that potion and not cover me with it, too."

She carefully navigated past a warren of garden gnomes. "I realize that, but Harry, you and I aren't a couple. We're ... it's different."

"Yeah, it is."

"Besides, I remembered more than just his blaming my cat for Scabbers' running away. There was, for example, the Lavender year."

"Now that's really not fair," Harry protested as he ducked beneath a low-lying branch. "Ron might have been a hormonal prat, but you weren't much better, Miss Attack-of-the-Killer-Canaries!"

She smiled ruefully. "I was quite horrid that year, but that's not what I meant."

"Enlighten me then."

"What he did with Lavender was cruel."

He snorted. "Kissing Lavender Brown was definitely cruel and unusual punishment. I always felt rather sorry for Ron." She winged him with her elbow and he whinged, "Ow, Hermione!"

"I know you've never liked Lavender, but I'm talking about the underlying lesson. The one which, when I understood it, made me certain I'd made the right decision to break it off."

His face was wiped of all levity. "What?"

"Ron walks out."

Harry's face darkened, and he kicked a wizened windfall apple like the football he'd never had a chance to play as a boy. He said very softly, "He always comes back."

"But at what cost? I wasn't willing to take the chance it could be when we were married and had children. That when we were all sick and he didn't like something I said because I was tired and needed his help, he would simply walk away."

"He'd never!"

She faced him. Her voice was very gentle and very sad. "But he does. How many times did he sleep at your place because we had a row?"

Harry didn't answer for awhile. They found themselves in the heart of the orchard, and he leaned against the stout trunk of an aged apple tree. "You really have given it a lot of thought."

"I wouldn't have given him up otherwise. I've loved him since I was thirteen, but I had to sort out whether it was platonic or something more ... and while it's always been something more, it wasn't enough for me to ignore the negatives.

"I don't want him to be unhappy." She joined Harry under the tree's umbrella of denuded branches, one hand reaching up to push a snarl of twigs out of her way. "At least he's moving on with his life."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but Romilda Vane?"

Hermione snickered. "She's always wanted a war hero of her very own."

"Well she's got one. Are you really all right with it?"

"I expected to be gutted, but I'm quite surprisingly not. A bit sad, of course. It was thoughtful of him not to invite her today."

"Could you imagine Molly's reaction if he had?"

She shuddered. "It's hard enough that you and I work with her. Ginny's never forgiven Romilda for those chocolate cauldrons."

Harry straightened. "Enough talk of Ron's love life."

"It's not something I particularly want to think about." She broke off a twig and bent it between her fingers. "What did you find when you were at Hogwarts?"

"The centaur herd is as unwelcoming as always and the Acromantulae are more prolific than ever."

She shuddered remembering the monstrous spiders climbing through the broken walls of Hogwarts during that last night of fighting. "That's disappointing."

"You have no idea. There was nothing. I counted a handful of wild boar, but otherwise" He shrugged.

"No kill zone?"

"Not that I could find. I suspect the centaurs know something, but I narrowly avoided being impaled by one of Bane's arrows, and when I politely asked about the boar, I was summarily dismissed."

Hermione's shoes made squelching noises while she paced in time with her thoughts. "And if someone or something is poaching in their territory, they won't come to us for help either."

"The heavens would have to be in more favorable alignment." His tone mocked Sibyll Trelawney. Hermione giggled in spite of herself, and Harry said, "That leaves us with more standard avenues of investigation."

"And none in my current area of expertise. I won't get to the lab until tomorrow, but I'll run standard diagnostic spells on the tissue and hair samples. I had hoped to find some distinctive magical residue, even if it only confirmed that the person who made Horace's Love Philtre and killed the boar were one and the same. I have to finish the Bulstrode report and complete the analysis on Falconworth before I can dedicate any of my time to this. At least I don't have any outside commitments these days."

"I am sorry, Hermione, but I'm glad you're available to help with this. I don't like the idea of Snape being persecuted." Absently, he traced a broken line of bark with his index finger.

"Or stalked."

"Do you want me to take the list?" he asked.

"Give me a couple of days. If I can't get to it by Thursday, then I'll ask for help."

"Sounds good. If all else fails," Harry said as they returned to the house, "I'll put in for some leave and stay at the school for a couple of weeks."

Hermione laughed as they reached the back door. "Can you imagine the look on Professor Snape's face? Harry Potter as his own personal bodyguard!"

The rougher timbre of Harry's laughter mingled with hers as they re-entered the house for the promise of dessert.

Later that night, when Hermione unpacked the care package Mrs. Weasley had sent home with her, she found a single Fantasy Cube stuffed in an envelope, accompanied by a letter.

Hermie One,

Your points are well taken and should we proceed with product development we'll tone down the subconscious wish fulfillment.

Ron doesn't know, nor will he.

Ange does, but that's because her reaction was the same as yours. She tried one while I was'tn on that junket to Paris. I don't fancy being replaced by one of my own products, 'ta ever so!

Happy Christmas!

Love,

George and Ange

Hermione tucked the little cube into her sock drawer and pretended it wasn't there. She didn't, however, quite have the nerve to use it, or to put it in the rubbish.

Harry tried to be as good as his word, but Wednesday afternoon saw his patience at an end. His sometime partner, Bones Harry never referred to her by her given name, his and Hermione's initial encounter the morning after the final battle serving as the cornerstone for their association had complained during their first assignment that he lacked the fortitude required for a long investigation. He had, only once, responded heatedly that he thought dying for a cause might serve as fortitude, but he could be wrong. Bones had never publicly criticized him again, but they weren't easy partners.

Hermione wasn't in her office, although a complex set-up of tubes, glasses, small graduated cylinders (one containing what appeared to be blood), and an odd gadget clamped to the edge of her table called a centrifuge, seemed to be running an automated series of tests in her absence. A barrier spell had been placed on her door, preventing entry, but he was fascinated by the amalgamation of Muggle and Magical methods, and watched for a while before resuming his search.

She wasn't to be found on either of the two floors which housed Magical Law Enforcement, and by the time he decided to create another Marauder's Map, this time for the Ministry of Magic, Harry had run into Dawlish three separate times.

"For the last time, Potter, I haven't seen Granger. Quit fart-arsing and send the woman a memo!" Then he sneered. "Your time would be better spent investigating properly rather than encouraging her eccentricities."

For the most part, he had learned to keep his temper over the years, but Dawlish always managed to find his trigger point, and Harry said hotly, "Her eccentricity secured life sentences for Rabastan Lestrangle and Aristotle Mulciber!"

"No one ever said she wasn't lucky." Dawlish pushed past the younger wizard without noticing his clenched fists.

Harry finally found Hermione, and it had only taken three Point Me Spells and a bit of well-chosen arse kissing before he discovered her buried amongst the dusty stacks in a small room off one of the main branches of the Records and Magical Statistics wing of the Ministry's archives.

"Here you are," he said as he rounded the corner of a floor-to-very-high-ceiling bookcase, ducking beneath a set of the *Encyclopedia Magica*, all thirty-seven volumes and twelve appendices, which had slid, *en masse*, from a head-high shelf in answer to a summons by a researcher in another part of the archives. "Couldn't you have left a note?"

She didn't respond to the comment, but her quill paused mid-word and she raised her head. "Even though it's only Wednesday, I'll give you half the list."

Harry pulled a chair from the table, flipped it around and straddled the seat, leaning his forearm across the top of the chair's back. "What happened with Bulstrode and Falconworth?"

"Bulstrode's done. Dawlish wasn't best pleased to release her, but she didn't tamper with the Vratsa racing brooms. If I hadn't found the wool from Meghan McCormack's jumper snagged in the handle, Dawlish would never have accepted my findings."

"He's a git. I may not have ever liked Bulstrode, but she's the Cannons best Beater." At her glare, he said, "Er ... I'm also very glad your methods proved her innocence."

His rote contrition amused her, but was short-lived. She rearranged a pile of books, stacking them by size. "On the other hand, Bones refused to accept my findings on Falconworth. Says it's a dodgy piece of work and she wants it done the *wizarding* way."

Harry's immediate anger erupted and he sprang from the chair. "Bloody cow!"

"Harry! Keep your voice down." Hermione's admonition had too few sibilants in it for a proper hiss, but it was effective nonetheless.

Harry grumbled as he paced. "I hate working with her almost as much as I do Dawlish."

Hermione picked her wand up from the table and anchored a *Muffliato* spell to one of the bookcases. Still, she lowered her voice. "I won't deny they're a significant factor in my potential change of career. Neither has been what I'd call welcoming, more of a permanent obstruction, and Bones has never thought we earned our place. Remember what she was like as an instructor?"

"Having survived Snape as a teacher, she wasn't so bad." He sat back down, his hands gripping the sides of the chair.

"I never thought we'd find anyone more demanding," she said.

"Or more unfair."

"But we survived. Still, I'm now following the *Approved Ministry Regulations for Magical Investigation* on Falconworth. He's guilty, but Bones refuses to entertain the possibility I might be right." Her ink-stained fingers aligned the pile of notes she'd taken. "It's so discouraging."

"It's the Ministry of Magic." Harry leaned forward, rocking on two of the chair's legs. "Discouragement is its motto. C'mon, we always knew we'd have to work from the inside to make any changes."

"I'm revising my opinion. I'm not sure it's possible any longer." She pulled a tendril of curly hair straight and then let it spring back into an irrepressible coil.

"Chin up! Dazzle me with the results of your Hogwarts investigation. What have you found out?"

Hermione pulled a scroll from a small pile and tossed it toward him. "Those are my results, and you can read them in depth later. Essentially, the exsanguinated boar was killed by a magical being or creature at an unknown location and transported from that point to Professor's Snape's living quarters in the castle. There were no signs of violence on the body other than the two wounds — one to the jugular and one to the heart — which were made with an unknown weapon. There is no magical residue for me to track or correlate, no signs of a hex, or a jinx, or any other sort of curse — Dark or light. There is one small bit of gen you might find interesting."

He raised his eyebrows.

"There was a trace of anti-coagulant in the neck wound. I might have found the same in the chest wound, except too much tissue was missing to create a seam."

Harry stopped rocking, dropping the chair back onto four legs. "What do you mean too much tissue was missing?"

"I performed a Suture Spell on the carcass and" she held up her small fist, "...there was a hole approximately this size missing from the wound."

Harry frowned. "I don't like what this means."

"It could easily be a diversionary tactic." She picked up her quill and jotted a note on a piece of parchment.

"Or," he said, grabbing her hand to still her note-taking and ignoring her frown, "it could be exactly what the clue suggests; that we're dealing with a Sanguinarian."

"There are different types of Sanguinarians. For example, a mosquito is a Sanguinarian."

As Hermione drew a breath to continue, Harry cut off her incipient lecture. "Stick to the point."

"I was." She poked his hand with a finger. "Mosquitoes inject their victims with anti-coagulant before they feed."

He flushed. "Right. Sorry."

"It's all right. But the primary question is would a Sanguinarian leave Professor Snape flowers or make a love potion?"

Harry snickered with real mirth. "It's highly unlikely. Here, give me the list." He held out his hand and she gave him a small slip of parchment. "I'll take the students, and you can use *proper wizarding techniques* for background checks on the staff."

"Why do I get the staff? Not that I haven't been reading through their files already."

Grinning irrepressibly, he rose from the chair. "Because if you take the Arithmancy position, you'll know all about your colleagues."

"It's nice to see you've learned some cunning over the years." Hermione laughed at his outrageous suggestion.

"Besides," Harry said, nudging her foot with his boot, "Charlie's my brother-in-law, and if this ever becomes official, I don't want there to be any question of 'undue influence'."

"Good point. Charlie has been openly anti-Snape, but it doesn't follow that he's the culprit. It would be more his style to dump a load of Thestral dung in the professor's classroom than this."

"Yeah, and he would know where to find the boar." Harry chuckled, but then his expression sobered. "Hermione, he's extremely strong."

"A boar that size would weigh over a hundred kilos!"

"Exsanguinated it would be less, and that's not beyond him."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Really? I didn't realize."

"I don't think he's our man, but don't count him out. He's a Weasley," Harry said, and despite the seriousness of their conversation there was a mischievous curve to his lips.

"Which means he's probably smarter than he looks."

"Or not." Harry shrugged, and she laughed, although there was an edge to it. She cleared her throat. "He's not the only member of the staff who has unknown depths."

"Oh?"

"Did you know Madam Pince has an Incognito File?"

"Madam Pince? The Hogwarts librarian?"

She nodded and consulted another list, this one written on parchment with red ink — which Harry knew meant 'priority'.

"Why?" he asked.

"Since I don't have the clearance, and unless something has changed since last week, I know you don't have the clearance, we may not find out."

Harry rolled the list Hermione had given to him into a tight scroll. "Think it has any bearing on Snape's stalker?"

"Not necessarily. She's been there for years." Hermione lifted a blue file from where it had been sandwiched between two piles of books. "Did you know Vector taught at Durmstrang?"

"No." He unrolled the list, but his eyes focused on her. "Did she know Karkaroff then?"

Hermione opened the slender file and flipped through the pages. "It doesn't say, but he didn't become Headmaster until after Voldemort's first disappearance. It's possible they knew one another, but I don't have that information here."

"It doesn't make any sense that she'd do something to Snape, though. There was ample opportunity at other times, and she's headmistress, for Merlin's sake!"

"You never know where a bit of gen will lead you." She closed the file while Harry gave his list a perusal. "Although she was quite outspoken about protecting him from the Board of Governors."

Abruptly, he dropped to one knee on the seat of the chair. "Hermione! Did you see this kid's name? Martin Edgecombe."

Their eyes met, and guilt heated Hermione's cheeks. Her lack of regret over Marietta Edgecombe's death during that last year of Voldemort's war still bothered her. It was something she and Harry had discussed on occasion. His position about the former Ravenclaw had been resolute. Marietta had been Umbridge's tool from their fifth year. Sometimes Hermione believed it, but mostly she was relieved not to have another lifelong enemy. "If I was the one being targeted," she said, "then he'd definitely be"

"What?" he asked when she trailed off, her eyes unfocused.

"My coat was damaged. You know, at Christmas. When I retrieved it from the cloakroom, I discovered that an owl had crapped on it and shredded one of the sleeves. I thought it was just a careless student, but it might have been someone seizing an opportunity. I mean who would ever believe ..."

Harry said in a falsetto, "Oh, Professor, I don't know how my owl got out of his cage. I was bringing him to the Owlery from my dorm, but it was time for breakfast. I just left him there for a minute."

She nodded her head. "Exactly. No proof, only suspicion."

"It's a brilliant ruse, and it's the worst thing about a case with so many suspects. It acquaints you with the seedier side of humanity."

"A stroll through Knockturn Alley will do that." He chuckled at her dry delivery, but then pointed to the list. "Sorry," she said. "I'll be serious. I think I've become a little jaded."

"Hermione you're the least jaded person I know; realistic, maybe, but not jaded."

She smiled and plucked a thick file from the nearest pile. In cramped, but legible ink, was written the name *Minerva Margaret McGonagall*.

"Oi! Potter!" a voice called from the archive's Main Hall, but the anti-eavesdropping spell distorted the words. Quickly, Hermione twirled her wand in the elegant counter-spell.

"Yeah?" Harry yelled.

"Get your worthless arse out here! We're supposed to be in Brighton in fifteen minutes."

Primly, Hermione pursed her lips. "Bones again?"

"Only this week. Just another sign of Dawlish's appreciation." He rose to his feet and yelled over his shoulder. "I'll be right there!"

"You know who else's file isn't here?" Hermione asked, grabbing his arm before he left.

"Who?"

"Professor Snape's. And his should be thicker than this." She balanced McGonagall's file in her hands. "If I were to bet on something, it would be that we'll find his file on Dawlish's desk. He hates the Professor enough to keep it handy, and that's exactly what the professors are attempting to avoid. See if you can find it, will you?"

"Always the sacrifice!" Harry sighed dramatically, and Hermione poked him with her wand. "All right, all right. Don't hex me. I'm going into the field with Bones; that's punishment enough, even for your ruthless little soul." He raised his hands in mock surrender when she held the well-oiled vine wood in a practiced dueling posture, and said, "I'll let you know what I find out, and you work on getting clearance so you can read Madam Pince's file." Harry re-rolled his half of the list and stuffed it into the pocket of his robes.

"I'll even take it up with Kingsley." She offered and then tucked a thick curl of her hair behind her ear; it had escaped from the braid she'd fixed that morning.

"Good. He always gives you what you want." He avoided another poke on his way to the end of the row, but then he turned back. "Look into the possibility of it being a Sanguinarian, too, just on the off-chance."

She gave him her bossiest look and patted a pile of books, her hand resting on the faded leatherwork of Antonius Liberalis *Metamorphoses*. "I had planned on it."

He pointed to the smaller pile of books on the other side, but before he asked, he read the title and laughed. "*Moste Potente Potions?*"

"I'm looking for Horace's recipe. There isn't a copy of his *Epodes* in the archive. I'll probably have to make a trip to Hogwarts to find it. I'm hoping the list of ingredients will include wild boar, but I doubt it."

"Let me know when you go. If I can I'll come with you," he said as he rounded the corner, but his voice carried back to her. "Good luck on Falconworth."

"Thanks," she called after him. "And be careful!"

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Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 12

In which Severus Snape gives detention, Hermione Granger visits the library, and Charlie Weasley delivers a warning.

Chapter Six: In which Severus Snape gives detention, Hermione Granger visits the library, and Charlie Weasley delivers a warning.

Several hours later, Hermione rose to her feet. "Pack!" she said, tracing a neat square with her wand causing her research to fly into an organized bundle, shrink, and slide into the open maw of her small beaded bag, including, but not limited to, all twelve files respecting the Hogwarts staff. It had come as a surprise that Madam Pince and Mr. Filch were married, a tidbit found in his employment file. Hermione might never tell Harry either; he had suspected something of the sort during their sixth year at school, and he would be insufferable for having been right.

Once back in her office, she double-checked her Arithmantical analysis of the Falconworth case before sending the results to Bones in the ordinary way, by inter-office mail, far slower than a memo. Hermione wasn't above getting a bit of her own back. Then, with a wave of her wand, four Petri dishes containing wild boar tissue samples flew overhead to the temperature-regulated storage chest behind and above Hermione's filing cabinet. The small glass dishes piled themselves neatly and slid next to the vial of pale purple love potion (only one-quarter of the original amount remained, the rest having been subjected to exhaustive testing for ingredient composition).

Above her door, a small bird slid out of the whimsical wooden clock hanging on the wall. "Past time to go home," the creature chirped in its annoyingly high-pitched voice. Ron and Harry had given it to her for her promotion to Special Investigator. They had laughed until they'd cried at her reaction the first time the yellow canary had popped out of the door. With a nostalgic smile, she waved her wand and extinguished the lamps, signaling the end of another long day at the office.

She set the security spells on her office and passed through the hallway she shared with the Hit Wizards before entering the Aurory's Commons. The Commons comprised a wide expanse of space dotted with a number of cubicles, and along the walls were several doors leading to offices housing the senior department staff. Four halls cross-quartered the Commons leading away from the hub of the Aurory; the shabbiest of those led to Arthur Weasley's old department, and opposite that was the hall Hermione had just exited. The desk nearest to the lifts was the reception desk, where she logged out.

"Quiet night?" she asked the Duty Auror.

"Nothing to speak of, Hermione. Delta Squad's on stand-by." Philip Jones was a burly wizard, easily a decade older than she, but he had always been polite to her. His mother had been among those lost in the first wave of Muggle-born Registrations under Umbridge's aegis.

"Is Smith still assigned to Delta?"

"Davies had him rotated out before Christmas." He grinned mischievously. No one, aside from Dawlish, particularly liked working with Zacharias Smith, not even amiable Roger Davies.

"Where did they place him then?"

His smile grew malicious. "Omega."

"Couldn't have happened to a more deserving chap." Hermione's eyes danced with mirth. "It might even be good for him." She'd first encountered Crespy Savage, the Omega Squad leader, during her sixth year at Hogwarts, when he had been assigned to protect the school. Tonks and he had been good friends then, but his losses during the war had left him hard and unyielding. "If anyone can keep Smith in line, it'll be Savage."

"I'd like to see that," Jones replied, grinning at the thought.

Their good-nights were brief, and she stepped into the creaky lift, thankfully free of inter-office memos. When the lift stopped on the fourth floor, Hermione was surprised to see the Minister waiting. Even more surprising, he wasn't surrounded by supplicants.

His smile lit his face, even white teeth flashing against dark skin. "Hermione, it's good to see you."

"It's been far too long, Kingsley." Her smile widened with affection. "How are you?"

"The usual."

"You've become a politician."

He angled his head in a familiar way and said blandly, "I didn't only file paper when I worked for the Muggle Prime Minister. It was quite an educational experience."

Hermione laughed. "It really has been too long."

"It has, and I hear rumors about you."

Her laugh abruptly terminated. "You do?"

His big hand was warm on her shoulder. "In the past month alone, more than half of the Hogwarts' Board of Governors has sought me out to ask about you, or to ask how to influence you. Should I expect to see your resignation in Dawlish's quarterly report?"

"You know Ron and I called it quits," she answered obliquely.

His mirth filled the carriage. It was one of the most attractive things about him, Hermione thought, listening to his response.

"The two of you are like a boomerang ... you toss each other but you always return to your point of origin."

"Only if the toss is true." She pushed hair out of her face. "We're done, Kingsley. I decided keeping his friendship was more important."

"Is that why you had an interview with Vector?"

"I was exploring my options in case Ron decided to come back to MLE. I'm very glad he chose to stay where he is, especially as he's started dating Romilda Vane." Before the polite political mask dropped back into place, Hermione noticed Kingsley's mouth form into a moue of distaste. "Is there something I should know about her? Ron may not be ... that is, he's still my friend and I don't want him to be hurt."

"No, no." Kingsley hastened to reassure her. "She has a good heart, but she has a thing for heroes."

His deep flush gave him away, and Hermione remarked, "She has very good taste in wizards."

"Hermione!" he exclaimed indignantly. "She's not at all my type. I like strong women who are willing to stand up for their beliefs rather than take a back seat while their wizard goes out to fight."

It was Hermione's turn to flush. "Speaking of strong women, how's Andromeda? And Teddy?"

"They're fine. She's going to skin me alive when I get home. This is my third late night this week, and I'd promised to cut back over the holidays."

"I know what you mean."

"I heard you were at Hogwarts Christmas Day," he said, cocking his head in inquiry. "Lobbying for the position?"

She adjusted the cloak draped across her arm and covering her beaded bag, folding the heavy wool so it no longer dragged on the floor. "I don't need to leave MLE, but, now that I've given it some thought, I'm intrigued by the idea of teaching."

"The position's yours if you choose. The Board is all but euphoric at the prospect of having any of the three of you on staff; however, if you're considering leaving the Aurory because of Dawlish..."

"He's a snarling Crup to work with and you know it, but that's not what would make me take the teaching position. I've always liked Arithmancy, and I'm really drawn by the summer hours and the possibility of all that free time for research."

"You'll let me know what you decide?"

"Of course. It isn't as if I won't see you anyway." She laid her hand on his sleeve, the material smooth beneath her fingers. "You're one of the few people I'd miss."

"What about Harry? He'll be most unhappy if you leave."

She laughed. "He's already told me he'll lobby for a Northern Division of Aurors based out of Hogsmeade if I go."

Shacklebolt grinned, but his expression turned thoughtful. "That idea has some merit. It would get him out of Dawlish's way, and it would give Harry more administrative experience."

"Kingsley? What are you thinking?" Her mind raced, connecting the dots until they formed a complete picture in broad strokes. "That's why Dawlish hates us!"

"Most likely." He leaned forward to catch her eyes. "John isn't a fool, and the choice is inevitable. If you stay, it will eventually be you, but if you take the Hogwarts' position, it will be Harry."

She blinked at the unexpectedly broad expanse of future possibilities. The lift's voice chimed, "*Atrium level.*"

Kingsley gestured for Hermione to precede him, and the sound of their footsteps accompanied them as they walked toward the dark bank of fireplaces to her left. Only two of the floo connections remained in operation this late in the evening.

Deliberately ignoring the conversational gambit he had dangled before her, she pursued her initial reason for having wanted to talk to him. "Before you go, I have a question about an Incognito file."

His eyebrows rose. "A case?"

"Too early to tell. Call it a preliminary investigation, but one of the people involved has an Incognito file, and I'd like to see it if at all possible."

"Whose file are you looking for?"

She glanced around the large room. "I don't want to say."

"Come with me." He said, and led her straight into the wall, grabbing her hand as they were about to crash into the smooth, dark wood. When they passed right through it and into a small office beyond, Hermione was astonished, and then irritated with herself for being so. "What is this?" she asked. "Office Seven and three-quarters?"

He laughed. "Ministers' privilege. It isn't accessible to anyone else, and I can only bring people I touch with me. Like Side-Along. It's sound-and-scry-proofed." He leaned against the small but beautifully crafted desk and folded his arms. "Tell me whose file you want to see."

"Irma Pince."

He frowned. "Looking for dirt on your future colleagues?"

"No! Kingsley, how could you -"

"An Auror never ignores a resource, preferring to go into any situation armed with as much information as possible. It's what I would do." He killed her hope with his next sentence. "However, no, Hermione, I cannot give you clearance for Irma Pince's file."

"You're right. It would be foolish to ignore the available information. Most of them have known me since I was a little girl, and I know practically nothing about them."

Kingsley crossed his arms, his ministerial robes draping elegantly to show the sleeves of his pristine scarlet shirt. "Leveling the playing field will not get you a look at Pince's file, no matter how much I might approve of your diligence."

"My foremost reason for asking relates to the preliminary investigation I mentioned." While she trusted him, he was the Minister of Magic. "And I would explain if there weren't confidentiality issues involved."

"Even if you told me everything, I couldn't help you in this case. Incognito files have stringent protocols and protections, and there are several which require each Minister to take an Unbreakable Vow."

Hermione stared at him in shock. "Are you saying Pince's file is one of those?"

He spoke not a word.

"Sorry. Sorry. What I need to know isn't worth your life," she said hastily. "May I come to you if things change? I don't want to go through Dawlish for this and I can't explain why."

"My door is always open to you."

"Thank you." She shifted her cloak and bag from one arm to the other. "If you like, you can tell Andromeda it's my fault you're late."

"And you don't think that would make it worse?"

"Not at all. She trusts me."

"As do I," he said, and his smile was warm and affectionate as he escorted her out of the office.

~oOo~

Hate, long relegated to the purgatory of his own devising, flexed its icy fingers, brushing the length of Severus Snape's spine as he neared a small group of gossiping students. His reputation as a git was of such long-standing, he rarely heard any of the epithets whispered in his vicinity, the words washing over and past him as so much water off a duck's back. Yet, after four months of insidious persecution, his temper was mercurial at best. It was the third day of the new term and his attention had been pricked when he had heard his name, but his anger was roused when he paused to listen to the conversation.

"Once a Death Eater" Susannah Dawlish made her dramatic pronouncement to an eager audience, tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder. Later Snape would recall, with grim humor, that he had succeeded where Albus Dumbledore had failed. He had achieved house unity, as all four were represented in the small clique loitering by the statue of Theresa the Tolerant when he rounded the corner and advanced upon the sixth years.

"Would you care to repeat that sentiment to the headmistress?" At its most effective, Snape's voice was precise and lethal. Satisfaction twisted his lips into a mockery of a smile while he watched the students panic, and he reined in his desire to verbally eviscerate the unwitting teenager. "Fifty points from Hufflepuff, Miss Dawlish, for impertinence, and ten more for a lack of creativity. Alastor Moody used that hackneyed phrase for decades, nevertheless, *I am still here.*"

Dawlish, like her uncle John, had been spoon-fed stories of Death Eaters at Mad-Eye Moody's paranoid knee, and she had never cared who knew that fact. The most vocal and blatantly disrespectful of Snape's current students, if she hadn't been absent over the holidays her name would have been at the top of Snape's list of probable culprits. As it was, her absence and the fact she was as fumble-fingered as Neville Longbottom around a potion protected her. However, while eyeing the group of sixth years, Snape noticed Martin Edgecombe hovering at Dawlish's elbow. Collusion wasn't beyond the little cretins' capabilities. "As for the rest of you, ten points from each of your houses for being stupid enough to listen to such drivel."

"Drivel?" Edgecombe bristled.

Snape fingered his wand and stepped into the center of the quietly grousing aggregation. He towered over the young wizard, and Martin Edgecombe's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed with some difficulty. Seeing that reaction served to calm Snape's imminent wrath, and he looked down his nose and into wide blue eyes. "Another thirty points from Ravenclaw, Edgecombe. Willful ignorance is a far greater crime than simply parroting the opinion of others."

"But you were a Death Eater!" protested Dawlish self-righteously. She jostled her neighbor to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Edgecombe.

"I was a *spy*, you vapid little girl." Her mouth snapped shut and Snape had the satisfaction of having silenced the entire group, most of whom were clearly undecided about his loyalties. "Until such time as you comprehend the concept, you might refrain from uttering pronouncements which prove you are a fool rather than keeping your mouth shut and allowing others to merely suspect." He held up a hand when the tall girl sputtered with inarticulate humiliation. "Detention, Dawlish. To be served with Professor Binns." She bowed her head, her cheeks red. Snape swept the rest of the clique with a repressive glare. "Get to class before I decide to give you all Detention ... with me."

They scattered like leaves before an arctic wind.

He was not pleased to remember that Edgecombe was in his next class; however, he used the opportunity to reinforce his authority by lecturing while pacing between rows of student desks, quite unlike his usual style of standing at the podium. He paused next to Edgecombe, noticing with some degree of satisfaction how the young wizard's hand shook while taking notes. Never one to forego an advantage, Snape insolently leaned against the desk. The teen edged to the far side of his bench, crowding his bench-mate in the process.

Snape suppressed an upwelling of petty exultation and continued his lecture. "No tainted creature can be trusted implicitly. They are driven by inhuman requirements and desires. Do not mistake romantic foolishness for fact. A werewolf will attack given the opportunity, regardless of their human inclinations. Centaurs, for example, are governed by laws which the Ministry of Magic has recognized as sovereign. Cross their territorial lines and the Ministry cannot save you if a Centaurian exercises his or her rights."

He straightened and then sauntered between the rows of desks, dark eyes scanning the diligent note-taking of his students. "Sanguinarians," he continued to lecture, "dependent upon which species, revenant or genetic, have negotiated treaties with several European Ministries. They do not hesitate to slake their thirst within those provinces where they have been granted immunity. Closer to home, Merpeople have a reigning monarch, and if one trespasses they are subject to Mermish law. There are reasons students are forbidden to swim in all but approved areas of the Black Lake."

After assigning an essay, Snape dismissed the class and gratefully climbed the stone steps leading to his office. Sinking into his desk chair, he pinched the bridge of his nose. Powerless to halt the progression of his intemperance, he nonetheless recognized its source. There had been no new 'gift' in his classroom or chambers for the past ten days. The temporary for he was certain this was a momentary lull reprieve had triggered unpleasant memories, reminding him painfully of the year Voldemort returned. The Dark Mark on his forearm had grown more distinct with each passing week, dread creeping along his spine, whispering words of death into his ear in Igor Karkaroff's panic-stricken voice as he had waited for the summons which would most likely end his life.

It galled him that anyone -- some *child* -- could evoke such a reaction in him. Not even Harry Potter had triggered this type of response, no matter how self-righteous the savior had been as a boy. Snape was a grown man, and while he was a demanding teacher, he had only bullied a handful of students during his years of authority (the aberration of the year he was headmaster aside). That he had resorted to such tactics now, almost a decade after the war ended, merely testified to the strain his stalker had created. Hating to admit the validity of Hermione Granger's statements about psychological trauma, Snape wanted nothing more than to allow his alter ego free reign and pounce on some small creature, but he beat the instinctive urge into submission.

Standing abruptly, Snape stormed from the room, ignoring the pile of essays waiting for his attention. The hallways were filled with students leaving their final classes of the day, chattering and relaxing in the hour before they would be called to dinner, but he slipped through them like a fox in a field of maize, so quickly and so silently that he had gone before they acknowledged his presence.

When he arrived at the side door of the Filches' quarters, he was startled to see the heavy oak door open. But when he stepped inside his jaw actually dropped. Argus Filch was seated on a well-worn leather chair and placing the final pawn on the chess board set up on the small table in front of him. "Come for a game, have you?"

"The speed with which gossip spreads in this castle is astonishing. It's no wonder Dumbledore was so well-informed." Snape glared at the portrait hanging above the mantelpiece. Its subject, Hypatia, had the grace to blush. "They were never as cooperative with me. Nor have they been useful recently."

"If this one weren't Irma's favorite, we wouldn't have any in our quarters. They're a right snobbish lot. Never a help to me or Mrs. Norris," Filch said, eyeing his sleeping cat affectionately. The old tabby had curled up on the hearthrug and was basking in front of the blazing fire. Filch picked up a bottle of Old Ogden's and poured a generous three-fingers of the firewhisky into each of two glasses.

Snape withdrew his wand from the narrow pocket of his teaching robes before settling into the chair opposite the caretaker, and then gratefully accepted the drink. When he leaned back in the chair, he pointed his wand at the board and stunned the wizarding chess pieces. Fifteen years before, during the first game they had ever played, the pieces had refused to cooperate with the Squib. Infuriated by the white queen's bigotry, Snape had cast *Petrificus Totalus* over the entire set. Following that incident, the

two men always played the Muggle way.

"Granger was right. All this waiting sets you on edge." Filch referred to the information she had imparted at Christmas and that the five friends had discussed exhaustively since. He took a drink of his own firewhisky, and then said, "Think it's a Muggle-born or a mixed-blood?"

"Does it matter? I suppose obsessive behavior is much the same in any culture. It's damned inconvenient."

Filch snorted, but made the first move of the game: king pawn to e4. "How many times have we done this, Severus?"

"Played chess?" Snape asked, his long fingers placing a black pawn in the opening square of a classic Sicilian Defense. It was an aggressive defense, but Snape liked to control the center of the board.

"Been the target for ill-mannered children."

Snape watched his opponent's move and then swiftly took the proffered pawn. "Too long and not long enough."

"Never was a truer word spoken."

~o0o~

It was three weeks before Hermione found the time to return to Hogwarts, and she was thankful the stalker's need for attention seemed to be in remission. In the interim, however, Harry had been back to scour the Forbidden Forest twice, with no results, and to interview five of the twelve students who had remained in the castle over the winter holidays, again with negative results.

In fact, Harry had planned to come with Hermione that day; however, an urgent situation had arisen and he was a member of the initial response team. He was presently in Cardiff, and it was unlikely his case would wrap up quickly.

Sparing a brief thought for her friend, Hermione bypassed the cloak room, keeping her heavy outer robes wrapped around her and carrying her broom as she climbed the main staircase. There was no need to invite a bout of malicious vandalism if someone resented her presence at the school. At the fourth floor, she was warm enough to remove her outer layer. Pausing to adjust the maroon angora jumper her parents had given her at Christmas, she adjusted her things until she no longer resembled a pack horse.

When she arrived at the library, the librarian was behind the circulation desk chastising a very small student.

"Mr. Marlowe, if you wish to retain lending privileges, then you will spend the next two Saturdays under my supervision." Pince leaned across the desk, her narrow features granting a hungry, predatory look to her posture. "Until such time as I am satisfied that you know how to handle books with the proper care, you are excused from the library."

The small boy shook like the last leaf clinging to the Whomping Willow in a storm. "Yes, but but, I need the b-b-book for Professor Weasley's essay on C-Crups."

It wasn't necessary to see the boy's tie to correctly label him a Gryffindor. During those first post-war years, Hermione had often thought students should have been re-sorted each year, thus giving them an opportunity to belong to each of the four Hogwarts houses and explore the different aspects of their own natures; nonetheless, it was amusing when a house trait emerged so blatantly.

Pince pointed a long, accusatory finger at her victim. "I don't care whether you are taking your Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests tomorrow, young man. You damaged *Here a Crup, There a Crup*, and I will not have such wanton carelessness in my library. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Madam Pince." The first year wilted, but when he turned his woebegone expression in Hermione's direction, he sucked in his breath sharply. "Miss Granger? Hermione Granger?" he asked.

"Er ... yes?"

"Oh, Miss Granger!" he enthused. "Will you sign my copy of *Hogwarts: A History*?"

Despite her amusement, Hermione had no chance to reply as Madam Pince rounded the circulation desk, shrieking, "Sign her book! Sign her book! Have you no sense, boy? Out! Out of my library, Mr. Marlowe, and don't return until Saturday!"

Young Mr. Marlowe fled, moving as fast as the Crups he was supposed to research.

Hermione barely contained a laugh, but she was sure her amusement was written across her face. "Hello, Madam Pince."

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger. I received your owl." The slender librarian had as much difficulty as her guest in restraining her mirth. After a moment, however, she said, "If you would follow me? While I'm quite aware you know the way to the Restricted Section there are rules for visitors."

"I understand." Hermione shifted her broomstick from her left hand to her right, and followed Pince through the aisles. She breathed deeply. Hogwarts' library was unlike any other, including the Ministry's archives. The familiar smells of old leather and fading parchment were unique, as was the slightly astringent odor of preservative magic. However, this library was redolent with the unique smell of the Quidditch pitch, student bombazine, and damp wool, not to mention the tang of youthful hormones which added a certain piquant quality to the entire aroma. It immediately conjured to mind some of her happier teenaged moments. "Thank you again for granting me the privilege."

"My pleasure," Pince replied. By then they had reached the Restricted Section, differentiated from the rest of the library by a complex working of Net and Entrapment Spells Hermione had never seen before. "We've tightened security since your day. We call this," Pince said slyly, as the magical netting disintegrated into glittering dust before her wand-work, "The Granger Repel-Net."

Hermione blushed. "That's so harsh!"

Pince was unable to repress her snicker, but her hand covered her mouth, and her small black eyes danced with amusement. She whispered, "I can't let the little beasts know I have a sense of humor. They'd take dreadful advantage. Not that some don't already."

"Yes, there's always someone wanting to know more about some things."

"And a very few who wish to know about everything." Pince eyed the younger woman with something like approbation. She preceded Hermione into the narrow aisle, ignoring a particularly aggressive book whose anchoring chain rattled threateningly. The librarian stopped at a small bookcase set apart from the rest of the magical volumes and scrolls. Pulling a dusty specimen from the third shelf, she waved her wand over the book to clean it. Hermione could make out the gilt lettering on the spine, *Horace*. "Here you are, Miss Granger, just as you wished."

Quickly, Hermione crossed to the small desk standing against the stone wall beneath a narrow Oriel window, and draped her winter robe over the back of the single chair, leaning her broomstick in its folds. Then she accepted the *Epodes* and reverently studied the aged tome. "Thank you, again. I'll just be over here, shall I?"

"That will do. Come have tea when you're finished. It's been quite some time since I've seen you, although if rumors are true, we might have more frequent opportunities in the near future."

Hermione smiled. "It's a distinct possibility, and I'll look forward to it."

The loud sound of a book being dropped on the floor thinned Pince's lips. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Of course."

Pince departed swiftly, but Hermione noticed, with some degree of nostalgic affection, that the librarian plied her wand as she went, dusting, securing, and re-shelving three books before she'd left the Restricted Section proper.

Within twenty minutes, the *Epodes* had yielded its bounty: a rudimentary recipe and a single sentence to add to the small but growing list of clues in the discovery of Snape's tormentor. "*Strix feathers are useful in love potions.*" was the sum total of Horace's wisdom.

She jotted a note about strix feathers being a constituent of the Love Philtre, which left three unidentified ingredients listed in her private analysis. The other components had been fairly standard, and their concentrations had been roughly equal: rose petals, apple seeds, and pomegranate juice. None of which would engender the potion with enough coercive properties to use in tracking the brewer by way of Snape's ingestion.

Placing her little beaded bag on the table, Hermione stuck her arm in it up to the elbow. While she was no longer plagued by incessant nightmares or irrational fears, her wartime experiences had nevertheless instilled in her the desire to be prepared for the unexpected. She operated on a *plan for the worst and then forget about it* basis. Thus, it wasn't easy to find the Ministry references she'd packed amidst three changes of clothes, emergency funds of both Muggle and wizarding currency, toiletries, a healing and potions kit, a sleeping bag and four days' worth of pre-packaged food.

When Hermione returned the beaded bag to the pocket of her heavy outer robe, she had added four books to the table. *Metamorphoses* in addition to the Liberalis work, and she had copies of Boios' *Ornithologia*, a book by Ovid (whose title had been worn away by time and careless handling), and a copy of *Hercules Furens*, although why the Roman playwright Seneca's work should have appeared as a result of her archival search for Sanguinarians was beyond her knowledge at present.

Dipping her quill in the blue ink she preferred for taking notes, Hermione opened the first aged book flat on the desk. Its leaves fanned in an arc, golden light shining approximately a third of the way through the text, and when the pages settled, her reference appeared in raised and illuminated lettering. Unlike Hogwarts, a search in the Ministry's archive activated a latent spell used on each and every piece of reference material the Ministry put into circulation. A smile graced Hermione's face every time she watched the spell work.

An hour later, she had amassed several pieces of information regarding strix, also referred to as strige or striga, and less frequently strigoi. Her interest had been piqued, and she would have to verify her translation of the text as her Latin was merely serviceable. However, according to Liberalis, a striga was *that which cries by night ... a harbinger of war and civil strife to men*. Just reading the sentence had caused a frisson of unease to course down Hermione's spine. She had lived through enough civil strife to last a lifetime and hoped the reference was allegorical rather than literal.

None of the books, however, were a fount of information. Seneca the Younger was practically useless, and Ovid's work, which remained unnamed because the text was badly damaged and barely legible, had one highlighted section claiming that striga are warned off with Arbutus and placated with the meat of pigs. She had immediately thought of the wild boar; it could be called a pig, and certainly in Ovid's time it might have been so.

When she replaced the Horace, a thick tome on a lower shelf caught her eye. As she withdrew Pliny's *Natural History* from the shelf, she wondered if the book hadn't glinted to draw her attention. Its beautifully preserved state shamed the Ministry's care of the Ovid.

Sliding back into her seat, Hermione opened the book, her fingers turning the yellowed pages with delicate reverence. Magical intervention had kept it from becoming brittle, but she was careful nonetheless. It took her another hour to discover the only reference to strix. According to *Natural History*, strix suckled their young, and, more importantly for Hermione's further research, strix was the genus name for owls.

"Oi, Hermione!" called a hushed voice. "You in there?"

"Charlie!" Hermione rose from her chair, meeting him in the narrow aisle. They exchanged a brief hug, and she noticed that this time he didn't smell of fresh dung. Instead, the crisp scent of snow, smoke, and broom oil clung to his coat and tickled her nose. "How did you know I was here?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

He, too, spoke quietly. "Harry sent an owl this morning saying you'd both be here, but I haven't seen him."

"He was sent to Wales this morning and couldn't get away. How did you find me?" She stretched then, feeling her joints and sinews pop, and her spine realigned after having sat for so long.

Charlie's grin was infectious. "Where else would you be?"

"Fair enough." She grinned at him in return. "I haven't seen you since Boxing Day. How've you been?"

After checking the nearest stack, Charlie moved a foot and leaned his shoulder against one of the bookcase's bracers. "All right. I've been coaching the Gryffindor Quidditch team. They've a fair shot to win the house cup this year."

"Isn't that cheating?" She asked, wagging a finger at him.

He smirked, entirely unrepentant. "Nothing in the rules against teachers supervising practice."

"I don't think supervising is quite the same as coaching." Hitching her thigh over the edge of the desk, she rested on half her bum.

"What?" he asked with an ersatz innocence which strongly reminded her of an earlier time and twin brothers covering up a monumental prank.

"I expected better of you," she chastised. "You can't give one house an unfair advantage over the others."

He snorted. "It's not as if Flitwick doesn't have Cho Chang coming every other weekend to chat up the Ravenclaw Seeker."

"She doesn't!"

"Young Davies can't think straight when she's around." He ran a hand through his short hair, dislodging several droplets of snow-melt. "I think she'll hurt Ravenclaw's chances more than she helps, even if she is playing professionally."

"Is she? I didn't realize."

"She's flying second string for the Harpies."

Hermione laughed a little maliciously, even if it was unfair, but she had never liked the way Cho had treated Harry as some sort of replacement or her ticket to instant celebrity especially that last morning after the final battle.

"Bollocks!" Charlie sprang forward, and drew his wand on the narrow book which had prodded his shoulder painfully in an effort to escape its shelf. Hermione laughed quietly at his predicament, and he gave her a look that promised retribution even as a spark from his wand resettled the book in its place. All he said, however, was, "If you're staying for dinner, I'll walk with you to the Great Hall."

"Dinner? Is it that late?" Hermione glanced through the window and realized it was quite dark outside. She capped her bottle of ink and gathered her things. "Here, put this back." She handed the Pliny to Charlie and pointed to the short bookcase.

"Yes, Professor Granger," he teased as he obeyed her command. "Are you going to take the Arithmancy position?"

She tucked an errant curl behind her ear. "If I do, Ron can return to the Aurory if he chooses."

Charlie crossed to the small desk where she was packing her beaded bag. "I suspect ickle Ronniekins likes his present income too much to give it up."

"I think you're probably right." Her smile was a little wistful. "Over the past six months, I don't think I've seen him wear the same thing twice." She carefully didn't say that six months before was when she and Ron had broken off their relationship.

Charlie retrieved her broom from where it leaned against the wall. And while he ostensibly examined its condition, he spoke. "It was harder on the younger ones than on Bill or me. We were the first to go through school. Dad's always made a decent salary, but it was stretched thin by the time Ron and Ginny came along. Ron got the blast-end of the Skrewt because he was the sixth son, so he got second and third-hand things. Ginny, being the only girl, had it easy."

Hermione stopped packing, one arm lost in the depths of her beaded bag. She said softly, "I remember."

"Percy hated being poor as much as Ron. The twins didn't even notice." He shook off the momentary pang reminders of Fred caused any member of the family. "Sorry."

"I quite understand." She resumed packing, tucking her quill into a magical pouch, enspelled to protect and preserve her quills' delicate conditions. It was a minute or two before either said anything, and then it was Hermione who broke their impromptu memorial silence. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you like teaching?"

"I do," he said and straightened one of the twigs on Hermione's broom. "After the war, I wanted to be closer to home, and I've discovered how much I enjoy working with the students. Even the most hormonal aren't as touchy as a Hungarian Horntail in season." She giggled at his wry expression. "The best part is the summers when I visit Romania. That freedom gives me the best of both worlds."

Hermione replaced the last reference, *Metamorphoses*, into her bag, saying thoughtfully, "I am honestly intrigued by the idea of coming here to teach, even though I've never considered it before. I would enjoy working with you and Minerva, and I think I'd like having Professor Snape as a colleague."

"Snape?" Charlie dropped her broomstick, and as it fell from his fingers, the built-in security charms kept it hovering above the stone floor. His expression darkened. "Do you remember what I said on Boxing Day?"

Hermione let her bag fall from her fingertips, regardless of the rarity of its contents, and she spoke in an angry whisper. "And do you remember how I reacted?"

"Look..." he held up a broad, calloused hand, "...aside from what he did to George's ear, I have nothing to hold against the wizard personally. I know it was an accident. However, he has all the affability of a hippogriff, and the temper of a basilisk. Don't underestimate him."

Hermione crossed her arms. "I'll grant that he was an ogre when I was at school, but considering his situation, can you really blame him?"

"No more than I blame a dragon protecting its clutch."

"See," she said triumphantly, ignoring the stubborn expression on his face, or the fact that his color had risen to give him the appearance of being tanned rather than freckled. "Charlie, we've all changed. Some more than others. Honestly, he's been perfectly pleasant when I've seen him these past few weeks."

He loomed over her, reminding her how stocky a man he was, because he seemed to block any light from the nearest torch. "And just why have you been seeing Snape so often?"

Not one to back down, Hermione pressed the digits of one hand against his chest and pushed. Charlie back-pedaled until his thighs hit the edge of the small desk. "Try using a different tone of voice with me, Charles Weasley," she said, softly, dangerously.

"Sorry." He raised his hands in a placating gesture. Hermione eased off, but she cocked an eyebrow expectantly. Finally, he asked, "Has the Board of Governors insisted you do multiple interviews for the position?" Before she could reply, he said angrily, "How could they do that? It's you!"

Hermione relaxed, warmed despite her irritation at his defense of her, and considered her reply before answering him. "While my visits have been partly about the position, I've also wanted to put some old memories to rest. Except these past few weeks, I haven't been back since that first anniversary."

Charlie nodded, then retrieved her broomstick; however, the torchlight cast shadows across his face, shielding his expression. "Perfectly understandable then. Just be wary with Snape. I know Flitwick and Minerva trust him, but I think their judgment might be colored by their guilt."

Hermione's jaw dropped, but then she gathered her wits. "What an awful thing to say!"

Pressing his advantage, he stepped away from the desk. "He's a dangerous wizard, Hermione, and he isn't well-liked."

Her cheeks heated and she narrowed her eyes. "Those same charges could be leveled at me. I've been called ruthless, and I wasn't particularly well-liked when I was here either."

He scoffed, "That's entirely different."

"How?"

"You were never a Death Eater." He balanced her broomstick on its point, simultaneously delivering his verbal one. "You never killed anyone."

"You I don't know that for certain. A lot of people died during that last battle, Charlie, and I fought just as fiercely as anyone."

"Stop rationalizing, Hermione. The circumstances are entirely different and you know it."

She picked up her beaded bag from where she'd let it fall, closing its gaping mouth before tucking it into one of the pockets of her winter robes. "I dislike seeing people judged unfairly."

He smiled then and tugged her thick braid. "I know you do, but you need to remember Snape isn't particularly nice and very few people like him."

"I've noticed," she said, remembering Pomona Sprout's reaction.

"It's not only Sprout. Hagrid doesn't speak to Snape when he visits, and Rolanda goes out of her way to avoid him."

She slanted a glance in his direction. "And how do you treat him?"

"Like a colleague, not a best friend."

"Good. I would be quite put out if you acted like a git. He's suffered more than anyone I know for his mistakes, and his heroic efforts "

Charlie groaned. "Don't make him a project."

She glared at him. "And don't treat me as if I'm a simpering idiot."

"All right, all right." He lightened the mood by raising her broomstick as if it were a shield. "It would be great if you decided to teach here. Snape's really the only problem, but he keeps to himself mostly, so you wouldn't have to choose sides."

As she took a last look at the small shelf she'd perused so thoroughly a question rose in her mind. "You're the Care of Magical Creatures professor. What can you tell me about strix?"

A gasp drew Hermione's and Charlie's attention to the front of the Restricted Section. Madam Pince was standing there, her face drained of color. A long-buried memory struggled to make itself known in Hermione's mind. "Are you all right, Madam Pince?" she asked, alarmed by the older woman's stricken expression.

Charlie took two steps toward her, his arm outstretched. "Irma?" he asked.

The older witch shook her head. "No. Yes. I'm all right. I've just just" Her hands clutched each other. "Miss Granger, I won't be able to have tea with you today. I have a ... a meeting and I'm afraid I'll be late as it is. You'll have to leave now. I can't leave the Restricted Section unsecured."

"I don't mind." Hermione draped her cloak over her arm as Charlie jauntily perched her broomstick on his shoulder. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you. Are you sure you're all right, Madam Pince?"

Pince wouldn't meet her eyes. "Yes, yes. I'm fine. Hurry along, if you please. I mustn't be late."

Before Hermione knew it, she and Charlie had been escorted from the library, and the circulation desk had been left in the hands of the current Head Girl. Madam Pince had disappeared, and the memory of a vaguely similar encounter slipped into the murky depths of imperfect memory.

"Shall I escort my future colleague to the Great Hall for dinner?" Charlie asked as they strolled down the corridor.

"Making a dry run, Miss Granger? Attempting to assert your authority before you've become a member of the staff?" Snape's voice preceded his presence, and Hermione turned around to greet him with a smile.

"Hello, Professor. Happy New Year. Having a quiet beginning of term?"

He drew abreast of the friends, inclining his head in his colleague's direction. Charlie nodded curtly in reply as Snape addressed Hermione. "The eye of the storm, I assure you."

"I certainly hope not, else I should jettison my potential career change."

Snape snorted. "Considering the length of time it's taking you to decide, I expected to read a paper in the annual edition of *Arithmantica* expostulating on the fourteen methods of determining a life change."

Charlie gaped and his cheeks reddened, but his mouth snapped shut when Hermione laughed. Then she said, "When I write such a paper, I'll be sure to send you a copy."

As they rode a little used staircase toward the body of the school, an older Ravenclaw, stranded behind them when the staircase had shifted, asked Charlie about the dragon reserve in Wales. While Charlie answered at length and with some enthusiasm, Hermione impulsively said to Snape, "Not to tempt fate during this 'eye of the storm,' but you might consider sprinkling dried *Arbutus* at the perimeter of your chambers, office, and classroom."

"*Arbutus*?"

"Yes. It's an evergreen which mostly grows in the Mediterranean, and it has red fruit, roughly the shape of strawberries. It's commonly referred to as the Strawberry Tree and is also found in North America, where it's called a Madrone." Snape narrowed his eyes and she flushed.

"Are you an eidetiker?" he asked unexpectedly.

"What? Oh. I was never tested for it, but it's possible. I remember practically everything I read."

He outlined his lips with his index finger, as she'd seen him do countless times when she was his student and again at Christmas; it signified deep thought. Snape was silent and Hermione respected him enough not to badger him. Behind him, Charlie said, "I'll be happy to write a letter on your behalf Sommers," just as the narrow staircase came to a halt.

Sommers headed toward his house common room, clearly interested in relieving himself of his books before dinner, while Charlie, Hermione and Snape descended the main stairs leading to the Entrance. Cliques of students clumped together waiting for the Great Hall's doors to open for the evening meal, and many heads turned at the sight of such an unusual group of adults.

"That's a Stormwind 2005, that is!"

Hermione sourced the exclamation to a group of Slytherins. It wouldn't have mattered much, except there had been a general lull in conversations at that moment, and as a result, everyone in the Entrance Hall heard the comment. A swell of rumor and innuendo rushed into the awkward silence like a wave crashing to the naked shore.

"Only Aurors fly those!" another voice said in a sort of hushed awe.

"Maybe she's come for Snape?"

"That's Hermione Granger, that is!" piped up young Mr. Marlowe from amongst a sizeable group of mixed-house second years. "She was doing research in the library."

Hermione smiled at the boy, and his face glowed with happiness. His group of friends instantly plied Marlowe with questions, and one of the other boys jabbed him in the side. Embarrassed, Hermione said, "As much as I'd like to enjoy your hospitality, Charlie, Professor Snape, I have several things to do this evening and I hadn't planned to remain in the library quite as long as I did."

"Coward," Snape said, so softly no one but Hermione heard him as he stepped onto the stone slab of the school's entrance hall.

She flushed and glanced at him through her lashes. "I'm afraid I'll strew the ground with lumps of coal if I stay."

For her pains, and to the astonishment of the others, including Charlie Weasley and Septima Vector who had just arrived from the dungeons deep in conversation with Horace Slughorn Severus Snape, feared ex-Death Eater and former greasy git, laughed with unfeigned amusement.

"What the hell?" Charlie asked.

"Inside joke," Hermione replied as she retrieved her broom from him and ignored his astonishment. "I really must go, but thanks for the invitation, Charlie." She turned toward the tall man at her other side. "It was nice seeing you again, Professor. I'm sure we'll meet again soon."

Of all unexpected things, she thought she might have seen a dimple flash in his cheek, but he simply said, "Good evening, Miss Granger." As she stepped toward the great oak doors opening to the dark Scottish night, he added, "All that fuel could start a real fire."

She opened her mouth to reply, but saw he had already greeted the headmistress and Potions master, and Charlie stood staring at Snape's back, a scowl marring his handsome face.

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Chapter Seven

Chapter 8 of 12

In which Hermione Granger and Harry Potter learn that Severus Snape's Patronus has changed, and he reveals a secret.

Chapter Seven: In which Hermione Granger and Harry Potter discover that Severus Snape's Patronus has changed, and he reveals a secret.

Hermione woke in a muck sweat, sheet sticking to her damp skin, and her heart beating at an erratic pace. The fading sound of a horrified cry echoed in the otherwise silent room, and all she could think about was blood. There had been so much blood.

Trembling uncontrollably, she stumbled to her small bathroom and opened the medicine chest above her sink. She surveyed the top shelf where she kept her potions (contraceptive, headache, Pepperup,) and grabbed the small green bottle of Calming Draught. She knocked the vial of Pepperup into the sink where it shattered. Steam rose from the white porcelain basin, but Hermione ignored the mess in favor of the Calming Draught. It had been at least a year since she had dreamed with such vivid recall.

After using the lavatory, she returned to bed, pulling the covers to her chin. She forced herself to relax, trying with a pathetic lack of success to replace the horrific images with any others, even the erotic encounter with the fantasy cube. However, every time she closed her eyes she plummeted once again into the surreal images of blood, a wall of books, the Shrieking Shack, an exsanguinated boar, and a woman's voice whispering '*Strige*.' Finally, the draught took effect, but for the remainder of the night, Hermione lay curled in a fetal position staring at the small seam between the panels of her curtains, looking for the first sight of dawn.

Hundreds of miles away from a one-bedroom flat in a wizarding part of Canterbury, Severus Snape rose at the urging of his alter ego. It was nearing dawn and instinct impelled him to hunt. He rose from his bed, one foot meeting the icy chill of the stone floor, the other sinking into the thick rug he preferred in his private rooms. Without bothering to dress, he crossed the sitting room and flung open the French doors. His spells kept the terrace free of snow, but it the air was frigid when he stepped onto the balcony. The temperature didn't affect him for long as he extended his arms and initiated the metamorphosis which allowed him to fly. He dived from the edge of the balcony and exulted at the heady rush of flight.

It had been at least a week since he was last airborne, but the weather had finally stabilized during the night. Snow powdered the landscape like a layer of confectioner's sugar, sparkling as if a Luminosity Charm had been cast on it. He soared over the castle, seeing the pinkish hue along the horizon, knowing the sun would follow in its wake.

He rode an air current toward the Quidditch pitch, reveling as wind rushed into his face. Snape swooped in and around the hoops, frivolously pretending he was a Keeper.

The sky grew brighter, and a large winged creature broke through the Forbidden Forest's canopy keening a fierce cry. Snape pulled out of his turn, hovering in an updraft while he watched the alpha thestral stretch his wings. After a cautious circuit above the trees, the thestral uttered an invitation. Several smaller winged creatures joined their alpha for a game of tag.

Snape watched their antics while gliding on an undulating current, but then he noticed a large owl skimming the treetops. At first, he thought it must belong to the Owlery, yet it seemed much larger than the usual school owl, or even a privately owned student familiar. Snape side-skipped into an updraft, riding it to a higher altitude for a better look. The owl's wing-span was considerable, and he hadn't been watching for long when it folded its wings and dropped through the trees in search of a meal. Wishing it the best of hunting, Snape wheeled midair.

It was time to begin the day, and he reluctantly returned to the castle.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived for breakfast in the Great Hall. The majority of his colleagues were already present, although Mellors and Flitwick were absent. The headmistress was seated in Dumbledore's throne-like chair, cutting up a grilled chop. Snape passed behind Charlie Weasley, prepared to take his own customary seat next to McGonagall when he noticed her pinched expression. Following her line of sight, Snape halted mid-stride as if he'd been jinxed, for there, placed on the center of his plain earthenware plate was a bouquet of flowers, the stems wrapped in dark green ribbon.

Snape recovered his composure quickly and lowered himself onto his chair. He prodded the flowers off his plate with his wand, simultaneously casting a nonverbal Revealing Spell. Something was packed within the bundle of stems, but there was no Dark taint to flowers, ribbon, or the hidden prize.

Impotent rage suffused him, and he longed to incinerate the 'offering' into nothing more than a distasteful memory; however, he refrained because he was in public and the bunch of weeds was not only evidence. It might contain clues. Whoever had taken it into their malicious little minds to taunt him would regret it, deeply and passionately.

Automatically he spooned scrambled eggs onto his plate from the serving bowl between him and McGonagall. Before he'd finished, the Care of Magical Creatures' teacher passed him a platter of grilled kippers, asking, "Red herring, Professor?"

Charlie's tone reminded Snape that Weasley humor sometimes bordered on the malicious, and he sneered before spearing two of his favorite breakfast treats. "It isn't amusing, Professor Weasley."

Glancing at the bouquet, Charlie's grin widened. "Definitely not. I can't imagine enjoying proof that someone appreciated my finer qualities."

McGonagall came to Charlie's rescue before Snape verbally rent him fore to aft. "I recognize the amethyst," she said, pointing at the bouquet, "but what is that pretty white flower?"

Snape ignored her and took a large bite of eggs and kippers.

Pomona Sprout who had never been able to ignore a botanical gambit piped up from the far side of Septima Vector. "That's a snowdrop, Minerva. It's a little early in the season for them, but I suppose you could find some along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They're commonly used in Valentine's bouquets because they symbolize hope." Her expression hardened as she rested her gaze on Snape.

He glared in return. Then, with a great show of indifference, he plucked a piece of toast from the rack and spread a thin coating of marmite across it before taking a large bite out of one corner.

McGonagall diverted attention like the stalwart friend she was. "When do you expect to hear from Miss Granger, Headmistress?"

Oracle Banneker, seated at the opposite end of the high table, wrapped her hand around her dreadlocks and pulled them over one shoulder to lean forward without getting her long hair in her meal. It was, after all, her potential replacement they were discussing.

Vector patted her mouth with white linen before speaking. "I have begun to have my doubts about her."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked the forthright deputy head.

"If it's taken her this long to make up her mind, I'm not sure I want someone on staff who has so little enthusiasm."

"Her enthusiasm has never been lacking," McGonagall replied. "I understand she's quite interested."

"Perhaps," replied the headmistress.

Horace Slughorn spoke up, arguing on Hermione's behalf, although it might have been that he wanted to secure his annual gift of candied pineapple or greater access to Harry Potter. Once Slughorn had said his piece, other staff members joined in the discussion, and Snape used the distraction to cover his departure. In his lap, he turned his serviette into a glove, although its edges were slightly frayed due to his haste. When he stood, he grabbed the bouquet before any of the others commented upon it.

He did not notice the exchange of worried looks between McGonagall and Irma Pince, nor the fact that they weren't the only ones to watch his departure with a speculative expression.

~o0o~

Hermione stepped out of the Floo at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and into the small parlor off the narrow entrance. The house barely resembled the dark and depressing place where Sirius Black had been imprisoned during the last year of his life. Hermione briefly wondered if the ancient Greeks would have considered his imprisonment and ultimate death an apt punishment for his teenaged hubris. It was a thought she had toyed with before, but the answer depended upon her mood. That day she decided Sirius' life had been a tragic waste.

She smiled at the small room in which she had arrived. It had once housed the Black family tapestry, which had spread like mold to cover three walls, and it had been applied with a Permanent Sticking Charm, like the portrait of Mrs. Black in the entry. After some negotiation with Kreacher, Harry had purchased Muggle plasterboard and a gross of two-by-fours. During the two months Hermione and Harry had lived at Grimmauld Place immediately after the Battle for Hogwarts, they made significant changes in the unwelcoming house. The Tapestry Room had been their first project, and it took a full week to create the inner framework of the room's new dimensions. The two friends had created a narrow passage between the inner frame and the original walls. As part of the agreement, Kreacher tended to the family legacy while a series of Spells kept the new room inviolate from the predations of the creeping tapestry. The finished room became the only room in the house to be linked to the Floo Network.

Instead of the ominous family tree, the walls now sported a portrait gallery of family and friends, including the few pictures Harry had of his parents and a single portrait of Sirius Black as a young teenager. The subject of one portrait greeted Hermione. "lo, 'ermione. It's good ter see you."

"Hi, Hagrid," she answered in a perky voice. "How are you? And Mrs. Hagrid?"

Flecks of red paint in the portrait's background shifted to give the half-giant a blush. "Fine, fine. We're both jus' fine."

A childish squeal of delight could be heard from farther in the house. "I hope to see you soon, Hagrid, but I'm a bit late."

"Say hullo to Harry for me."

"I will. Bye."

Following the shrieks of laughter, Hermione stepped through the wide open archway from hallway to lounge, right through the place Mrs. Black's portrait had once hung. She had been removed by the simple expedient of Harry removing the wall. By creating an open and airy entrance to the lounge, they had changed the entire feel of the house, not to mention no one, save Kreacher, missed the abuse Walburga Black heaped on visitors to her former home.

It had taken four years to complete the bulk of the renovations, but now Grimmauld Place was a unique mix of wizarding and Muggle aesthetics, and when Harry and Ginny had married, the house had become a home.

"Mine!" shrieked two-year old James when he saw Hermione, running to her with the awkward gait of a small child. "Mine, mine, mine!"

He couldn't manage her entire name, but his nickname for her always caused the adults around him to smile. Hermione caught the small boy in her arms and spun him in a circle. "Jamesy, Jamesy, how are you?"

He giggled, pressed his chubby little hands against her cheeks, and with great solemnity he stared into her eyes. "I am fine, thank you. Unca Ron came to play."

Hermione looked beyond the young boy to where Ron was catching his breath on the hearth rug, his red hair and beard sticking up all over. She nearly laughed when she saw a smudge of dirt on his nose, just exactly where one had been when she'd first seen him on the Hogwarts Express all those years before. "Hullo, Ron."

The lanky redhead rose to his not inconsiderable height, brushing off his new dragonhide trousers. "It's about time you got here, 'Mione. We're starved, and Kreacher's got breakfast ready."

"Sorry. I overslept."

"You're forgiven," Ginny said as she entered the room. Her long hair would have been the envy of any Titian model, but it was tied by a ribbon these days to keep it out of the way of small hands.

James wriggled in Hermione's arms and she let him slide to the floor, where he ran across to grab his uncle's hand and pull him toward the hall.

Ginny greeted Hermione affectionately and they followed Ron and James to the dining room.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked.

"He'll be down in a minute. He's doing some work in Regulus' old room."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "He is? You mean? Are you..."

Ginny patted her slightly rounded abdomen which had escaped Hermione's notice until that instinctive, protective gesture. "Yes," Ginny answered, "pregnant again, and with another boy, too. You should've seen Harry's face when I told him. I thought I had the flu and couldn't understand why the Pepperup didn't work. The Healer at St. Mungo's thought I was a half-wit for not recognizing the symptoms."

"What wonderful news. Your parents must be thrilled."

Ginny dropped her hands, and her loose top hid the telltale bump once more. "They don't know yet."

"Really? Oh!" She remembered the miscarriage Ginny had suffered the year before, and understood. "You're waiting for the end of your first trimester?"

The two friends crossed into the hall, and the redhead explained, "I can't go through that again. I don't mean the miscarriage but we don't want everyone to know, or I'll have Mum hovering. She'd smother me in a week!"

Hermione paused at the foot of the narrow staircase, turning toward her friend. "Then why tell me? Does Ron know?"

"It's the curse of having such close friends!" Ginny rested her hand on the bannister's finial. "We didn't tell him, but when Harry said he was finishing the ceiling in Regulus' room, Ron knew what it meant immediately. Only you and he knew we'd planned to use that room for little Al."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Little Al?"

"Albus Severus. That's what Harry wants to name the baby."

"That's almost as bad as Hermione. What is he thinking?"

"He can either go by Al or Rus," commented the baby's father as he came down the stairs, brushing wood shavings from his shirt.

Hermione arched her neck to look up at him. "True," she said, and accepted a brush of his lips against her cheek. "At least it's not as horrible as 'Mione, although the way James says it is rather adorable."

"Daddy, what does 'dorable mean?" James asked, returning to the hallway in search of his wayward family.

"It means lovable," Harry answered his son.

James beamed and then pronounced, "Breakfast!" and tugged on his father's trousers.

Ron waited impatiently in the dining room, a cup of very strong tea in his hand. The sideboard groaned quite literally in a wizarding home with their meal. Chafing dishes were filled with eggs, bacon, sausages and other delicacies. Kreacher and Ginny had come to an understanding over house management; she left him completely alone in his kitchen, not being the domestic goddess her mother was, and he didn't interfere in the raising of the young master, although he doted on the black-haired sprite much as he must have when Regulus Black had been a small child.

In fact, Kreacher took James to get cleaned up after his enthusiastic meal, when, simultaneously, a large Patronus glided into the room and the house wards were tripped.

Ron and Hermione covered their ears, and Ginny shrieked, "Harry! I told you that spell was too sensitive! Shut it off!"

"Shit!" Harry swore and dashed from the room, wand drawn. He shouted a Charm string as he ran.

No one heard what the strange Patronus said, and the large avian circled the dining room once before coming to land on the back of Hermione's chair. She twisted, looking up into the gleaming silver eyes of a large owl. It was bigger than Hedwig had been, but not abnormally so; only its startling wingspan gave the impression of enormous size.

Within moments the horrible warning shriek was cut off, and the sound of James' fear could be clearly heard from upstairs. "Sorry," Ginny said as she dashed from the room to calm her frightened child.

The Patronus waited patiently, giving Ron a dismissive once-over, but studying Hermione intensely.

"I think it likes your hair. It's probably building a nest," Ron teased, and pushed his plate away from him.

"Very funny," she replied tartly, and buttered her last scone.

"I thought so." He folded a piece of bacon into his mouth and spoke around it. "Never a dull moment with Harry."

Hermione's irritation was subsumed by her affection for Harry. "Not often."

Ron fingered his glossy beard. "I wouldn't change him for anything."

Thoughtfully, she spread jam on half her scone and took a bite. When she swallowed, she agreed with him.

For a moment they were in perfect accord, but then Ron straightened in his chair. "Hermione, do you really not mind about Romilda, I mean?"

"If she makes you happy, then that's what I want for you."

He pushed his plate to the side and huffed a deep sigh. "I wanted it to be you."

"Me, too. But I think ..."

"We're better off friends." The taint of acrimony hid between the words. "I know."

Hermione leaned toward him. "Please don't be angry."

"I'm not, really. Not anymore. A bit sad, I expect."

She reached a hand across the table and he took it, squeezing tight.

Harry hurtled back into the room at that moment. "What was the message?" But his eyes goggled at his friends' clasped hands.

"It's not what you think." For once, Ron accurately read the subtext. "She's my best friend."

Hermione grinned and pointed a finger at Harry, "And you're pumpkin juice!"

Harry chuckled but their attention was drawn to the Patronus whose patience had worn thin. It crouched, hunching its body and extended its wings slightly as if preparing to take flight. Instead, it opened its beak and Severus Snape's smooth tones issued forth. "Miss Granger, and Mr. Potter, if my Patronus finds you together, I regret to inform you the stalker has resumed hostilities, only this time the tribute was left at a time and location I would discover in public. I would deem it a ... favor ... if you would come to Hogwarts as there had been an unsettling development."

"Unsettling?" Ron asked, rising to his feet. "What could be more unsettling than a dead pig across your threshold?"

"Boar, Ron. It was a wild boar," Hermione corrected as she wiped her mouth, leaving the remaining half-scone on her plate. "But it's a fair point. What could be more unsettling?"

With absolute certainty, Harry replied, "Having to discover it in public."

"Too right," Ron agreed.

Hermione dropped her serviette on the table and would have risen from her chair save for the Patronus which remained still and silent. "The stakes have been raised."

Snagging his left-over toast, Harry bit into it before adding, "Or the stalker feels his or her agenda has been threatened in some way."

At that moment, Ginny entered the room with a barely mollified, but clean, child on her hip and a martial glint in her eyes. Any scolding she might have given Harry died at the sight of the Patronus still perched on the back of Hermione's chair.

"Bird! Pretty bird," James chirped happily, displaying the mercurial temperament of toddlers.

"Ginny..."

She handed James to his father for a good-bye cuddle. "It's all right, Harry."

"It's Professor Snape's," Hermione explained. "We have to go."

Ron came round the table and ruffled his nephew's dark hair. "I can come if you want."

"Don't you have a date later?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, but this is more important. If you need me, Harry, I'll cancel."

"Thanks, mate," Harry said, handing James off to his uncle, "but it shouldn't take long, besides, Hermione's the one who'll have all the work to do if we find what we're looking for."

"Thanks loads." Hermione then turned toward the silvery owl. "Please tell the Professor we're on our way."

The owl bobbed its head before expanding its wings to their full extension and launching from the chair.

"Wow!" Ginny's reverent exclamation was covered by James' excitement as he reached for the Patronus with both hands and almost fell from Ron's grasp.

"Get your things, Harry, and let's go."

"Right." He kissed his wife and ruffled his son's hair. "If Snape is asking nicely, then it's pretty serious. Ron, if we need you we'll send a Patronus." He faltered mid-step toward the door. "Did you notice it wasn't a doe any longer?"

Hermione answered quietly, "We all did. I hope it means he's finally found peace with the past."

Five minutes later, Harry swore expressively. "Shit! I hate this weather. Why the hell did they have to put the fucking gate so far from the bloody castle?"

He and Hermione had Apparated to the Hogwarts gates, arriving in the midst of a snowstorm. Neither was dressed appropriately.

"I don't think we can fly in this, either," Hermione whinged. "Whatever happened, it had better be bloody important."

"That is the appropriate adjective, Miss Granger," Snape said, stepping out from the massive stone gatepost.

"Where did you come from?" Harry asked, looking around.

Snape smirked. "The Marauders Map didn't reveal all the castle's secrets, Mr. Potter. If you'll come with me." He tapped his wand in a deliberate pattern on the broad side of the gatepost causing the post's stones to fold and shift, revealing a man-sized opening.

Hermione's mouth dropped. "That's not in *Hogwarts: a History* either!"

His lip curled. "You should know by now "

She cut Snape off. "I know, I know. Not everything can be found in a book."

"After you," he said, and sketched a courtly bow.

"Thank you." Somewhat disgruntled, she descended the short flight of steps to a stone-lined tunnel angled toward the castle. When the ingress closed behind Snape, the only sounds which could be heard were the rustle of their clothing and their footsteps. The tunnel was wide enough for them to walk two abreast, and Snape joined Hermione in the lead with Harry bringing up the rear. As they walked, torches lining the walls flared to life, illuminating their path several paces to the front, but they extinguished as soon as Harry passed their position.

"We got your message," he said redundantly.

Snape merely shot him a glance, but Hermione, taken aback by the teacher's attitude, had been looking at the dark-haired wizard carefully. "You haven't been sleeping," she commented.

Black eyes widened in surprise. "Not that it's your business, but no, I have not." Then he peered at her more closely. "It seems neither have you."

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Nightmares," she replied tersely, recalling the frustration and distress of her early morning dream.

Harry shuddered in sympathy. "Sorry."

Charitably, Snape said, "I doubt any of us are free of them, even after all this time."

"No, probably not," she agreed, and then fell silent.

At that point the tunnel's incline grew steep, and none spoke until they reached the seeming dead end. Snape reached through the illusion to grasp the hidden door's handle and gestured for Hermione to precede him into the cloak room off the castle's Entrance Hall, the one where Hermione's winter cloak had been soiled.

"Does the entire staff know about this?" she asked.

"Only the heads of house, the deputy head, and the headmaster, or headmistress as the case may be. As I have been both head of house and headmaster I am privy to more of the castle's secrets than many."

"Rank having its privileges?" she asked.

"It's more a question of security, I believe. We cling to outdated traditions, but change is inevitable, if lamentably slow." Snape sealed the tunnel behind them. "Now, if you'll permit me to disillusion you, I would like to keep your presence unknown."

Harry nodded, stepping forward, and Snape anointed him first. Then it was her turn, and Hermione shuddered at the familiar chill dripping down to her toes.

When they reached Snape's private rooms in the South Tower, Harry and Hermione immediately re-cast the Magical Law Enforcement spells she had performed at Christmas. This time, Snape felt the magic brushing his skin, identifying him. "Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Only those on your list or who were here at Christmas have been in these rooms. Aside from you, no one else has been here within the past four days, not even a house-elf." Something in Snape's posture seemed to relax, but it was too soon as the younger man said, "You'll have to dismantle the Tongue-tying Jinx, Professor. It's illegal. If this were an official inquiry, I'd have to report it."

Snape frowned from his position at the French doors. "It's supposed to be untraceable."

Harry's eyes reflected the light like an old lemonade bottle in sunlight and he smirked. "Hermione's research has been rather profitable. The spell itself is undetectable, but as a result of her work, I can track the wand movements you used to cast it."

Hermione had ended up next to the window seat where Flitwick had drunk his coffee on her last visit, but now she frowned at Snape. While he had removed the Dark spell she had warned him about at Christmas, he had nonetheless used another, quasi-ethical piece of magic to secure his quarters. She couldn't really blame him so she said nothing, turning her attention to toward Harry's announcement. "Harry, you didn't say."

He stood near Snape's small desk, his back to the wall. "I haven't tried it till now."

"Tell me," she demanded, extremely pleased with his adaptation. "How did it present?"

With accompanying hand-strokes to emphasize his point, Harry recreated his experiment. "The wand movements in order, which is why I knew I was seeing the Tongue-tying Jinx."

"This is quite promising," Hermione enthused, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Before you hare off into some arcane bit of research in the archive's stacks and don't come out for a month, could we focus on the issue at hand?" Snape asked pointedly.

"Don't chastise her!" Harry snapped. "Her innovations could revolutionize the MLE's investigations. How do you think I caught Mulciber and LeStrange last year?"

"Luck?" Snape drawled, but desisted when he saw the real anger on the younger man's face. "Pax, Mr. Potter. Miss Granger, my remark was uncalled for."

Harry gaped.

A swift rush of pleasure burred in Hermione's chest, caused by Harry's defense and by Snape's apology. As she removed her heavy coat and withdrew her beaded bag from the pocket, she said, "Despite the fact you've previously told me you don't apologize, Professor, I'm willing to make allowances for your vile temper. Under the circumstances anyone's patience would have been sorely tried."

"And you have reason to know that my temper is "

"Mercurial," Hermione quipped even as Harry muttered, "Volatile."

Snape laughed, short but amused, Harry grinned, and Hermione ignored their mirth and expounded on her original thought. "The jinx might have been useful. Someone was bound to notice if one of their friends couldn't talk."

Holding his hand out for Hermione's coat, Snape also waited for Harry to remove his outer wear. "Yet Potter's point is well-made. If I use illegal means to identify the culprit, it invalidates the proof in any official capacity. If you'll have a seat, I'll retrieve the morning's evidence." He carried his guests' winter wear into his bedroom.

Harry chose one corner of the sofa while Hermione sat in Snape's armchair, a smile softening the edges of her mouth when the ottoman waddled in her direction. "No, thank you," she said to the charmed piece of furniture. It halted, its demeanor that of a chastened puppy.

"Ignore that," Snape said as he returned to the room and accurately predicted Hermione's imminent capitulation. "If you're not firm it will follow you everywhere."

Harry choked off a laugh, but Hermione asked, "Where did you get it?"

"Filius, a year ago last Christmas, but that's not the point." A tray hovered, shoulder-height, behind him. He waved his wand and the tray continued into the room and settled on the book-strewn coffee table. Upon its surface was a bedraggled bundle of wilting flowers, a wide green ribbon in the exact hue of Slytherin's dominant house color, and a small clear vial filled with a dark, viscous liquid.

Harry and Hermione immediately noted the presence of the small vial and they exchanged a glance.

Dryly, Snape said from his position by the mantelpiece, "It isn't a love potion."

"We can see that," Harry replied with a frown. "If it's what I think it is, circumstances have changed. We can't continue sneaking around to use the department's resources, taking the odd hour here and there. If we elevate this to an official investigation, we can make some real progress."

Snape turned his back on his guests, peering into the large mirror hanging above the mantelpiece. The two Aurors had no difficulty seeing his troubled expression, nor the obvious way in which he was gritting his teeth. "Due to the terms of my contract, if I am the subject of an official inquiry I'll be sacked."

"No!" Hermione exclaimed, jerking the material of her beaded bag. "That's so unfair! Those inbred, pathetic excuses for educators! Oooh! I'd like to give them "

Snape turned to face her, his anger vented with her vehemence. "Coal."

It stopped her mid-invective, and she stared at him before a peal of her laughter rang in the room. Bewildered, Harry looked between the two. "What does coal have to do with this?"

"Nothing," Hermione replied, but directed her next comment to the taller man. "Let's postpone the discussion about making it an official investigation until we confirm the contents of the vial. I assume you've already done so."

"I have." His mouth set in a grim line.

"Then the discussion is moot." She rose to her feet in order to take a closer look at the floral specimen, saying to Harry, "It means debatable, Harry, not immaterial. However, I would also like to know about these flowers. Those are snowdrops but what are the purple ones?"

Harry, too, took a closer look at the evidence, his fingers hovering above the small vial, and Snape answered Hermione's question. "Amethysts," he said from his position in front of the fire. "They're a variety of violet."

"Thanks." Hermione gave him a quick smile before she retrieved her bag to rummage through it. After considerable effort, she pulled a very thick book from the bag's depths, and then crooked her finger at the ottoman. It waddled as close to her as it could get, wriggling like a contented spaniel.

Snape snorted as he watched Hermione drop the beaded bag onto the seat of the chair and sat on the ottoman. "Do you carry that disreputable thing with you everywhere?"

Hermione shoved her hair off her forehead and glanced up at him. "Since Bill and Fleur Weasley's wedding nine years ago."

"I see."

As she opened the pages of *Collier's Cyclopaedia of Commercial and Social Information and Treasure of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* compiled by Nugent Robinson in 1882, Harry returned to the corner of the sofa and took up the tale of the Most Useful Beaded Bag. "We lived out of that thing the entire last year of the war. For several months, Hermione carried Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait in it, along with our clothes, a tent, and our cookware."

"Don't forget my books," Hermione added distractedly as she flipped pages.

"And your books."

Snape sneered at the bag. "It's nostalgia that keeps it in its highly noticeable state?"

"It's nostalgia that makes me keep it," Hermione said as she turned to the Cyclopaedia's index. "It's the fact that I was an underage and inadequately trained witch which means I unintentionally linked the Expanding Charm with the Appearance Charm. I can't change the exterior without destroying it."

Only Harry saw Snape nod before he said, "I did much the same thing when I devised the *Muffliato* spell. It worked, but not in the way I had intended."

"All too often, innovations deviate from their intended purpose." Hermione raised her head to smile at Snape, remembering several of their earlier discussions. He was watching her, and for a beat they carried on a wordless conversation.

Harry's voice broke the nonverbal *tete-a-tete*. "I've long wanted to thank you for *Muffliato*, Professor, but there's never been the right moment."

Snape inclined his head and said sardonically, "I created it with Gryffindors in mind."

Harry grinned. "To use on them, I'm sure."

"Indeed," Snape said.

Hermione had dived back into her book during Snape and Harry's bonding moment. "Ah! Just as I expected."

"What did you find, Hermione?" Harry rose from his spot on the sofa and stood behind her, peering into the book.

She pointed to a passage on the yellowed page. "As all previous floral tributes were lavender heather, it was impossible to speculate whether the flower was chosen because of availability or if it was a deliberate choice because of the potential message."

Snape leaned against the mantelpiece, warming his long legs in front of the fire, listening to her intently and with a darkening visage.

"However," she said, shifting closer to the tray with the wilted flowers, "now that you've been given snowdrops and amethyst, it's logical to surmise their meaning was intentional."

"I had thought you a believer in the dissemination of information." Snape glowered and stepped away from the fireplace. "Why am I only learning of this now?"

Closing the book on her finger as a place holder, Hermione was startled by his expression. "It was inconclusive speculation at best, and while I mentioned it to Minerva and Filius the first time we were here, it seemed premature to concern you."

"After all, why should I be concerned?" he asked disbelievingly, drawing close enough for his posture to be considered looming.

Not to be intimidated, Hermione rose to her feet, without relinquishing the Cyclopaedia or her finger's place in its pages. "Must you misconstrue practically *everything* I say?" Snape's overlarge nostrils flared but he remained silent. Hermione stepped sideways, between him and Harry, and she looked at both men. "Building a cohesive theory or putting an investigation together takes more than a single conjecture or clue. Lavender heather by itself is merely a locally grown, readily available flower there are still places in the Forbidden Forest where it can be found this late in winter."

Hermione began to pace as she lectured, and if she'd looked at Harry, she would have noticed that despite the underlying seriousness of their visit, he was holding back amusement that Hermione had, at last, a captive audience in Severus Snape.

The cadence of her voice would be perfect for the classroom, and it was infused with the hint of the enthusiasm she held for the pure joy of learning. Snape's attention never wandered from her. "The wizarding world embraced the language of flowers for two decades in the early nineteenth century until they realized the fad was introduced by a Muggle-born, and then its cachet died a swift, ignoble death." She stopped pacing next to the coffee table and pointed at the amethyst blooms. "However," she said, and Snape drew closer to her side, "there are brief resurgences of the fad from time to time, and in this case, when other less easily obtained blossoms are given, as they have been here, the language of flowers becomes a potentially viable clue."

Harry asked, "And what is it about these flowers that allows you to draw any sort of conclusion?"

The three magical humans stood in a row, staring down at the innocuous plants. Harry's expression was intensely curious, Hermione radiated the zeal of research fulfilled, but everything in Snape's manner expressed revulsion. It was he who said, "Other than 'hope' for my demise, I cannot see what message this irritating cretin is attempting to communicate."

"Hope?" Harry asked, perplexed, and he leaned forward to look at Snape. "But I thought..."

Hermione interrupted, lifting and opening the Cyclopaedia at her finger-marked page. She quickly scanned an entry on the page and said, "The snowdrops represent hope. And it isn't for your death." Raising her head, Hermione looked straight into Snape's eyes. "The lavender heather and the amethyst violets both represent admiration."

Snape sucked in a breath, his lip curling in disgust.

Hermione elaborated. "I would venture to say your stalker admires you and hopes you will return the sentiment."

"Shit!" Harry swore, and it was his turn to pace, from window seat to French doors, he took long strides, passing the others twice before he returned to his point of departure.

Snape sneered. "I take it you're not pleased to find I'm admired, Mr. Potter?"

"Of course I'm not pleased," Harry snapped. "It has nothing to do with your being admired or not. This is serious."

"He knows that," Hermione said, huffily, poking her index finger into Harry's sternum. At her side, Snape clenched his fists.

"Besides," Harry said, removing her finger, "the message could have been deliberately misleading."

Snape strode to the French doors. "Designed to lull me with the promise of affection when ..."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "It's used as a lure."

Hermione put the book on the ottoman and sank to her knees to examine the evidence more closely. "Harry, did you check the liquid?"

"Not yet," he replied grimly, withdrawing his wand from its sheath inside his sleeve. He swirled the tip in an anti-clockwise rotation and then swiftly jerked it in a hooking motion as he nonverbally cast a spell. A jet of viridian shot from the end of his wand, encasing the small vial containing the unidentified liquid. Within seconds the magical shroud attached itself to the bottle, and then penetrated the glass, strobing in a rapid display as it passed into the liquid itself and shrank into a tiny pulsating dot of red light. Then, with a blinding flash, the spell flared bright white before it winked out.

"Not only is it blood," Harry stated, "but it's human blood."

"Yes," Snape agreed while he stared out into the bleak winter landscape.

Harry turned his head in Snape's direction, and asked, "Did you also realize it's *Muggle* blood?"

In the reflective surface of the mirror, Hermione saw Snape's eyes widen for a fraction of a second, but then he gripped the door's handle as if he were on the brink of seeking escape.

Hermione and Harry wore identical, concerned expressions, but it was she who approached the former spy. Gently she touched his arm and he flinched. "You must see that this changes things," she said. "We / don't want you to be sacked, but Harry and I can't do what's necessary unless we make our investigation official."

"You forget I've already been the focus of two MLE investigations and the entire Wizengamot. I will not willingly live through another official investigation. I would rather take my chances with the stalker."

"We don't know how the blood was collected. The situation has become too dangerous to ignore."

Her voice contained a note of pleading Harry hadn't heard in a very long time, and his expression became more speculative than concerned.

Snape stared at her, and then said very quietly, "I am quite familiar with danger, Miss Granger."

She blinked furiously and looked out the window at the heavy snowfall beyond.

Harry joined them at the double doors. "We don't want to see you hurt. *Been there, done that.*"

Snape turned toward the younger man, his face expressionless. "Ah yes, the day you received my most precious memories."

"Which I have returned to you," Harry replied equably, and then more soberly, "Watching Nagini bite you when I could do nothing about it was one of the most horrible experiences of my life. Believe me when I say I have no desire to see any more of your blood spilled."

"Blood!" Hermione choked out, the horror of her earlier nightmare beating at her brain, blood red and oozing. "You!" She pointed a shaking finger at Snape.

Harry and Snape looked at her with some degree of alarm. But she continued in a high, shaky voice, "Your Patronus changed."

Snape said coldly, "How perceptive of you."

"It's you! You're the owl!"

Snape remained silent, his entire demeanor stiff with foreboding. He didn't need to be a seer to know where she was leading the conversation, but it was Harry who asked the leading question. "What the hell are you talking about, Hermione?"

"In the Shrieking Shack." She grabbed Harry's arm and pointed at Snape. "When we went back. Severus was the owl we found. Remember?"

Neither noticed Snape's reaction to her use of his first name, but some of the tension eased from his spine, and the taut line of his shoulders became more human and less like a piece of carved marble. Hermione was too busy connecting the dots to notice, and Harry was taking yet another in a long line of intuitive leaps.

He had been a lost and neglected child when he'd arrived at Hogwarts, and his first seven years in the wizarding world had been a continual assault on his fortitude. Until his sixth year at school, Harry had annually suffered through months of Dumbledore's stonewalling tactics followed by quixotic bouts of excessive information, usually in the aftermath of traumatic events, all of which he had been expected to assimilate while learning to embrace the concept that it was he, Cupboard Under the Stairs Harry, who was destined to save a world he hadn't known existed until his eleventh birthday.

With all that being said, after his death-and-rebirth, Harry had made several decisions, one of which was that if he was going to be an Auror, he wouldn't do it riding on Hermione's brains. Thus, when he entered Auror training, he had become a dedicated student. As an Auror, he was competent, well-respected, and no longer the lack-wit Snape had once called him.

He ran his fingers through his perpetually messy hair and faced Snape. "You're an Animagus."

That statement proved the catalyst for Hermione. "He's not just an Animagus, Harry. He's a Sanguinarian."

Snape bowed his head. "An astute observation, Hermione. You see, now, why I wish to avoid an official investigation into these events."

"It would have been easier had you told us." She held up a hand. "However, I understand why you didn't."

"How long have you been an Animagus?" Harry leaned his shoulder against the door frame, ignoring the winter chill of the nearest window panes. "Your name isn't in the register."

"It isn't?" Snape asked.

"Stop being coy!" Hermione snapped. "You know it isn't. Just tell us why."

Instead of stepping away from her into the room, Snape opened the French door, and stepped out onto the protected balcony. He asked over his shoulder, "What makes you think you have the right to know all my secrets? Haven't I bared my soul sufficiently?"

Harry followed him, and said very quietly, "Neither Hermione nor I want to see you hurt."

Snape's lip curled, and he crossed to the stone rail beyond which snow fell in a thick blanket.

"If only we had known" Hermione, too, left the cozy comfort of his rooms, crossing her arms against the chill, but she let her inadequate comment hang. What could she say? If they had known he wasn't a traitor. If they had known he wasn't actually dead. If they had known more about healing. She dropped her hand and played nervously with the hem of her jumper. "Despite everything we had experienced, we believed your charade. How could we have guessed differently?"

"Dumbledore," she said the name with more loathing than she had ever said Voldemort, "manipulated us for years, and like good little pawns, we believed in him." It was Harry's turn to have a hand held to forestall the repetition of a years-long dispute. "But you know we came back for you. You saw us."

Snape heaved a sigh and turned his back on the winter storm. Instead, he faced the more dangerous one ahead. He stared into Hermione's warm brown eyes. "Very well. It's a lengthy story. Have you the time?"

"Ginny knows where I am," Harry answered.

Hermione shrugged, "I'm supposed to have a dinner tonight."

"A date?" Snape inquired lightly when he passed her while returning to his sitting room.

"With my parents." She followed closely on his heels rubbing her arms for warmth. Her thin red blouse was inadequate for rural Scotland in a snowstorm. "I see them every few weeks, but that's not until later, and if necessary, I'll Floo them and cancel."

Snape crossed to the leather chair with every intention of sitting in it, but as he did, his stomach growled loudly. Color stained his high cheekbones.

"I'd offer to take you to Hogsmeade for lunch, Professor, but I doubt any of us want to venture out into that." Harry gestured toward the snow falling in a thick curtain, and closing the French doors as he was the last to re-enter the room.

Snape stood in front of the hearth. "I can have something delivered from the kitchens if you'd care to join me."

"That would be lovely," Hermione said, giving Harry a pointed look. "Soup would be welcome."

Although he was still quite full, Harry made a request. "I always liked those chocolate biscuits the house-elves make. If they have any left"

Snape summoned Flossy and gave her their order, but once she had disappeared, he paced in front of the fireplace, unsure where to begin his tale, and unwilling to do so until the meal had been delivered.

Aware of the highly confidential nature of Snape's confession, Harry asked a simple question. "How many people know?"

"Five."

"Is it possible..." Snape cut across Hermione's half-formed question. "None would divulge the information."

The sound of a loud *crack* heralded the arrival of three trays filled with savory aromas and tempting victuals. Snape waved the trays toward the coffee table, and Hermione hastily moved the evidence. Placing it on the corner desk, she then turned and encountered Harry's amusement. He mouthed, *'Are you a witch or not?'* in her direction.

Hermione ostentatiously fingered her wand and Harry raised his hands in mock surrender.

Snape sank into his chair, the tray containing his meal sliding into place as soon as he settled, but he'd noticed the byplay between the two friends and was hard pressed not to offer a biting comment. Hermione chose the end of the sofa nearest Snape, leaving Harry to resume his original seat at the opposite end. Their trays levitated into place.

"Not having to scrounge dinner at the end of a very long day of work is one of the most appealing aspects of accepting the position here." Hermione commented before her first spoonful of the fragrant beef and veg soup.

"Having to eat at least two of those meals a day in front of the students diminishes the pleasure, I assure you."

"Is it so different than when you were a student?"

Snape shrugged. "It becomes commonplace after a term."

Harry swallowed a bite of his thick roast beef sandwich. "Mind if we get back on track?" Snape nodded. "I don't want to be insensitive, Professor, but my parents were mistaken in Pettigrew. How do you know one of the five people who hold your secret isn't equally untrustworthy?"

Snape took his time before answering the question; he used his serviette to wipe his mouth and took a long pull at the ale he'd been served with his meal. "Peter Pettigrew was a weaking, consumed with envy and self-importance." When he continued, there was a trace of bitterness sustaining his tone. "I do not inspire envy."

"Have they taken an Unbreakable Vow?" Hermione asked bluntly. When Snape stiffened in shock, she set her spoon on the edge of her tray. "Don't say it! I could heat Hogwarts with the amount of coal I utter around you, but it's a valid question. If they've taken an Unbreakable Vow and are all still living, then we can eliminate them from the equation, otherwise, they remain variables."

"Does questioning under the influence of Veritaserum count?"

She gave him an admonishing glare. "As you know very well. You could've said."

"You're horribly impatient. You might have the decency to let me finish my meal and tell the story in my own way."

Harry was taken aback by their convivial bickering, and he grabbed a chocolate biscuit and stuffed it into his mouth before pushing the tray from his lap. Its purpose complete, the tray disappeared with an almost inaudible *pop*. "Are you saying you've questioned all five of your confidants with Veritaserum since the beginning of the school year?"

Snape turned his attention from Hermione, and she picked up her spoon again.

"Four of the five insisted upon it after that first intrusion into my office. As the potion came from the school's stores and was the product of my own brewing, I'm reasonably assured its potency wasn't compromised, nor did any of the four take an antidote in my presence. As I, too, partook on that occasion, I can assure you its potency was undiminished."

"There's always the possibility of natural resistance, in which case, you would hardly tell the difference, but I'll assume you've already considered that, given your areas of expertise." Harry ran his fingers through his already rumpled hair. "It's always possible the fifth person is unreliable."

"Only if you consider the Minister of Magic unreliable," Snape said dryly.

"Shacklebolt knows?" Harry asked, leaning forward, but Hermione's question sliced across his. "Just how long have you been an Animagus, Severus?"

Again she'd used his first name without thinking, but this time it didn't disconcert Snape. "Not as long as you suspect. I transformed for the first time the day Nagini attacked me."

Hermione nodded as if fitting the final pieces of data into an equation.

"While not the standard method of discovery, nonetheless it was effective, and kept me from dying as nothing else had." Harry's head bowed, but Snape made no comment. Hermione had been correct earlier when she'd said she and her friends had been manipulated by Dumbledore. They all had, and Snape no longer chose to use Harry Potter as his whipping boy.

Hermione's eyes glazed with the memory of a bloody wooden floor and the red-soaked feathers of the dazed owl she and Harry had discovered. "The blood. You drank your own blood," she whispered, her expression one of understanding and distaste.

"An astute assumption," Snape replied, pushing aside the tray, his meal unfinished. Like Harry's before, it, too, popped out of existence. "Apparently, among the Romans scattered liberally among my ancestors, a number were also striga. The genetic tendency has been repressed for generations. It seems my subconscious desire to survive triggered the latent trait in a reflexive, last ditch effort to keep me alive."

"I'm very glad it worked," Hermione said softly.

Snape's answering smile was sardonic. "As am I, regardless of an irritating desire to hunt small field mice at the most inappropriate times."

"Field mice?" Harry pounced on the comment.

"Indeed." Snape acknowledged both the question and the underlying possibilities. "I hunt only the natural prey of my Animagus form."

"What's the difference between a striga and other types of vampires?" Harry asked curiously.

"According to my research," Hermione said, ignoring Snape's indelicate snort, "a striga is one of the four predominant species of human-equivalent Sanguinarians. Striga inherit their powers which normally occur at the onset of puberty. They only require blood while transformed in their Animagus form, and their lifespan is unusually long, but they aren't immortal. And yes, a stake through the heart will kill a striga just as it would any human being who was subjected to the same treatment. On the other hand, Revenant Sanguinarians, or common vampires, as you call them, Harry, are one of the other species. They're often called strigoi, and among those, a fully-adapted Animagus strigoi will require blood in both forms." She noticed Snape's expression and flushed, toying with her soup spoon so she didn't have to look at his amusement.

"Would you like to tell my story for me, Hermione?" he asked, his dark eyes glittering.

"I thought it prudent for all of us to share a common understanding," she said with some bite.

"As ignorance promotes the spread of prejudice and intolerance, I concede the point."

She simply said, "Thank you," and then moved her tray as well. No one noticed when it disappeared.

"All right," Harry said. "So you're a blood-sucker" he ignored Hermione's shocked exclamation, "...but only when you're an owl."

"Crude, but accurate," Snape acknowledged.

"It's a short-cut," Harry said dismissively. "We'll assume, for the time being, that you're not perpetrating these bits of vandalism in a bid for attention."

Snape's laughter was harsh and short-lived. "No, Potter, I'm not seeking a bid for attention. I have had more than enough to last a lifetime, as you no doubt understand."

"To continue," Harry said, pointedly, "there are five others who know your secret, one of whom is the Minister of Magic. I would assume that two of the remaining four are Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall."

Snape leaned forward, impressed despite their history. "How did you reach that conclusion?"

"Because it was they who approached us on your behalf in the first place," Hermione interjected. "Also, Minerva Floo'd me at Christmas, and Filius is the one who brought me here."

Harry rose to his feet and began to pace along the wall of bookcases. "If you transformed for the first time that day in the Shrieking Shack, I doubt you would have known how to turn back into a man. Who better to seek assistance from than the resident Animagus?"

"Is that why you went to Germany?" Hermione asked the question out of turn.

"Partially." Snape leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his face. His black hair gleamed in the firelight, and framed his face, lending him a saturnine appeal. "I spent that first year hidden in the Forbidden Forest or living with Filius at his flat in London. I couldn't control my transformations when the craving struck, and Minerva stayed with us those first three months teaching me how to master the skill. I still spontaneously transformed on occasion; fortunately, they were at predictable times and I made certain to be on my own then."

"Dawn and dusk," Hermione said, nodding as another bit of her research was verified.

"Dawn and dusk," Snape confirmed.

"It must've been dreadful," Harry said.

"It wasn't easy, especially as it took months to heal my injuries. I was as crippled in my strix form as I was as a man."

"Strix? I thought you said you were a striga?"

Snape looked expectantly at Hermione but she shook her head and pinched her lips. Pursing his lips in order not to laugh, Snape answered Harry's question. "Strix is the genus name for owl. In particular, I become a Great Gray owl."

"And that's when your Patronus changed." Harry said it as a statement.

"Indeed. It is also when I put the memory of your mother to rest, Potter."

Hermione gave him a penetrating look, and Harry pulled his pocket watch from his trousers' pocket, glanced at the time, which read *You should be home* and cleared his throat. "As I was saying, if this isn't a bid for attention on your part, then someone, other than the five you trust and now us, has discovered your secret."

Snape's sneer was his only response.

"I would venture to guess that Kingsley has your file in his office."

Green eyes met brown and Hermione nodded in agreement. "He probably keeps it in with the Incognito files," she said, "and they're protected by Unbreakable Vow."

Harry's head snapped up. "You didn't tell me that."

"I told you Kingsley couldn't give me the information we sought; I didn't think it was necessary to explain about the Unbreakable."

"It crosses him off the list entirely," Harry said angrily.

"True. Harry!"

"What?"

But she faced Snape instead of her friend, leaning over the arm of the sofa toward her former professor. "I know you don't want to elevate this to an official investigation, but I've an idea." His attention was all hers. "Whoever is stalking you is not only a threat to your secret, but dangerous to you as well. They must be discovered."

"Your point?"

"Kingsley already knows, and he'll have a vested interest in keeping this information from reaching others' ears. So ..." She smiled in triumph.

"So?" Snape asked a trifle impatiently.

"So we'll get Kingsley to put us on Special Assignment," Harry said, practically crowing their triumph.

"Exactly!" Hermione agreed. "We can devote our full time to the investigation, rather than sneaking an hour here or an hour there."

Snape's eyes glittered as he looked at her, and tone was bland. "With your relationship I'm sure he'll grant your request."

"My relationship? With Kingsley?" She frowned, glancing at Harry who shrugged. "What are you... Oh!" Then Hermione blushed. "Minerva has a big mouth."

Harry laughed. "If you think Kingsley Shackbolt would bend to Hermione's will unless he agrees with her wholeheartedly, then you don't know him very well."

"Thanks, Harry."

He shrugged off her sarcasm as if it were a midge. "No problem."

"I concede the point, as I do know Shackbolt, although not as well as I had originally thought." Snape rose to his feet, his eyes on Hermione's flushed cheeks. "As difficult as it is to admit, the idea of a Special Assignment is an excellent suggestion, and will most likely circumvent the contractual requirements." He offered the *amende honorable* and his hand.

When their skin touched, she shuddered, an intense contact shock firing the synapses in her entire body. Suddenly she was short of breath, and it was entirely gratifying to hear his sharp inhalation acknowledge that he, too, was affected. Gathering her scattered wits, she said, "If we leave now, I can spend an hour in my lab examining the vial and its contents. I want to see if there are any similarities between this vial and the one containing Horace's Love Philtre."

"Very well. You will keep me informed of your progress."

"Absolutely. Will you let us know if there are any other gifts? Which reminds me, why didn't you use the D.A. galleon I gave you?"

Snape pursed his lips. "I left it in my office. However, I've subsequently transferred it to the pocket of my robes for easy access."

"It's almost like an instant message. You will let us know of any sort of gift or tribute left for you?"

By way of an answer, Snape conjured a small bag to hold the wilted flowers, the ribbon and the vial containing Muggle blood. He presented it to Hermione with a flourish, and then tapped her on the crown of her head with his wand.

The Disillusionment spell cloaked her while he struck Harry's crown, and then, they retraced their steps through the castle and out the private tunnel beneath the school's grounds. Above ground, the howling wind blew snow in great drifts and the temperature plummeted.

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Chapter Eight

Chapter 9 of 12

In which the Minister of Magic extends a favor, and Hermione Granger acquires a lively correspondent.

Chapter Eight: In which the Minister of Magic extends a favor, and Hermione Granger acquires a lively correspondent.

Monday morning found Harry and Hermione ensconced in Kingsley Shackbolt's impressive office. When the Minister cancelled two of his standing meetings, rumors began to fly quite literally.

When John Dawlish sauntered into his office at ten, Romilda Vane was waiting for him. Dawlish shot a fulminating glare at his secretary, but forced a smile for Percy Weasley's lackey. "To what do I owe the honor, Miss Vane?"

"What case are Potter and Granger working on?" she asked in her blunt Gryffindorian manner.

"Sorry?" he asked, completely wrong-footed.

"What case are Potter and Granger working?"

"None! I don't allow ... er ... I mean, Potter and Granger have different assignments within the department, as you well know. Why do you ask?"

"Because they've been in with the Minister of Magic since eight twenty-two this morning. Privately." As she spoke, her heavy, dark hair swung forward to frame her face like

a living parenthetical.

The blood drained from Dawlish's face and he stormed behind his desk as if Fiendfyre was licking at his boot heels.

Ron Weasley's girlfriend smiled and bid the Head of Magical Law Enforcement good morning, excusing herself from his office. However, when she arrived at Percy's office for her daily ten-thirty report, she was informed by his assistant, Ernie Macmillan, that he was with the Minister. She drummed her fingers on Ernie's desk impatiently, then borrowed quill, ink and parchment to write a note to Ron, asking him if he could spare time for lunch.

By eleven, Harry and Hermione were in the lift rising to the second floor of the Ministry.

"You can't just cross her off the list because she's gay!" Harry exclaimed.

"We agreed the stalker was focused on him romantically, so that would preclude Vector."

"Hermione, you don't *know* she's gay."

"She turned down Kingsley," Hermione said as if that were sufficient explanation.

"That doesn't make her a lesbian." Harry rolled his eyes. "I think your bias is showing."

She pouted. "Maybe, but you're not a woman. No one turns down a date with Kingsley Shacklebolt, even if he weren't the Minister for Magic and four years happily married. He's charming and incredibly sexy."

Harry snorted. "Too much information, Hermione." Then he leaned one shoulder against the wall of the lift and asked more seriously, "Do you have any concrete reason to suspect that Vector really is gay?"

"No." She shook her head, a stray curl flipping into her eye. "There are notes in her file from the year Voldemort controlled the Ministry. All the teachers were under surveillance then, and she was noticeably and protractedly grief-stricken over Charity Burbage's disappearance and death. Apparently there had been rumors about them for years." Hermione huffed. "I know, I know. I can't cross her off the list because of rumors or the fact she didn't find Kingsley irresistible, even if they're true."

"It's more likely that Dawlish is trying to get Snape sacked, and he's put that niece of his up to it."

Hermione actually laughed. "That's certainly my preferred solution, although with Dawlish gone I might have to stay in MLE rather than teaching."

"I'm beginning to think you want that job."

"I'm beginning to think you're right."

When they reached their destination, "*Level Two*," the pleasant-voiced lift announced, "*Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, and Wizengamot Administrative Offices*," and they disembarked. They strolled past the reception desk and into the Commons.

With her iron-gray hair wrapped in a tight bun, Mrs. Corner sat primly at her desk outside Dawlish's office, along the wall farthest from, and in direct line-of-sight with, the lift. When she saw Hermione and Harry, she tilted her head and arched an eyebrow. Recognizing a noble summons when he saw one, Harry briefly exchanged a mirth-filled look with his best friend and, in perfect synchronicity, the two crossed the expansive room.

"Yes, Mrs. Corner?" Harry asked.

"Mr. Dawlish has asked to speak with you as soon as you returned from your unexpected meeting with the Minister." She might not have openly supported Harry or Hermione, but her dislike of her employer was evident as she divulged the entirety of her information to prepare them for what waited beyond the closed door.

Harry smiled at her; it was a surprisingly winsome smile, and the dour-faced woman was not unaffected. "That's why we're here," he said.

Mrs. Corner murmured her thanks when Hermione suggested quietly, "You might want to cancel his lunch if he has one," as she followed Harry.

Dawlish's sanctum sanctorum reminded Hermione of Percy at his most pompous, although the similarities saddened her a little. Both men were intelligent and eminently capable, but tended toward rigid officiousness. Fortunately, Percy had reconciled with his family, and Fred, soon enough to save him from further pomposity. Not so with John Dawlish.

The man in question glared at his Aurors from behind his massive desk. "Where have you been?"

"I'm afraid that's privileged information, sir," Harry said affably, but he didn't choose to take a seat, not having been invited to do so.

Hermione waited patiently at Harry's side.

"Whilst I'm your superior you have an obligation to report to me. You and Granger have not been assigned to a case together. I've given explicit orders not ..." He spluttered for a moment, his face florid with frustrated anger. "Well. That's neither here nor there. Going to the Minister to complain of your treatment is an outrage!"

"Is there a reason for us to complain, sir?" Hermione asked.

Harry said, bluntly "We've been put on Special Assignment."

"What?"

Harry explained as if to a particularly dimwitted trainee. "We have been reassigned to the Minister's staff temporarily, and as such, we report directly to him."

Hermione plucked a single curly strand of hair from the sleeve of her robes and wrapped it around her finger it was a long-standing habit to prevent others from impersonating her with Polyjuice Potion. She didn't look at Dawlish. "I'm afraid we cannot discuss it with you."

"What about your current cases? You have ..."

"Nothing in my current caseload is critical," Hermione said sourly, finally looking up. Dawlish's face had turned purple.

Harry spoke up. "Bones doesn't need me; any junior Auror could take my place."

Dawlish rose to his feet, bracing himself on his hands spread wide on his desk, but as he was about to give voice to his mushrooming tirade, Hermione said sweetly, "The Minister would like to see you in his office."

"What?" Dawlish snapped.

"Didn't we mention it?" Harry asked. "Minister Shacklebolt would like to see you immediately."

Dawlish ground his teeth. "No, you didn't mention it." He rounded the corner of his desk and herded them from his office. "How long will this assignment take?"

As if a Disillusionment spell had been *finite'd*, Harry's seeming affability evaporated, and Dawlish recoiled slightly, but the younger man merely said, "Until we get results."

Dawlish strode toward the elevator.

Hermione crossed directly toward the hallway leading to her office, Harry so close on her heels she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. Once inside her office, she closed the door, warded and spelled it against eavesdroppers, and only then did she give in to her mirth. "Did you see his face?"

"Oh, bloody hell!" Harry laughed with the same abandon as his two-year old son. "I owe Snape for that."

"What do you think of Kingsley's proposal?" she asked.

Harry sobered, and toyed with a miniature Sneakoscope on her desk. "I always thought it would be you."

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't considered it, but you know what my reputation has become," she said, passing him on her way to the file cabinet, where she began to sort through a pile of reports and parchment notes on various cases.

"Thanks to Dawlish." He ground out the words between his teeth. "It shouldn't be like that. You would be an excellent department head."

"But it is like that, Harry. And while it's repairable, it would take years to change people's impressions. Eccentric is the nicest thing I've heard, but there are other things people say about me."

Harry sat in the single guest chair and continued to play with the Dark detector. "If I get a branch office and you don't take the job at Hogwarts, you will work for me, won't you?"

She twisted at the waist to look at him, and her eyes shone. "Naturally."

"Good. Excellent." He straightened in the guest chair and tapped a finger on her desk. "Let's get to work."

Hermione plucked several reports from the pile, pulled her wand and cleared her desktop. She laid the parchment in one corner, and while she retrieved the boar's tissue samples and the vial of love potion, Harry grabbed the bag Snape had conjured the Saturday before from the depths of her expandable bag.

"I wasn't able to accomplish anything this weekend," she lamented. "Bones was Senior Auror, and the Omega team was here."

Harry angled his head and grimaced as if he'd just eaten a bogey-flavored Bertie Bott's Bean. "How was Smith?"

"Condescending."

"What happened?"

"Nothing really." Hermione blew out a breath quickly, and a wily curl rose in the updraft. "He becomes less tolerable the longer I know him. I know he was in the D.A., but Harry, he's the same prat he always was. I left practically as soon as I arrived."

Harry stood then, and asked, "What do you still need to do and what do you need help with?"

"It'll take me several hours to prepare the samples and run the tests on the glass and the liquids." As she spoke, she finished sorting the things on her desk. "As we already know it's Muggle blood, you should probably talk to that liaison at Scotland Yard."

"There's not much to ask at this point. We don't even know if there's a dead body."

"True, but you could introduce yourself so that when we do need his cooperation, it'll speed up the process," she pointed out logically.

"All right." Harry crowded her when he rounded her desk to put the Sneakoscope atop her file cabinet. "Did you write the bloke's name down?"

"I didn't."

"But you remember it, yeah?"

"If you're going to run Magical Law Enforcement, Harry James Potter," she said tartly, then straightened to face him, "you're going to have to stop relying on me to pick up all the details."

"If you take the job at Hogwarts I'll have no other option." He handed her a small pile of Petri dishes, which she set next to the test tubes. "Otherwise, why would you think I'd ever let you leave my department."

"Harry," she growled. Her foot tapped in irritation, and it wasn't necessary for him to look at her to recognize it.

"All right, all right. It's Prewett," he said quickly to forestall her nagging. "The bloke's name is Bentley Prewett and he's a very distant cousin of Molly's."

She beamed at him. "I knew Kingsley made a wise choice."

Harry puffed out his chest and then snorted. "As I don't actually have an office," he said, referring to his shared cubicle in the Commons, "we should work from here ... or your flat. Which would you prefer?"

"My flat." And then, having made the decision, she placed her overused bag on the seat of her chair. When she heard her friend's chuckle as she removed a tin of beans from the bag she glared at him. However, her comment remained on point. "I don't really trust Dawlish."

"Join the club."

"It's not that he's Dark or evil, but as you pointed out, he's jealous, and I don't want to tempt that." She leaned across her desk and picked up two vials, Horace's potion and the Muggle blood. "It's been safe until now because we haven't aroused anyone's suspicions, but I can easily see him reassigning Smith to harass us."

"Yeah." He took the vials from her hand and placed them carefully in a pocket in the lining of her capacious bag. "Especially if he does have a hand in it."

"I don't really expect those results."

"Me either; more along the lines of wishful thinking," Harry said.

Hermione opened a drawer and pulled out a sealed metal box before handing it to Harry to add to the bag. "I'll sort everything out at my flat."

"Right. I'll be off to Scotland Yard and Bentley Prewett." He strode to the door of her office, but paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Do you want me to stop at Sainsbury's before I meet you later?"

Pausing in the midst of slipping the reports between two books, Hermione raised her head to look at him. The willful curl dangled across her forehead again. "Thanks, but

no. I went only last week and I still have some of those crisps you like."

"Good, good. I'm going home first. I don't want to leave an easy trail."

Hermione raised her head. "You don't think Of course, he would."

"Wouldn't you?" Harry asked, his expression hard. In that moment, he looked exactly like what he was: a seasoned Dark wizard catcher.

She nodded. "Definitely."

"Then we should expect it. While Dawlish hates the Muggle world, there are more of us mixed-bloods than most realize, and it would be easy for him to send one or another Muggle-born to track me."

"Good point. If you wait five minutes, we can leave together."

"All right." He dropped his hand from the doorknob. "What else do you need to pack?"

She pointed. "Grab the microscope and centrifuge off that table. Can you conjure some bubble wrap?"

"Yeah," he said, suiting action to words. "Got it."

They worked rapidly. It took the full five minutes, but then Hermione delayed for another five to transfigure several ersatz pieces of scientific equipment to fool an uninvited and ignorant snoop.

As they walked through the Commons, they heard a furious spate of whispers and noticed one or two conversations stop entirely when they came within hearing distance. Along the far wall, Bones took a step out of Dawlish's office and watched their departure silently. The rumor mill had already ground the bare facts of their assignment into fine dust.

Once Hermione reached her flat she wasted no time in getting to work. Choosing to use her u-shaped kitchen, tiled in a spritely yellow, she sacrificed one entire worktop for her lab equipment, but there wasn't enough room. She eyed the available space, then plying her wand, she enlarged the worktop-height table she'd recently bought on a shopping spree with her parents, so that it extended the length of the work surface across the entire length of her small breakfast nook between the kitchen proper and the wall separating it from the lounge.

She left one of her tall chairs as it was, but with another swish and jab, the second chair transfigured into a short bookcase fitting snugly beneath the new worktop. Several minutes later, the new furniture matched the pale wood and glass-fronted cabinets in the rest of the kitchen, and they had absorbed several spells designed to resist all manner of damage, including *Finite Incantatem*. Once satisfied with her handiwork, Hermione retrieved her equipment and reference material, shelving things where appropriate, and allocating an entire shelf to sample storage in her magically modified refrigerator.

When she was finished, Hermione had a hybrid laboratory. A number seven cauldron had been placed on the hob, racks of test tubes nestled amongst vials of standard potions ingredients, and stirring rods of various magical enhancements lined the tiled worktop adjacent to glass slides for the microscope. Satisfied, she set to work, carefully and diligently, a Quick Notes Quill hovering at head height, jotting down her dictated remarks on a piece of parchment.

Over the next hour, preliminary tests showed a ninety-seven percent probability that the two vials left for Snape, although filled with different liquids, had been handled by magic and by the same person. She needed to confirm the results Arithmatically and by running a longer test, but allowing for a wide margin of error, Hermione was quite pleased. She had always believed they were dealing with the same person, but her results supported the theory.

She took a break to snack on an apple and some Stilton, and headed into the lounge, wondering what was taking Harry so long. Before she returned to work, she brushed her teeth and took off her shoes. As she returned to the kitchen, she thought she could get used to working from home.

Disposing of the apple core, Hermione washed her hands before tackling the next series of tests on the vial of blood. In this, she combined wizarding and Muggle methods of investigation. Using a pipette she removed one-fourth of the blood from its vial, dividing that into three test tubes for a standard battery of tests: blood type, presence of diseases, white blood cell count, magical aura, or presence of an anti-coagulant. Then she pulled her wand from where she'd woven it into her braid, and cast the first in a series of standard magical investigative spells, "*Gender revelio!*"

A pink mist formed around the vial of liquid life, settling into the median range of hue, and Hermione ended the spell. "Dictate," she said, and heard the sound of the charmed quill following directions as it scratched her words into the surface of the floating parchment. "The blood, type B positive, originated from a Muggle female, between the ages of thirty and fifty. According to the spell, she was within normal parameters for health and fitness."

Next, Hermione sucked a single drop from one of the test tubes and smeared it on a glass slide before pushing the slide into place on the bed of the microscope. She pressed her face to the eyepieces which she had modified for comfort and better vision.

Steps sounded in her hall. "Hermione?"

"In here," she called without removing her face from the binocular microscope. "What took you so long?"

Rustling noises came from her lounge, and she had no trouble imagining Harry shedding his coat.

"You'll never guess."

"Just tell me then."

Thud ... thud The sound of his, no doubt, wet boots was loud as they hit the floor in the other room. Ginny had Harry well-trained, Hermione thought, and smirked.

"That Prewett bloke looks just like the twins, only older."

"No!" She sat up abruptly. "You're joking."

"Yes. No. I'm not joking." He entered the lab-cum-kitchen. His hair was damp from melted snow, and he took three steps to the sink, where a tea towel hung. As he rough-dried his hair, he continued his tale. "It was quite a shock. Scotland Yard, for all that it's Muggle, is practically as convoluted as the Ministry. I was wandering a hall wondering how the hell to get back to the receptionist when the spitting image of Fred Weasley approached me, asking if I was Potter." He shuddered.

"Oh, Harry, that must've been dreadful," she said, turning in her chair to listen to his unexpected encounter.

"I would've thought he was a ghost..." his voice was muffled as the towel fell in front of his face, "...except we know what they're like, and then I thought Polyjuice, but when I got close to him, it was obvious he was older. It was bloody unnerving."

"I can imagine."

"His branch of the family live in Leeds, and when he was at Hogwarts, he and Gideon Prewett used to pretend they were twins." He dropped the soiled towel on the worktop, its dark saffron color complimenting the paler tile beneath its messy heap.

"Is that what took you so long?" When Harry nodded, Hermione ignored the floating quill and parchment at head-height and reached for a Self-Inking Quill and a parchment already inscribed with a list of names. "I wonder why we've never heard of him," she commented, as she jotted a note next to Prewett's name.

"He married a Muggle, you see, so they live there, in the Muggle world, and his working for Scotland Yard makes it easy for him to fit in."

"That's brilliant."

Harry leaned against the frontispiece of her sink and smiled widely. "He was quite helpful all round." Then he asked, "What have you found out?"

Hermione waved her hand toward her dictated notes, still hovering at head height. He stepped toward the parchment rather than summoning it. Even after living for almost a decade exclusively in the wizarding world, Harry still did some things the Muggle way. It was a distinction to be found at all levels of their culture.

"There's something odd about this blood." Hermione peered back in the microscope. "I don't know that I've ever looked at Muggle blood before, so I don't know if it's the Muggle-magical divide or this sample specifically. Harry, give me your hand."

"What?"

"Your hand, Harry; I need some of your blood." She summoned a point-five stirring rod and transfigured it into a sharp needle, and then pursed her mouth.

"Won't that taint my blood with magical residue?"

Hermione gave him an approving smile, as if he were a first-year student who'd answered a challenging question correctly. "It shouldn't. First of all, the spell I used is benign in nature, transfiguring one item from metal into another. It would be different if I'd transfigured glass to metal or wood to metal. Secondly, the spell's contained within the magical field holding the mutated object's integrity. Unless I damage the needle against your Quidditch calluses, there should be no cross-contamination."

He poked her. "I'll pretend I understood what you said, shall I?"

Hermione glared at him and jabbed his finger harder than necessary.

"Ow! Hermione, that hurt!" He tried to pull his hand back, but she held onto it tightly.

"Don't be a baby," she scolded, siphoning off his blood into an empty test tube and sealing it with a waxy cork designed for the purpose. "You have to stop doing that."

"Doing what? What'd I do?" He plucked a bottle of Essence of Dittany from among her small collection of potions ingredients and then crossed to the sink to wash his finger and tear off a sheet of paper toweling. He poured a small amount of the Dittany onto the paper towel and applied it to the pinprick.

"You have to stop pretending you're a half-wit if you want to run the department."

"I I don't..."

"You do. I know why, but you're not just The Boy Who Lived Twice." She turned toward him; her brow furrowed in an expression those who knew her well meant she was in deadly earnest. "You're also Harry Potter, a devoted husband and father, a bloody good Auror, and my best friend. The amiable half-wit camouflage won't lead a department of Aurors nor earn their respect. It's part of why Dawlish is where he is. He's an officious, obnoxious git, but he's competent and people respect that."

Harry's face was a complex mix of emotions, and Hermione didn't wait for the anger or hurt to surface. "Just like remembering Bentley Prewett's name earlier. You remembered what Kingsley said as well as I do, but you pretended otherwise. And you did that with *me!*

"Just be yourself. I told you once, and I'll say it again, you're a great wizard, Harry." She watched the lines on his face settle into embarrassed pleasure and returned to her task, giving him time to adjust to her lecture. When she smeared another slide with his blood and slipped it onto the microscope's bed, he said, "You've got better at that."

"This?" she asked as she bent to the microscope's eyepieces.

"Cutting me down to size and then building me back up."

"Oh, Harry!" She spun to face him, her sincere brown eyes meeting his. "I never meant to hurt your feelings."

"I know you didn't." He returned to his former place, leaning against her sink. "I know you, too, Hermione, and when you have a point to make you go for the jugular."

"I spew coal," she muttered, jabbing that wayward curl back into place with more force this time.

"What's that?"

"Coal. Severus Snape says I'm like that girl in the fairy tale. You know the one who has diamonds and pearls fall from her mouth when she speaks. Only my comments haven't been turned into diamonds yet ... they're still chunks of coal."

Harry snorted and then broke into side-aching laughter. Indulgently, Hermione smiled for a minute, but when he showed no sign of stopping, she tapped her foot in annoyance. "It's not that funny."

"No, no. It is." He howled with laughter, bending at the waist as if he couldn't catch his breath. "It's ... bloody ... brilliant! Wait ... till ... I tell ... Ron."

"Please don't." She sulked. "I wish I hadn't told you. It's sort of an inside joke."

Her comment worked as efficiently as a Charm; Harry stopped laughing immediately. "You and Snape have an inside joke?"

She looked anywhere but at him. "Sort of."

"Hermione?"

Shifting uncomfortably, she fingered the list with Bentley Prewett's name on it. "I told you he's been cordial. You've seen him."

"I have." Harry sounded abstracted, but the look he gave her was anything but. "He called you Hermione."

"He didn't."

"Yes. He did. On Saturday ... after you called him Severus."

"What?" She goggled at him. "I never!"

"You did," Harry smirked. "You called him Severus just after you realized he was an Animagus."

"My my Great Circe!" she exclaimed and slid off her chair. "I did."

Her reaction caused Harry to chuckle, but he said quietly enough, "You really did."

"I'm lucky he didn't hex me."

"He's not going to hex you." Harry shook his head. "He called you Hermione."

"I I " Her eyes were wide and curiously unguarded.

"Do you like him?"

She avoided his too-interested eyes by hitching herself back into the chair. "I certainly admire him, and he's not cruel like he used to be." Harry crossed his arms, but said nothing. The tactic worked. Hermione's resolve crumbled, and she blurted, "I don't know! Maybe."

"All right. Let's get back to work, and after we solve this case, you can decide if you like him or not."

"Thanks." Deftly shunting any potential revelation aside, however, Hermione bent to her previous task.

Behind her, Harry returned to the lounge, but his voice carried easily. "My meeting with Prewett was quite good, and among other things, he gave me a print-out of the current unsolved murders within a one-hundred mile radius of Hogwarts. There are fewer than ten, although there's potentially twice that number if we include those that haven't been discovered or reported yet."

"That could be helpful." She frowned as she studied Harry's blood sample, and then switched slides, staring at the greatly magnified blood sample Snape had given her. "Although I don't think this blood was acquired as a result of an assault."

"Why's that?" he asked from a position next to her elbow.

"If the blood had been taken from a dead body a crime scene, for example I'd expect to find carpet or clothing fibers, or perhaps even pieces of skin from the wound site. If it was a wizarding wound, there would be magical residue, or, as in the case of the boar, traces of anti-coagulant. And yet, the Muggle sample I tested is entirely free of contaminants." While she worked she pointed her wand at the sample of Harry's blood and cast a wordless spell. Immediately, miniscule flecks of luminous purple appeared in the smear of blood proving that he was, indeed, a wizard.

He picked up the vial of Muggle blood Snape's unknown tormenter had left, rolling it between his fingers. "You'll have to check the entire vial."

"I know," she said, taking the vial from him and returning it to its place amongst the test tubes. "Although considering how much we've moved the sample, any contaminant should've been dislodged from settling at the bottom."

"Good point. What do you see in my blood?"

Her grin was infectious. "You're definitely a wizard."

He wiped his brow in mock relief. "Whew!"

"I thought you'd be pleased." Removing the slide from the bed of the microscope, she sealed it with a tap of her wand. "There's very little difference in structure and composition, but there's something irregular about the Muggle blood. I'm not a phlebotomist, but I think it's been treated in some way."

"Perhaps this will help." Harry placed a large folder on the corner of the butcher block table. "Prewett also gave me a list of hospitals, nursing facilities, and blood banks."

"That's it!" She sat up and hopped from her chair. "We have to see Mum."

"What's *it* and why? Not that I don't like your mum, but why?"

"She'll be able to confirm my guess."

Harry blocked her passage with his arms crossed. He looked quite intimidating. "If I have to stop pretending to be a dimwit, Hermione Jean Granger, then you have to stop treating me as if I'm so feeble-minded I can't follow your thought processes."

"I don't!"

"You do. I know you follow threads of research into places I've never considered, but it doesn't mean I don't have the ability if you'd tell me what's going on in that enormous brain of yours."

"I had no idea, Harry," she said contritely.

His mouth twitched and he relaxed. "It's probably the curse of being childhood friends. We tend to cling to our first impressions."

"What an awful thought. But if that's true, then why do I find Snape's company so bracing and enjoyable?"

Harry grimaced. "Enjoyable?"

Her chin tilted defensively. "Yes. Enjoyable. He's quite witty."

"If you say so, but that just fits in with what I've said. We've been friends since we were kids ... continuously. Sometimes when I look at you, I expect to see this little face peeking through a mountain of hair, but you're not that girl anymore. With Snape, it's been years since we've seen him, and he's changed, but more than that, we've changed. It's easier to see those changes from a distance."

Hermione's mouth gaped. "That was very insightful, Harry."

He smirked. "You told me to stop pretending."

She laughed. "I did, didn't I? It'll take a bit to adjust to this new you, but I think I like it."

"Good. Then explain why we need to see your mum."

"I suspect the blood's been subjected to a medical procedure, possibly for storage, but my mum will have more information because she always keeps a liter of a patient's blood type on hand when she does surgery. In case of an emergency."

"Is that standard procedure?"

She explained while retrieving her shoes, "No, but when she was at college, one of the volunteer patients had undiagnosed haemophilia and almost died before they could save her. He was just a little boy, and no one had known."

"I had no idea dentistry was so hazardous." He slid his feet into his now-dry boots before donning his coat.

"It isn't usually. Mum called it an enlightening experience. C'mon, let's go. She'll be at work, so we'll Apparate to the car park and walk from there." She hooked her arm

around his waist and spun into Side-Along-Apparation. Regrettably, Hermione was wrong, and her mother wasn't at her dental surgery in Windsor. Mrs. Granger had taken a rare day off; fortunately, Hermione reached her by mobile phone while Harry paced in the parking lot.

The call was brief, and when Hermione hung up, she said to Harry, "It was frozen. After blood has been crystallized, there are residual indicators upon reconstitution."

"We'll probably need to use that second list Prewett gave me." He squinted into the darkening sky, ignoring the drizzle which had started while Hermione spoke with her mother. "Shall we call it a day? I'd like to get home to Ginny and James early for a change."

"All right. If you leave the list with me, I'll sort it by location." Her shoulders slumped, even after the day's tremendous successes, and she kicked the kerb with the toe of her shoe. "I don't think we're looking for a murderer."

"Perhaps not a murderer yet." Harry's tone was ominous. "I don't like the implicit threat in the public display."

"Me, either."

He pulled several sheets of folded Muggle paper from his coat pocket and handed it to her. "We'll decide who gets where in the morning."

"All right." Unfolding the paper, she gave it a cursory glance. "Give my love to Ginny and James."

"You're welcome to come for dinner."

She looked up from the list and smiled. "No, thanks. I know how rarely it's just the three of you. Soon it'll be four, so go home and enjoy your family. I'm going to have a bath."

"I'll have to tell Ron you're doing more of those girly things again."

Harry's grin was mischievous, and she shoved him playfully. "Prat!"

Laughing, he fended her off, and then, still chuckling, he said, "Night, Hermione. See you in the morning." He spun on the ball of his foot, disappearing with nary a sound of displacement.

"Show off," she murmured before twirling into her own seamless Disapparation.

She never got that bath. Once she arrived at her flat, she preserved the slides with Harry's and the unknown Muggle's blood, and cleaned her work surfaces and equipment. Then she sat down to peruse the lengthy list of locations known to store blood. The size of the list was daunting, but also the only real lead they had to identify the person behind the Snape-baiting.

Thinking of Snape, she composed a message to tell him of their progress, and then recalled her happiest memory finding her parents alive and well in Melbourne after the war before casting her Patronus and sending it to Hogwarts. Finally, she settled on her sofa with a cup of tea, a healthy splash of milk to whiten it to her taste, and prepared to sort out the list of blood resources. There were hundreds of possibilities to consider. Prewett had been quite thorough. In addition to listing blood banks, hospitals, and nursing facilities, he had also included research laboratories, morgues, and six university medical facilities.

It was just going on midnight when she finished breaking down the list by city, county, and country. As she organized her notes into three piles, Prewett's original list, and one each for Harry and her, Snape's Patronus swept into her flat. As it had done the last time, it swooped into a circular landing, ultimately coming to rest on the table in front of her. It cocked its head, blinked its eyes and opened its beak. Snape's uniquely hypnotizing voice issued forth. After initial salutations, which left Hermione chuckling, Snape's voice said, "I find myself as much astonished as encouraged by yours and Potter's efforts on my behalf. There was another bouquet this morning, although it was on the podium in my classroom and not at the high table. There was no accompanying gift and the flowers were the same as Saturday."

The Patronus clacked its beak and faded slowly from existence, but its luminous eyes held her attention until they were the last things to disappear.

Tiredly, Hermione shuffled off to her bed, thinking they should begin their search in Scotland and then work their way south.

The next three weeks were lessons in patience and futility. It reminded Hermione of the endless months she, Harry and Ron had spent on the trail of Voldemort's Horcruxes. And no matter how experienced an investigator or how magically powerful they were, there was little Hermione or Harry could do to replace the tedious footwork of visiting every potential source of the Muggle blood concealed in Snape's bouquet.

Harry had initially suggested phoning the places on the list, but Hermione pointed out that they couldn't cast any sort of diagnostic spell that way, and in the end they spent twelve days popping in-and-out of Muggle Scotland and Northern England.

Their only consolations were that Harry made it home in time for dinner every night, and Hermione's rather spirited Patronus correspondence with Severus Snape was occurring on a daily basis.

Nightly, Hermione recalculated her data, Arithmatically looking for patterns in the slow but certain escalation of Snape's stalker. There were three notable plateaux initiating more visible expressions of the stalker's interest thereafter. But she could find no discernable significance to their dates. They didn't correspond to any *misdeeds* Snape might have performed as a Death Eater. Neither did they coincide with a full moon, or Snape's birthday on the ninth of January. She had sent him a belated birthday card, complete with crumbs and a note which read, *I made you a cake and wish you'd been here to share it with me. It was delicious.* His return message had been a Patronus of hearty laughter and nothing more. She had fallen asleep that night with a smile on her face.

On the twentieth night, she soaked in the bath for an hour before bed, contemplating Snape's earlier message. His D.A. galleon was gone. He believed it was the result of a real prank and not the work of the stalker. He had been demonstrating a basic avoidance technique, duck and run, to his youngest students when the school's alarm sounded for an impromptu evacuation. Since the disorganized exodus during the Battle for Hogwarts, there had been periodic, mandatory evacuation drills for all students and staff members. Regrettably, Snape had been in his shirtsleeves at the time; when several of his students panicked, he had ushered them to their pre-arranged safe zone without grabbing his outer robes.

"It was bloody cold in that courtyard," he had complained through his Patronus. "But it wasn't until we returned to the classroom that I discovered my teaching robes were missing. They were returned this morning, but my pockets were empty. There was nothing of material value other than the D.A. coin, and I doubt the thief knows what he or she has in their possession. It was careless of me."

Her reply had been short. "Don't be daft, Severus. You weren't careless, someone deliberately pinched your robes. I'm sure you'll hear rumors of the escapade soon enough who could keep that to themselves? I would dearly love to be there when you discover the culprit."

The next day saw her moving on to Edinburgh from St. Andrews.

Ten days later, Hermione arrived home and dispiritedly kicked off her trainers it had been years since she'd spent so much time in Muggle clothing before slipping into her kitchen for a glass of wine. As she was so depressed she opened a good bottle, one her parents had brought back from a trip to Provence. Flicking her wand, she removed the cork from the Roger Lassarat Saint-Veran Prestige, and then twisted the magical vinewood to chill the wine.

That night she planned to adjust her equations to include her most recent idea: dates Snape had transformed into an Animagus during the past six months. He had sent a list by regular owl that morning. When the owl had arrived, Hermione had been shocked by how small it seemed. So used to the size of Snape's Patronus, whose wingspan was longer than she was tall, the smaller, real avian reminded her of Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon.

Cutting up a pear and some cheese, Hermione put it all on a plate with a couple of digestive biscuits. She levitated it to the lounge where her entire coffee table had been taken over by the investigation.

She was just adding the final dates to the equation when her nightly apparition glided into the room. She waved a greeting and hastily scribbled the last date on the paper.

"It's you, Coal." Snape's voice was deep and dark as it issued forth from his Patronus.

She stared blankly at the messenger, quill poised above the parchment, until the owl continued.

"You're the common denominator." The transparent Patronus cocked its head, its beak wide open. "Each of the more blatant expressions of interest has occurred after you visited the school ... openly." Suddenly lightheaded, Hermione felt the blood drain from her face even as his smooth baritone voice continued to relay his message. "Someone is indeed watching. From what Potter has said, there is the possibility of diverting attention to someone or something considered competition. I would be heartily displeased if that were to happen in this case."

As had become her custom, Hermione thanked the owl and watched as the entity blurred, losing its corporeal form and fading into a fog of glowing magical energy before it evaporated entirely. She stared blindly at a score of equations scrawled in variegated ink.

Too keyed up to conjure a happy thought to summon her own Patronus, Hermione bounced to her feet, plucking the empty plate and wine glass from the table and entered the kitchen. She filled her sink with hot soapy water and plunged her hands into the bubbles. While her hands were busy, her mind provided her with an image of her winter coat, befouled and shredded, hanging in the cloak room of Hogwarts castle. While she had assumed the damage was personally motivated, she hadn't considered it related to Snape, but that had become a reasonable possibility.

If the stalker perceived Hermione as a real threat, their focus might shift from Snape and it would be more difficult to discover their identity. Hermione and Harry couldn't afford to let that happen.

She scrubbed a smudge of cheese off the plate, remembering Snape's warning and thinking his protectiveness was endearing especially as he hadn't spoiled it by suggesting she give up the investigation. Ideas flitted through her mind; using a disguise when visiting Hogwarts, avoiding Snape, or even using the information to manipulate the situation. There were both plausible and implausible scenarios.

After she'd dried and put her dishes away, she was composed enough to send a reply. Her otter oozed from the tip of her wand, gamboling about the room until it came to attention at her feet. "I have a message for Severus Snape." After she'd thanked Snape for his warning, she said, "I would be equally displeased if the stalker took matters into a more personal or public direction. Please be as careful as you would have me do in your stead." The silvery otter lolloped across the kitchen floor, onto the worktop, and slipped through the crack between window and sill over the sink.

With good conscience, Hermione returned to work, settling on the sofa and pulling the sheet of Arithmantic formulae closer. When she substituted the dates of her visits for the dates of Snape's Animagus transformations, the two sides of the equation balanced perfectly. Snape had been correct; she was the common factor.

Next, she took the variable for "x" and plugged it into a different set of Arithmantic projections. Instantly, the rune Hagalaz rose from the parchment to hover and spin mid-air. Hagalaz represented many things: destructive, uncontrolled forces, a crisis, a tempering, testing, or a trial. None of those gave her any comfort at all, even if she was unsurprised by the result.

By the time she crawled into bed three hours later, her head ached and she dreamed of blood.

Two days later, Harry found their lead.

Hermione practically splinched herself Apparating to Newcastle where Harry had found their source: the School of Applied Sciences at Northumbria University's City Campus.

"Harry?"

"Come with me," he said brusquely. The length of time it had taken them had grated on his nerves as much as it had hers.

She followed Harry up the stairs in the brick, metal and glass building, and then down a long, wide corridor. Her trainers made little noise on the linoleum floor while his boots resounded in the nearly empty hall. Few students were present, and those who were paid little attention to the two whose clothing was several years out of fashion.

Harry stopped at a door with a faceplate she hadn't time to read because he ushered her inside. A man rose upon their entry, extending his hand toward Hermione. "Miss Granger, it is an honor to meet you at last. I've read a great many things about you."

Entirely taken aback by the welcome, Hermione managed to retrieve her hand from his fervent greeting and stutter, "M-my pleasure, I'm sure."

"Hermione, meet Matthew Flint." Harry stepped forward, closing the door behind him, and with a subtle sweep of his hand, he cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door.

Flint was a middle-aged man of rugged good looks and abundant health. His shock of white hair set off the healthy ruddy tone of his skin and his teeth gleamed in his broad smile. He was surprisingly quite fit, unlike his younger cousin Marcus who many had accused of having troll blood in his family line. This Flint wore ubiquitous jeans and a pale green jersey, and his trainers were far newer than Hermione's.

"Mr. Flint, it's kind of you to help us," she said.

"Not at all," he replied, and offered her a seat in one of the room's industrial chairs. "While Mr. Potter waited for your arrival, I've pulled the file."

"File?" she asked while taking the proffered seat and crossing her legs. "I'm sorry?"

From his position leaning against the closed door, Harry said diplomatically, "Professor Dumbledore gave Mr. Flint his references, much the same way he found Mrs. Figg a position in Little Whinging."

"Ah," she said, mentally slotting disparate puzzle pieces into place. "Professor Dumbledore "

"Dumbledore was a great man." Flint stepped behind his standard educator's desk: broad and cluttered. "His death was tragic necessary I realize, but a great loss."

Hermione bit her tongue, but nodded politely.

"You see I'm a Squib, Miss Granger," Flint said as he sat in a surprisingly modern, orthopedic chair. "And Albus Dumbledore helped me find my way when my family disowned me."

"Professor Dumbledore helped a great many people over the years," she said, deliberately remembering what he had done for Hagrid rather than how the old wizard had abandoned a sulky, brilliant teenager to the predations of two pureblooded scions bearing wealth, charm, and beauty.

"He did." Flint's zeal was boundless. "I've been quite happy here, but I see Mr. Potter is fidgeting. Shall I come right to the point?"

"Please."

"I came to work for the University in the mid-seventies, while Voldemort was in his first ascendancy. I had been living with my Uncle on mother's side, you understand and

when he died, he left most of his estate to another nephew, another wizard who had been disowned." He smiled in reminiscent fondness.

While he elaborated, Hermione took a look around her. The walls of his office were painted industrial white, and the four certificates asserting his accomplishments were framed in cheap stainless frames. The industrial furniture was rounded out with a filing cabinet pushed against the wall beneath a double set of windows. There were no family pictures on the man's desk, but, incongruously, there was a potted aspidistra on the cabinet beneath the windows.

"It was his specialty, Uncle Alphard's," explained Flint, "supporting the family's outcasts. He left a small stipend for me, but I would have to find employment. You can imagine how difficult it was for me to find anything in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. Albus Dumbledore found me sweeping floors at the Hogs Head in Hogsmeade. He helped me find this position, and on occasion, I was able to acquire certain plants for the toxicology department through his kind offices."

Harry shifted his position, moving behind Hermione's chair, and he cut to the chase. "There's a reciprocal agreement between the University and Hogwarts, Hermione. The University receives a number of rare and precious plants for study, and Hogwarts receives a bi-annual delivery of blood frozen blood."

"This is enormously helpful information." She smiled at Flint wittingly. "Could you tell us when the agreement went into effect, sir?"

Flint opened a slender file which was there for the purpose. "The first delivery to Hogwarts was in August 1980, and has continued for twenty-six years. During that time our Biomedical Science department has gained tremendous prestige in its field, and I've been honored to have been of some modest help."

Harry returned to his position by the door, and asked, "Can you tell us how the frozen blood is delivered?"

"I wish I could," Flint said apologetically, and nervously fingered one of the pages in the file. "Until the year of his death, Dumbledore came himself. He always stopped by for tea afterward, but since then ... well, things are different. A messenger, with proper Hogwarts' authorization, picks up the specially wrapped parcel."

"When is the next delivery scheduled?" Harry's and Hermione's eyes met above Flint's head as he bent his head to confirm the date.

"You've missed one by only a few weeks. The exchange was made during the second week of January, and there won't be another until August. Is there some trouble?"

"Not really," Harry deliberately met Flint's eyes, and Hermione knew he was using Legilimency. It had taken several years and a great deal of training, but Harry had become proficient at both Legilimency and Occlumency.

While Harry sorted through the Squib's mind, Hermione swallowed her distaste for the practice, and applied the principles of strategic misrepresentation. "The Department of Magical Law Enforcement is conducting an annual field test, Mr. Flint. It's similar to a road rally or a scavenger hunt. With the information you've provided, Harry and I stand a chance to be the first to complete our assignment. As I said before, you've been enormously helpful."

Harry broke the visual connection, and gave his head a barely perceptible, negative shake. Hermione rose to her feet.

"It's my pleasure, I'm sure." Flint, too, rose to his feet, then offered his hand. "Do you have time for tea? If not today then perhaps another time? Occasionally I get homesick."

"Another time perhaps," Hermione took his hand once more, but then she squirmed as he gave her a glance which held a hint of a leer, and this time, he bent in a courtly gesture and kissed the back of her hand rather than shaking it. Hermione maintained a straight face, and Harry's eyes twinkled like George Weasley's when developing a new wheeze.

Moments later, the two friends left the building, and Hermione poked Harry in the side.

"Ow! What was that for?" he whinged, rubbing his ribs.

"Enjoying his slobbering all over my hand." She made a face, and turned onto the bisecting path.

Harry's steps were drowned out by the noise of the Muggle city, but he matched her pace. "Yeah, but we've got the information we needed."

She sobered immediately. "I know. We need to talk about what it means. Have you eaten yet? I was in Carlisle and hadn't stopped for lunch when I got your message."

He looked both ways at the next street, but none of their surroundings were familiar. Two students passed them without giving them so much as a second glance even though they blocked their path. "I got a late start this morning so the University was my first stop."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, Ginny was having a bit of a lie-in. Morning sickness again, so I played with James until Molly arrived." He buttoned his jacket against the chill of the day.

Reminded of the temperature, Hermione pulled her gloves from her pocket and slipped her hands into their warmth. "The advantages of a mother-in-law who doesn't work," she said.

"Molly's great, but sometimes" He didn't finish his sentence, but shrugged.

"A little over-bearing?"

"Yeah."

"Let's not go to Grimmauld Place for lunch then." Hermione looked along the road they'd chosen, looking for some sign of a café, but the buildings mostly belonged to the university, and none of them appeared to house a place to eat, at least not from the outside.

Harry didn't reply, but showed his agreement by asking the nearest student if he could recommend a good Indian restaurant in town.

They were given an enthusiastic recommendation and explicit directions. The student waved and meandered upon his way.

Hermione laughed. "Why do we always eat Indian when we go Muggle?"

"I like Indian," Harry said defensively, then he turned about and started walking in the direction from which they'd come.

"Me, too," she said, matching his stride, "but it's funny how often we have it when we eat out."

"It's Ginny's favorite, but she can't stand it at the moment. All she wants is meat and potatoes ... for every meal."

Hermione snickered, and her breath fogged in the cold air. "You're probably having another boy, then."

Harry grinned. "Brilliant."

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Chapter Nine

Chapter 10 of 12

In which another of Severus Snape's secrets is revealed, and Hermione Granger comes face-to-face with his stalker.

Chapter Nine: In which another of Severus Snape's secrets is revealed, and Hermione Granger comes face-to-face with his stalker.

Harry and Hermione followed the directions they'd been given and soon found themselves in The Bigg Market. They walked past number ten, Half-Moon Chambers and Café Neon with its sandwich board proclaiming *English Breakfast* for only three Muggle pounds. They didn't pause in their search for the Indian restaurant, and as they walked, their conversation focused on the information they'd just learned.

"If only we could question Dumbledore," Harry lamented.

Hermione stopped mid-stride, alternately repelled by the idea and eager to solve their mystery. "It would make things much easier, but even if we could get permission from the headmistress, he, like his predecessors, is bound by his confidentiality oaths."

"Here we are," Harry said, as they arrived at their destination. Savory aromas assailed them as they stepped through the entrance to Rupali. A late lunch crowd kept the restaurant busy, but after a short wait, the hungry Aurors were seated at a table in the corner. After Harry daringly ordered Curry Hell, the restaurant's renowned specialty, for himself and a milder chicken dish for Hermione, she cast the nonverbal *Muffliato* on their nearest neighbors with her wand jammed up the sleeve of her pink jumper.

"You know we can't get the information from Dumbledore without causing his only official portrait to combust," Harry said bluntly.

Hermione unfolded her serviette, twisting it out of frustration. "I know. It's like working with the Department of Mysteries, Harry. Have I ever told you how much I loathe being stonewalled?"

He nodded, and then smirked. "Or in this case, portrait-walled." She snorted, but then he asked bluntly, "What do you really think about this information?"

"1980 is when Professor Snape began teaching."

"He said he wasn't a fully-adapted strigoi, but what if he's lying? There were always those rumors at school."

She glared at him, instantly indignant. "He was called a lot of things while we were at school, including greasy git and bat of the dungeons."

They were interrupted as their drinks were delivered to the table, and when their waiter left, he tugged on one ear as if to clear it.

Harry took a long pull on his beer before he said, "Rumors are usually founded on some grain of the truth."

"Remember Rita?" Hermione asked, rearranging the table's condiments into a more orderly tablescape. "She claimed I was your girlfriend, and there's never been any truth to that allegation."

"That's true." He shrugged. "But I can see how the rumor started. We've always spent a lot of time together."

Their food arrived at that moment, and Hermione held her response until after she'd taken her first bite. The masala sauce was remarkable; as aromatic as the fragrance of the restaurant, and the chicken was cut into perfect bite-sized, tender pieces. She laughed when Harry tried the Curry Hell and his eyes watered and sweat dotted his forehead. "Hot enough?" she asked.

"Hell, yeah! It's great." He shoveled another piece of lamb into his mouth.

"Good. As I was saying, though ... there was as little basis for the rumors about the professor. He lived in the dungeons, and he still wears those billowing teaching robes. No one ever mentioned the word *striga*." Despite the anti-eavesdropping spell, Hermione lowered her voice on the last word. "I don't remember ever hearing the word before I began looking these past few weeks."

"That doesn't mean anything conclusive."

"I'm sure it's not him." Hermione speared a piece of chicken with as much emphasis as she defended Snape.

Harry didn't reply for several minutes, taking a long pull on his drink, and the two friends ate companionably. Hermione polished off the chicken quickly, but liked the sauce enough to add another spoonful of rice to her plate so she could savor the last dribs and drabs.

"I think," Harry said slowly, as if evaluating each word on its individual merits, "you might have become too involved for objectivity."

Hermione dropped her fork. "Harry!"

He said earnestly, "I know it's just you and I working this case, but I leave it behind me when I go home to Ginny and James. You're working on it round the clock. To the exclusion of everything else."

"It's my only case," she said, furious with him. Shoving her plate aside, she tapped on the tabletop to emphasize the points of her rebuttal. "It involves a man we both admire, and is happening at the school where I'm probably going to live and work for the next two or three decades. Of course, I'm working on it to the exclusion of everything else. I can't leave it 'at the office' when the office is currently my home."

"Oh. Good point." His expression lightened. "And you've always been a bit of a swot anyway." He popped his last bite of lamb into his mouth.

Hermione glared at him, but was relieved he'd backed off his assertion. "Besides," she said, just remembering, "he wasn't the only one to start that year. Both Madam Pince and the headmistress took positions at the same time."

"I hadn't realized."

"It's in my notes back at the flat. Professor Vector told me about it in my initial interview, when she asked me to call her Seven."

"Seven?"

Hermione recounted the story while Harry mopped up the last of his lamb curry with his naan bread. "I've only called her that once. I'm not quite comfortable calling her Seven. I don't know her all that well."

"I still have difficulty calling Flitwick Filius."

"I know exactly what you mean."

"But you can call Snape Severus," Harry said slyly.

"Only the once ... or twice ... besides, I've spent more time with him than the others." She picked up her glass and drained the last of the yoghurt drink. "There's another reason I don't think he's lying to us."

"What's that?" Harry wiped his mouth with his serviette.

"Wouldn't Remus have been able to tell? I mean, shouldn't he have been able to smell the professor's Animagus form?"

Harry paused in the middle of lifting his beer, and when he spoke his voice was low and thoughtful. "I don't know. As far as I know, Remus never recognized Pettigrew."

"Was he ever in Scabbers' presence?"

"No. Yes. Maybe."

"Wait! Yes." Her eyes canted to the left as she retrieved the memory. "Ron had Scabbers with him on the train the first time we met Remus. Remember your Sneakoscope?"

"Yes, but Remus was asleep. And after that, the dementors were there." He grimaced at the memory. "If I remember it right, Remus spent the rest of the ride calming us down, not to mention that he would've had more than his fair share of nightmares to combat."

"Fair enough." Hermione dipped her finger in the condensation on her glass, her eyes unfocused. "But, Scabbers was all over the school that year. I can't imagine Remus didn't have an opportunity to recognize his scent at some point or another. That is, if he could make that sort of identification from scent alone."

Harry picked at the label on his beer bottle. "Pettigrew may have been a coward, but he wasn't stupid. He would have kept as far away from Remus as possible."

"Well, that eliminates that line of thought." She watched Harry for a moment, and then she said, "You know, I think we can clear Severus." Harry's brow furrowed while the busboy removed their empty plates from the table. When he was gone, Hermione said, "I don't think he would have been as righteous about Remus teaching if he himself was a Sanguinarian."

Harry snorted, and accepted the bill from their waiter. "I don't think you can base your argument on that."

"Why not?" she asked, her voice rising.

"Hermione, I realize you've grown to like him." She set her chin, and he said, gently, "We know he's an accomplished liar."

She nodded reluctantly. "But he always ... always, Harry ... protected the children of the school. To the best of his ability and whether he liked them or not."

"True, but that has no bearing on whether he lied. And if Remus couldn't tell an Animagus by scent, then Snape had nothing to be concerned about."

"But he couldn't know that. If he was a Sanguinarian at that point, then oh! Remus would have smelled the blood when he killed."

Harry shifted and pulled his wallet from his jeans. "Remus was always sensitive to the smell of blood."

Hermione blushed. "He was."

"What?" He paused in the act of counting out the appropriate amount of Muggle money.

Despite having lived in a tent with Harry for almost a year, and having been friends for more than a decade, there were some things they had never discussed. "You don't want to know."

An impatient rapping of his fingers was her answer.

"All right," she smirked. "Ginny told me once that he wouldn't come to dinner when it was Molly's time of the month."

"Oh." Harry choked. "She's never mentioned it to me."

Hermione's expression told him she thought he was an idiot. "She wouldn't have, would she?"

Harry said sheepishly, "No. She wouldn't."

"Besides, I don't believe the professor is, or was, such a hypocrite as to have been a Sanguinarian and then self-righteously protest Remus' appointment."

"Snape hated Remus."

"Regardless of how he felt about Remus, Severus rarely challenged Dumbledore, and I remember him baiting the headmaster all year long."

"All year?"

"Once I figured out Remus' secret, I was startled how blatant Severus' smear campaign was that year."

The waiter came and took Harry's money. After he'd left, Harry asked, with more than a touch of distaste, "And you like him?"

Hermione blushed and looked out the restaurant window. "He's different now. We're different now. I believe he's an honorable man," she said stiffly.

Before the waiter returned with change, Harry asked carefully, "How often have you been in his company?"

She tilted her chin. "I haven't seen him since we all met in his rooms, and it has no bearing on our discussion at the moment."

He eyed her thoughtfully. "I thought Snape was the topic of discussion."

"He is. The number of times I've been at the school is no" She trailed off. "Harry!" In her excitement she leaned forward, soiling her jumper in a spot of sauce in the process, but it went unnoticed. "She was there."

"You've lost me. Who is she? And where is there?"

"Madam Pince."

Again their conversation was interrupted, this time as the waiter brought the change. When he departed it was with a wide smile for their compliments on the food. While Harry counted out a generous tip, Hermione cancelled the anti-eavesdropping spells she'd cast on the other diners, and then rose to her feet.

Harry, too, stood. He left the tip on the table and pulled his coat from the back of his chair. Neither spoke again until they'd left the restaurant, and stepped out into the cold winter's day. The Bigg Market wasn't terribly crowded and they ducked into an alleyway before Disapparating to her flat.

As soon as they arrived, Harry asked, "Will you kindly explain what Madam Pince has to do with this?"

Hermione removed her coat, and said, "That day in the Shrieking Shack. Remember? Madam Pince was there when we found the owl."

"Oh, yeah," he said, unbuttoning his coat. "And she said something when we left. I didn't hear what?"

Leaving his favorite chair for him, Hermione headed into the lounge and sat on her sofa, ignoring the piles of parchment and writing paraphernalia that littered her coffee table. "That was eight years ago. I don't remember, either, but we could use my Pensieve."

He entered the lounge behind her, and draped his coat over one arm of the chair before flopping into it. "If what we're beginning to suspect has any validity we'll do just that."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "And she was in the library the other week, when I was looking up information about Horace's Love Philtre and Sanguinarians. She invited me to tea but then rescinded the offer. She was really out of sorts. I thought she was irritated because Charlie was Oh, goddess! She heard me asking Charlie if he knew anything about strix."

Harry stretched out his legs and removed his glasses to rub his eyes. "You do realize it's purely circumstantial."

"Circumstantial doesn't mean inaccurate, only that we should definitely consider her a possibility."

"Why didn't she do anything earlier?"

Hermione slipped her shoes off and tucked her feet beneath her, settling in for a long discussion. "He was gone until last year, and she might not have put all the clues together until then."

Harry slid his glasses back on. "Do you think she's a vampire?"

"Sanguinarian, Harry. If she is, maybe that's why she has an Incognito file."

"Good point. I'd say we invite her for a drink at the Three Broomsticks."

Hermione pursed her lips in thought. "If the school holds to its traditional calendar, next weekend should be a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Then it won't be any hardship for her to meet us for lunch."

"Exactly."

"Hermione," he said, sitting upright suddenly, "we might have this solved in three more days."

She sighed. "Then I can start creating class plans."

"You're that sure then?"

"I think I'd like the challenge." She fluffed a pillow and settled more comfortably. "Despite the reasons we fought the war, there isn't a single Muggle-born on Hogwarts' staff. I've always wanted to effect change in the wizarding world, and maybe I'll have a greater opportunity if I start young."

Abruptly, Harry jerked as if he'd been stung by a wasp. Sheepishly, he pulled his watch from the pocket of his trousers. It was the one his in-laws had given him when he'd turned seventeen. "Molly's leaving, and I'll have to get take-away." He rose to his feet, preparing to leave, but he said quietly. "If you leave MLE, I'll miss you."

"Don't miss me yet," she rose to her feet and gave him a quick hug before walking with him to the entrance. "I haven't given my notice and our investigation isn't finished."

It was only after he'd gone that she realized she hadn't mentioned Snape's most recent Patronus message.

~o0o~

When he returned from scavenging breakfast in the forest, Snape cast a series of little-known revealing and detection spells on his quarters. It had become his habit to do so in recent weeks, a practice he had all but dropped entirely three or four years post-war. There was enough ill-will generated in his direction that he was never entirely off-guard, but recent events demanded additional security measures.

All too often these days, his temper was on edge, and he used every reasonable opportunity to leave the castle far behind. Flying was the only thing which soothed and kept him from returning to a mid-war surliness. Not that he cared about the students' feelings, *per se*, but he did care about his friends, and they were worried.

As he shucked his flannel nightshirt for a long shower, he thought he might have to adjust the small numbers of his friends upward to include Hermione Granger. He hadn't seen her in close to a month, but their unconventional communications had been surprisingly pleasant. Unconsciously, he smiled when he thought of her most recent Patronus message. She and Harry had found a potential lead they were pursuing, and they hoped to have encouraging if not positive news within the next few days.

He lathered his hair a second time and contemplated the day.

Saturday. It was a Hogsmeade weekend and he wasn't on duty, which was just as well. For twenty years or more he had loathed February's Hogsmeade weekend. It didn't matter if it fell on the fourteenth or not, because the entire village and school population spent the weekend under the influence of supercharged hormones. When he'd been reeling from the loss of what he'd believed was his one true love *thank you, Albus Dumbledore, you old bastard, for reinforcing that concept, ad nauseum, ad infinite* Valentine's Day had been as agonizing as the Cruciatius. Later, when the newness of the grief had worn thin, the lovers' holiday had been merely painful. After the war, after he'd put his memories away for safekeeping, the holiday had merely been one of saccharine sentiment.

After his shower, Snape dressed, leaving off his formal teaching robes and chose one of his favorite books *Of Mice and Men*. He'd read it so many times, he could recite entire pages. The Muggle Studies teacher, Smith, had loaned it to him the year she'd taught at Hogwarts. Although it had been written by a Muggle, and an American at that, Snape had disdainfully opened the first pages of the novella only to find John Steinbeck's character, George Milton, captivated his imagination. While Dumbledore had been no Lennie, and the circumstances had been vastly different, Snape had nonetheless understood the tragedy of George's choices all too well.

Surprisingly, Snape hadn't picked up the book since the war, and while he could still see the excellence of the story, it no longer enthralled him the way it had once. He read the first chapter, but soon put the book down. He wasn't the same man he had been.

Severus Snape had a future. George Milton had none.

Restless, Snape waved his wand, returning the Steinbeck to its place amongst the small collection of Muggle literature. He decided to pay a visit to the Filches. Perhaps he could scare up a good game of chess and one or two of Irma Pince's toasted, buttered crumpets. He was hungry for human food and dinner was a long time to wait.

He met a sour-faced Argus Filch along the fourth floor hallway. The man was wearing his oldest clothes and carrying a bucket and a mop while Mrs. Norris trotted at his heels. "Mr. Filch?"

"Professor Snape. Be glad you're no longer a head of house. Some o' the first year Hufflepuffs have taken it into their heads to open the Chamber of Secrets."

Snape scowled. "It's used as an exhibit at the anniversary celebrations. Don't they know that?"

Filch's expression rivaled the Defense master's. "They wanted to start an Appreciate Harry Potter Club, and thought the chamber would be an appropriate place to hold meetings. Myrtle, bless her black heart, objected." Snape smirked, and Filch said angrily, "It's a mess to clean. All that water."

Snape fell in step with the caretaker as they descended a fixed flight of stairs. "I'm perfectly willing to lend a wand."

"I thought you were meeting Irma at the Three Broomsticks. She got one of those Patronuses this morning."

The two men paused at an intersection of hallways. "And you thought it was mine?" Snape asked.

"Isn't your Patronus a hind?" Filch gestured with one hand, wiggling his fingers atop his head as if they were antlers.

"It used to be a doe." Fleeting, he had a sympathetic pang for his younger, desperately unhappy self. How relieved Snape had been the first time his owl Patronus had emerged from his wand tip.

"Yeah, that's right."

Impatiently, Snape asked, "Well, what message did it bring?"

"You know I can't understand them!"

"I thought perhaps Irma had translated." As a Squib, Filch could see but couldn't understand Patronus messages. Nevertheless, Snape knew exactly whose had visited Irma Pince. What he didn't know was why. Taking the lead, he said, "Let's dispatch that mess in the girls' lavatory and then I'm bound for the Three Broomsticks."

"You don't think sommat's wrong?" Filch turned in Snape's direction, the bucket swinging in his grip.

"No, but I'll stop in to make certain."

Fortunately, Moaning Myrtle remained in her U-bend, sulking, while Snape flicked and swished and cleaned the small flood in quick and efficient fashion. Filch thanked him and returned to his cozy sitting room for a quiet day in front of the fire.

Snape stopped in at his rooms, via the shortest route, and donned his winter robes before descending to the Entrance Hall and ducking into the cloak room. When he burst into the cold February air he used his wand to melt a narrow path to the road leading to the village. A short ten-minute walk found him amidst the lunch crowd at the tavern. He noticed McGonagall and Sprout seated at a table, conversing little, but Snape recognized the pinched expression on the Animagus' face. He smiled affectionately at the stern Scottish witch. When McGonagall gave her loyalty, she could outlast the staunchest Hufflepuff, and he was the lucky recipient of her friendship.

Without removing his outer garments, he slid quietly to the end of the bar, a location which gave him the best vantage point. Martin Edgecombe was seated at a table with two of his year-mates, surreptitiously showing one another their purchases from the newest of the Weasley franchises. The Three W's, as Weasley's Wizard Wheezes was known in Hogsmeade, had opened the previous August and gave Zonko's stiff competition.

Snape perused the crowd; there was no sign of Harry Potter or Irma Pince. He resigned himself to asking the barmaid, a buxom redhead whose age was carefully concealed by a glamour charm. After her ordeal under Draco Malfoy's Imperius curse, Madam Rosmerta no longer served customers directly, although she still ran the tavern which had been in her family for generations.

A waitress entered the public room from the kitchen, levitating a heavily laden tray. Snape's attention honed in on one of the plates which held a serving of Haggis, turnips, and potatoes, one of Hogwarts' librarian's favorite meals. Briefly, he expected Pince to join McGonagall and Sprout even though he knew Pince and Sprout hadn't said more than was civil since his return to teaching. The two women had engaged in a vicious disagreement; Irma Pince would no more sit down to a private meal with Pomona Sprout than he would invite Lucius Malfoy to a Muggle play.

Snape followed the waitress when she ascended the stairs at the back of the tavern. There were four private rooms on the first floor, and hung back until the waitress entered the second room on the left before boldly opening the door to the room directly opposite as if he'd hired it for the day. It was a trick he had learned during his years as a spy. If he acted as if he belonged, then the majority of people assumed he did; rarely was he questioned.

Snape positioned himself next to the door, leaving it open the barest crack, and regretting his lack of an Invisibility Cloak. In lieu of such a coveted magical device, Snape smacked his head with his wand and Disillusioned himself. After a short few minutes, the opposite door opened; he heard Pince's voice and then another woman's reply. He was certain the other woman was Hermione. Of Harry Potter he heard nothing.

He gave the waitress time to have returned to the kitchens before stepping into the hall. The moment he did, he remembered that he was needed back at the school, and in fact, the compulsion was so strong Snape descended three steps before realizing he was under the influence of a spell. Gritting his teeth, he ignored the swell of panic and fear that something was wrong at Hogwarts ... that he had to leave right away ... that he was needed desperately ... elsewhere.

When Snape stopped outside the suspect door, he waved his wand and dismantled the Keep Away spell, privately impressed with its strength. Then, wand in hand, he attempted to listen in, but recognized the signature orange glow of an Imperturbable when he cast a revealing charm on the door. Fortunately, however, the spell had only been cast on the door, and not along the walls; Snape discovered a small hole in the floorboard where some creature, most likely a mouse, had burrowed into the old wood. With a smug smile, he retrieved an Extendable Ear, the 2005 model, from the pocket of his robes, and placing the receiving ear bud in his own ear, he levitated the listening end into the mouse hole.

"Madam Pince..." he heard Harry's voice speaking, "...we know you were hired the same year as Professor Snape, and we know you were at the Shrieking Shack that day. You sent us away."

"As I have already told you, Mr. Potter, I have nothing to say on this subject."

"I heard you," Hermione interjected, her voice pleading. "I heard what you said, and then again in the library when you found me talking to Charlie." From the quality of the following silence, Snape had no trouble imagining the stern expression on Pince's face. "We're not accusing you of harassing Professor Snape." Hermione continued to speak persuasively, and Snape thought she would make a good teacher one day. "On the contrary, we think you might have inadvertently revealed the information to someone else."

"Miss Granger, I would never divulge privileged information."

"Why not?" Harry asked, and his voice turned the two words into a nasty insinuation. "People share secrets all the time."

Again the remarkable disapproving silence filled the air.

From below, in the main room, a burst of noise made it impossible for Snape to hear the conversation. He scowled and stuck a finger in his unencumbered ear, blocking out the noisome interference.

"I'm sure you wouldn't do anything to hurt Professor Snape," Hermione said soothingly, and Snape realized she and her friend were playing a game; both ends against the middle, light Auror, dark Auror. Instinctively, despite the use of the Extendable Ear, Snape leaned closer to the wall, as if proximity could help him hear better. From inside, Hermione prodded. "You've already admitted to knowing his secret."

"I have admitted nothing." Pince was clearly agitated.

"You admitted knowing about the Snape-baiting. You admitted that you knew about the tributes left for him. And you certainly didn't deny knowing Snape *well*," Harry sneered.

"Harry," Hermione admonished her partner. "Madam Pince, we want to help Professor Snape. Don't you want to help him?"

"Of course I want to help him," the librarian's answer was sharp and angry.

"We're concerned you might have revealed the professor's secret. Don't you want to see the prankster caught?"

"Yes, I want to see them caught, but I would never, never betray Severus."

The sounds of a chair scraping against the floor reached Snape's ear, and he gripped his wand. *They already know my secret* he wanted to shout.

"Again I'll ask you, Madam Pince, why not?" Harry's tone was strident, and Snape thought he might have been able to hear it through the walls alone. "What do you know about Severus Snape or these Snape-baiting incidents which you're keeping from us?"

And then Irma Pince did the one thing guaranteed to move Severus Snape into action. She sniffled as if she were crying, and when she replied, her voice sounded thick with tears. "I have never betrayed him."

"Are you saying that you're the one leaving the flowers?" Hermione asked.

"No!"

"How can we believe you if you won't answer our questions?"

Pince snuffled and suppressed a noisy sob.

Snape flashed his wand, destroying the Imperturbable on the room's door in an instant; he threw open the door before cancelling his Disillusionment Spell. Later, he would be impressed by their quick reflexes, because as he burst into the room, Harry and Hermione had leapt to their feet knocking over the table and sending crockery flying wands in hand, and standing directly between the invisible intruder and Madam Pince.

Twin hexes hit Snape's hastily cast *Protego*, but one of them, Hermione's he would also later learn, corkscrewed its way through his shield charm and hit him in the thigh. Snape toppled like Neville Longbottom in the Gryffindor common room his first year at school.

When he came to, Snape heard the quiet murmur of voices in the room. He was lying on some sort of divan, and he could feel the presence of someone seated next to him; from the light fragrance, he surmised it was Hermione. "Bloody fucking hell!" he said, groaning, and then he opened his eyes. "I'm never going to live this down, am I?" he asked, irritably.

"Probably not," Harry said, smirking but not maliciously.

Hermione was seated at the end of the faded green divan, and her lips trembled on the verge of a wide grin. "I suspect your skills are a little rusty, but you were always a bit impetuous."

Snape snorted.

Harry paced the room, miraculously restored to pre-invasion order, and looked searchingly at both Snape and the librarian, who had gone silent and pale the moment Hermione had removed the Disillusionment Spell on their intruder. Harry paused mid-stride, then held a wordless conversation with Hermione. Her eyes widened and she bit her lip, a rarely indulged childhood habit, but then she addressed Madam Pince, "Professor Snape's the reason you have an Incognito file, isn't he?"

"It's comforting to know that you're able to manipulate single integer equations, Miss Granger," Snape said and rose from his recumbent position, only to lean forward and pinch the bridge of his nose. His head hurt.

"It's true though," Harry stated. "You're the reason ... Ah, Merlin on Billiwig Juice!" He turned to face Pince then, his expression carefully neutral, but something about his posture gave away his internal excitement, and he pointed a finger at the librarian. "You're Eileen Prince!"

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, her eyes darting between mother and son. "How stupid of me! Eileen Prince ... Irma Pince. I'm a Prince."

The librarian said nothing, but her hands clutched each other so tightly, her fingers appeared bloodless.

Snape rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking off Hermione's attempts at lending a hand. "That was either a lucky guess, or proximity to Miss Granger has rubbed off on you, Potter." Two strides took him to his mother's side, and he placed a hand on her shoulder. She was shaking, but she looked at him and her expression was one of relief. "You're quite right, Madam Pince is my mother."

"But why keep it a secret?" Harry asked, stepping round the divan to take a seat next to Hermione. "The war's over."

"As an Incognito, she is geas-bound not to speak of it until the Minister releases her from the spell."

"But Irma Pince," Hermione protested. "It's such an obvious anagram."

"So obvious that no one has ever figured it out," Pince said dryly. "I've grown so used to it I doubt I'd ever change it now. Definitely not while I remain at Hogwarts."

"*The Purloined Letter*," Snape said by way of explanation.

"What letter?" Harry asked, reversing Snape's recently upgraded opinion in a single question.

"It's a story by Edgar Allen Poe, Harry," Hermione supplied. "It's terribly clever, and in it, the letter the thing everyone is searching for is hidden in plain sight, but no one ever finds it; well, until the detective figures it out."

"That's quite clever." Harry nodded his head.

"Indeed," Snape said. "My mother's safety was a condition of my agreement with Dumbledore. If I was to act as a double-agent for him, then she was to be kept safe from any reprisals." One of Pince's hands patted her son's long fingers where they rested upon her shoulders. Aside from a swift look at her, he continued to address Harry and

Hermione. "The arrangement remained in place during your formative years because neither Dumbledore nor I were convinced Voldemort was truly vanquished. We had hoped, but didn't believe." He squeezed Pince's shoulder before releasing her. "I would do anything to protect my mother."

Hermione rose to her feet and responded to Snape's last comment. "I understand better than you can imagine."

Snape raised a brow interrogatively.

She spread her hands. "I removed my parents' memories and cast Memory Charms on them before sending them to Australia that last year of the war."

"Good god, how enterprising of you."

She couldn't tell whether he was being facetious or not, but elected to think charitably. "I was terrified," she said, "but with everything happening, I couldn't see any other choice. Aside from Ron and Harry, I didn't have anyone left I could trust with their safety."

"What about Minerva?" Snape asked, unconsciously taking a step closer to her. "Or the Weasleys?"

"After you well, after that night, I chose to rely only on myself." She turned, briefly, to give Harry an apologetic look, but then faced Snape again. "If I hadn't survived, then at least they would have been happy in their new life."

The Defense master stared at her for a long moment, but it was his mother who said, "It is a loving child who will live with such a burden."

Hermione smiled at the older woman.

"What did you do with their memories?" Snape asked.

"I stored them in a Nutella jar in the kitchen pantry of their house." She took a step in his direction, smiling conspiratorially. "It's one of the reasons I'm so familiar with *The Purloined Letter*. It's where I came up with the idea."

Snape laughed.

There was a knock at the door and Harry opened it for the waitress. Once their meals were sorted, Snape settled against the divan with a plate of fish and chips, no mushy peas, thank you, and watched his mother shed her carapace while she chatted with Hermione.

Harry had resumed his pacing. When he stopped, he raised his head and looked directly at Hermione. "Unless it's either Filius or Minerva, the logical choice is Vector."

"Vector?" Snape asked, shocked, a bite of fish falling from his fork. His response automatically discounted either of the other two possibilities. His mother's fingers flew to her mouth as if to cover a curse or a gasp, and her teacup rattled as she placed it hastily in its saucer. "You said it was a romantic fixation."

Harry replied, "I did."

"Then it couldn't be Vector. She's a lesbian."

Hermione grinned at Harry triumphantly. Her success was to be short-lived as Pince spoke. "A lesbian? Whatever gave you that idea, Severus?"

Snape stared at his mother dumbfounded. "She isn't? What about Charity?"

Despite the seriousness of the moment, real amusement momentarily lightened the lines on Pince's face. "They were very good friends. Don't tell me you believed all those rumors?"

As if she herself hadn't come to the same erroneous conclusion, Hermione placated Snape. "It's an understandable mistake. However, if it isn't true, then she becomes a prime suspect." Harry's grim expression drew Hermione from her seat, and she crossed to his side, placing a calming hand on his arm. "The taint of Peter Pettigrew's betrayal has changed the way we look at our investigations, but, Harry, Minerva and Filius took the Veritaserum. We *know* them."

"Severus," Pince's voice was shrill, and it was clear she was frightened, "Minerva's the one who got the Veritaserum that night."

Snape had moved quickly to kneel at his mother's side. "I brewed the potion, and I, too, partook of it. I know it was efficacious. No, Mum, it wasn't either of them."

Harry shrugged before he said, "It's important to explore the possibilities."

Looking down at the kneeling Defense master, Hermione asked, "Does Professor Vector know you're a striga?"

"I bloody well hope not!" Snape surged to his feet. "What reason do you have to consider her a possibility?"

"The blood," Harry stated flatly, leaning one hip against the side of the divan.

"The Muggle blood?"

"Yes." Hermione leaned toward Snape, speaking earnestly. "We've discovered that Hogwarts has an arrangement for a bi-annual shipment of frozen blood. An arrangement put into place the year you, your mother, and Professor Vector started at the school."

"Which is one of the reasons we suspected Madam Pince," Harry added, nodding in the librarian's direction. "She was at the Shrieking Shack the day Hermione and I discovered you in your Animagus form, and she reacted negatively to Hermione's research into owls a few weeks ago. Once we eliminated Martin Edgecombe and my brother-in-law as suspects, and then combined what little we knew with the fact Madam Pince has an Incognito file She became our most likely suspect."

"Weasley's too blunt for such trickery. But Edgecombe?" Snape shook his head. "The boy's an agitator certainly, but I wouldn't have said he was a vandal."

"As I said, he's no longer on the list, although he dislikes Hermione quite intensely."

"I wish he didn't have reason." Hermione shifted uncomfortably, but confined her question to the matter at hand. "What can you tell us about the headmistress?"

Pince replied, "She's cordial, but she's always been quite reserved. I believe Charity was her only confidante, and to my knowledge, they weren't lovers. Although I suppose it's possible."

Snape traced his mouth with a finger, deep in thought. "For all that we've worked together for such a long time, I hardly know her. She can be funny and she's extremely competent."

"You did dance with her," Hermione commented.

"I did nothing of the sort."

"At last year's Valentine's dance." Hermione smirked. "I know because Minerva mentioned it in passing. Speaking etiologically, an obsession can be triggered by a seemingly insignificant gesture. Your dancing with her might have been the catalyst."

"You think she's responsible for the boar, and the rodents, and the flowers?" Stepping closer, Snape looked down his long nose at her.

"She could be," Hermione mused aloud. "As Headmistress she has access to all areas of the castle. I've always wondered why the portraits hadn't seen anything, but " Snape interrupted, "They are forbidden, on pain of burning, to reveal any information about the headmistress or headmaster."

"Part of their confidentiality clause?"

"And it supports your theory." He strode to the small, dark fireplace. "What about the blood?"

"We don't know." Harry shrugged. "Our most recent conjectures have been that you lied to us about how long you've been an Animagus or that Madam Pince discovered the secret and was tormenting you for some unknown reason."

Snape said stiffly, "What flimsy hypotheses."

"Perhaps, but as Harry mentioned before, it's important to examine all possibilities. Now that you've both been removed from the suspects' list..." Hermione nodded genially at Pince, "...we're left with Vector as the only possible link with the frozen blood. Unless, of course, you've been lying to us all along, and it's for you that Hogwarts imports its supply." Snape's face darkened in anger, and Hermione glanced at Harry, who, in turn, was watching Snape intently. "No?" she asked. "I didn't think so. Harry?"

"Agreed. It's not Snape, but that brings us back to Vector."

Hermione gestured with her hands to enhance her point. "If it is Vector that would explain the results of our revealing spells. We only identified staff members. We found no evidence of students in the South Tower at all, and none in your office, Severus even though the spells were performed to long after the fact for accuracy."

"As Headmistress, Vector would have had access to my office, without triggering any of the wards. Additionally, she was in my rooms the day the boar was delivered, so any trace you might have found would have been accounted for." Snape rose and paced in counter-point to Harry. "Her visit was anomalous, and I should have mentioned to you that she'd never been there before, but I was distracted by a three-hundred-pound carcass draped across my threshold."

"She was covering her tracks," Hermione replied. "Is it possible she's a Sanguinarian? If so, it would account for her being able to move the boar without assistance."

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Pince, aghast, her teacup halted between saucer and her mouth. "Who would be mad enough to hire a known parasite to teach small children?"

Snape shot his mother a scathing look. "The same man who hired Remus Lupin to teach those same small children. It wasn't at all beyond his arrogance to hire a Sanguinarian."

For a wonder, Harry didn't leap to Remus Lupin's defense as he would have done as a younger man. As a father, he had found himself questioning a number of Dumbledore's decisions.

Hermione shifted forward, poised on the edge of the divan. "Then I suppose Harry and I know what our next step is. We need to question Professor Vector. Shall we return to Hogwarts with you?"

"The headmistress isn't at the school." Snape stared at the naked grate, his mind spinning at the concept of Vector being his tormentor. "She went to London yesterday. I don't know when she plans to return, but there is a staff meeting Monday morning."

"Then I think we can safely wait until Monday to question her." Harry crossed the room to retrieve his cloak before speaking to the librarian. "I'm sorry to have distressed you, Madam Pince."

"It's understandable, Mr. Potter," she replied. "A little discomfort is negligible if the end result makes my son's life easier."

Snape flushed, and his sallow cheeks filled with color. "Shall we?" he asked his mother pointedly, but she merely patted his arm.

Harry was the first to leave after agreeing upon a time to meet Hermione Monday morning. When he was gone, Snape assisted his mother into her coat. "Why," he asked Hermione, "would she approach me now, and in such a way?"

Hermione answered him as if he had lost the plot. "The message of the flowers makes it quite clear. She's courting you."

Snape snorted.

"It's not inconceivable," she said staunchly, and then looked away when son and mother glanced at her with identically quizzical expressions.

Snape cleared his throat. "The question is not whether it's possible for me to attract that sort of attention, but why now? Why not when I first began teaching? Or when I returned two years ago?"

"If the blood being exchanged with Hogwarts is for her use, then I would suspect her active pursuit occurred after she discovered your dual nature."

"Not before? You mentioned the dance."

"Her interest was probably piqued at that time. Considering the way you move, I'm sure you're an excellent dancer." So involved in developing her theory, Hermione didn't notice Pince's sharpened assessment. "Vector wouldn't have done anything because of her circumstances, but she might have begun to pay close attention to you, which is how she discovered your Animagus form. You began to receive 'gifts' after the dance."

Snape whirled and stalked to the opposite end of the room, muttering to himself. His face was mottled, red and white, as his anger rose.

Pince said quietly, "He did that as a boy. Pace until his temper was under control."

"No wonder he spent so much time patrolling when I was at school, then."

Pince inclined her head, a small affectionate smile curving her thin lips. "It was a very difficult time for him." Hermione touched the older woman's arm in sympathy.

Snape strode up to them, and asked abruptly, "So you believe she's a Sanguinarian?"

"I think it's a real possibility given the situation and our knowledge of Albus Dumbledore's unpredictable nature. It wasn't beyond him to flout rules which hindered his purposes, nor to question the validity of his own actions." Condemnation colored her tone. "If it suited his goal, then what did the safety of three or four hundred children matter?"

He held Hermione's cloak for her, draping it about her shoulders. "I had no idea your opinion of the late headmaster was so ... caustic."

Hermione merely shrugged. "I'm surprised yours isn't."

"We can engage in Dumbledore bashing another time." Snape then retrieved his own cloak, the heavy material fanned outward as he spun it around his own shoulders. "For now, I think we've a working hypothesis, and we should return to the castle. Poor Argus has been left on his own long enough. He'll begin to pine."

Pince snorted, but passed through the door her son held open. "He's probably in our quarters, curled up in front of the fire with that cat of his, listening to the wizarding wireless."

"I thought he might be teaching her to play chess as abysmally as he's played this last year."

"He's been more tired than usual, Severus. This year's students are worse than the last."

Hermione wisely said nothing, but silently added Hogwarts' caretaker to the list of those who knew Snape's secrets, rounding out the five he'd admitted to quite neatly. It would explain why Filch had been so friendly to Snape all these years; Filch was his step-father.

The three descended into the busy main room, while Hermione chatted amiably about Australia and the year she'd spent there with her parents just after the war. The pub was crowded with students taking a break from the cold, staff members taking a break from herding students, and locals enjoying a pint or a late lunch.

Hermione spotted McGonagall, and so she bid mother and son a cordial farewell and crossed to chat with her friend. The post-war years had done much to render Hermione immune from her fame, but she heard her name spoken several times as she wound her way through the crowd, and she greeted several people she recognized as she went.

Regrettably, McGonagall was preparing to take her turn policing the main village, but she invited her young friend to join her. They stepped into the lane outside the Three Broomsticks, and the icy air proved how inadequate Hermione's choice of cloak was for protecting her against the cold.

"You are still considering taking the position, aren't you?" McGonagall asked as they walked past Honeydukes. Hermione noticed the shop was as popular as when she'd been a student.

"Once we solve this case, I plan to accept it if the position is offered."

"I was unaware you'd made a decision." McGonagall's brow creased in thought. "The headmistress mentioned you might no longer be interested."

Her shoes crunching through the dirty streets accompanied Hermione's reply. "I can't imagine where she got that impression."

"She also mentioned the Board of Directors might not approve your appointment."

Hermione stopped in the street, and McGonagall stopped with her. A small cluster of students parted around them, like so many lemmings around a boulder in their path to the sea. "As far as I know," Hermione said, "and Kingsley assured me of this himself, the job's mine if I want it."

McGonagall smiled. "If that's the case, I'll assume you'll be in residence in the autumn."

Hermione laughed. "You're such a Gryffindor, Minerva."

"Thank you, Hermione." McGonagall preened, and then joined her former student in laughter.

The two women toured the village for the next fifteen minutes, snickering at the reactions of students when they saw McGonagall coming. By then, however, Hermione was chilled to the bone. "Next time I'll wear my heavier cloak, although it was warm enough earlier. I've grown soft living in London."

"There's a trick my mother taught me when I was a young girl," McGonagall said primly, dusting an errant snowflake from the sleeve of her robe. "She had a Muggle-born friend who brought something called thermal underwear with her to the castle."

Hermione grinned. "Brilliant. I never even considered it."

"Teaching robes tend to be drafty in the winter, but I've always been quite comfortable," the older witch said.

"I know who I'll be asking for advice next winter. In the meantime, I'm headed back to my flat for a hot bath and some cocoa."

Their goodbyes were brief and affectionate, and within scant minutes Hermione had Disapparated.

Once again, Hermione didn't end up taking a bath when she returned to her flat. Her intentions were to wallow in the hot water, but her earlier Arithmantic projections were spread across her coffee table, and her brain itched to write down her notes from the surprising day. She had already factored Vector's name into several of her equations, but the Pince variable had always skewed her results. On paper, Pince had been the more logical candidate.

Instead of heading into her bathroom, Hermione entered her bedroom and changed her clothes. She ignored her reflection in the cheval mirror standing in the corner, and dropped her dirty clothes into the decorative basket next to her chest of drawers. Then she slipped her legs into a pair of Ron's cast-off track pants which were too long for her, but warm and comfortable, pulled on a pair of thick woolly socks, and then donned a long-sleeved cotton shirt before she slid her arms into her one and only Molly-made cardigan, knitted in a surprisingly becoming pale green yarn.

Five minutes later, Hermione had magically heated water and poured it on top of a pre-packaged mound of cocoa in her mug she was still useless at cooking anything more than survival food and was ensconced on her sofa, quill, ink, and fresh parchment ready to commit her thoughts into a semblance of order.

A knock at her door pulled her from her comfortable seat, and a quick glance at the Foe-glass in her entrance showed Septima Vector standing on the other side of her door.

"Fuck!" Hermione swore fervently and quietly, then frantically considered whether to open the door or not.

"Miss Granger?" Vector called through the door, accompanied by another spate of knocking. "Are you home? Minerva thought you should be home by now."

Deciding the risk was worth it after all she didn't know the headmistress was Snape's stalker Hermione called, "Just a minute. I'm not dressed."

Hastily she levitated her notes into the kitchen and onto her worktop, and then because she had lived through too much to be a complete fool, Hermione sent a Patronus to Harry.

"Coming!" She slid through the entrance and opened the door. "Professor Vector, what an unexpected pleasure. I hadn't realized you knew where I lived."

"I saw Minerva on my way back to school, and she gave me your address."

It seemed out of character for McGonagall to volunteer such information, and Hermione would have asked about it later. "Of course. Come in, please."

The elder witch entered, never noticing the Foe-glass Hermione had blocked with her body, and glided gracefully through the entry and into the flat proper. She was, as usual, dressed with understated elegance, her hair folded and tucked into a crown of shining black atop her head. "This is charming, Hermione."

"Thank you. I'm afraid you've caught me at a bit of a loss, Prof...er Seven."

"Did you have plans tonight? I was under the impression you were in for the evening."

Hermione pointed to her mug of steaming cocoa. "My only plans were that, a good book, and a hot bath. I hadn't remembered how cold Hogsmeade could be."

Vector smiled in amusement. "Then you don't mind that I've come without notice?"

"Curious, perhaps, but that's not to say you aren't welcome."

"I saw the Minister today and he endorsed your appointment as Hogwarts' Arithmancy Professor."

"Did he?" Hermione smiled, and gestured for her guest to have a seat.

"Yes," Vector said as she looked about her with interest, her eyes glancing into the kitchen and lighting on the worktop for a brief moment, before she chose the squashy chair angled toward the sofa, the one with its back to the wall of bookcases.

Hermione perched on the edge of her sofa. "Have you changed your mind about offering me the position?"

Vector smoothed the skirt of her forest green robes. "I'd like to be honest with you."

"By all means." Hermione had never considered that the headmistress might dislike her, but if Vector was in her Foe-glass, then dislike was too pale a description. It was difficult to know if Vector's enmity was a result of the Snape situation or something else. While she waited for Vector's response, she palmed the butt of her wand where it was tucked between the sleeve of her cardigan and shirt.

"I have considered whether you'd be happy at Hogwarts. You would be the youngest member of the staff. And aside from the other children, there would be no one for you to interact with."

Ignoring the insult, Hermione answered cordially enough. "I already have friends there, and I would be a mere Apparition away from anyone else. I'm fascinated by the subject, and I have an ulterior motive as well."

Vector's spine, already straight, seemed to grow rigid. "Yes?"

"There isn't another Muggle-born on staff." Hermione's instincts prickled and she carefully shifted her feet for better leverage. "It occurred to me that I might be a role model."

"I remember your misguided efforts with S.P.E.W."

Recognizing Vector's comment as a gambit, Hermione bit her tongue on a reflexive retort and gave a more measured response. "If my introduction to wizarding culture had been less erratic, I suppose I might not have proceeded as I did. I can assure you, Headmistress, I don't have plans to pass out badges promoting equality for Muggle-borns."

"How reassuring," Vector replied, and her eyes glanced back toward the kitchen. "It occurs to me that your original impetus for exploring other career opportunities has been assuaged. Ron Weasley was recently quoted in *The Daily Prophet* regarding his interest in expanding the family business onto the continent. I see no further impediment to your remaining at the Ministry."

"Other than my own inclinations, you're quite correct. But, since I've spent some time at the castle recently, I'm leaning in that direction more and more."

"Is there some specific reason you're considering it over your other options?"

Vector's look was almost invasive, but there had been nothing in her file to suggest she was a Legilimens. Still, Hermione avoided looking directly at her, focusing instead on the woman's delicate earrings.

It was possible to read too much into Vector's obvious attempt at dissuading her from accepting the teaching position, which might account for her appearance in the Foe-glass. Distinguishing malicious intent was a knife-edged difficulty many Aurors faced, one of the reasons so many were paranoid. Mad-Eye Moody had once said, *It's not paranoia if they really do want to kill you*. But as a precaution, Hermione angled her forearm across her lap, pointing her wand directly at Hogwarts' headmistress, before answering her question. "Other than looking for a position in which I might make a meaningful contribution to our world, none."

Vector's eyes flicked back to the kitchen once again. "I would imagine your position at the Aurory would give you ample opportunity. The Minister gave me to understand he would support whatever decision you made."

"Kingsley is very good."

"Kingsley?" Vector's attention refocused on Hermione.

"We were in the Order of the Phoenix together. His step-son is Harry's godson, and we've all been friends for a long time."

"It had slipped my mind. Forgive me."

"Quite all right." As the woman looked back into the kitchen, Hermione's unease increased. *Hurry up, Harry!* She rose to her feet, remembering the second step in hostile interrogation: dampen the tension with mundane diversions. "I'm so sorry. I haven't offered you any refreshment. I do have things other than cocoa in the house."

Vector rose to her feet as well, her eyes never leaving a spot in the kitchen. "So I see. What are you doing with a vial of blood in your kitchen, Miss Granger?"

Every swear word Hermione knew vied for vocalization as she sought an appropriate response. "It's for work."

Regrettably, it was the wrong thing to say.

She knew it as soon as the words left her lips, and she shifted her wand further into her palm.

"For work?" Vector's voice was sharp.

Still maintaining the fallacy of a social conversation, Hermione said, "I'm attempting to combine Muggle science with wizarding forensic analysis, and I practice here at home."

"Then having two of my vials in your possession has nothing to do with your Special Assignment for the Minister of Magic?"

It took all of Hermione's training to remain superficially calm. "You have no idea how difficult it has been to ascertain the fact that they belong to you, Professor."

The second Hermione made the decision to Stupefy her uninvited guest, Vector acted. Faster than one could draw breath, Vector was suddenly there, holding Hermione's arms in place, in a grip strong enough to cut off the blood flow to her hands.

The young Auror had never seen anyone or anything move that fast. Vector's expression was as unyielding as a statue. "I hadn't intended for anyone other than Severus Snape to know."

"Headmistress," Hermione managed to say soothingly, "I'm sure you know Professor Snape is a very private man."

Vector's eyes narrowed then; they were black and pitiless, and Hermione wondered how she had never noticed before. She stifled a shudder and braced her inadequate Occlumency shields for all her practice, she wasn't very good but she was unable to drag her eyes away from her captor's. Hermione felt the brush of a preying, alien mind, and when Vector spoke, her voice carried the chill of dead things. "I know Severus Snape in ways you cannot imagine, witchling. We share a heritage you know nothing about."

Hermione tried to blink, to focus her defenses, but her thoughts were sluggish, disconnected, and her fingers were numb from blood-constriction. It was as if she'd been Imperio'd; it took considerable effort for her to speak, each word took supreme effort. "He doesn't ... like ... the harassment. There ... are ... laws which ... forbid ... it."

Vector laughed, and it was the most unpleasant sound Hermione had heard since she had writhed at Bellatrix Lestrange's feet. "Severus would never pursue that course of action. He would lose his position if there was any hint of scandal, and with his reputation, it is by no means certain that he would find a position anywhere else."

"My god," Hermione gritted out, despite the overwhelming urge to submit to the other woman's will. "You've ... planned ... this for ... a long ... time."

"You, witchling, aren't the only one to find Severus Snape attractive, but he is not for the likes of *you*." Her dark eyes bore into Hermione's, mesmerizing the younger woman as if Vector were a cobra fascinating its terrified prey. "It is time to leave now. I am not reckless enough to think you invited me into your home without taking precautions."

Hermione forced the words through unwilling lips. "All you ... have to do ... is leave ... the professor ... alone. We ... won't ... reveal ... your secret."

"He is my chosen mate!" Vector moved, carefully skirting the furniture while never losing eye contact with her victim. She released Hermione's arms then, and her mouth formed into a feral smile.

At that moment Hermione saw her fangs.

"Come!" Vector commanded.

Hermione's muscles obeyed the order even as she fought the compulsion. Sweat broke out on her brow and trickled down her spine as she tried to resist Vector's control. Able to throw off the Imperius Curse since she was eighteen, Hermione had never fully appreciated the power of a Sanguinarian's enticement before. Deep in the recesses of her mind, however, she thought, *do not consider me a fool either*, and as she followed her captor, Hermione managed to shake her wand from her sleeve.

Vector's reflection filled the entire Foe-glass, but neither woman noticed, one because she was controlling her victim, the other because she was resisting with every erg of her own power.

The *CRACK* of their dual Apparition was loud enough to echo in Hermione's bathroom.

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Chapter Ten

Chapter 11 of 12

In which Severus Snape and Harry Potter act like heroes.

Chapter Ten: In which Severus Snape and Harry Potter act like heroes.

The last straggling students had returned to Hogwarts under Mr. Filch's and Mrs. Norris' watchful eyes. Yet the caretaker and his familiar waited on the broad steps to the school's entrance as Minerva McGonagall had not yet returned. Night advanced swiftly in February, and the temperature had dropped, winter's hand clenching the highlands of Scotland tightly within its fist.

Filch peered into the gloaming, and his scowl became more pronounced. Then he nodded to his cat. "Best go get Professor Snape, my pretty. He'll be annoyed if she returns and I've disturbed him without reason, but I reckon he'd be a sight more angry if she was hurt and we hadn't bothered him."

His familiar stropped her tail against his legs as she trotted into the castle and the nearest set of stairs.

Filch's anxiety had risen several notches by the time Mrs. Norris returned with Snape in tow.

"What is the trouble, Mr. Filch?"

"Minerva," the caretaker said succinctly. "She hasn't come back from Hogsmeade."

Snape didn't bother with useless questions such as whether all the students were accounted for, because Filch would have already checked before summoning him. "Inform Flitwick," he said, and then waved the wand he'd been holding to summon his heavy cloak, even as he hurried down the steps and onto the gravel-lined path demarked by dirty snow banked along its edge.

He heard his cloak whooshing through the air before it arrived, and he draped its comforting thickness around his shoulders as he lengthened his stride, uneasiness speeding his progress. It had been three or four years since the last retaliatory attack against a member of the Order of the Phoenix for its overthrow of Lord Voldemort's short reign. It was possible, however unlikely, that McGonagall had been waylaid by someone with revenge on their mind.

"*Lumen Agito*," he muttered, snapping his wrist. A ball of yellow flame shot from the end of his wand and sped several lengths ahead of him, lighting his way.

When he reached the site of Hagrid's cottage, his standard memory of fleeing Hogwarts the night he'd killed Dumbledore was offset by his more recent memory of bantering with Hermione Granger, yet both of those were overridden by his concern for McGonagall. If she had been abducted his speed would be of no help, but if some other trouble had befallen her, then speed was of the essence.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" The golden ball of flame was snuffed.

Snape worked his way to the back of the hut, where he was safely obscured from the path, and then he slipped his wand into his sleeve. Concentrating as the witch he sought had so patiently taught him during those long months of seclusion eight years before, Snape initiated his transformation to his alter ego. His skin itched as feathers

sprouted and his eyesight improved dramatically.

The three minutes he lost were more than negated by his Animagus' mobility and speed. He hopped clear of the hut's awning and leaped upward, the downstroke of his wings powerful and effective. With two beats he had risen above the cottage, and in another moment, Snape had caught an updraft to speed his ascent.

He reached the gates within seconds, but there was no sign of Minerva McGonagall and he knew his enhanced eyesight hadn't missed her.

She was not to be found along the road to the village either, and when Snape circled The Three Broomsticks his heart pounded with anxiety. He took a different route on his return to the castle, passing over the Shrieking Shack for the first time since his return to Scotland. Fate was a quixotic bitch, he thought, when he noticed the figure of a witch slumped against the fence leading to the dilapidated building.

He swooped, transfiguring even as he landed so that he hit the ground running on human legs rather than avian claws. "Minerva!" he barked.

A slender hand patted her hair in place, and she turned toward Snape, her expression difficult to discern. "Severus?" she asked in a small voice.

"What has happened?" He reached her side, alarmed. She was trembling and practically blue with cold. "Are you injured?"

"I'm I'm not certain exactly." She took a step toward him and stumbled, but Snape caught her before she could fall. Gritting his teeth against the cold, he shed his heavy winter cloak and wrapped it about her shoulders. Then he pulled his wand.

"*Confringo!*" he shouted, and the gate shattered.

Snape led McGonagall to the building, kicking through the snow and keeping her on her feet. He would far rather appear naked in the Great Hall than enter the Shrieking Shack, but his friend needed immediate help. He didn't bother with *Alohomora*, nonverbally blasting the door off its hinges, as he assisted her up the steps and into the place of nightmare.

Fortunately, the shack had been cleaned in the intervening years, but crossing its threshold caused Snape's stomach to clench and he swallowed convulsively.

"Why are we here, Severus?" McGonagall sounded more like herself, but it was clear that she had been Confunded in some way.

"I need to know what has happened to you, Minerva, and you were on the verge of hypothermia."

Spotting the crate he had once hidden behind, Snape waved his wand and Summoned it to his side. He helped McGonagall to sit, and then, cast a simple diagnostic spell over her to determine whether she was injured in any other way.

While she tried to gather her scattered wits, he *Accio'd* the splintered wood from the door, and then laid it on the bare stone in the large, but unused fireplace. Murmuring, "*Incendio!*" he ignited the wood, feeding it magically, until it burned hot.

Coaxing McGonagall closer, he then held out his hands to warm himself. His fingers were chilled to the bone.

"It's the oddest thing," she said, hesitantly, as if grasping at a distant strand of memory. "Septima Vector met me outside Scrivenshaft's and then she brought me here."

"She brought you here?" he asked sharply.

McGonagall blinked. "Give me a moment, Severus. If I hadn't learned better, I would say she hit me with an Imperius, but I can fight that."

"Bugger!" he swore. Bits and pieces of information melded in the cauldron of his mind, transmuting into certainty. "She *fascinated* you."

"Sorry?" Firelight reflected off the square lenses of her glasses, and Snape couldn't see her eyes behind them, but he heard the sharpening of her acuity.

"She's my stalker."

"Fuck me!" McGonagall swore reverently. Under other circumstances Snape would have twitted her about it.

"And you've just provided the final piece of evidence to confirm that she is also a Sanguinarian, possibly a common, or garden variety, vampire."

McGonagall's eyes grew wide, and her hands began to shake again.

"What did she want, Minerva?" Snape could see her struggle against the magical compulsion which had been laid upon her. "Will you permit me to look?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered, squaring her chin and opening her eyes wide.

In spite of the situation, Snape smiled at her faith in him, and then with a twitch of his wand, he slipped into her mind. After three minutes, he whispered, "Hermione."

"What?" McGonagall asked, sounding more like herself than at any time since he had found her. "What did you see?"

He added more wood to the fire, and carefully did not allow his trepidation to leach into his tone. "You gave Vector Hermione Granger's address."

Her brow furrowed. "But why would she coerce the information from me?"

"Would you have told her otherwise?"

With each passing second, as McGonagall's mind cast off the residual effects of the *fascination*, her expression cleared from her befuddled state. "She did ask, and I offered to accompany her to London as soon as all the students were safely back at school."

He shook his head. "Then why didn't she wait for you?"

"I haven't the faintest. I remember telling her how pleased I am that Hermione's joining the staff next year, and..."

Snape's spine snapped to rigid attention, and he demanded, "Repeat that!"

"I'm pleased Hermione will be teaching" McGonagall trailed off, her fingers covering her mouth in distress. "Great Merlin! It's just as Harry said. Severus, we must warn Hermione."

He gritted his teeth. "Indeed. Do you still have your wand?"

"Yes," she responded automatically, patting her robes, "No! That Pettigrewish bitch took it! I'll claw her eyes out!" McGonagall was so angry she practically spat the words from her mouth like a hissing cat.

"We haven't time for this," he snarled. "Can you tell me when Vector left?"

"I hurried Edgecombe, Dawlish and their little clique she's a rather nasty sort, isn't she? out of Honeydukes, and they were the last. I made a final circuit of the shops and

that's when I met Vector. It was almost completely dark you don't think she intends to hurt Hermione, do you?"

"Each escalation of *tributes* has occurred after I've been seen in Hermione's company."

McGonagall leapt to her feet. "What are we waiting for, man? Let us away ..."

Snape didn't move from in front of the fire, but his expression was one his enemies had learned to fear. "You have no wand."

"Damn her to the Veil!" she snapped. "Then you go and I'll summon help." She grabbed his arm suddenly. "Severus, we can't call the Aurors. You could lose your position."

He stalked to the doorway. "Bugger the job!"

Handing him his winter cloak, Minerva hurried back into the large room, saying over her shoulder, "I'll send Filius to you, and we'll send a Patronus to Potter."

"How will you get back?"

Pointing to the hole in the wall near the floor, she said, "This way is quickest." Snape shuddered, remembering the tunnel was where the trio of former students had watched Nagini attack him. "Isn't it blocked?"

"Not to an Animagus. Now go, Severus, and I'll send you back-up."

"I don't know where she lives." He draped the heavy wool around his shoulders as McGonagall gave him the information he needed.

Before Snape could fasten his cloak's clasp, she transformed into her cat self. "Be careful," he warned as she bounded into the crawl space. Then he doused the flames before storming from the house, sprinting through the Anti-Apparition shield placed there by Magical Law Enforcement after the final battle.

CRACK!

He landed in a small entrance hall, welcomed by a cry of, "Hermione?" which preceded the form of Harry Potter, grim expression and drawn wand, into Snape's line of sight.

"Snape?" Harry spluttered.

"She's not here?" He spared no time for inanities.

"No." The Auror ran his hand through his shaggy hair anxiously. "I got a Patronus."

"Thank you, Minerva," Snape said fervently.

"Minerva? No. Hermione sent one telling me Vector was at the door. I had James with me at Fortescue's and I couldn't just bring a toddler into I've only just arrived."

Harry strode into the cozy lounge, and Snape took in his surroundings at a glance: tall bookcases against pale blue walls, a comfortable sofa, and worn leather chair. His eyes lit on the mug of cocoa set on the otherwise empty coffee table. Despite his worry, he could easily imagine Hermione sitting there composing her nightly messages to him.

"Doesn't she do her work here?" he asked abruptly.

Harry halted in the doorway leading to the kitchen and spun on his heel. Unerringly, his eyes focused on Hermione's denuded table. "I won't ask how you know that, but this is not good." The muscles in his jaw bunched and flexed; his intense gaze shifted to Snape. "How did you know she was in trouble?"

Snape stood next to the coffee table, his answer crisp and impatient. "Vector waylaid Minerva in Hogsmeade and coerced her into giving up Hermione's address."

"Bugger!" Harry squared his shoulders. "We need to know where we stand, and how much Vector knows. Hermione's makeshift lab is in the kitchen. I'll look there, but you look in here for any sign of her notes." He waved his hand at the bookshelves while he entered the kitchen. "The edges of the scrolls are tinted dark green in your honor."

Briefly, Snape stared after The Boy Who Lived Twice. This was the third time Snape had seen the younger man shed his public persona in favor of the competent Auror. It was more impressive than he would've liked to admit. There was, however, no time to dawdle over epiphanies, no matter how small, and Snape moved around the coffee table, dipping his index finger in Hermione's abandoned mug. The cocoa was cool, but not cold, and from his many years of brewing potions, taking into account the thickness of the receptacle, and the likelihood that she preferred to drink it hot but not scalding, Snape estimated that no more than twenty minutes had passed since she'd put it down.

"Her work is here, Professor," Harry called from the kitchen.

Snape took a step before inadvertently kicking something with the toe of his boot. The slender wood made no noise until it clattered on the hardwood floor beyond the thick rug. Snape scooped it up with a free hand. "Potter!" he shouted. "She's unarmed!"

"What?" Harry re-entered the lounge fast. Bottle green eyes lit on the vinewood wand in Snape's hands, and they glittered with triumph. "That's my swot," he cooed.

"Pardon?"

"Turn it around," Harry commanded.

To his own surprise, Snape complied instantly.

Harry pointed to the base of the handle, where a slender band of silver appeared to be embedded in the wand itself. Harry tapped the precious metal with the tip of his wand; instantly the silver emitted a shiny glow which pulsed rhythmically. "Tracing Charm. It's a prototype, but Hermione's on very good terms with several Unspeakables. This tracks her physiological responses; as you can see by the pulses, her heartbeat is quite fast at the moment. Fear but no outright panic. With due precautions, we can initiate the link between wand and witch, and be at her side in a moment."

"Disillusionment?" Snape asked.

"Invisibility."

"Unless you know a spell I don't, Potter."

"My cloak, Snape. It's infallible, except when the sun's at your back." When Snape snorted, Harry narrowed his eyes. "It isn't common knowledge, outside Dumbledore, Hermione and Ron, but my cloak..." he pulled it from the pocket of his trousers, just as he had all those years ago when he and Hermione had returned to the Shack to retrieve their dead professor, "...is one of the three Deathly Hallows, and it's foolproof."

Snape stared at the shimmering, magical cloth. "Yet another piece of information which could have proven useful had Dumbledore shared it."

Harry snorted. "Don't get me started."

Despite the circumstances, a smile tugged at the corners of Snape's mouth. "I suspect we might have a decent conversation one of these days, Potter."

"Agreed." Harry balanced his weight onto the balls of his feet. "Let's go."

"One moment," Snape said. "If we're correct, if, as I believe, Vector *fascinated* Minerva and has abducted Hermione, then Vector's our Sanguinarian, and she'll be able to smell our presence." He tapped Harry on the tip of the nose with his ebony wand and said, "*Mascherare*," before casting the same spell on himself. "It will mask our scent for a time."

"Good." Harry stepped close to Snape and covered them both with his cloak. "I'll lead the Side-Along if you don't mind. You arrived like a herd of erumpents."

"I was in a hurry."

Harry's eyes under the Invisibility Cloak were hard to distinguish, and Snape shifted uncomfortably the younger man's scrutiny.

"She cares about you, too," Harry said before returning to the point at hand. "We've developed a silent Apparition, so I can guarantee to land us in her proximity without notice, however, if you're willing to risk it"

"No. You lead," Snape said. "Christ! I never thought I'd say that."

Harry snorted. "Me, either, and I don't promise not to remind you of that fact. Ready?"

"Five minutes ago, Potter. Just do it."

As good as his word, Harry and Snape Disapparated without a sound, not even the swish of invisible fabric as it fluttered in the displaced air.

Fortunately for them, they landed in deep, dry sand rather than on the rocky shoreline dimly illuminated by light reflecting off the nearby body of water. The sound of surf and the tang of salt air confirmed that it was the sea rather than a large lake, but Snape had no idea where they were. When it started to rain, he ground his teeth.

Next to him, Harry had gone rigid.

A short distance away, at the edge of the tide line, Septima Vector kicked her victim in the ribs. Hermione, stunned, lay face up on the sand. Even from this distance the men could tell her eyes were open, the whites shone in the moonlit dark, but neither Snape nor Harry could tell if she was cognizant of her surroundings.

"Months of work, Miss Granger," Vector ranted. Her usually cultured voice was harsh with passion and carried easily to the two men. "Months of carefully calculated courtship ruined by you. I have waited a long time to find a mate. Centuries to be precise, and you will not be allowed to interfere any longer." She drew a long wand and circled Hermione, kicking her viciously in the thigh. "You're not even worth biting."

When moonlight shone on the polished wand in her hand, Snape grunted. Then he hissed into Harry's ear, "It's not hers. She stole Minerva's."

To Snape's gratified surprise, Harry didn't waste a second grandstanding. He threw off the cloak, and shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" as he ran toward Vector.

Concurrently, Snape bellowed, "*Stupefy!*"

Vector's reflexes were remarkable. Return hexfire sheared perilously close to the wizard's heads before harmlessly veering out over the ocean as McGonagall's wand flew straight into an oncoming wave and the headmistress of Hogwarts toppled face down onto the sand.

The wizards covered the distance separating them from Vector and Hermione rapidly. With unspoken accord, Harry veered off to check Vector's incapacity and Snape ran to Hermione. Snape knelt at her side, pulling her torso into his arms and holding her tightly, unable to explain or deny his need to do so.

Hermione coughed, pressing against her side with one hand, and clutching at his robes with the other. Her breath was ragged with pain and relief, and when he loosened his grip on her, she stared deeply into his eyes. Then Snape brushed her brow with his lips, and she found her voice. "Severus?" she asked in an identical tone to the one he'd heard not an hour before from Minerva McGonagall.

"Vector abducted you," he replied, laying her back on the sandy beach, but leaning over her to keep some of the rain off her face. "Be still, Hermione."

"It's cold," she complained, and for the second time that night, Snape removed his cloak to cover a recovering woman. Gently, he tucked the wool around Hermione's shoulders. She stared at his hands while her mind struggled to slice through the layers of cotton wool Vector had wrapped around it.

"Fuck!" They heard Harry shout followed by an unearthly screech.

Snape leapt to his feet, pointing his wand in the direction of the altercation; in the poor light it was only clear that one participant had been subdued. Snape sprinted in their direction, and at that moment, moonlight shone through the downpour, shining off Vector's fangs. It was she who had prevailed.

Hermione screamed, "Harry!"

In triumph, the strigoi bent her head to rend her prey.

Snape jabbed and hooked his wand, and Vector's rage could be heard above the pounding surf as she was hoisted into the air as a result of the spell created by a lovelorn sixteen-year old. She screamed with impotent fury, but her words were muffled by the heavy robes hanging around her face.

Harry regained his feet by the time Snape reached him, one hand clutching his neck.

"Are you bit?" Snape never took his eyes from Vector's suspended form. He knew she could defeat his spell in short order, and he whipped his wand, silently casting *Incarcerous!* as he had done long ago when he'd thought Sirius Black was a mass murderer.

"Just a scratch," Harry replied, wiping the blood from his throat, and ignoring the trickle which continued to leak from the small cut Vector had made with her fangs. "Bugger, but she's strong. The bitch was waiting for me!" He pulled Hermione's wand from his pocket, and Summoned his own from the nearby sand. It had been buried during the scuffle. When he had his own wand in hand, Harry cast three sets of Auror-strength restraints on the woman hanging upside down. "I realize it's rude to keep her in such a state." Harry glanced apologetically at Snape, remembering another time.

"You're counting on her clothing to slow her down if she breaks through the restraints." Remarkably, Snape had no empathy for Vector's plight, or the fact her undergarments were on display.

Harry nodded, and together the two men lowered Hogwarts' headmistress to the sand. Then, Harry petrified her again and Snape reinforced the bindings before he stunned her for good measure.

"The only other vampire I've ever encountered was Sanguini," Harry said. "I had no idea they were so strong."

"They're inhuman," Snape said drolly, and Harry snorted.

"Harry?" Hermione called. "Severus?" She had managed to cover half the distance to them.

"I'll be right there, 'Mione!" Harry called, checking Vector's bindings.

Snape stalked to where Hermione lay in the wet sand, her hair plastered to her head and her clothes a wet, sandy mess. She had lost his cloak in her struggle to reach them. "I thought I told you to be still?" His words might have been harsh, but the delivery was anything but.

Hermione panted, but she managed to speak. "I wanted to help."

He dropped to one knee, and brushed the sand from her face. "If you will cooperate, I'll make you fresh chocolate when we return to your home."

"All right," she said and remained still while he cast several diagnostic charms over her, but her eyes blinked rapidly as if doing so would help her regain her mental acuity. "Are you all right?" she asked. "Was Harry hurt?"

In the background, they heard Harry shout, "*Accio* Minerva's wand!"

"He has a scratch, but Vector didn't harm him otherwise." Snape's long fingers followed the fault lines of the diagnostic spell he had cast, smoothing over Hermione's soaking wet cardigan to ascertain the location of her wounds. "I am quite well, and you are the most serious casualty. You have two broken ribs on this side," he said, "and three cracked on the other. It's fortunate your lungs weren't punctured. It was foolish for you to move."

"But ..." Her hand wrapped around his wrist.

His voice deepened. "And it was sheer folly for me to have lifted you before."

"But I liked it," she replied, and then, "It hurts to breathe."

"Disapparation will be painful, but if you'll permit me, I'll take you to St. Mungo's."

"No, you can't!" Hermione cried out and gasped in pain; she pressed a hand against her side and whimpered.

Harry slid on his knees next to her, his distress painfully evident. "If we go to St. Mungo's, the information will be public knowledge."

Snape raised his head and met Harry's look directly. "While I appreciate your concern on my behalf, Miss Granger's injuries must be mended. You take her, Potter, and I'll deliver Vector to the Ministry."

"No!" Hermione tightened her grip on Snape. Her face was stark white and her eyes were huge, but she was lucid. "Not St. Mungo's."

"You're injured," he argued.

"Take me home," Hermione said, taking sips of breath in order not to disturb her ribs, "and call Molly. She can patch me up and we can decide what to do with Vector then."

"No."

Harry cocked his head at Snape's peremptory manner, but said, "Pomfrey then."

Snape glowered, but his hands were gentle as he settled his nonverbally summoned cloak around Hermione once more. "You will have to ask her," he said, looking at Harry. "She does not speak to me."

"Stupid cow!" Hermione's disparagement ended on a pained sigh, but then she inhaled shallowly. "I can always go to a Muggle hospital "

"Or I can sneak into Hogwarts' infirmary and steal some Skele-gro," Harry affably suggested.

"Feeling nostalgic, are you, Potter?"

Harry chuckled. "Relieved, actually. Considering the potential for violence and bloodshed, we have been extraordinarily lucky."

"About time," Hermione said, and then lapsed into silence; talking took too much of her air supply.

Harry said, "Let's get moving. I'm soaking wet, Hermione's drenched and needs to get dry and patched up, and we have to decide what to do about Vector."

"Where are we going?" Snape asked.

"Hermione's flat," Harry replied decisively. "I'll bring Vector and then I'll go to Hogwarts and either fetch Pomfrey or the Skele-gro. I'm sure Hermione has a book or two with medical treatments if we need to resort to healing her ourselves. It won't be the first time."

Hermione smiled wanly and began to shiver, which caused her ribs to hurt. When she moaned, Snape whispered a spell over her, "*Nox*," and she instantly fell asleep.

"What the hell?" Harry gripped Snape's wand arm.

"I have to move her, Potter! Would you rather she pass out from the pain or already be unaware when I cause her agony?"

"Oh, right. Go to it then. I'll bring Vector." He patted Hermione's arm before he got to his feet and strode to the incarcerated Sanguinarian's side, kicking sand in his wake. "*Petrificus Totalus! Mobilicorpus!*"

Within two minutes, the beach was deserted.

When they arrived at Hermione's flat, things were in an uproar. Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick, and Ron Weasley were arguing heatedly over what they should do next, and every few seconds, Flitwick would stretch and release his braces, adding a loud *SNAP!* to the cacophony. The noise was so loud none of the three heard Snape's arrival. Within seconds, however, he had been spotted and the others fell silent for the length of one, long indrawn breath.

"Oh, thank Circe!" McGonagall cried out.

Her exclamation was drowned out by Ron's fearful cry. "Hermione!" It had taken him a second to recognize that it was Hermione's head lolling against Snape's arm. Her hair, a wet, bedraggled mess, draped over her rescuer's arm and hung almost to his knees.

When Ron would have snatched Hermione from Snape, the dark-haired wizard snarled, "Don't touch her, Weasley!"

Ron recoiled as if he'd been jinxed, but then leaned forward belligerently. "Why not?"

"She's injured." Snape swept past the younger man, sneering disdainfully at the redhead's inappropriately lavish clothing. He carried Hermione into her bedroom Ron hard on his heels and laid her atop the leaf-patterned duvet. "Minerva!"

"Yes, Severus?" She entered the room right behind Ron. "How can I help?"

"We have to get her out of these clothes, but she has broken and cracked ribs, and it will hurt if we wait until she's awake. Potter should be arriving momentarily with Vector."

"Vector?" Ron sounded befuddled.

Snape exulted in the proof that Harry and Hermione had protected his secrets so well, but he ignored the other man and spoke directly to McGonagall. "She's been incapacitated, and we'll have to talk to her."

"But what about Hermione?" Ron asked. "We have to get her to St. Mungo's!"

Nothing else had roused her, but Hermione woke enough to mumble, "No, Ron. It would hurt Severus."

Snape's cheeks heated as the other man stared at him with blatant suspicion. "What does she mean?" Ron asked.

Before Snape could answer, Poppy Pomfrey bustled into the room, carrying a basket of medical potions and paraphernalia. "I came as soon as Filius..." She halted abruptly when she saw Snape.

"I'll leave," he said stiffly.

Her eyes darted around the room, lighting on Ron, McGonagall, and Hermione before they returned to Snape. "No, it's all right. I'll want to take a look at you and Mr. Potter when I'm finished with Miss Granger. For now, I only need Minerva." When the men didn't move quickly enough to suit her, she gestured with her hands. "Out. Now. Shoo! Shoo!"

"Yes, Poppy," Snape replied, surprisingly meek for a man hated by many.

Ron shot him a look but he preceded Snape into Hermione's narrow hallway before saying, "You'll want to get out of those wet things, Professor Snape. I can be to my place and back in a tic. We're about the same size."

"You would lend me clothing?"

"Sure. Harry and Hermione obviously trust you, as do McGonagall and Flitwick. I've never known them to be wrong, especially Hermione excepting Lockhart, of course."

"Hormonal aberration, I'm sure."

Ron snickered. "I expect."

When they entered the lounge, Harry had arrived with his prisoner. She had been placed on Hermione's sofa. When he saw Snape, he said, "She nearly got out, but I was ready this time."

Snape drawled, "No doubt that accounts for the fact we can no longer see her knickers."

Harry chortled, and Ron goggled at the camaraderie which had sprung up between the two men.

"Severus, what's happened?" Flitwick asked.

"We could use your expertise, Filius, in keeping her restrained. At least for the time being."

"Of course, of course." The Charms master stepped up to the sofa and drew his wand.

"How's Hermione?" Harry's brow furrowed.

Ron answered, "Madam Pomfrey's with her."

"You should have her look at your neck," Snape added, watching Flitwick at work. "You don't want an infection to set in."

"Are you hurt, Harry?" Ron's blue eyes inspected his friend.

"Just a nick." He pressed his fingertips to his throat which was crusted with dried blood and sand. "Where are you going, Ron?"

"Home." The redhead grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the china bowl on the mantelpiece. "Want me to grab you a set of clothes, too, Harry?"

"Would you?"

"Yeah. I'll be back in five." He cast the powder onto the flames and stepped into the green fire.

"What will we do with her?" Flitwick asked, staring angrily at Vector. A fiery blue cocoon enveloped the headmistress' body, and Flitwick seemed quite pleased with his handiwork.

From the bedroom a sharp, pained cry was heard and then cut off. All three men turned in the sound's direction, but there was nothing they could do.

"We should talk to Vector first," Harry pronounced, pacing along the edge of Hermione's rug. His shoes squelched as he walked, and he looked down and frowned. "After we do that, we'll decide whether to involve Kingsley or not."

"The Minister?" Flitwick's voice rose an octave.

"Yes." Harry removed his sandy, soggy Muggle trainers. He had already draped the infamous Deathly Hallow over two prongs of Hermione's coat stand which someone had placed adjacent to the fire. "He has the authority, and Hermione and I report to him directly in this investigation."

"Providentially, we have an honorable Minister," Snape commented, remembering what had happened to Barty Crouch, Jr. during Cornelius Fudge's term in office.

"That we have," Harry agreed, hanging his socks on the mantelpiece to dry.

Snape removed his own shoes in time for Ron to tumble back through the Floo and knock Harry's socks to the floor. He held two sets of men's clothes. "Ginny will come if you need her, Harry."

"I'll send a Patronus, after I change. You should go first" He trailed off not knowing what to call his former professor, ex-nemesis, and current ally.

"Thank you, Harry," Snape replied and accepted the clothes Ron held out for him. "You can call me Severus if you like." He nodded at Ron, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Ron," he said, and headed toward the small bathroom, leaving the two friends to stare in open-mouthed astonishment behind him.

Pausing outside Hermione's bedroom door, he listened intently. By the quality of silence, he assumed a Silencing Charm had been used on the door. As he had already done what he could to help, he entered the small bathroom across the hall. He hung his wet clothes in the shower stall, but didn't waste the energy to dry them. He was exhausted, as much from hunger as anything else, and he didn't want to consider the unexpected, emotional costs of the day's events, at least not yet.

When he returned to the lounge, additional chairs had been transfigured to accommodate the number of people crowded in the small flat, Ron had just ducked his head into the Floo, and Vector had been moved to a conjured, padded bench in front of the wall of bookcases. Flitwick balanced on the leather chair, where Vector had sat an hour before, wielding his wand and effectively creating a jail cell to contain their prisoner, if necessary.

Snape recognized the complex warding from Hogwarts' Restricted Section. Suppressing a laugh, he joined Flitwick. "The only flaw I can see, Filius, is that Vector knows how the Granger Repel-Net works."

Before Flitwick could reply, Ron pulled his head out of the Floo, its green fire tinting his hair and beard the patina of aged and weathered bronze. "Oi! Did you say Granger Repel-Net?"

Harry paused in the process of carrying his own dry clothes toward the bathroom, and swung his head in Flitwick and Snape's direction. Despite the gravity of the situation, he was smiling with genuine amusement. "Do I have to ask, or will you tell us what a Granger Repel-Net is?"

Hogwarts' Charms master, wand raised to perform the next spell in the series, turned toward his interrogator and said with some degree of pride, "It's a complex and multi-layered series of security and entrapment spells designed to keep unauthorized students from sneaking into the library's Restricted Section."

Harry and Ron looked at each other across the small room, both desperate to howl with laughter. Harry managed to ask, "And you named it after Hermione?"

Flitwick's smile was as amused as the grins breaking out on the younger men's faces. "It was a unanimous decision."

Neither Ron nor Harry could control their laughter any longer, and they were joined by Snape and Flitwick, whose own mirth, while more restrained, was nonetheless heartfelt. In short order though, Ron managed to speak through his subsiding chuckles. "Brilliant! Absolutely bloody brilliant!"

Harry shifted his pile of clothes to his other arm and asked, "Does she know?"

"I understand that she does," Snape replied. "I don't believe, however, she found it quite as amusing."

"She wouldn't, would she?" Harry and Snape shared a moment of understanding and affection for the witch who had inspired such an enchantment.

From his position on the floor, Ron called out, "I'm ordering take-away. Do you like Chinese ... Severus?"

"I do indeed."

Ron ducked his head back into the flames, and before he left the room, Harry said, "It's Hermione's favorite and we thought ... after her day ... she might want a little coddling."

"An excellent idea. While that happens, I'll lend Filius a hand with the final entrapment spells."

"Are you certain, Severus?" Flitwick teased his friend. "All that *foolish wand waving*?"

Snape smirked, and withdrew his wand from the narrow pocket sewn into the outer leg seam of his borrowed trousers. He looked down his nose at his longtime friend, "I think I can manage."

In good humor, the two men infused the barrier with the last of the entrapment spells to enclose the headmistress of Hogwarts.

By then, Ron had finished ordering their meal, and had been driven by his curiosity to examine the Repel-Net. "I think this might have commercial applications. Have you considered selling or licensing the idea?"

As Flitwick explained the school's need for proprietary interest, Snape levitated Hermione's cold mug of cocoa from her coffee table and followed it into the kitchen.

Harry, now dressed in dry and comfortable jeans and a Molly-made jumper, joined him. "Do you think Vector drugged Hermione?" Snape raised a quizzical eyebrow. "The cocoa." Harry pointed. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Vector didn't drug Hermione. She *fascinated* her. It's among the arsenal of certain species of Sanguinarians, and acts very much like the Imperius Curse with a *souppçon* of Confundus thrown into the mix. I," he said while lowering the used mug into the sink, "was planning to make Hermione a fresh cup. I promised her one while we were on the beach."

With the kitchen light reflecting off his glasses, the expression in Harry's eyes was unreadable, but his voice was colored with a surprising amount of emotion. "And you don't break promises, do you, Severus?"

"No, Harry, I don't." Peripherally, he noticed Ron and Flitwick standing in the doorway, watching the interaction. "What?" he snapped.

Flitwick ventured, "It's nice to see you making friends."

Ron snorted with real mirth and Snape sneered. He said bitingly, "I'm not a child."

"No, you're not," McGonagall agreed as she came up behind Flitwick, peeking into the kitchen over his head. "However, we've known you since you were, and I quite agree with Filius. It's nice to see you make friends." Flitwick snickered, and suffered the pointed end of a glare from Snape, but McGonagall ignored it because she had noticed his clothing. "Goodness, Severus, what are you wearing?"

Ron broke the congestion at the kitchen entrance by stepping back into the lounge and answering for Snape. "They're my clothes, Professor."

Flitwick began to investigate Hermione's small collection of lab equipment, Harry passed him on the way into the lounge to check on the effectiveness of the Granger Repel-Net, and Minerva had stepped back to talk to Ron. "I had no idea you two were so similar in build. The trousers what are they called again?"

"Jeans," Ron supplied.

"Jeans. They suit you, Severus," she called over her shoulder. "And Mr. Weasley, Ron, as Harry and Hermione call me Minerva, I wish you would do likewise."

"Yes, Professor. I mean ... Minerva." Ron fingered his beard nervously, but when she moved to look at Septima Vector, he followed her, asking her questions about the Repel-Net.

Snape entered the lounge carrying a mug of cocoa to which a Heating Charm had been applied, and Flitwick joined Ron and Minerva as they discussed public domain aspects of entrapment spells. Harry wasn't in the lounge, and Snape heard voices coming from Hermione's room, so he quietly moved into the hallway.

Harry was seated at the foot of Hermione's bed, his head held at an odd angle while Pomfrey finished wrapping gauze around his neck, securing a medicated bandage to his small wound. "Hermione will be awake in a few minutes, Mr. Potter," said the mediwitch, "and she'll need to eat before I give her the pain potion."

Harry's voice was muffled. "Ron's ordered dinner and it shouldn't be long. Were the ribs her only injuries?"

Snape waited for the answer, the mug of cocoa warm in his hand.

"In addition to her ribs, there was significant bruising on her arms and one thigh," Pomfrey said, tucking a pale blue coverlet around Hermione's feet. "From the discoloration, I presume the arms were the result of the initial confrontation. There are distinctive finger-marks on her biceps, so I surmise she was restrained both mentally and physically." She straightened and began to repack her basket. "The thigh is more recent, and I've been able to reduce the swelling on it. Bruise Healing Paste will have to be applied for several days. As I said, the bruising was extensive. Otherwise, she should be quite well by morning."

"Excellent." Harry fingered the gauze bandage around his neck. "That makes things much easier."

"Indeed," Snape agreed, joining the discussion, and entering the room fully.

Pomfrey whirled but then relaxed. "Is there anyone else I need to look at?"

Snape let Harry answer; the détente between the matron and him was too new to test. He placed the mug of cocoa on Hermione's dresser, next to the heirloom silver hairbrush and mirror set she obviously treasured. But didn't use, he noticed.

"No," Harry replied. "The headmistress is merely stunned and incarcerated, and Professor McGonagall suffered nothing more than a chill and a bit of confusion."

"Minerva? What happened to Minerva?" Pomfrey set her hands on her hips. "What has been going on?"

"Stalker," Hermione piped up. "Keep Sev'us safe," she mumbled, half-sleep, and Snape pivoted to look at her.

The matron's eyes grew wide. "Were you being hunted, Severus?" she asked, using his name for the first time in more than eight years.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." He never took his eyes from Hermione's pale face as he answered. "If we adjourn to the other room, we could talk there. I believe Mr. Weasley has yet to be informed of all the details as well."

"He'll be properly pissed off," Harry said cheerfully, patting his friend's covered feet as he stood up from the bed. "Serves him right for leaving the Aurory."

Snape noticed Hermione's eyelids flutter. "I suspect we'll all be participating in the discussion in short order."

Pomfrey looked down at her charge. "You always were impatient, Miss Granger."

"Hermione," the younger witch said, blinking against the light. "You might as well call me Hermione. We'll be working together soon enough."

"You're still planning on accepting the position then?" Snape asked.

Hermione's eyes found his instantly. "I doubt it will ever be tedious."

Harry laughed. "Come on, you. We have to go and decide the fate of yet another Dark creature." He would have helped her up except Snape was at her side faster.

"I told you I would be displeased if you were hurt," he said sternly.

"I'm fine," she said, but sucked air through her teeth when she tried to rise. "Or I will be tomorrow. Really, Severus, I can walk."

"You have a choice, Hermione. Either Potter or I will carry you."

"Some choice," she replied. "You, of course." She laughed at the others' expressions. "Ginny would kill me if I chose Harry!"

Snape lifted her from the bed, and it was an entirely different experience carrying her while she was awake. She looped an arm around his neck, hissing in momentary discomfort, but he was gentle while carrying her to the lounge and depositing her on her sofa. After that, he promptly disappeared back into her bedroom, ostensibly to retrieve the cocoa, but in reality for some privacy to sort out his disordered emotions.

In the lounge, Hermione answered questions, but she kept glancing toward the hallway. She smiled when Snape returned carrying a steaming mug. However, it wasn't the cocoa which drew her attention, it was his appearance. She'd never seen him dressed so casually, and it suited him. When he placed the mug on the coffee table, their eyes met, but neither said a word.

He leaned against the end of her sofa, listening to Harry, Minerva and Flitwick tell the story. When the Chinese food arrived, Poppy Pomfrey excused herself and Minerva to Hermione's room, while Flitwick and Snape checked on the prisoner.

The restrictive cocoon of Flitwick's casting was no longer a solid glowing blue; instead, there were spots of flickering magic as the strigoi fought her confinement.

Flitwick snapped his braces. *SNAP!*

Snape frowned. "She's thrown off the *Stupefy* and two of the Auror restraining fields."

Flitwick's wand was already in motion. Golden sparks flew from the tip of his wand, spreading and attaching themselves to various points of the entrapment wards. They looked like Muggle glitter scattered across a piece of fine mesh.

"Trouble?" asked Harry, as he joined the two friends.

Flitwick replied, "She's resisting."

Snape pulled his wand and gave Harry a look which brooked no argument. Nonverbally he cast a spell in a distinctive viridian hue; it anchored itself to the golden motes Flitwick had just attached to the net. Together, the conjoined spells turned the same sickly shade of bronze Ron's hair and beard had been when he'd pulled his head from the Floo before.

Harry and Flitwick exchanged a troubled look, but neither said a word about the Dark magic Snape had just used in their presence. However, Harry suggested, "Perhaps we should deal with her now, before we eat."

"She will be secure for at least the next half hour," Snape said with certainty. "Besides, Hermione must eat before she can take her pain potion."

"All right," Harry agreed, and he moved his favorite chair into a position where he could easily see Vector and the rest of the room without difficulty. Snape returned to the sofa, only this time he sat at the end, just beyond Hermione's feet.

At that moment, McGonagall returned to the room with the mediwitch following, her basket tucked over her arm. Pomfrey stopped by the side of the sofa where Snape sat. She said softly, "I've been angry."

He craned his neck to look up at her. "Understandably."

She smiled and patted his shoulder.

"Aren't you staying, Madam Pomfrey?" Ron entered from the kitchen, directing the floating dishes and silverware to the coffee table where a number of cartons had already been placed. He said, "I ordered enough for you, too."

"I'd like that," she said, putting her basket in the small entrance, under the Foe-glass which reflected only Septima Vector's flickering form, before taking a plate and helping herself to a generous portion of sesame chicken. "Now if the house-elves cooked like this, it would be heaven."

Over an unusually convivial dinner considering the circumstances, the fact that Harry kept his wand trained on the Granger Repel-Net, and that bit-by-bit Vector was demolishing each layer of the restraints placed upon her every aspect of the case was discussed. Pomfrey was particularly interested in Hermione's adaptations of Muggle science, an interest shared by Flitwick, while Ron commented on how much he didn't miss the tedium of law enforcement.

In the end, however, it was Hermione they all turned to.

"You were right, Severus," she said, relinquishing her plate to McGonagall who was banishing them to the kitchen sink as soon as people were finished eating. "It was just as Harry feared. The headmistress saw me as competition. I'm sure she would have tossed my dead body into the outgoing tide, but I want there to be no doubts when we decide what to do next, so we should ask for her side of the story."

"You're quite correct, Hermione," Flitwick agreed, fingering his braces. "Everyone should have the right to be heard."

As Harry rose to his feet, Snape suddenly swore, "Scheiss!"

"What?" The question chorused from everyone save Hermione who had just taken a drink of her cocoa."

"Vector still has her wand." Snape pulled his own wand at that point. "It was Minerva's she planned to use on Hermione."

Harry swore creatively before saying sheepishly, "I forgot."

"My wand?" McGonagall asked, her color rising in anger. "She was going to use *my wand* on Hermione?"

Neither Snape nor Harry replied as they'd turned their attention to the captive. Only the faintest of blue still shimmered around her, but within moments she would have broken through all the restraints holding her in place.

Flitwick was on his feet, standing in front of his wards. While he might have lost some of his speed with his advancing years, he had once been a champion duelist, and was even more canny than he had once been. Ron shoved his transfigured chair in to the entrance and drew his wand, coming to stand at Harry's elbow. He might have been happy to leave the grind of the Aurory, but he would back his best friends anywhere, any when.

Harry widened his stance but looked at Snape, who had remained on the sofa with Hermione. "Will the Repel-Net hold her?"

"As I said earlier, she knows how to release it, but each layer will take time. Time during which we will be free to act."

Snape's reply was rendered unnecessary because Septima Vector broke through the final layer of restraints holding her against her will. The remnants of the blue cocoon flared briefly in a final death knell. Hogwarts' headmistress sat up, and then rose to her feet, adjusting her damp, sandy clothing as best she could.

When she raised her head and looked at her thunderstruck audience, she sneered. Her canines weren't pronounced but they were indeed sharp, and her piercing black eyes found Hermione immediately. "You were always an excellent student, Miss Granger," she said with great rancor. "I have nothing to add to this farce."

"How can you have nothing to say?" Pomfrey's expression was a blend of revulsion and astonishment.

The dark-haired vampire smiled her perfect little smile and said softly, "I have done nothing beyond my nature, Poppy. I am a seventh generation strigoi, directly descended from Vlad the Impaler. Like my forefather, I, too, am an Animagus. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I enjoy teaching, and Albus made it possible for me to do so. I see no reason why things have to change." Belying her declaration, Vector had stepped up to the modified magical barricade, and spread one hand out as if to touch the enchanted net. Magic sparked and hissed, and she withdrew a pace.

"You have committed a crime, Professor Vector," Harry said implacably, standing in front of the witch he had grappled so fiercely with on the beach. "One which will see you deposed and spending time in Azkaban."

She smiled, but there was frost in her tone. "Only if charges are pressed. Severus will never do that because he wants to teach at his precious school, to seek redemption for crimes he's paid for repeatedly."

"I wasn't referring to Professor Snape," Harry asserted. "You illegally coerced Minerva McGonagall to gain privileged information which you then used to abduct Hermione before you assaulted me."

"Nonsense. Minerva was Confused by one of the cretins at school. Dawlish, perhaps. She has a grudge against Minerva because of her friendship with Severus."

"Fact," he replied. "Hermione Granger is an Auror, and you interfered with an investigation and threatened her life. You attacked two law enforcement officials and that carries triple the maximum sentence. We needn't ever mention Professor Snape's name at all, and you'll be in prison for two or three decades."

"I was terribly shocked to discover Miss Granger's body in the cove below my family's home, and I was coming to her aid when you attacked me in the dark, Mr. Potter." She sneered at him, and the tip of one gleaming fang shone green in the reflected glow from the Repel-Net. "I was defending myself."

Harry's expression didn't change, but McGonagall had pressed her hand against her heart. Vector's twisted account would undoubtedly be accepted at face value by many. Her reputation was impeccable.

The headmistress adjusted the shoulders of her robes as if she hadn't a care, and said conversationally, "The charges won't stick unless Granger and McGonagall give up Snape, and I doubt either of them will do that. And if they press charges, I'll tell my story to Rita Skeeter. She's always looking for a good story. Now, I need to get back to the school. Too many members of its staff are missing this evening." She gave the others a cool, assessing glance.

It was at that moment Hermione showed her more devious side. She had said nothing, but had watched the Sanguinarian. Vector affected nonchalance, but every few seconds her eyes darted to where Snape remained seated at the end of the sofa. If Hermione stretched she could reach him with her toes. Carefully, subtly, she inched her way along the cushions, ignoring the bright flare of pain from her battered ribs as she moved. The next time Vector focused on Harry, Hermione lifted both feet and boldly placed them in Snape's lap. She bit her lip to keep from giggling at his reaction, but he quickly schooled his expression and laid one of his hands upon her ankle. He glanced sideways at her, and she winked before she returned her attention to Harry and Vector.

"You ... you," Flitwick stuttered. "Seven, you don't honestly think we can allow you to return after what has happened?"

"What do you think has happened, Filius?" Vector took a step closer to the barrier. "I have simply paid court to one of my own kind, and it was rebuffed."

"You persecuted him!" McGonagall said, explosively. "You've tormented him for months. And what about that boar?"

"It threatened the children under my care. I have a responsibility to protect them against threats, do I not? I have no idea how it found its way to Severus' rooms during the night."

McGonagall spluttered and Poppy Pomfrey looked to be in shock.

"You will not return to Hogwarts," Snape said, entering the discussion for the first time. Vector snapped her head in his direction, but her eyes were riveted to Hermione's

feet in his lap.

"There is nothing stopping me."

"I will stop you, Madam." Snape caressed Hermione's ankles absently, as if he'd done it before. The others watched uneasily, and Harry bounced a little on the balls of his feet, his wand shifting in his grip.

Vector clenched her fists, her eyes growing colder, darker ... until death was the only message in them. "You were supposed to be mine," she said, and unless one was looking closely, as indeed Harry and Ron were, it would have been impossible to tell that her fangs had grown.

Snape shrugged negligently, but the expression in his eyes was as cold as black ice. "I have found someone far more worthy."

"I don't believe you." Vector stood rigid, an alabaster statue of centuries-old perfection, but there was an unstable fault line waiting for the right pressure to split it wide open.

"Believe what you will, but I will never be yours. I belong to another," he said, and with remarkable *sangfroid*, he turned his head to look at Hermione, and she smiled so widely it could appear fatuous to a jaundiced audience.

However, it was the final insult which fractured the fault line.

Vector screamed as if the Moirae empowered her wrath, and she ripped through the first four layers of the reinforced Repel-Net as if they were smoke. Her eyes mutated to iridescent gold, and as she leapt toward Hermione, hands already shifting into talons, the final melded layers of protection were triggered. Flitwick and Snape's double spell released from its four attachment points, ceiling and floor, and dropped in a solid, opaque sheet, enclosing the charging strigoi as if she were a jacket potato being wrapped for baking.

Inside her magical shroud, Vector shrieked and raged, fighting against the ever tightening magical field. The tip of one claw poked through the sickly bronze-colored magical field, but then Vector screamed as the protruding talon was severed and cauterized. When it fell to the wooden floor, the talon reverted to its human form, revealing the tip of a finger, and an acrid smell overpowered the aromas of sesame chicken.

Vector stopped struggling.

Within ten minutes, the Dark component of the spell had been removed, Vector had been re-trussed, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had arrived. It took a further fifteen minutes for him to be caught up on the details, and he, availing himself of the discretionary powers of his office, was the one to cast the Memory Charm on Septima Vector. During that entire time, Hermione hadn't moved from her location, neither had Snape.

"You're free," Hermione whispered to him.

"Again," he said, his fingers tracing runes on the smooth skin beneath his fingers.

~o0o~

Epilogue

Chapter 12 of 12

In which the future is at hand

Author's note: My apologies for the delay in posting this chapter; real life (including a lack of internet) interfered. At last, here is the end ... or, maybe, it's the beginning.

Epilogue: In which the future is at hand.

Hermione levitated the portrait of Bridget Wenlock into place between the windows overlooking the courtyard.

"What a tranquil view." Bridget said, peering out from her canvas. The portrait eagerly took in her new surroundings, some of which gleamed as a result of nature's kiss, as sunlight streamed into the room, or a little humanly applied beeswax, granting a soft shine to centuries' old desks and chairs.

"I hope you'll be happy here," Hermione replied while making infinitesimal adjustments to the frame so it would hang level and centered between the windows. She was impeded in her efforts by the castle's own construction which didn't lend itself to symmetry.

"I'm sure I shall be. It's very kind of you to include Jabir's portrait. We've become such good friends; I would have missed him otherwise." Bridget referred to the portrait of Jabir ibn Hayyan, the famous Persian Alchemist, whose portrait Hermione had hung directly across from the famous Arithmancer. Jabir's portrait was empty, but he had gone to visit Nicolas Flamel in the dungeons.

"It was my pleasure." Hermione stood beneath the gilt frame, facing her classroom her very own classroom and grinned happily before she continued putting the final touches on the room's décor.

Once Vector had left Britain following the dictates of a cleverly implanted Suggestive Charm -- Hogwarts' new headmistress had done a bit of judicious housekeeping to welcome her newest member of the staff. McGonagall had switched the location of the Muggle Studies and Arithmancy classes so that Arithmancy was now comfortably nestled between History of Magic and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Hermione had been in residence for three weeks, but her lesson plans had been in place within two weeks of meeting privately with Kingsley and handing in her letter of resignation. What he had said then, she still blushed to remember. She had practically floated into John Dawlish's office after that meeting. It might have been petty, she had thoroughly relished the look on Dawlish's face when she mentioned how much she looked forward to teaching his niece, about whom she had heard so much. The man had practically swooned.

Snickering in a thoroughly unladylike manner, Hermione appraised her unusual floor plan. There were seven rows of desks, three in each, arrayed in a semi-circle around a central point where her podium would stand shortly. The configuration was touted for its harmonizing and generative qualities in *The Secret Alchemist* by Perenelle Flamel, and Hermione had adapted it immediately. In fact, that was one portrait she had been unable to acquire for her walls. Perenelle refused to leave her husband's side, but

had promised to stop by from time-to-time.

Beyond the student seating, and in the far corner of the room, was the door leading to Hermione's office. It had once been a broom cupboard; however, the castle had been obliging when the headmistress had asked, shifting two walls to make room for a desk and chair, two bookshelves, and guest seating. There was no fireplace, so instead, Argus Filch had unearthed a pot-bellied stove from somewhere in the castle, its flue magically connecting to the ceiling above. The stove vented beautifully, with only a curl of smoke escaping every now and then. Filch promised it would produce enough heat to keep the small room comfortable even in the depths of winter.

Hermione kept a fanciful kettle, in the shape of a dragon honoring Hagrid's ever-ready hospitality atop the stove, and a number of her colleagues had taken to stopping by for a spot of tea.

The only members of the staff who had remained in constant residence during the long summer had been McGonagall, whose duties would keep her at the school all year round, her new Deputy Head, Pomona Sprout, who had been civil to Hermione, but not terribly welcoming. In addition to the two witches, the other heads of house, Flitwick and Slughorn, and a newly appointed head of Gryffindor, Charlie Weasley, had remained throughout the summer, although each had taken short holidays in rotation. Charlie, as had become customary after the war, would be the staff member returning with the students on the Hogwarts Express that afternoon.

Just thinking about the students' arrival caused a frisson of nerves to prickle along the length of Hermione's spine. *I'm as ready as I can possibly be* was a refrain which seemed to run on a perpetual thought-loop in her head; she was sure the words had been engraved on the insides of her eyelids when she'd awoken that morning.

In preparation of the coming term, Hermione had read each of her students' files. That was the source of her giggling disquiet. Fortunately, however, Susannah Dawlish and Martin Edgecombe were seventh years, both scheduled to take N.E.W.T. level Arithmancy. Dawlish planned on being an Auror and Edgecombe had aspirations of working for Gringotts' International. In order to do so, they would need top marks in Hermione's class, and in fact, she counted on their ambition to stem the tide of their malice.

Putting aside the thought of nine months of antagonism to look forward to, Hermione flourished her wand and levitated the last portrait into the air. She followed it across the long room, to the short wall at the far end. The subject of this canvas didn't move and didn't speak being entirely Muggle, but Hermione had taken Kingsley's advice to heart, and she would begin as she meant to continue. Mathematics had much in common with Arithmancy, and no study of numbers was complete without a passing familiarity of geometry. As she situated the painting of Euclid of Alexandria, Hermione thought about the small collection of Muggle references to be found in the low bookshelf running the length of the wall. On top of the case, Euclid's book, *The Elements*, sat prominently. Also to be found were *Geometry and Experience*, and *Ether and Relativity*, both by Albert Einstein, as well as works by Thomas Hobbes, Sir Isaac Newton, and Thales of Miletus. Of course, *The New Theory of Numerology* and *Numerology and Gramatica* had equal pride of place.

Threading her wand through her thick braid, Hermione grabbed the podium standing to the side of the semi-circle of desks. Moving it was the last task on her list, aside from *meet Harry and Ron for lunch at Three Broomsticks and get ready for Welcoming Feast*.

As Kingsley had promised, Harry, and a small, hand-picked team, had been ensconced in the Shrieking Shack as Hogsmeade's Office of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry had accepted the position before the Minister had finished making the offer. Within twenty-four hours, the newly promoted Deputy Head of Magical Law Enforcement and his team had applied their do-it-yourself skills toward renovating the Shrieking Shack. What had taken Harry and Hermione three months at Grimmauld Place took only three days at the dilapidated shack.

Harry had enticed Roger Davies and Philip Jones to join him, along with four junior Aurors just graduating from the training program. Roger had been so enthusiastic he had practically re-built the notorious building from the ground up, sealing the passage between it and Hogwarts in the process.

While Harry's promotion had been gratifying, it hadn't brought the incandescent joy to his face the birth of his and Ginny's second son had. They had christened the baby Albus Severus, much to Snape's chagrin, but no one called him Little Al, instead he was called Rus.

Hermione grunted as she maneuvered the heavy podium across the stone floor, and then she flushed with deep embarrassment when a familiar drawing voice asked, "Are you a witch or not? *Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The heavy podium rose six inches and hovered, waiting to be directed as Severus Snape, dressed to impress, entered the classroom, his wand held in his long-fingered grasp. "Where would you like it?"

She wouldn't look at him, instead walking to the center spot which she had marked that morning with chalk. "Here, please."

The podium obeyed his silent commands docilely and moved into position exactly as directed. His footsteps sounded loud in the room, accompanied by the soft susurration of his teaching robes sweeping across the stones. Hermione finally looked up, but there was nothing of condemnation in his expression.

"To this day," he said casually, "I prefer to shave the Muggle way." Her eyes examined the smooth skin of his face, and her fingers itched to explore its texture, but she flexed her fingers instead, and listened to the rest of his comment. "Never be embarrassed because you straddle both worlds, Hermione. It gives you greater adaptability, and it will bring you the respect you deserve."

"Thank you, Severus," she said softly, touched by his encouragement.

"Are you ready?" he asked, stepping next to her at the podium.

"For lunch or the students?"

"Both. Either."

"I'm starved..." there was a small furrow between her brows, where worry lines would make their mark in another two or three decades, "...and I fervently hope so."

One long finger pressed beneath her chin, raising her face so he could look into her eyes. "That it matters enough for you to doubt yourself shows a degree of dedication many would envy. Your students choose to take this course because they have an interest in it, and you, who are boundlessly enthusiastic, will undoubtedly inspire rabid devotion."

"Thank you, I think."

Since mid-February, their awareness of one another had simmered like Amortentia's third stage of brewing. Unlike the potion, which remained in stasis indefinitely, Hermione's and Snape's attraction had grown into something more than a potion-enhanced lust, despite what Horace Slughorn had to say on the topic of love potions. At that moment, when Hermione's feelings were so accessible, and Snape was reading her eyes as if they were the index to her soul, she leaned toward him.

Never breaking eye contact with her, he bent his head and, between one ragged breath and the next, their lips met. It was nothing more than a gossamer brush, a test if you will, but then she uttered a small sound; a moan, perhaps, or possibly a whine.

It worked like a spur on an unbroken filly, and in the next second, Hermione was in Snape's arms, her eyelashes brushing against her cheeks and her mouth fastened upon his. Curiously enough, there was no awkward bumping of noses, no seductive flicking of the tongue at the seam of her mouth asking for an invitation. In their place was an exploration of interest, a testing of stimuli ... to the resultant satisfaction of each.

When they ended their kiss, it was with a gentle, chaste press of lips, and a resting of one brow against another.

"We will be late." The timbre of his voice was soft, low, and unleashed a curl of desire deep within Hermione's womb.

She held onto his arm for balance. "I should be ready to leave in a moment."

Then Hermione turned from him to survey her domain. It was exactly as she had imagined. This, she thought, was where she would make her mark in the world. She would teach her students flexibility and how to stretch their minds, discarding their preconceptions. She would introduce them to the strengths Muggle-borns brought into the wizarding world. She would encourage them not to exclude, but to include and embrace broader concepts. But she would start one small step at a time. It was possible she had learned patience. She nodded to herself. "To answer that latter question again, yes, I think I am ready."

"As do I." Snape offered her his arm and she tucked her hand at the bend of his elbow, just as she had done for the past week. They descended the short staircase leading to a side door and out into the late summer sunshine.

"I'm sorry I was running a bit late."

"I sent my Patronus ahead." Snape covered her fingers with his free hand. "Weasley is already there."

She mock-groaned. "He'll already have ordered for us. You'd think Ron would grow tired of Madam Rosmerta's cottage pie by now."

"Cottage pie?" Snape looked at her darkly. "Next time we're going Muggle. I wanted curry."

Terribly amused, Hermione teased, "I think Harry's corrupted you."

There would never be a more defining moment to illustrate the differences between wartime and post-war Snape, because he said, "You may be right," with no umbrage at all.

To their right, high above the Forbidden Forest, a rare Snidget reached the apogee of its flight, the sunlight glinting gold off its widespread wings.

Finite