

# In Spirit

by Ariadne AWS

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

## Ceilings

Chapter 1 of 33

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A/N: Bit of a romp. Can't promise there won't be serious moments (and that I won't up the rating later), but hey. For now? Have a kitten.

Thanks, as always, to the Furies: Anastasia, Melenka, Luna, Annie Talbot, Machshefa, and Indigofeathers.

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**Story Summary:** *Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.*



### 1: Ceilings

His first thought upon opening his eyes was, *That is not my ceiling.*

His second was that he was, in all probability, dead, and that he should thus not be seeing a ceiling at all. He didn't know what he should be seeing in its stead, but a ceiling was rather more mundane than anything he might have imagined.

He lay still, listening, and heard only silence. No sounds of battle it must be over by now. He closed his eyes and wondered who had won the Dark Lord or Potter...

He started to his elbows in a rush of remembering. Had he really given his memories to that what *had* he been thinking?

Oh, right. That didn't matter; he was dead.

At that realisation, relief flooded his chest, and he collapsed back to the floor, scraping his elbow on the way down.

Elbow? Wait.

Hm... perhaps he wasn't dead after all. Perhaps she had gotten his instructions and followed them, countering Nagini's venom.

Yes. That must be it. She'd obviously chosen to keep his survival a secret, leaving him to awaken in solitude free, finally, to decide his fate for himself.

It had been rather a long shot. Clever girl.

In the years leading up to the battle, he had had ample occasion to consider his likely demise, and, for a time, he had indulged in wondering what might come afterwards. Something like sleep? Some kind of afterlife?

He had, for a time, enjoyed torturing himself with thoughts of seeing Lily again, but had quickly learned to squelch such fantasies as soon as they started. His afterlife and hers would not mesh, as hers would inevitably include James Potter.

As always when he thought of James Potter, he growled low in his throat, and the sound of his own voice brought him back to the present moment, where, once again, he found himself looking at the manifestly cobwebby ceiling of the Shrieking Shack.

He flinched reflexively away from the no doubt equally unsanitary floor. Definitely not the afterlife. Had he not growled, just now?

He remembered with absolute clarity the feel of Nagini's fangs at his throat, the infliction of the wounds which, life-saving measures aside, should technically have rendered growling quite beyond his capabilities.

But he had, without question, growled.

So. She had indeed found the information he'd hidden in the sword found, understood, and expanded on it. Clever, clever girl.

In his own mind, he had taken to calling it "the memo," as he expected it to have no greater effect than any of the Ministry's ridiculous paper-airplanes. But in her capable hands, it had.

He smiled slowly, his hand rising to his throat, where he found the skin smooth and whole.

His smile broadened.

"Well done," he said, his voice equally smooth and whole in the empty air around him. He closed his eyes and lay still, enjoying the peace, quiet, and solitude of having, for the first time in forever, nowhere to be.

The sunlight moved to his eyelids, and he winced, raising his hand as a shield.

A hand that should have been not only bloody but, more to the point, visible.

It wasn't.

"Bugger."

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Seven years to the day after the final battle, Hermione sat in a restaurant with Ron Weasley, feeling as though she had played this same scene before.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I'm just not..."

But here his hopeful look always forestalled her next words, which were, of course, "... in love with you." She'd never found the courage to speak them aloud and always extricated her hand from Ron's, finishing lamely, "... ready."

This time was no exception, and she picked up her water goblet to avoid seeing the look of cheerful determination that always crossed Ron's features as he announced that he would wait.

"You're the witch for me, Hermione," he declared, seemingly oblivious that he had uttered the same statement with equal conviction for the last four years.

She never debated this point. Aware only that her throat was scratchy, she sipped her water.

It had always been easiest to continue as they had at Hogwarts comfortable enough in each other's presence and sharing experiences only they and Harry had shared. They had never needed to explain to each other why certain sounds, tastes, and smells were best avoided, and she enjoyed the simple ease of knowing the whys and ways of each other as they moved from Hogwarts, where they had returned to finish their final year, to London, where she had taken an apprentice position in the wizarding branch of the British Library, and Harry and Ron had gone into Auror training.

"Join us, Hermione, do," Ron had cajoled several times during their last year at school. "We make an unbeatable team. We can fight the good fight with the best of them."

"We are the best of them," Harry always pointed out.

*To be sure*, she had thought, wondering what there was left to fight. Outwardly, she merely shook her head and smiled.

"Growing soft on us?" the boys had teased her. "No more taste for adventure, for the rugged life, living by our wits?"

"No more camping," she had countered firmly, "and the wits were mostly mine, thank you."

Now, in her twenty-sixth year, she found herself rather pleased with her life with her comfortable flat in a smart but inexpensive street just off Diagon Alley, with her job, her books, and her gloriously, brilliantly, wonderfully non-canvas ceiling.

She had yet to stop liking having solid walls sensibly about and refused to hang any art that remotely resembled a landscape.

As always after one of their dates, Ron walked her home and, after their usual quick snog really, he had improved since Hogwarts he stuffed his hands into his pockets

and sauntered away, whistling, his optimism untainted by a refusal that had become almost as comfortable as their relationship itself.

*Same old Ron*, she thought mildly, reaching for her wand to unlock the tall, black door that contrasted sharply with the rest of her pale Georgian building.

Focused as she always was when working even the simplest of spells, she did not note the slight lightening of a shadow at the end of the street.

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Where Severus Snape had been and what he had been doing for the last seven years, only he knew. Were he the sort to share, and had anyone known of his existence and thus been in a position to be told, the story would go something like this:

Swearing: two months.

Scowling: a year and a half.

Slipping undetected about Hogwarts and spying on his former colleagues: one week, after which he concluded that, as amusing as draining Minerva's inkwell when her head was turned might have been initially, it quite lost its appeal when it became apparent none of them had yet realised he had no portrait.

Sniffing with a superiority Lucius Malfoy might have envied: four and a half hours.

Realising that no one at Malfoy Manor could see him either: point oh six seconds, or thereabouts.

Swearing, scowling, and roaring, simultaneously: twenty-four hours.

Severus Snape had spent the next six months plotting revenge and the rest of those seven years deciding which was the greater crime: Harry Potter's, for being Harry Potter, or Hermione Granger's, for being Hermione Granger and *still* missing the obvious.

This proved quite the dilemma, and it was the kitten that decided it.

For reasons he could not begin to fathom, six years and fifty-one weeks after his death, during which time neither his absence nor his presence seemed to register to any living creature, a small mewling at his heels in a pre-dawn Knockturn Alley drew him up short.

He looked down to see a pair of large golden eyes staring at him with hopeful adoration.

"I've nothing for you," he muttered, turning and sweeping his invisible cloak in the manner of a wizard whose business was far too urgent to give a moment's notice to a small, fluffy creature, however wide and innocent its eyes.

"Meee," the kitten responded, scampering happily after his retreating cloak.

"Meee'?" Snape repeated scornfully. Ridiculous cat couldn't even meow properly.

"Meee," the kitten agreed, pouncing triumphantly on a corner of the cloak and pinning it to a cobblestone. "Meee!"

"You can't do that," he admonished it. "It's invisible."

The kitten, who was seized with a sudden urge to wash its paw, ignored him.

"Ridiculous." Snape snorted, nonetheless watching as the kitten waved its paw behind its ear and across its whiskers.

The kitten spared him a brief, vaguely condescending glance before returning to its paw-waving.

Having nowhere else to be, Snape watched, bemused, until he realised he was watching it with more intensity and irritation than, strictly speaking, it warranted.

Recalled to himself, he reflexively checked his surroundings still empty, save for himself and the kitten and traced his reaction to its source: to the Granger chit's ridiculous hand-waving in his Potions classroom. Then a slow smile spread on his invisible face, and he chuckled.

So pleased was he to have finally decided his dilemma that he had celebrated by slipping into the Leaky Cauldron's cellar, where he learned that ghosts are immune to firewhisky but that he was as susceptible as a house-elf to butterbeer.

Thence began a week he could never quite remember, after which he spent the final twenty minutes of the seven years since his death disentangling himself from all manner of inconvenient things in a dumpster.

The last of these was the kitten, who was standing on his chest staring at him with worried eyes.

He peered back, and it responded with a gleeful "Meee," its throaty purr rumbling straight through his bones and into his skull, triggering a headache that would have flattened a Hippogriff. He ignored it both headache and kitten. He had no bloody idea why this kitten was the first creature in seven years to evince any awareness of his presence, but just then he didn't care.

He clambered out of the dumpster, heading straight to the end of Hermione Granger's quiet, comfortable street. The ghost of Severus Snape may have been hung over, but his mind was determined, and his will was steel.

## Windows

*Chapter 2 of 33*

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: I'm nudging canon around by a few months regarding the birth of Harry and Ginny's second son. So shoot me. :)

Gratitude to Mr. Melenka, Somigliana, Droxy, and Melenka, a.k.a. Team "Torture Hermione," and endless blessings on my alpha readers, Anastasia, Indigofeathers, and

**Summary:** Operation "Torment the Granger Chit" begins.



## 2: Windows

Hermione, long asleep, had her feet tucked under the soft throw on the ottoman and didn't notice when a distinctly cat-like shape appeared in her window.

To the kitten, the woman asleep in the chair looked like a perfect place to curl up and nap, and, as its paws were chilled from padding over cobblestones after the strangely swirling cloak, it wanted nothing more than to knead the throw at the woman's feet.

Stretching up on its hind legs, the kitten pawed the glass and gave a hopeful "Meee?"

Hermione shifted in the chair but did not awaken.

"Meee?"

When there was no response from the woman inside, it turned to look at the shadowy wizard who had lifted it to the windowbox, blinking a rebuke.

Severus's unblinking response was to tug the kitten's tail.

Not hard, but hard enough.

The kitten squeaked, turning twice around to sit glaring at him, tail twitching.

At the sound, Hermione mumbled, "Crooks?" and found herself half out of the chair before she remembered that her familiar had gone to live with the Potters after laying eyes, once, on the newborn Albus Severus. Her familiar looked at her wistfully whenever she visited, but stayed firmly by the baby's side.

She stretched her legs before her, shaking her head. It couldn't be Crooks; she must have been dreaming.

She stared sleepily at nothing, half-bemused by the play of light from the streetlamps. She was lamenting the distance between the chair and her bed when some corner of her mind awakened fully enough to realize that she was staring at the shadow of a twitching tail.

She jumped to the window.

The kitten looked up at her, its plaintive "Meee?" silenced by the glass between them.

"You poor thing!" she exclaimed, wrapping the throw around herself as she reached for the door. "However did you get all the way up there?"

The wizard below smirked his satisfaction as the front door opened.

A swift, silent flight of stairs, and all three were inside Hermione's flat.

"You must be starving," Hermione murmured to the kitten, who clambered up her arm to cling to her shoulder, half on and half in her tangled curls. "No, kitty; not the hair..."

Severus stood in the front room, listening as Hermione's kitten-centered monologue faded into the kitchen.

His eyes assessed the room. He was in.

Excellent.

An hour later, kitten and witch were asleep in the flat's back bedroom, and Severus knew all he deemed necessary. Operation "Torment the Granger Chit" could begin.

A few gestures toward the hot water supply, and her morning shower would alternate between "icy" and "scalding." A few moments in the kitchen, a few more gestures toward her tea things, and her morning cuppa would be nicely salty. He eyed the bedroom, but decided that initiating the old Slytherin standby of charming her knickers to shrink randomly over the course of her day could wait until morning.

Settling himself in the chaise Hermione had but recently vacated, his eyes raked her immaculately ordered bookshelves. *Yes. That one will do nicely.*

He removed a slim volume entitled *Subtle Slytherins and How to Stymie Them*, by Serpentius Sissel. Three more works followed: *Sublime Species: Speaking to Salamanders*, by Scylla Scorch; *Harvesting Herbs: A How-To*, by Haethia Happenstance; and, after due consideration and a decidedly nasty chuckle, an impossibly fat, leather-bound scroll entitled, *Speak, Memory: An Apology*, by Gilderoy Lockhart.

The books he returned to the shelf out of order; he spent a long forty minutes unrolling the scroll and re-rolling it, backwards.

And then he sat back down and waited.

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"Good morning, kitty." Hermione's voice lilted from the bedroom.

"Meee?" came the distant response.

"Yes, you, silly thing. Come along." Creaking bedsprings. "Let's get you some breakfast."

Sounds from the kitchen. The kettle on to boil.

So. The witch retained the early morning habits of her Muggle upbringing. Severus filed that information away and continued listening.

Cabinet doors. The sound of cat food hitting a bowl. Soft paws padding across the floor.

"Oh, don't trip me, kitty... it wouldn't do to have to chase your food, would it? Not like outside, you poor thing, living on mice and..."

Severus stopped listening and yawned. Best nick into the bedroom while it was empty.

Keeping half an ear on Hermione's nattering, he slipped into the bedroom. The low bed was already made this made him frown and she seemed to have no other furniture than an impossibly small jewelry box. Knees creaking, he leaned over it to determine whether it were magically altered. He had ascertained that, in fact, it was, and was consequently pondering tabling the "shrinking knickers" plan for later when Hermione's footsteps sounded in the hall.

"... just take a shower, and then we'll have time for a good snuggle before I Floo to the Library."

Hermione entered the bedroom, followed by the kitten, who spotted Severus immediately and trotted happily over to him.

"Scat," he breathed almost inaudibly, while Hermione started to unbutton her pyjamas.

The kitten ignored him, twining around his ankles in a festival of ecstasy.

He nudged the kitten with his toe, but the kitten continued, undaunted.

Hermione, however, didn't notice. "I'm awfully sorry to leave you alone, poor thing," she began, pausing in her unbuttoning to untangle her necklace from her hair, "... but Demetrios insists we complete the reshelving by week-end. That group from California left the reading room in frightful disarray oh, they're brilliant theorists, Mimi..." She resumed her unbuttoning.

The kitten looked up at Hermione and blinked.

*Mimi?* Severus scowled. *Mimi?!*

"... but there's not a practical one among them. Bitched the whole time about inadequate closet space in their lodgings and how you couldn't get a decent cup of coffee anywhere and 'What a disorganized country!' and yet they managed to undo six months' of cross-referencing in ten minutes' time. Mixing Archimedes with Freud; can you imagine?" Hermione slipped out of her pyjama top and spread her arms wide for emphasis.

Severus stood very, very still. *Close your eyes, Snape. Close them. Eyes. Closed. Now.*

It didn't seem to be working.

*Blink, dammit.*

That either.

He swallowed. Quietly.

Hermione hooked a finger in the waistband of her pyjama bottoms and began to wriggle out of them. "As if *that* weren't enough..."

*Quite enough. Quite. Stop. Do.*

"... they've completely disordered the Hawking papers we'll have to call in a specialist from Paris to sort *that* mess out; it's quite beyond either of us and one corner of the room has a distinct odor of tequila. No idea what that's about; it's quite forbidden. We suspect them of throwing an after-hours party after receiving special permission to 'continue their important discussion on-site.'" Hermione snorted, bending over to step out of the pyjama bottoms. "We should have called security on the lot of them, but Demetrios insisted that their work was very, very important indeed, and well, the San Francisco Center for Wizarding Theory *has* given us some tremendous advances, but really, I ask you, how many theories can you base on a single anomalous text?"

Her hair escaped its messy morning knot and cascaded to the floor.

The kitten scampered over and pounced on it.

Laughing, Hermione scooped the kitten and stood, holding it, paws dangling, over her head. "Aren't you a love?" She curled the kitten against her bare breasts and nuzzled its head. "Such a softie, you are."

The kitten closed its eyes in rapture.

*Traitor*, came Severus's unbidden thought.

She stood that way for a moment, lost in the kitten's affection, then, before Severus could remember to remind himself again to blink, she was out of the bedroom and heading for the bath.

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*A note on sources and other things:*

Speak, Memory *is the title of a lesser-known work by Vladimir Nabokov, who is far more famous for writing some other book which may or may not be tangentially pertinent.*

~ A.

# Entrees and Exits

Chapter 3 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: \*twirls quill\* My thanks as always to my inestimably perfect writing partner, Anastasia, who summoned her laughter out of a difficult day. Thanks also to my divine beta, Lady Karelia, who rescues my prose from those pesky little stumbles to which Americans seem prone. And, finally, thank you to Droxy for rippling around in that damned cloak, which amuses Mimi no end.

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**Summary:** *In which Severus encounters a bit of a snag.*



## 3: Entrees and Exits

... before Severus could remember to remind himself again to blink, she was out of the bedroom and heading for the bath.

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Severus didn't have long to wait before he heard a yelp from the bathroom, and a slow, satisfied rumble started low in his throat, resonating quietly in her sparsely furnished bedroom.

He was leaning once again over the jewelry box, pondering how long the witch would tolerate the temperature fluctuations in her shower, when the kitten trotted in to join him.

Spotting the jewelry box, it paused to sniff at it curiously.

"You nearly gave me away with your foolish display," Severus chided it, mentally evaluating which of several charms Hermione might have used on the jewelry box.

"Meee?"

"To whom else might I be speaking? See to it that doesn't happen again." He decided that the box should wait until Hermione left.

A rather high-pitched squeal from the bathroom ended with a nasty thump, followed almost immediately by a spate of barely-intelligible profanity.

Severus smirked.

"Meee," the kitten noted sadly, jumping onto the low bed and curling into a ball on Hermione's pillow.

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A quarter of an hour later, Hermione hunched at her table, clenching a mug in her shivering hands.

From where he stood leaning against the counter edge, ankles and arms crossed, Severus could hear her teeth chattering.

With shaking hands, she raised the mug carefully, nonetheless sloshing a bit of tea onto her plush white robe. Swearing, she thumped the mug to the table-top and went in search of her wand.

Severus smirked in wicked anticipation.

*Evanesco*, Hermione grumbled, returning to the kitchen rubbing her hair with a towel.

*Mildew*, Severus thought, and was almost instantly rewarded by Hermione's nose wrinkling.

She tossed the towel through the hall in disgust and set about getting her breakfast, waving a bowl, spoon, and a box of cereal to the table.

Severus maneuvered closer to read the box. *Typo-Bits?*

Hermione poured cream over the cereal and stared vaguely into space.

*Tea*, he thought intently. *Drink your tea.*

Hermione shuddered out of her stupor as though brushed by a cold hand. "All right, you interloping bundle of black. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Severus froze. Not even the Dark Lord had had the ability to sense his thoughts undetected...

Then he realized she was speaking to her cereal bowl.

His eyebrows arched, then narrowed to a V of displeasure over the bridge of his nose. It would be far less satisfying to drive someone mental who was already halfway there.

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Hermione stared into her cereal bowl as if it contained the central mystery of the universe – which, in a way, it did.

In their initial efforts to understand Crookshanks' defection to the Potter house – a defection unprecedented in the history of familiars, she'd learned – she and Ginny had bargained a box of prototype cereal from George.

"Alpha-Bits. Old Muggle formula," he'd said. "Bought the rights to it off a bloke from Las Vegas. Just hit it with a spruced-up version of the 'Icebox Poetry' Charm, and the letters queue up into limericks."

He'd demonstrated, and Hermione had blanched – once she'd finally worked out what she'd read.

"Knokkrz?" Ginny had sniffed. "Did you never learn to spell?"

George had merely grinned. "Haven't worked that bit out yet. Trade you a box for some help with that, Hermione?"

Hermione hadn't bothered yet – her first priority had been to stop the blasted stuff from rhyming. She'd devised a particularly tricky charm, of which she was quite justifiably proud, and Typo-Bits cereal now provided a fairly good estimation of what her cat was thinking.

But for three weeks now – she'd requisitioned a few more boxes – her breakfast had informed her only that *Baybe needz kitteh.*"

This morning, however, the cereal read differently.

Idly fingering her mug, Hermione stared as a long string of Zs floated on the surface of the cream. She glanced toward the bedroom. Was it picking up Mimi? Or Crooks, still?

A soft thud from the bedroom answered her question immediately, and she smiled into her bowl as she read, *Awayk naow! Wher everwon? Left kitteh!* As the letters spun and reformed into, *Wher teh cloke?!* Hermione heard urgent padding in the hall.

"Cloak?" Hermione laughed, setting down her tea to scoop the kitten onto her lap. "It's called a 'bathrobe,' silly."

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Severus scowled – he couldn't follow this at all.

His mood did not improve when, after much nonsensical prattling to the cat, Hermione whisked through the rest of her preparations and into the Floo without touching her tea.

Which she left on the table along with the rest of her unfinished breakfast.

Unsanitary.

He sniffed, glancing into the cereal bowl, ignoring the kitten who was rubbing insistently at his ankles.

*"Why u no lyke Hermny?"*

Severus blinked and glanced behind him.

"Meee?"

He frowned, looking down.

The kitten arched into his shin, reaching its paws up toward his knee. "Meee!"

He ignored it, looking back into the bowl.

*"Kitteh lyke Hermny."*

He took a step back in shock. She couldn't have – it had never been done. Flitwick had prattled on interminably about the League of International Charms Masters' eternal failures when it came to cats.

Eternal failures, and yet...

And yet... *she* had succeeded.

He snorted.

Useless. How utterly useless an application for her – his mind balked at the word, but he was, if nothing else, a realist – talents.

When she hadn't been able to follow the simplest instructions. *His.* He snarled.

"Meee," the kitten grumbled back, tail twitching as his agitation sent his cloak fluttering around his boots. It crouched, twitched twice, and pounced, but Severus was already stepping forward to stare into the bowl, one eyebrow rising in involuntary admiration at the subtlety of Hermione's charm work.

He growled his indignation at the kitten's questionable taste to the cereal and was rewarded with, *Hermny snugglz kitteh. Skyn sofft. Handz gentl!*"

"Her hands are not my concern," Severus retorted with a brusque gesture which set his cloak to rippling again.

*"Cloke!"* said the cereal.

The kitten's front paws landed firmly on the fabric, only to slide out from under her as silk and momentum met the polished floor.

The words in the bowl changed instantly to: *Die, cloke, die!*

And Severus' eyes darkened as he finally realized the inevitable security breach implicit in Hermione's breakfast cereal.

A moment later, he was striding determinedly down the hall. He would find her knickers or die trying.

# Locks

Chapter 4 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to Anastasia, Annie Talbot, and Lady Karelia, for alpha- and beta-reading.

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**Summary:** *A boggle of butterflies, bubbles, and Hermione's boss.*



## 4: Locks

*He would find her knickers or die trying.*

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"Good morning, dear."

Hermione looked up from a desk piled high with file folders and boxes as the Director of the Library floated in. "Good morning, Demetrios."

"Are you having any luck determining where they've put the Freud files?"

Hermione made a face. "I think they've misfiled them with Dali, but I've not had a chance to undo the latch - it keeps melting, and the countercharm keeps producing butterflies."

"Butterflies? Oh, dear..." Demetrios shook his translucent head benignly. "I do wonder what was actually in that punch..."

"Was there something you needed?" Her smile was genuine - over the last several years she'd grown particularly fond of the aeons-old ghost.

"I seem to have misplaced my owl," he replied, his hands fluttering vaguely. "I'm afraid the mice have got to her again, and she does find them so very bothersome..."

"You really shouldn't leave it lying about, you know." Hermione closed her eyes and whispered a locator spell. A 3-D image of the archive appeared over the teetering boxes. She leaned in and squinted. "You left it between the Phoenicians and the Rosicrucians."

"Oh, thank you, dear." He patted her head distractedly, and she laughed.

"What are you doing up there, anyway?"

"Mmm? Oh, merely indulging my curiosity."

She laughed again. "As always."

"Whyever did you think I created the archive? Surely not for anyone else's convenience..." With a cheeky wink, he floated out through the sarcophagus behind her.

Shaking her head indulgently, she bent once again over the latch on the Dali file-box.

A butterfly flitted out of her wand tip and perched on the latch, which was once again melting. It minced across the sticky surface, fanning itself with affronted wings.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Hermione said, coaxing the butterfly onto her finger and carrying it to the window.

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Severus sat on Hermione's floor holding the jewelry case, muttering low incantations whilst prodding its various corners and angles with a relentless finger.

Mimi started into his lap, but he nudged her aside with an elbow.

She walked around behind him and butted him in the ribs.

"Cease," he said, still focused on the box.

"Meee," she informed him, coming around his other side to inspect the case. She sniffed at it, paused, and sniffed again.

Then she butted his elbow.



He shot her a long, measuring glance from the corner of his eye.

She butted his elbow again.

He rolled his neck, which he imagined was getting stiff, and examined the case more closely.

The kitten ventured a paw onto his knee.

When he didn't push her away, she hopped the rest of the way up and turned around twice, waving her tail for balance.

"*Requiro*," Severus muttered.

He was rewarded with the appearance of several soap bubbles, which hovered above the case.

He snorted, and one of the bubbles floated toward Mimi, who raised her head to sniff at it.

It burst on her nose, and she started to purr.

"Ridiculous cat." He waved his hand through the remaining bubbles, ignoring the iridescent puddles they made on the floor. "*Requiro*," he said again, and the bubbles reappeared.

His eyes gleamed, and he said nothing for a few minutes as he mentally catalogued them by size, relative position, and dominant hue.

He then started popping them in sequence. When that didn't work, he methodically changed the sequence by one and tried again.

And again.

Mimi stretched, her claws catching on his trousers, and pranced off his lap toward the kitchen.

Intent on remembering which combinations he'd used, Severus barely registered her departure.

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As the late afternoon sunlight glinted against the eye of the sarcophagus in Hermione's office, she finally straightened through a cloud of black butterflies.

"What were those Americans *thinking*?" she grumbled, setting her wand down with a *snick* of finality and opening the file box to discover, as she'd expected, Sigmund Freud's notes for *Totem and Taboo* nestled in amongst the sketches for Salvador Dalí's "The Persistence of Memory."

Several business-like flicks of her wand later, the archives' resources were in passable order, and she made her way down aisles of floating metal shelves, seeking some human companionship.

She smiled inwardly at thinking of Demetrios as "human." With just the two of them working the archives (he had frightened off several well-connected but entirely incompetent hopefuls before promoting Hermione out from under the Muggle Artifacts curator), she sometimes forgot that he was dead.

With his flute-like, contralto voice, his indiscriminate fondness for 20th-century music, and his uncanny ability to temporarily misplace valuable reference-scrolls right before someone requested them, he had taken her under his ghostly wing, entrusting her with the world-famous archive he usually regarded as his own personal collection - in which he often shelved materials not by content but by size.

"Size matters, dear," he'd informed her.

She could hear him warbling through "Heaven Can Wait" somewhere near the rafters in the upper vaults. She was relieved he'd left off AC/DC; it had taken her a week to get "Highway to Hell" out of her head.

"And all the gods come down'... mmhmm... 'to sing for me'... now, where have you disappeared to, my lovely? Ah... there you are..."

She started up a spiral staircase, grinning to herself as she heard Demetrios rustling through a pile of scrolls. A moment later, something small and metallic clanged off the handrail near her head, and she jumped.

Demetrios called down, "Hermione, dear, would you be so kind..."

"I see it, Demetrios. Half a moment." She hurried down the stairs after the small coin he'd dropped and retrieved it from a dustbin.

"Heads or tails?" his voice piped down the stair.

She picked it up, turned it over, and laughed, heading back up the stairs. "Owl, of course - on both sides, same as always. Demetrios," she continued, reaching the landing under where he hovered up by a skylight, "have you been thieving again?" She flipped the coin up to him. "Doesn't this belong to Archaeology?"

"Oh, my. No, dear," he said, floating down to floor level, "not this one. They had to dig all of theirs out of the dirt; I've had my little pretty for millennia. Wouldn't do to lose her. There, now, my pretty thing," he said to the coin, running it between his fingers before tossing it in the air, "our Hermione has rescued you. Say 'Thank you.'" Sparkling a palely glowing grin, he wrinkled his nose. "Did you solve our flutterby problem?"

"Yes," she nodded. "They'd stuffed Freud in with Dalí, just as we'd suspected."

"How irresponsible," he chided the absent theorists. "So good of you to separate them. I shudder at the results were those two in particular left to whisper together disturbing bedfellows, indeed..." He chuckled. "And what an attractive picture that makes all those unfortunate whiskers!"

"Demetrios!" Hermione laughed. "Such a dirty mind for such an august personage."

"Oh, I don't think I'm quite *august* yet, dear. Perhaps in a few more centuries..."

She rolled her eyes. "I sometimes wonder they didn't kill you sooner."

"Oh, they tried, my dear, they tried," he murmured pleasantly. "But the old Library and I had our secrets, and we very nearly outsmarted them. If only I'd..." His cheer faded, a haunted look dimming his usual sunny translucence.

Hermione looked down. No one had known, when the Great Library of Alexandria had burned, that its first Librarian had died with it, trying to rectify an error so disgraceful it had ended his career, although now even he could not remember what it had been.

After a moment and with visible effort, he brightened again. "Well, no point dwelling over spilled choices... now don't look so sad, dear; it's all for the best. I have my treasures here with me, mostly intact and now that I have you to help me, why lament? Why, indeed, when we've thoughts to sing, ideas to dance with, and our lovely, lovely tomes to keep us company..."

Her throat was scratchy as she reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Indeed."

He patted her hand, his eyes drifting back toward the upper shelves.

"What has you so fascinated with the Phoenicians lately?" she asked.

"Why, I've no idea," he replied brightly. "The path of wisdom leads where it will, and I've long since ceased trying to fathom the night from the perspective of dawn... the world is young, Hermione, dear, and so are we so why don't you knock off early today, mm? Perhaps see your young man..." He drifted back toward the ceiling, already humming again.

He was in full voice by the time she collected her things and left the library.

---

The sun's low angle into Hermione's bedroom gleamed on several dozen bubble-spots on her floor as Severus's last sequence failed to open her jewelry case.

Cursing roundly, he kicked the offending box across the floor, rousing Mimi from yet another nap to go scampering after its trailing bubbles.

She batted at one, and it popped, sending her leaping sideways, tail lashing. She sat and shook her now-damp paw, pausing to sniff the air again.

Severus watched her and a dark gleam grew in his eyes as he realized she'd been scenting something for the better part of the day. Drawing himself to his full height, he commanded the bubbles to reappear. Wrapping himself in his cloak, he closed his eyes and inhaled.

*Parchment.*

One of the paler bubbles stopped its lazy spinning and solidified into a ball of parchment.

His eyebrow twitched. Bloody clever of her to refigure Amortentia as a locking Charm. Too bloody clever - but he had her now. He chuckled darkly.

He filed the scent of parchment away, mentally separating it from the rest which blended subtly in the air, and focused on the next. *Ink.* The bubble became a perfect sphere of liquid indigo. And the next. *Sealing wax.* A boiling ball of melted sooty-red.

His lip twitched in derision. Such an obvious combination of scents. Had he not used those very items for his instructions? Even Transfigured into a ruby on a sword-hilt, sealing wax retained a very distinctive odour. She should have noted that straightaway, found the memo, and...

*Focus.* Schooling his mind out of the way of his perceptions, he identified pine, silver, and old canvas.

A decidedly nasty smile. Too easy, really.

The last bubble hovered before him, perfectly transparent, lined with something so subtle it seemed more mirage than bubble.

He inhaled slowly. Carefully.

He almost couldn't detect it - it was almost odourless.

Mimi watched him with hooded eyes.

He inhaled again, more deeply, and perceived more a sensation than a scent. *Chill... death? Not her style. Snow? No; something murkier. Earthier.* He frowned unconsciously. *Ice? No...*

The sound of the heavy outside door roused him, and he waved the bedroom to hasty rights and flew to the kitchen, deliberately knocking the Typo-Bits to the floor as he flew to the living room.

His robes fluttered to stillness as he trained his attention on the flat's door.

He heard her mutter the unlocking spell, and he prevented it with a thought.

Louder, "*Alohomora.*"

His *Negato* was out before she'd finished the word.

"Oh, bollocks," he heard her mutter.

After several minutes of this, during which a glowering smile grew, etching itself almost permanently on his invisible lips, she switched the spell, as he knew she would, and he timed his own response to the very instant.

"*Salveus Maximus!*" she shouted at the door. The intense power of her spell was drawn into the depths of his own "*Vacuo Totalus,*" launching both door and witch into the room.

Hermione Granger landed at his feet with angry eyes echoing in his own with the force of silent thunder.

---

*A note on sources and spells:*

*Demetrios of Alexandria, an actual historical personage, was the first named librarian in the Western world and was largely responsible for building the collection at the Great Library, where he actually did organize things by size and would sometimes acquire archival items through theft he would borrow scrolls for copying from private collectors and simply not return them.*

*Apologies to Sigmund Freud and Salvador Dali for borrowing their Actual Works^TM, although as the thought of the two in combination gives Demetrios nightmares perhaps the apologies aren't all that sincere...*

*The spells at the end are meant to vaguely resemble something like "Huge Hello" and "Absolute Vacuum." Make of that what you will...*

~ A.

# Pathways

Chapter 5 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks as always to my writing partner, Anastasia, and to Annie Talbot and Lady Karelia for alpha- and beta-reading. Special thanks to Dicky (richardgloucester) for her valiant effort to teach this American to speak English - would that I could claim credit for the "bargepole" line, but that one's hers. :) ~ Ari

**Summary:** Steam rises, powder falls, a book disappears, and the especially charitable might spare a passing thought for Ron. Or, you know, not.



## 5: Pathways

*Hermione Granger landed at his feet with angry eyes echoing in his own with the force of silent thunder.*

-----

"OH," she huffed, leaping to her feet with a nimbleness Severus couldn't help but envy and gesturing abruptly with her wand.

The door to her flat slammed back into its frame.

A skittering noise from the hallway as Mimi darted under the nearest bit of furniture.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mimi..." Hermione moaned, waving her cloak and bag to a slightly crooked cloak-rack and disappearing into the hallway.

Severus followed, only to be greeted by the sight of her rump as she reached under an antique settee and groped for the kitten.

"Do come out, little thing."

A small noise from the kitten Severus caught himself mentally supplying the "Meee," and his lips thinned into a severe line and Hermione leaned her head on the floorboards.

"Please, Mimi? I'm so sorry I scared you."

But Mimi was not to be coaxed, and Hermione eventually gave up, standing up and twisting her hair back into a knot. "Tea," she said firmly. "I could do with a cuppa."

His lips twisting into a teeth-baring smile, Severus stepped neatly out of the way as Hermione wheeled around and started for the kitchen archway. "Stay," he hissed almost silently at Mimi.

Hermione stopped short as she saw the Typo-Bits scattered on the floor. "Oh, Mimi," she sighed, setting about clearing the breakfast things and putting the kettle on as the cereal gathered into a small pile and leapt one piece at a time into the dustbin.

Severus's eyes followed the letters. Their order appeared to be random.

Neither he nor Hermione noticed some several of them lying on the table under the tea tray, their progress toward the dustbin blocked by the sugar now salt bowl.

They spelled nothing of any importance as she sat down a few minutes later with tea.

In the shadow of the icebox, Severus found himself holding his breath with anticipation as she took a long, eager sip.

As she spat it across the kitchen with a horrified choking noise, he crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall, relaxed for the first time all day.

---

Hermione picked up the sugar bowl and examined its contents. She knew she'd been preoccupied, what with Crooks and the visiting Americans and evading Ron's annual proposal, but this? This was too unlike her. "Perhaps I'm having a senior moment?" she wondered aloud. "A soak, then. What do you think, Mimi?" Pushing back her chair, she wandered into the hallway.

Severus quickly returned the hot water pipes to normal.

Both of them completely missed the soft scraping sound that resulted in the word "Skyn!" lying completely exposed at the edge of the table.

---

Having learned his lesson from that morning's eyeful, Severus lurked in the hallway whilst Hermione disappeared briefly into her bedroom, passing within a hair's breadth of him moments later wearing a loosely tied and entirely too silky bathrobe.

Severus's eye caught a small black shadow stretching its way out from under the settee and gathering itself for a leap as the bathrobe's tie trailed past.

Severus shut his eyes quickly, nodding sharply in self-congratulation as he heard the unmistakable sound of silk rippling to the floor.

"Such a delightful thing," a now

*Don't look. Don't.*

naked Hermione paused to lean over

Severus gritted his teeth.

to scratch the kitten, whose purr filled the narrow hallway.

"What say you to a book, Mimi?"

*Bloody hell*, Severus thought, standing with his eyes clamped firmly shut, torn between wanting to watch her discover that her books were out of order and trying not to imagine her bending over her bookshelves in the altogether.

He had no wish to see that.

At all.

...

None.

He heard her head for the living room and opened one eye to a slit.

His lashes blurred everything into rounded shadows. Deeming the distortion acceptable, he slipped through the kitchen to watch from its other door.

Mimi looked up from a pile of silk and trotted after him.

As Severus squinted, Hermione trailed a musing finger along a shelf and then stopped. "Lockhart?!"

From her tone he deduced his impulsive decision to include the scroll amongst his chosen few had been correct. *Still harboring a schoolgirl crush, Miss Granger?* He smirked, but his smirk changed to confusion when he heard something hard hit the floor and the Floo roared to life.

"Ronald Weasley, have you been in my flat?"

"Oi, Hermione say, you're not wearing any "

"I've told you a thousand times not to come over when I'm at work."

"I haven't, Hermione, I swear. And " Severus heard his strangled swallow from the kitchen. " you're... you look..."

"Yes, yes, beautiful when I'm starkers, *I know*. Such an original compliment. Eyes. Up here, Weasley," Hermione flared. "A locking prank salt for sugar completely childish "

Severus's eyes widened involuntarily.

She was kneeling at the hearth, in a mass of spilled powder, her hair tumbling from its knot.

He shut them firmly.

" and that *ridiculous* Lockhart scroll you and Harry found such *anamusing* birthday present under 'S' really, Ron rearranging my books? When are you ever going to grow up?!"

"Hermione, I "

Severus heard her stand, and, carefully calibrating the exact length of his eyelashes, peeked.

She stood silhouetted against the flames in a blurry aura of dignified outrage. "Don't say anything. Just. Don't!"

A sweep of her arm, and the connection closed. "Bugger me backwards with a bargepole," she growled, stomping to the bathroom and slamming the door.

Mimi glanced up at Severus, and they exchanged nearly identical looks.

The letters on the table scraped almost silently into "Wtf?"

To Mimi, of course, that meant "Whut that forr?" but Severus didn't see it, and Mimi couldn't have explained it to him if he had.

It amounted to much the same thing, regardless.

---

After a long five minutes during which the Floo flashed with several incoming connection attempts, Severus decided that Hermione was done yowling at Weasley and, even better, unlikely to emerge from her bath for a while.

He slipped into the bedroom, where the jewelry case stood a full eight feet tall.

More to the point, it stood open.

*At last.*

It was time to shrink her knickers.

He felt almost cheerful.

---

One rapid assessment of the interior later, Severus realized three things: that the box contained her entire wardrobe, that she never threw anything away, and that she was

as careless with her clothes as she was fastidious with her books.

He took in a jumble of professional robes, Muggle clothing of several sizes, and, half off its hanger in a corner, a set of dress robes he seemed dimly to recall. Several hand-knitted sweaters peeked from underneath a jumble of towels and that morning's plush white bathrobe.

He also noted that the witch also owned far more shoes than reasonable circumstances could actually warrant.

Opening a set of drawers methodically, he discovered a row marked "Hogwarts" which contained her crisply folded school uniforms from each progressive year. These he closed as soon as he opened them, frowning.

Odd.

When no eventual combination of means magical or mundane revealed where the witch kept her knickers, he reluctantly admitted defeat. He couldn't very well shrink what he couldn't find.

Filing this new frustration away with the rest of his grievances, he emerged from the wardrobe and went to lurk in the hall.

The steam from Hermione's bath billowed through the open door to swirl around him, and he froze mid-stride lest its motion reveal his presence.

For a full three quarters of an hour, he stood motionless in the steam. At regular intervals he heard her murmur a heating spell, and he stood there, waiting.

A waiting in which he couldn't help but hear the sound of falling water as she waved a page to turn.

A rustle of paper, followed by yet more silence.

Severus watched the steam float and fall.

Finally, she finished her bath, and he slipped away.

---

Still rosy from her bath, a pajama-clad Hermione headed into the living room, parked herself on the floor and began a systematic examination of her bookshelves.

Mimi trotted over to where Severus stood sentry by the window and leapt up to the window ledge, golden eyes turned up to him with a look that any other wizard would have recognized as happiness.

It didn't take Hermione long to find the other titles he'd rearranged.

"*Subtle Slytherins... Speaking to ... Merlin, how random... Happenstance's Herba?*" She sniffed. "No thematic contiguity whatsoever. Oh," she continued, reaching for the Lockhart scroll, "and *that* awful thing. Such wit." She tucked the books back into their proper respective slots and shook her head. "Time to put this day to bed."

Glancing toward the window, she smiled. "Coming?"

Severus nearly snarled.

Right. The cat.

He settled for sneering.

When Mimi didn't move, Hermione scratched her fingers on the floorboard. "Come along, Mimi. Bed time."

Mimi stood staring hopefully at Severus.

"What are you looking at, my love?" Hermione rose, heading for the window.

Severus barely escaped detection, slipping away from her outstretched arm as she reached for the kitten.

His boot bumped the box of Floo powder.

At the noise, Hermione glanced at the box and frowned.

Severus drew himself absolutely still, poised on the edge of discovery.

"Let's put you back where you belong, shall we?"

He narrowly dodged her hand as she retrieved the box and placed it on the mantel.

"Talking to inanimate objects going like Demetrios, I am..." Her short laugh was quiet and strangely empty.

A subtle scent permeated her hair, and he fled to the other side of the room.

Mimi followed, adoring eyes turned upward toward him.

"What's gotten into you this evening?" Hermione shrugged, laughed helplessly, and said, "Fine. If you'd prefer to stay in this drafty big room all alone instead of coming to bed for a proper snuggle, suit yourself."

As she disappeared down the hall, Severus scooted the kitten toward her. *Go*, he thought.

Mimi promptly sat down.

*Go!* He glared.

The kitten just looked at him, unperturbed.

The lights went out, and Severus sank into Hermione's armchair for a good think.

"Childish," she'd said. He assessed her appraisal dispassionately and found it accurate. The tactics of his early years in Slytherin house would be childish. But he'd gone from that nearly straight to the Dark Lord's side, doubtless missing the vast middle of the spectrum between pranks and well, murder.

So intent was his inward focus as he searched intently for a middle ground, he was only half-aware of Mimi climbing into his lap, of her claws snagging his wool trousers as she kneaded his legs, of her tail tickling his hand into stroking her.

She turned herself inside-over under his ministrations and purred herself to contented sleep.

She was long asleep, whiskers twitching in a dream-hunt for a silken cloak, when a middle path finally occurred to the wizard whose invisible finger nuzzled softly behind her ear.

His reasoning was flawless:

Given: that it is a far, far easier matter to torment someone if they actually know it's happening, and

Given: that he was more or less a ghost

If: he made a bit of noise, so to speak,

Then: she could have no doubt that he was imminent he, Severus Snape, and not that terminally boorish Ron Weasley (Given especially, he amended, that Weasley was demonstrably not in her flat).

Therefore: He must wrest her from complacency - strip her mind of even the illusion of comfort she derived from blaming Weasley.

By ignoring his hidden directive, she'd broken his rules. The fact that she hadn't known either existed bothered him not in the slightest.

He would deny her even the possibility of denial.

---

His plan of action clear, he stood, tumbling a startled and suddenly very pointy-clawed kitten scraping down his trouser leg.

Ignoring the cat, he gestured imperiously toward Hermione's bookcases. A slash of his arm and her Hogwarts texts lay in rigid order, by year, on her floor; a twist of his hand and the rest of her collection burst forth from their shelves to hang in haphazard, slowly spinning suspension before her window.

A still-blinking Mimi shook her paw, eyes tracking the lower-hanging books. A ribbon bookmark dangled from one, and she batted at it, sending it toward Severus's hand.

He caught it reflexively and examined it an old, leather-bound volume of undoubtedly Muggle origins, its spine bearing the faded-gilt title "Selected Tales of E. A. Poe."

"Well done, kitten," he murmured, with a slight nod.

The cat's selection had been purely a matter of chance the cereal on the table still read "Wtf?" but better wizards than Severus Snape had entertained worse metaphors unawares, and, alive or dead, he would observe the proper forms. Merlin knew they'd been discarded too often where he was concerned.

Tucking Poe's stories into his robes, where they, too, became invisible, he turned his attention toward Hermione's bedroom, his eyes glittering with wicked anticipation.

A ghostly chortle disturbed the night, and Severus's precisely measured steps sounded in the hall, echoing their way into her dreams.

## Walls

Chapter 6 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: Ana's on vacation and hasn't seen this one yet; in her honour I borrowed her "Debts" playlist, with the usual results. Special thanks are due my alpha readers and fellow word-seekers, Annie Talbot, Lady Karelia, the Goalie, and Indigofeathers.

A note on the pink dress: Yes, yes, it's blue in canon; I know. Truuuust me.

Another note: Bit darker here, but never fear; it won't stay that way long. Mimi points out that she *is* black and wonders what all the fuss is about.

---

**Summary:** *In her dreams, he laughs; in her sleep, she smiles. But then she wakes up.*



### 6: Walls

*A ghostly chortle disturbed the night, and Severus's precisely measured steps sounded in the hall, echoing their way into her dreams.*

-----  
In her dream, she heard his laugh, and the laughter erased the slate of whatever she'd been dreaming before, until...

*She was eighteen and in a forest of Dementors, a glowing little otter turning them into trees...*

*... at seventeen, a phoenix singing promises as a canary beat a frantic warning from its cage of lemon drops...*

*... sixteen, and in the Hall of Prophecy whose jars turned to Time-Turners as down they forgot as then they fell, shattering in a whirlwind of butterflies whose wings spoke in shadows... beating the Dark out of old, dusty curtains, giving up doxy wings that sparkled in the sunlight, falling to mirrors on the floor...*

*... and in a mirror, fifteen, and (oh, dear; pink; just a dream)...*

*... fourteen... thirteen... twelve...*

*... and eleven, watching the words from her Hogwarts letter leap into her cereal bowl... she ate them, and they tasted of salt...*

*... younger still, her books dancing off her bookshelves to sing her to sleep, hovering just out of reach as she jumped on her bed, laughing, the books retreating as she jumped higher and higher, always out of reach of her outstretched hands...*

*... her mother hushing her from the door; "I'm sleeping, Mummy, see? My eyes are closed..."*

*... and the books floating silently to rest on the bedcovers before her mother could see... reading their spines under the counterpane by the light of her own finger... "H is for Happenstance; H is for Hermione. G is for Gilderoy..." (but that came later... oh, right; I'm dreaming...) "... is for Granger"... under the bedcovers the child Hermione reached for the next book with her glowing finger and a spark arced from the book, a spark by whose flash she read the word "Scorch," and the little girl giggled, wondering what a "Slytherin" was and why her eyes watered when its cover turned green...*

*... and who was that man, laughing? He could teach her why her books danced and her finger glowed, and even maybe reach the books that she couldn't when they wouldn't come down from the bookshelves... "Maybe he'll read them to me... maybe... when I'm older..."*

*She curled closer into her pillow, laughing along with the laughter as the footsteps approached her door... sitting up in bed with hopeful eyes dancing as the laughing brought the books down from the ceiling where she was sometimes sure she could see stars...*

The heavy footsteps stopped outside her door, and Hermione Granger's twenty-six year old eyes flew open. Her wand was in her hand, the room blazing to light, before the echoes of the laughter had died into silence.

---

Lumos before Protego, Granger? Sloppy. Fully alert, Severus's unblinking eyes tracked her as she slid out from under the covers, swinging her feet to the floor to stand. He countered her movements as she slipped around the room, her back to the wall, to stand next to the door.

Consequently, when she whipped around the door frame and blasted a fully mature shielding spell down the hall, he was standing directly behind her, his eyes boring into the back of her neck.

Her shiver was almost imperceptible.

A less observant spy might not have caught it. Severus adjusted his chin and his invisible eyes darkened with something like his old certainty.

When nothing more sinister than a curious, "Meeee?" answered Hermione's spell, she edged into the hallway.

Drawing on the lifetime of stealth which seemed once again to be his to command at will, Severus followed her, his booted steps making no sound.

He exulted in the return of his habits of body and mind. The Granger minx had very nearly bested him - his instincts had been blunted by the worlds' seven-year ignorance. But he'd borne far too much during his lifetime to suffer comparison to a Weasley lightly.

---

"What the..." Hermione's words died as she stared at her books hanging in mid-air. This was completely beyond Ron's imagination, if not his skill, and she tensed.

"Meeee," said the kitten, leaping out of the armchair and landing softly on the floor.

In a flash, Hermione had the kitten in her arms, her wand still out as she backed into the corner by the window. "It's okay, Mimi. It's going to be okay."

A series of complicated wand movements, and she and the kitten were surrounded by an impenetrable wall of rippling force through which Severus could not hear.

He moved closer and saw her eyes grow stern as she cast a series of advanced Defense spells.

He gestured, and her old DADA book flung itself at her head.

She flinched, twisting instinctively to shield Mimi with her body as the book bounced off her shields.

Severus made no sound as he released her books one by one. They hurled themselves singly to the floor in a regular, increasing tempo that left no doubt as to the intelligence behind it even as it crescendoed to a deafening storm of leather, paper, and glue.

Hermione's look of horror was replaced by guarded confusion as she realized that not one book had been damaged on impact.

Severus frowned and Summoned the jewelry case from her bedroom.

It shot into his waiting palm with a sharp slapping sound, and he sent it spinning to hover over Hermione's Hogwarts texts.

*Requiro*, he commanded it silently, and its several bubbles appeared.

One at a time, in sequence, he sent them to float at eye-level before Hermione's shield.

*Parchment*, he snarled mentally, and the bubble enlarged monstrously, transforming into a life-sized parchment doll.

*Ink*, his thoughts snapped, enlarging the second bubble into an ensuing wave of indigo that rippled at the parchment figure's feet, rising inexorably around it, threatening to consume it from beneath.

*Sealing wax* - and a shower of boiling ink streaked with soot rained onto the figure, spattering it with droplets of crimson that hissed when they met the rising wave of ink.

Hermione visibly trembled as she watched, transfixed; Mimi swiveled her head to stare at him with wide, amazed eyes.

He stood unmoved, expanding the fourth bubble to fill the room. It burst from within into ominously waving pine boughs which surrounded the parchment figure, battering it until it creased and swayed precariously over the glint of the sharp silver sword that had sliced its way out of the fifth.

He shot the sixth straight at the ceiling, where it silently exploded into a falling shroud of moldering canvas and fell on the figure, crumpling bough, blade, and the bespattered parchment figure into the lapping pool of darkening ink.

The seventh bubble hung unseen in the air, and he knew a moment of panic as he realized he'd never identified its contents, but it didn't matter.

Behind the wall of rippling magic, Hermione was staring straight ahead, her eyes burning with fury, her cheeks wet with naked tears.

Through the rippling field of her protection spell, he saw her mouth the words, "How dare you?"

Her impotent rage at seeing her most intimate longings unlocked and transformed into a grotesque pantomime whilst she stood by, trapped behind her own protective machinations, sent a bolt of satisfaction to Severus's extremities, and he reveled in her violation.

*Welcome to my hell, Miss Granger*, he thought. *Welcome to my hell.*

He saw her tear her eyes from the roiling mass of indigo.

Her eyes raked the room, flickering more than once as they traveled over the spot he inhabited.

He paused; startled *Can she see me?*

Mimi blinked at him haughtily, but whether the blink meant "Don't be daft" or "Run, you idiot," he'd no idea.

A soft scraping noise from the kitchen; this time, his ears caught it.

*Accio cereal*, he thought, and the letters flew into his hand.

"Missd bubbl."

He turned his gaze on the seventh bubble, which hovered almost invisibly between him and Hermione.

He blinked, and it burst, and, as the air filled with the scent of loss, Hermione's shield dissolved.

She tilted her chin and appeared to consider something. After a moment, she shook herself as if settling a mantle around her shoulders. She turned slightly toward him and, still not looking quite at him but not quite not

*Can she see me?!*

her voice preternaturally calm, she said, "Professor Snape, I presume?"

## Thresholds

*Chapter 7 of 33*

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: As always, thanks to Lady Karelia for her exacting beta-read, and to Annie and Indy for their commentary and support.

We're flying Air Demetrios for a bit in this chapter - fasten your seatbelts. Should a loss of oxygen occur, a small black kitten will be provided for your comfort. Pay no attention to the pilot behind the curtain.

---

Note to readers on TPP: I had an issue and uploaded chapters out of order. Chapters 5 and 6 are fixed now; chapter 5 may be new to some of you who've been following the story. My bad!

---

**Summary:** *In which confrontation ends in a startling conclusion. Whilst Severus worries at his ripped trousers, Hermione, with Demetrios's help, resolves a dilemma.*





## 7: Thresholds

... as the air filled with the scent of loss, Hermione's shield dissolved.

...

Can she see me?!

----

"Professor Snape, I presume?"

When Severus didn't respond, she continued sharply. "There's no point pretending. I don't know how you've managed invisibility as a ghost, but regardless, I do know you're there. I chose that particular combination of scents rather specifically, and Ron would never" - she gestured to the rippling pool of ink, which had settled to the floor after swallowing the canvas "could never be that malicious."

Severus's smile crept dangerously near the border of "smug."

Mimi was leaning curiously toward the pool of ink on the floor. She twisted, trying to escape Hermione's arms.

Hermione vanished the pool and set the kitten down. "No, Professor Snape. You or, rather, your ghost are somewhere in this very room."

He said nothing.

Hermione's eyes swept the room in vain. "Ron will never be able to identify the last scent. It's so delicate, really, that the other scents render it nearly undetectable unless one has enough subtlety to know something's missing..."

Subtlety, motive the difference was academic. Severus stayed silent as she continued her babbling. As a teacher, never mind a spy, he'd had ample occasion to learn much of value from the ramblings of unsettled minds. He'd cultivated his innate ability to disconcert with a look toward that very end.

"To be perfectly accurate," she went on, "I should have chosen scents from the Shrieking Shack..."

He blinked. Her Amortentia potion smelled like the Shrieking Shack? Great Merlin, she was mental.

"... but then... well, I'm in that wardrobe every morning of my life, and I those weren't really pleasant odours, were they? The Charm served its purpose, anyway, until 'Absolutely unbreakable,' I thought, seeing as how you're dead, and no one else would ever think to Ron assumes I chose the scents with reference to the night he came back, which is exactly what I intended him to think." She shook her head. "I can't think how many mornings he's which is absolutely none of your business!"

None, he agreed emphatically, although he had the fleeting thought that he must be missing something important.

"Which brings me to the point: What, exactly, is your business with my things, and what the hell are you doing in my flat?"

Mimi looked up at her. "Meee?"

When he said nothing, she flared, "Must you stand there like a bad imitation of an invisible Dementor after that spectacularly nasty invasion of my privacy? Now that you have my full attention, I assume you do have a purpose?"

Severus scrutinized her face hungrily, eager in spite of his derision to see what reaction his first successful interaction with a living person would elicit. "Revenge," he growled.

She had no reaction.

None at all it was as though he hadn't spoken.

Mimi, however, blinked at him.

"Well?"

Snarling, he spoke more slowly. "Revenge, you idiot."

She snorted. "Fine, don't answer me."

Mimi looked at him sorrowfully and trotted toward him only to stop suddenly, sit down, and shake her paw in irritation. "Meee?"

The cereal in his palm read, "Halp!"

Sniding inwardly about cats' utter lack of respect for the niceties of timing, Severus reached down and untangled the several black woolen threads she had trapped in her claws. Threads from his trousers. Rumbling a warning, he examined his trouser leg and found a small hole at the knee.

Mimi purred and arched into his hand.

Hermione watched the threads leave the kitten's claws and disappear, peering closer as Mimi's fur flattened against Severus's invisible palm. "Oh, dear." Turning her eyes to where she thought his head might be, she spoke in a voice that sounded strangely hollow. "Professor Snape, if you can hear me, could you please say something to

Mimi?"

He blinked. Feeling the fool, he grumbled, "You have damaged my trousers."

The cereal changed to, "Thredz hurtz pawz."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh oh, Merlin, *no*. You *poor* thing." Her legs shuddered, and she reached down toward the floor to catch herself as she sank to her knees. "Sweet Merlin..."

Severus snorted at her rather extreme reaction, wondering if he had perhaps succeeded in unbalancing her after all. The kitten had clearly not suffered any permanent damage from threads? Please. Really; the witch would do better to worry less about its ridiculous claws than about

"How awful," she breathed.

He glared at her in full frontal exasperation. Could one not even finish a thought in this madhouse?

She was pale; her words almost inaudible: "You're not dead at all, are you..."

"Of course I am," he spat, even as the cereal changed to, "Off coursnot."

---

Of everything he had expected to feel since deciding to avenge his own death on the Granger witch rather than the insufferable Potter, he had not expected boredom.

Upon Hermione's startling and, of course, completely wrong-headed pronouncement that he wasn't dead, she'd admonished his general direction to "Please, please stay until I get back" and hopped into the Floo in her pajamas.

That had been two hours ago.

Boredom was not his favorite pastime especially not when laced with confusion.

Having had the last two hours to recall her nervous ramblings and to reflect on them, he'd isolated part of what he'd missed: It was clear from her insistence on her "choice" of the scents in her locking charm that she had no idea she'd modified the Amortentia potion in its creation.

Shunting aside the implications of her possessing the talent to do nearly impossible Charms work more or less unconsciously because her intellect was clearly not his problem he focused instead on the two issues that blasted seventh bubble implicitly raised.

The first, of course, was her association of love with loss. Troubling, if one cared about that sort of thing; he, however, found it an interesting vulnerability, and one he could no doubt exploit should the occasion arise. Assuming, that is, that she would return.

He'd looked for some sort of timepiece in her flat but found none. Close enough to two hours, at any rate. Perhaps edging closer to three...

The second issue raised by that last scent and, to him, the far more troubling of the two was that he had without doubt missed something. And when after however many hours of intense reflection, punctuated only by keeping the kitten away from the hole in his trouser knee, he still couldn't quite grasp what it was, he was troubled, indeed.

Mimi pounced on the dangling threads at his knee, catching her claws again and Meee-ing plaintively.

Distractedly, he sorted out threads and claws and went back to thinking, face resting on hand, slowly rubbing his thumb along his jaw-line.

He didn't notice that his knee was bleeding.

Ghosts don't bleed, after all; why should he feel the impossible?

---

Hermione made her way briskly through the library's cavernous grand entrance hall toward the door to the warren of back corridors reserved for staff. The marble floors were cool on her bare feet, and, although the hall was deserted, she couldn't for the life of her dispel her sense of exposure at being at work in her pajamas, and the chill floor wouldn't let her forget it.

*Like that nightmare about attending class in your underwear,* she thought as she placed her hand on the door to the staff corridors.

Exactly like. Especially, she mused as the corridors branched into a dizzying array of choices, most especially when one's just had one's private memories paraded in so symbolically violent a fashion before one's nose.

By one's former *professor*.

She shuddered, then scolded herself for thinking nonsensically. Really, she had a larger problem here. If he hadn't actually died and the kitten was proof of that, although one of her purposes in coming was to double-check a very specific Egyptian papyrus if he hadn't actually died, what had he been doing for the last several years? Seven, already.

She shook her head sympathetically, taking a short-cut through the Department of Impossibilities, reaching up to touch her wand to the propeller of Amelia Earhart's airplane as she passed it.

This didn't do anything, but all of the staff did it religiously.

"For luck, dear," Demetrios had told her.

"Demetrios," she'd said as he'd floated back down to continue their conversation, "why isn't this Department located at the Ministry? Shouldn't it be in the Department of Mysteries?"

He'd chuckled warmly. "Oh, no, my dear, although it's an easy slip of the mind to think so. Mysteries involve possibility, of course; there is no mystery in the impossible."

She reached for the ship's bell from the Flying Dutchman and rang it twice.

Demetrios's voice echoed from within its brass hollow. "Biblioteke... pardon, Archives..."

"I'm awfully sorry to wake you, Demetrios, but..."

"Hermione? At this hour? Sweetness and light, whatever is wrong? And I wasn't sleeping, of course; I don't, you know... but I treasure your politeness all the same, of course; oh, dear, surprise is so flustering. Come up, come in... what's troubling you, dear?"

She clasped the bell's clapper firmly, and it pulled her up several stories to deposit her on the ledge that marked the archive's back entrance.

Demetrios appeared beside her, placing his translucent arm around her shoulders as he ushered her in.

"Demetrios, I have a problem," she said, reaching for one of the cardigans she kept sequestered throughout the archive.

He regarded her pajamas. "If that's your nightwear, my dear, then I don't wonder that you do. We must have a collection of catalogs somewhere about; they *do* send rather a lot of them..." He smiled. "I'm sure we can select something more appropriate to the, hm, yes, to your boudoir..." His smile was kind, but his eyes revealed his concern.

Despite what she felt was the very real urgency of her mission, she laughed. "Demetrios, *really*..."

His smile deepened, but his pale eyes remained serious. "There, my dear; you're the better for laughing. Now, tell me what is it? Problem with your young man?"

She shuddered. "No, it's not Ron." She didn't mean to emphasize his name, but she did, and Demetrios caught the emphasis.

"Ooo, a love triangle, then?" He said something in Middle French that Hermione couldn't quite catch. "Not the best choice, if the literature is to be believed, but people sometimes do survive... rarely, of course, but nonetheless." He spread his hands.

Hermione laughed again she couldn't help herself but the ghost nodded for her to continue. "It's nothing like that. It's just... Demetrios, there's something someone in my flat, something like a ghost, but he's not dead; he's invisible, and he has a familiar, and he's really, *really* angry with me."

Demetrios blinked slowly. "Perhaps, my dear, you'd best start at the beginning."

She nodded and pulled her hair out of her face, twisting it up and sticking her wand through it. Taking a slow breath, she began, "I know you were aware of the second war a few years back."

He nodded.

"You recall the business about Professor Snape? That he was a spy?"

"Severus Snape?"

She nodded.

For the first time since she'd met him, Demetrios looked thoroughly perplexed. "Severus Snape is in your flat?"

"It has to be him," she insisted.

"And how do you know that, dear? Has he spoken to you?"

"I can't see or hear him. But something's there, and it can do magic, and it has a familiar, and " She hesitated, not wanting to share the details of her locking Charm with her boss, however fond of him she was. " and I'm nearly certain it's him. Items from the war, small things of which only he, Ron, or Harry would understand the significance he's been manipulating them to get my attention."

"You're sure Ron and Harry aren't having fun with you?"

"Quite." It came out more disdainfully than she'd intended. She ran her hands through her snarled hair, realized she hadn't even brushed it, and blushed.

"Don't worry, dear, you look quite fetching. Has this entity evinced interest in your books?"

She nodded, and gasped as she suddenly understood their significance. "Oh yes the authors' initials were H, G, S, and S."

Demetrios frowned. "You don't mean to tell me you're still organizing according to the alphabet?"

"Well, yes... but just at home, of course." She blushed more deeply than before.

"Astonishing... but that's a matter for another time; do go on..."

As she told him a slightly edited version of that night's events, he interrupted only twice. Once to ascertain that her books were, in fact, unharmed for some reason he found that very important and once to inquire about how she'd charmed the cereal.

"Oh," she said. "I based it on principles of Animatism, of course, modified for organic non-sentience in the flour, and isolated and applied the translation aspect of general inorganic Transfiguration. It took a few tries to effect the necessary unity of balance between the polarities, but the theory seemed sound..." She trailed off as she realized she was off topic.

Demetrios's eyes shone with reflected pride. "He'd be so very proud of you, my dear."

"Who? Professor Snape?"

Demetrios laughed. "No, my dear. Aristotle. He was my teacher, you know..." A fond smile crossed his features. "Forgive me for interrupting."

"Aristotle?!"

"Of course, dear. Such a lovely man; I miss him still," he mused softly, but brightened almost instantly. "But now I have you to keep me company, of course, which is equally delightful, and you and I shall learn together."

Hermione's mind tried to encompass a reality where her company was even a pale substitute for that of Aristotle's some part of her brain kept repeating *Aristotle?! and would not be still*. Aristotle combined with the events of the evening to finally push her over some edge, and she broke into peals of only slightly manic laughter. "You did *not* just compare me to Aristotle!"

"Not in all ways, my dear. Not even all of the important ones. But he would respect the evolution of your Charms. Not even he had any idea what his cat was thinking." Demetrios chuckled. "His guesses were worse than most, you know."

"Cats... of *course*." Hermione recollected herself. "Demetrios, I need to consult the papyrus we had out when Crookshanks..."

"When your familiar took up a career in babysitting? Yes, dear, of course. May I inquire which roll you need?"

"I'm almost certain there was a passage in that earliest one about the bond between a feline familiar and its wizarding counterpart. Something about spirit..."

"*The spirit flows between them as the spring floods the fields, and thus and only even so are they sustained*"

"That's the one. The hieroglyph used for 'floods' if I recall, it's the variant that connotes 'life-bringing' and not the variant used when describing 'death' or 'disaster'?"

"It does indeed, my dear." He nodded approvingly.

"So if the papyrus is correct..."

"Ah, I quite see your point unlike the phoenix, which can be loyal after death, a feline can only bond with a spirit that is at least esoterically alive. And that delightful kitten... she looks to him, you say?"

"I'm certain of it."

Demetrios nodded again, more slowly. "Then whatever is in your apartment is indeed alive."

"You're sure?"

"Quite. I did not have time when the fire broke out to collect the Bad Papyruses, just those which contained the utmost authority."

Hermione leaned forward slightly. "Dare I ask?"

He laughed. "That particular roll was inscribed by Bast herself. Trust me when she's moody, which happens quite frequently, it goes blank and refuses to be read at all."

"So Professor Snape *is* alive."

"It seems so, dear."

"But..."

"Yes?"

She shook her head. "But the fact remains that he's invisible, and although Mimi seems to hear him, I can't."

"Oh. Hmm..." Demetrios's face grew serious. "Perhaps... perhaps 'alive' isn't quite the right word, then." He zoomed into the rows of metal shelves, and a few moments later, Hermione heard the low gong that signaled the opening of the titanium vault where they kept their most fragile artifacts.

When he floated back into sight, he was already reading. "You were right about the variant, my dear; I was wrong about the translation."

"Translation?" her voice faltered.

"Not 'alive.' 'Quick.' Here." He showed it to her.

She shook her head. "I'm better with the Norse, I'm afraid."

"'Quick', my dear. The difference is subtle, but in this case, quite powerful. It means well, it doesn't translate into English, but the sense is this: Your professor awaits some judgment yet unmade on which his spirit hangs. How distressing. How very distressing indeed."

"Judgment?" Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Like a trial?"

"No, no, nothing that civil. The judgment he awaits is his own." Demetrios shook his head, apparently overcome by some inner melancholy.

"I don't follow."

"When he died I assure you, he did die; you will understand in a moment - he was given the opportunity to stay or go, as we all are." He folded his hands as though that settled the matter.

Hermione bit her lip. "And?"

"Isn't it obvious? Apraxia." He opened his hands.

"I'm sorry?"

"'Inaction', my dear, it means 'inaction'. Your professor simply didn't choose."

Hermione considered this. "Apraxia, it's called?"

Demetrios nodded, folding his hands over his middle. "The concept of inaction is the last recourse of the stoic when confronted with skepticism as a philosophy, mind you, not merely 'doubt'. Something larger. Systemic."

Hermione weighed his words.

Stoic well, the Professor certainly had been that.

And systemic skepticism? Yes, that was the flip side; he'd earned it, thoroughly. He'd had to, she knew, to keep his cover as a spy, but...

She wrinkled her nose. That was *his* problem. Not hers.

As was characteristic of Gryffindors when faced with a dilemma of potentially epic scale, Hermione's decision was measurable in nanoseconds. "Stoics? Skeptics? Bugger the lot of them I want that bastard out of my flat."

Demetrios's rich laughter rang joyously through the entire archive. "Aristotle would approve, my dear. On both points."

---

*Note on sources, random allusions, and other delights:*

*The plane in the chapter art is Amelia Earhart's.*

*Middle French - although Hermione doesn't understand him, Demetrios is referring to one of the sources for Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur and the Arthur/Guinevere/Lancelot triangle. Not really applicable here, as Severus's opinion of Ron is... quite.*

*Biblioteke - Greek for "library."*

*Aristotle - An Actual Historical Personage™ - who was the real Demetrios's teacher. (No pressure, there.) Any rumours about him and his students are completely*

unfounded. Also, perhaps incidentally, the author of *The Poetics*, in which he propounded on the humanistic achievements that are unity and balance.

*Bast* - Egyptian cat goddess. Not, to the best of my knowledge, the author of any papyruses, good, bad, or indifferent.

*Bad Papyruses* - Riff on the concept of Shakespeare's *Bad Quartos*.

*Apraxia* - Philosophical weapon with which adherents to Stoicism would smite proponents of Skepticism when they weren't looking.

~ A., twirling quill of excessive geekery.

## Connections

Chapter 8 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my alpha- and beta-readers, Lady Karelia, Annie Talbot, and Indigofeathers. Ana's still on vacation. \*pouts\*

**Summary:** *There are always ways to communicate.*



### 8: Connections

*"Stoics? Skeptics? Bugger the lot of them I want that bastard out of my flat."*

*Demetrios's rich laughter rang joyously through the entire archive. "Aristotle would approve, my dear. On both points."*

-----

Severus and Mimi looked up as the Floo sprang briefly to life. An orange paper airplane soared into the room and circled indecisively.

*Orange?*

Mimi leapt after it with gleaming eyes and twitching tail.

Something flickered in Severus's invisible eyes as he watched her.

After a particularly impressive leap, she batted it to the ground and pounced on it.

The paper airplane twitched, still trying to complete its delivery. Mimi stared at it as if daring it to try to escape, its efforts crumpling it beneath her paws.

It twitched free and skittered across the floor, and she pounced again, this time sitting on it and looking up at Severus, who arose from the chair and retrieved it.

"Meee," Mimi exclaimed, her eyes tracking the paper airplane.

He sat back down to read, only to be impeded in that usually straightforward action by Mimi, who was in his lap instantly, balancing with one forepaw on his shoulder as she slashed at the now-quiescent paper he held out of her reach.

Severus fixed her with a steely look. "Cease. Unless you can read."

"Meee," she countered emphatically, reaching for the memo.

"No. As you can deduce from its lack of flapping, it is patently a delivery for me."

The cereal he'd placed on a side-table shuffled to, *'Mi burd. Killd it.'*

"It's called a *memo*, and it's mine. Go wash. Purr. Whatever is next on your agenda." He shot her a directive look.

Mimi glared at him and hopped off his lap, stalking out of the room with her tail held sarcastically high.

To: Professor Snape, care of H. Granger (home Floo)

From: Hermione Granger, Ph.D., O.o.M. (1st), Assistant Archivist, British Library (Wizarding Branch)

Re: \_\_\_\_\_

*I'm terribly sorry to have left so abruptly well, no, I'm not, but the forms must be followed (edit: omit) stay out of my things! but after consultation with Head Archivist Demetrios (Bay-Laurel of Athena, 2nd Class) (he sends his regards), I have determined that your current predicament is your own fault (edit: reword).*

Severus's lip curled dangerously at the facile dismissal. "Predicament"? The witch's time would be better spent attending to her own plight.

At his almost casual gesture, all of the books on her bookshelf exchanged covers, and her wardrobe expanded to its full height.

He continued reading.

*When, at your death (Demetrios offers his belated condolences), you were offered the choice to remain as a ghost or move on to whatever's next you engaged in something called "apraxia" (def.: "inaction")...*

"I know what it means, you patronizing bint."

*... and, as a result, tethered your spirit but not the rest of you (mem.: locate body?) to the known wizarding world.*

Hermione's offhand "locate body?" cast an ominous shadow over his face. As he finished reading, it lowered, heavy with unspent thunder.

*I know Professor Dumbledore rather mucked about (edit: re-word) with your life, and I'm reallyreally sorry for you, but did you really intend to give him such power over your death? I suppose you must have, since you have done... if our choices make us who we are (Demetrios says that's philosophically unsound, however fashionable), then your lack of choice, Professor Snape, made you who more precisely, what - you're not.*

His hands twitched as, mentally, he strangled her.

*All of which is brings me to the point.*

"Goody," he muttered.

*Your condition is straightforward; all you must do to bring closure to what must be a terribly boring existence I can't think why else you'd suddenly appear in my flat if not out of boredom is choose. If you remain as a ghost, it would be an honour to speak with you further (edit: "at all?"); if you move on (which must be more restful than your current agitated (edit: omit) state), I assure you that I would be happy (edit: "honoured") to take care of Mimi for you.*

His chest tightened slightly at the word "Mimi."

*If you prefer other arrangements, please inform Mimi, and I will follow the cereal's instructions to the extent they're coherent (edit: omit?).*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Hermione Granger, Ph.D., O.o.M. (1st)*

"Your definition of 'respect' is somewhat lacking, Miss Granger." He was damned if he'd afford her an honorific.

*P.S. I shall return home after a decent interval. I imagine such choices are better made without an audience.*

As opposed to the last time? Severus glowered at the memo as if the power of his eyes alone could reduce it to ashes, then turned it over.

*This Memo Property of the British Library (Wizarding Branch). Not for Reproduction.*

*Purple: Final draft; indelible ink. Respond and file.*

*Grey: Intermediate draft; pencil. Forward to members of appropriate committee. (Paper specially treated to resist disintegration under multiple erasures and amendments.)*

*Orange: First draft; semi-automatic quill; not for circulation.*

*Pink: Confidential; scented ink optional. Does not officially exist.*

He crushed the paper into a ball and hurled it across the room, his nostrils flaring.

Mimi poked her head around the corner, spied the ball of paper, and chased after it, meeee-ing happily.

Without pausing to realize the futility of his actions, Severus stormed across the room, seized a handful of powder and threw it into the Floo.

"Connection?" said the pleasant, disembodied voice from the flames.

"Granger," he growled, barely keeping his voice even. "Get me Hermione Bugging Granger, now!"

"One moment please..." The spell that provided operator service for the Floo network made several gratuitous clicking noises. "Your party has been located. Who may I say is calling?"

"Snape," he barked.

"First name?"

"What the fuck do you think?"

"I'm sorry," the spell responded blithely, "that identity does not officially exist. Who may I say is calling?"

"Ronald Stinking Weasley," he lied.

"Dr. Granger is presently in her office... connecting you now..."

At that moment, he couldn't have bloody well cared if she was St. Hermione, capering naked in a field of daisies.

Somewhere through the field of white rage that completely obscured all rational thought, he heard the disembodied voice of the Floo spell repeating, "Does not officially exist... does not officially exist..."

---

"Miss-Bloody-Granger, get your sodding arse home. Right. Now."

At the sound of Severus Snape's voice blasting into the dusty hush of the archive, Hermione nearly exploded out of her skin. "Professor Snape! I can hear you!" She leapt up, knocking her chair over.

Across the room, Demetrios looked up from his scroll and raised his eyebrows, the rest of him floating upwards to rejoin them.

Severus's voice echoed from the Floo: "I repeat: Arse. Home."

Hermione recollected herself and her surroundings. "I would thank you not to speak to me as though I'm a child, Professor."

He snorted, the force of his derision knocking an antique inkwell off Hermione's desk. "Insolence! How dare you trivialize "

"How dare *you* order me about?!" she snapped. "Perving about my flat, messing about with my things my *books*. I was trying to *help* you because I feel *feltsorry* for you, you insufferable, egotistical *shadow!*"

Silent fury emanated from the Floo.

Demetrios set aside his scroll, fished the small coin from the folds of his robe, and folded his hands placidly. The coin glinted from between his fingers.

Finally, the Floo emanated a low, dark murmur. "This matter is not settled, Miss Granger."

"*Doctor* Granger," she snapped.

But the connection was closed.

Hermione stood before the Floo at a loss.

At Demetrios's discreet cough, she turned around, her eyes falling on the purple, final draft of the memo she'd sent the Professor. That meant she'd sent "Bloody hell." She looked at her boss. "I'm so sorry about all that..."

He chuckled. "No worries, my dear, no worries. I've heard worse, far worse, a time or two."

A small, worried smile. "I suppose you would have, yes."

"That's better, dear."

"I'd best go, I think." She sighed. "Merlin only knows what I'll find at home if I delay."

Demetrios gave her a long, measuring look, then flipped the coin over to her.

"For luck, dear. Just a loan, of course. I can't bear to be parted from her for long."

Impulsively, she rushed over and hugged him tightly. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm going to need it."

As the flames fell to silence after her departure, Demetrios smiled, and murmured, "I quite imagine you will, my little Hermione. May Athena's wisdom prevail. It usually does..." His kindly eyes rested a moment longer on the empty Floo. "... but for better or worse, who can say?"

He started humming he was still on "Heaven Can Wait" and then to sing as he floated toward back toward the Phoenicians. By the time he reached the shelf he'd been searching when Hermione had burst in, the entire archive resounded with a swelling orchestral accompaniment, and he launched full voice into the first chorus.

---

Only the total silence that greeted Hermione when she returned home could have been louder.

"Professor Snape?"

No response.

She spotted the crumpled orange memo under her now full-size wardrobe and swallowed.

"Professor Snape, I'm awfully sorry."

Nothing.

Not even a scratching from the kitchen table.

She looked around the room for the cereal bits and spotted a pile of crumbs on the floor. They bore the unmistakable impression of a boot heel.

She sighed and heard footsteps from the hallway.

---

"Your apologies are worthless," he said coldly, rounding the corner with Mimi at his heels.

---

She spotted Mimi, but of her professor there was no sign.

She headed for the kitchen and opened a new box of cereal, scattering it over the table.

"Talk to me?"

Nothing.

"Please?"

Mimi hopped up to the table, and the cereal spelled out, "R-S-P-C-T."

Hermione nodded. "That memo was frightfully disrespectful. You weren't supposed to see that copy, of course."

"B-V-S-L-Y."

She frowned. Adverbs were usually beyond even Crookshanks, and Mimi was no Kneazle. "Are you spelling for her?"

"Y-E-S."

Hermione rubbed her hands over her face, pausing to press her cheeks, which ached from tension.

It was going to be a long night.

It was already dark. She just hoped to weather the storm.

## Openings

Chapter 9 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks to my alpha-readers, Anastasia (yay! she's back!), Indigofeathers, AnnieTalbot, Lady Karelia, and Mia Madwyn. My apologies to non-native English-speakers for puzzling bits with the cereal in the last chapter - I used a slightly different method in this one. \*blush\* \*blows kiss\*

Oh... you did notice that the genre wasn't only "humour" but also "angst," right?

---

**Summary:** *Sword-strikes and some bleeding. It's mostly a metaphor.*



### 9: Openings

*It was already dark. She just hoped to weather the storm.*

----

Hermione stared at the "Y-E-S" on her table. Mimi blinked calmly at her as a cabinet opened and a quill and parchment floated out.

Hermione sent them flying back with a sharp gesture, slamming the cupboard door shut with a neat twist of her wand. "No. Not even you can scorch me raw using cereal we'll stick with this for now. What the hell are you doing in my flat?"

"R-S-P."

"Respect is most effective if it's mutual, Professor. Don't think I'm unaware of exactly how much you've seen since you've arrived."

The cereal didn't move.

"I respectfully re-submit for your consideration the question of why you are here, in particular?"

"R-E-V-E-N-G-E"

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. "Revenge?! What did I ever do to you?"

"M-E-M-O."

"I know, and I'm awfully sorry for that as I've already said but "

The letters were moving emphatically.

"M-N-E-!"

Mimi was batting a letter around the table-top. She looked up, startled, her eyes fixed on a spot just behind Hermione's shoulder.



Hermione shivered as the errant letter moved slowly into place.

"*M-I-N-E.*"

"Your memo? What under Merlin's sky are you talking about?"

A long pause.

Then, "*S-W-O-R-D.*"

Hermione pushed her chair back suddenly from the table and was almost immediately shoved back.

"Don't touch me," she snarled. "Not with a sword. Not with anything."

The chair across from her was knocked hard to the floor. Mimi bolted for the living room.

"Please." She flicked her wand, and parchment, quill, and ink floated out of the cupboard. "Sit down. Over there."

The chair righted, and, as Hermione watched, it slid out roughly then back in, more heavily.

The vitality, the energy of the movements struck her hard, and her breath caught as, unbidden, she recalled the professor as she'd last seen him, lying in the Shrieking Shack, Voldemort's discarded, broken toy.

And Dumbledore's.

Her throat tightened.

The cap twisted off the ink bottle, and the quill lifted and dipped with smooth efficiency. The parchment slid sharply to lie at a more acute angle.

She had seen him write uncountable times in her life, and, although she'd paid such motions as these no heed at the time, they suddenly mattered in a way she couldn't begin to account for. The preferred angle of the parchment, the exact amount of ink the pressure of his hand required... each bespoke his singular personality, the habits of a lifetime minutiae signifying everything she'd watched bleed away into the rotted wood of the Shrieking Shack's floor, everything that she'd been too young, too scared, too distraught to realize was dying at the time.

Hermione smelled parchment and ink, leather and loss.

Her vision blurred.

---

Bugger it all, was she crying?

---

The quill paused at a snide angle to the parchment, and she imagined she could feel the intensity of his withering stare.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and stared at the parchment, muttering, "Sorry. Bad timing. Please, just tell me why you're here."

The quill scratched sharply. "*Because you failed.*"

The same handwriting as on her essays; the same scathing succinctness. The only thing new was the plain black ink. For a moment, she imagined it was scarlet.

No. Just black.

"I don't understand," she said wearily, leaning her head on her hand, still not taking her eyes off the parchment.

"*Obviously.*" The quill paused again as if to ascertain her full attention.

She nodded.

"*I left instructions for responding to several likely hazards, including specific medical charms and explicit directions for brewing an anti-venin..*"

As he wrote, she became aware of his physical presence. A whisper of silk as his arm moved, his words racing across the parchment. The nearly inaudible creaking of boots beneath her table as he shifted his weight, leaning in, she saw, to dip the quill again. And an indefinable aura of power that she firmly told herself was her imagination.

"*... sealed with a ring bearing the initials E.J.P...*"

Something brushed her leg under the table and she flinched away, horrified lest her leg had touched her former professor's.

At the same moment, his quill froze on the page.

"Meee?"

Even as Hermione exhaled, the ink blot under his quill vanished, and the quill moved once more.

Hermione felt a paw on her knee and leaned under the table to retrieve the kitten. As she extracted Mimi's claws from her robes, she heard his boot scrape slightly on the floor, and she glanced reflexively toward the noise.

She gasped. "Professor Snape, have you been bleeding?"

Sudden silence from the quill, and the chair was pushed back.

She straightened, placing Mimi on the table, trying to spot what she'd seen before he'd moved. "Stay still, please. I saw something."

Taking the silence for his acquiescence, she searched her kitchen at knee-height for what she'd been fairly sure was a small spot of blood.

Finally, she shook her head. "I lost it. But I know I saw blood."

The quill scratched quickly.

"*Don't be ridiculous.*"

"On your knee, I think. Just a scratch..."

"Impossible. Ghosts don't"

"You're not a ghost, Professor."

She felt the air sneer.

"You're not."

"Stop interrupting. I Transfigured the instructions into a ruby and..."

While he was writing, Hermione cast a broad-spectrum Healing spell in his general direction.

It couldn't hurt.

A quarter of an hour later, during which Mimi batted various letters around the table-top, the writing concluded with, "... the sealing wax, whose odour should have been distinctive enough to penetrate even your insensibilities. I risked detection that night not only as Dumbledore's delivery-boy, but for a chance.

"Yet you failed. You, who had been so eager to impress us all by tattling on Potter's mysterious broomstick, were your suspicions not at all aroused by the sudden appearance of an extremely useful object under circumstances far more dangerous? You failed, Miss Granger, and I died because of it." The quill snapped to the table-top, and she imagined she could see his hands flick open, see his arms cross, hear him exhale with barely restrained anger.

She reached a hand toward the stack of parchment. "May I?"

The parchments were shoved toward her and, although she'd witnessed the writing of every word, she re-read them carefully.

She swore she could hear him breathing; she didn't need to see to know the accusation in his hard eyes.

Very softly, she said, "The boys had destroyed the locket before they returned to camp the sword's authenticity was already established. I had no reason to doubt it." Almost choking on her own breath, she continued, "It was all a matter of chance."

The parchments were snatched from her hands and the ink splattered with the force of his next words: "Sealing wax?"

She shook her head again. "I had mine with me. The presence of more made no discernable difference."

The quill started another letter but scratched it out half-formed, so deeply it gouged the parchment.

It might have been an L.

---

Severus clenched his fists on the table, struggling to control his breathing. In the writing, he had relived his hope, his death, and the futility of both.

He tasted the accuracy of her logic, the truth in her quiet words.

The sword had been used before it ever got near her. Its authenticity had been self-evident.

He raised his hands, still clenched, to his forehead, his shoulders rigid.

She hadn't got the memo.

There was no way she could have known to look for it.

The animating force of his revenge evaporated, leaving him a desiccated husk.

Thank Merlin she couldn't see him.

Perhaps he should just choose, after all.

A silence settled over him.

Just choose...

"Meee?" The kitten's query was tiny in the retreating vacuum of his mind.

Then he remembered Dumbledore.

"You buggered my soul on the altar of your guilt, you fucking, self-expiating whore."

---

"Excuse me?!" Hermione, eyes blazing, was on her feet, her wand pointing straight at him.

Severus froze.

## Tables

Chapter 10 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my alpha- and beta-readers, Anastasia, Lady Karelia, Annie Talbot, Indigofeathers, and Mia Madwyn.

A note on the chapter art: I saw this lovely image of an animal shelter volunteer, and its tenderness and poignance absolutely captured my heart. I did my best with PhotoShop to protect her identity.

First of all, if anyone has any objections to this image being used as art, please email me at ariadne dot snape at gmail dot com and I will remove it instantly but I hope you don't object; please read on.

Second thing: Please consider making a donation to your local animal shelter of money, food, blankets, toys, or time and please, please consider adopting a shelter kitty. Wee kitties like Mimi shouldn't have to brave the cobblestones of Knockturn Alley all alone at night. /end PSA

---

**Summary:** *Conversation and confession.*



## 10: Tables

*"You buggered my soul on the altar of your guilt, you fucking, self-expiating whore."*

---

*"Excuse me?!" Hermione, eyes blazing, was on her feet, her wand pointing straight at him.*

----

"What did you call me?"

Severus had done quite enough time held at wandpoint by the irrational, and he jerked his chair back with a fair amount of deliberate noise, snarling, "Not you, you idiot. You lack the prerequisites for buggery."

"Then who oh, Merlin, I can hear you but who are you talking about?"

"Who is none of your business," he growled, easing himself silently out of the range of her wand.

Her wand point followed his voice. "This is my home, is it not? And why can I hear you?" Her voice held a tinge of hysteria.

Bloody hell. This being heard business would clearly require some refinement of his stealth. For now, he stopped moving and nodded, his eyes cold. "It is. And I've no idea."

"Then of whom were you speaking?"

He said nothing.

"Oh. Of course." She dropped her wand and ran her free hand through her tangled hair. "Dumbledore."

Severus nodded.

She seemed to hear him, and her demeanor sagged. "Professor Snape, I'm so sorry, but I never got your memo. I would have done whatever you..."

His tone was icy. "The impossible is quite academic at this juncture."

She seemed to be waiting for something.

"Well?" The word was clipped.

"I nothing. Just..." She looked away from where she knew he was standing and into the shadowed hall. "Nothing. Your voice. I don't know."

"I shan't trouble you any longer."

"Meee?" The kitten was pacing on the table. She reared up and paused, as if measuring whether she could jump to him.

"You're... you're leaving?" Hermione's gaze fell on Mimi. "But..."

"My business here is now moot. Good evening." He strode toward the door, and Mimi jumped down from the table and followed.

Hermione scooped the kitten off the floor. "But where will you go? And why can I hear you now? And... what about Mimi?"

"If I'd known it would result in resurrecting your schoolgirl habit of incessant questions, Miss Granger, I'd far rather..." But would he really rather have remained in silence? No. Refusing to lie, he extended his hands for the kitten and waited, forgetting that being heard did not necessarily imply being seen. "My cat, if you please."

Mimi rubbed her head under Hermione's chin and purred.

"She seems to want to stay here, Professor."

"She will do as she is bidden."

Hermione laughed shortly. "You don't have much experience with cats, do you?"

"You yourself pointed out, however rudely," he paused to let the word twist in her conscience, "that she is my familiar. As such, she will obey."

Hermione nuzzled the kitten sadly. "If you force her, she might, unless she has better ideas. Cats often do."

Silence.

Hermione rested her cheek on Mimi's head for a long moment before speaking. "You're determined, then? I might be able to provide "

"I need nothing you might provide."

"Fine." With a sigh, she set Mimi down and stroked her forehead with a wistful finger. "Good luck, little thing. You're going to need it."

"Come, Mimi." He reached for the doorknob. "Goodbye, Miss Granger."

She said something he couldn't quite catch, and he huffed. "Do speak up, girl."

"I said, and please don't call me 'girl,' that I wish you'd stay."

"Meee!" Mimi twined around Severus's ankles, thoroughly twisting his cloak around them.

"Get your own familiar, Miss Granger."

Her eyes flashed. "I *have* one, thank you; anyway, I meant both of you."

Again she seemed to require an answer.

Exasperating. "Your persistence grows tiresome. You've some ulterior motive." He reached down to untangle his cloak. Mimi had trapped a substantial fold under herself and flopped onto her back to bat at his hand.

"Oh, well... I do have one, of course, it's just that I... I'm not sure you'll believe me."

"I shall have no opportunity to decide if you refuse to speak." He nudged Mimi off of his cloak with his foot and picked her up.

"Meee?" she said, twisting around to blink at Hermione.

Hermione took a deep breath. "I think, Sir, that I miss you."

He snorted. "Sentimentality, Miss Granger? Your mind is addled."

"Whose wouldn't be?" Hermione muttered.

"You don't have the first idea who or what I was or am." She thought she missed him? His first instinct was to find insult, but he couldn't quite twist her words to make that fit. Not knowing how to respond, he rumbled ambiguously.

"I'm sincere. Not that I *have* missed you, particularly, because I haven't, but now that you're here, I'm certain I miss you*now*." She leaned on the wall, her weariness etched under her eyes, her smile a shadow of his self-denigrating smirk. "I'm not saying this well because I scarcely understand it myself, but..."

"On that we agree."

"No, please, hear me out you were there. You remember, as an adult. Not like the boys, not like the parents, or the other teachers. You saw everything. You saved everything - *everything*. We'd all have been lost, if not for you. And not very many people since the war seem really to understand what you did, or why, or even want to remember you at all. I'd like to think I do, or could, but I'm sure I only have part of it..."

"Your point, Granger?"

"I'd like it if you wouldn't leave, at least not tonight. It's late, I'm in dire need of sleep, and if you've nowhere to go, why not stay here? At least until tomorrow?"

Mimi looked at him expectantly.

Blasted cat. "Why should I?"

"Because I'm asking you to?"

He snorted again.

"Or, if you prefer, because you owe me."

His tone burned with ice: "I owe no one."

Hermione smiled quietly. "You're wrong. Please stay, Professor, if for no other reason than as partial repayment for what I am sure was an entirely inadvertent trespass. You've doubtless realized I'm not particularly shy, in some ways, but I adamantly reserve the right to determine who does and does not get to see me naked. It's only fair."

Thoroughly confused, he took recourse in another rumble.

"Conversely, you could say that I owe you."

"You've no debt to me."

"That's a load of tosh, but if the reasons for that aren't obvious, then a full explanation would take hours, and I'm ruddy exhausted."

"I release you from your debt," he said, turning away to escape wherever this conversation was going.

"You can't, Professor it's voluntary."

In spite of himself, he snapped, "Explain."

"If you'd wanted to hurt me, even destroy me, you could have done, easily. You didn't." She shrugged as if in apology for having to explain something that simple. "Even hell-bent on revenge, you protected me, in a way, and I respect that."

Damn the witch and her twisty logic. He made a mental note to revise his earlier conclusion that she lacked the requisite equipment for buggery.

"Please, Professor Snape. It's late. Leave debts out of it. I'm merely offering you and your familiar a place to stay. It's nothing, really."

"Nothing, you say?"

"Nothing at all."

Nothing was something he could accept.

"Very well."

---

He leaned against the headboard in the spare room, hands clasped around his knee, idly watching Mimi wander in and out. His thumb worried the hole at his knee.

When he realized what he was doing, he finally thought to repair it. Drawing his will and magic from the air around him, he whispered, "*Reparo*." Mimi's ear twitched as she peeked around the doorframe.

He chuckled.

If Mimi hadn't so obviously heard him physically heard him he might have realized that Mimi's scratch was gone and, along with it, the permanent damage done to his throat by long-ago fangs.

## Exchanges

Chapter 11 of 33

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks to my phalanx of wonderful alpha- and beta-readers for their help with this rather niggly chapter: Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Indigofeathers, and Lady Karelia, who had to hear this one over the phone because she lost her internet. Any compound predicate comma errors, being completely inaudible, are absolutely not her fault.

Special thanks to Melenka for helping me figure out the structural specifics of something extremely important, as she did so often with *A Walking Shadow*. \*hugs\*

Demetrios, who is quite happily blowing my iTunes budget, is quite flushed with all of your wonderful reviews!

---

**Summary:** Severus bargains, books dance, and Mimi gets breakfast. Hermione flips a coin.



### 11: Exchanges

If Mimi hadn't so obviously heard him physically heard him he might have realized that her scratch was gone and, along with it, the permanent damage done to his throat by long-ago fangs.

-----

How she managed to fall asleep, Hermione had no idea; no more had she why, after only a very few hours, she greeted the morning feeling thoroughly rested.

She reached for her wand and, rubbing her eyes, began the sequence of spells that would expand and unlock her wardrobe before she remembered that it was still in the living room.

At her door, she hesitated, listening, but heard nothing. *Don't be stupid. He saw you in your pajamas last night.* She slipped into the hallway, trying to move quietly and to dispel the ridiculous notion that morning made any difference to the intimacy level of being seen in one's pajamas by one's former teacher.

It didn't, but it did.

The spare room door was closed, however, and she relaxed a fraction, retrieving the wardrobe from the living room and setting about her morning routine.

She wasn't being watched. Not really. But she couldn't shake the awareness that Professor Snape was in her flat. It seemed to settle on her very skin and was particularly acute in the vicinity of her elbows.

---

He'd heard her awaken the noises from her bedroom revealed far more than he wished to know about details like "gets tangled in sheets" and he'd abandoned her armchair, slipping back to the spare room before she emerged from her own.

Mimi had spent the better part of the night in his lap, save for a thoroughly baffling episode at around three in the morning, when she'd leapt up quite suddenly and rushed about after no object he could discern.

Wondering what the kitten imagined she was chasing had provided a brief but welcome distraction from whatever it was he'd spent the night trying not to think about.

He'd been successful. He still had no bloody idea what it was.

He waited until he heard the shower stop and Hermione's door close before stepping into the hall, careful to tread heavily enough for her to hear.

---

After an uncomfortable few minutes during which her completed preparations for the day offered her no further delay, she firmly told herself that there was nothing at all awkward about having the... ghost? It would have to do for now... the ghost of one's former professor in one's flat first thing in the morning.

Not even if one had blurted an invitation in the wee hours. *"Because I asked you to?" "I think, Sir, that I miss you?"* What had she been thinking?

Well, at least he was no longer warping her memories into Dali-esque nightmares, leaving great pools of ink on the floor.

Fingering the coin Demetrios had given her, Hermione ventured out of her room and into the kitchen, where she could hear cat food hitting Mimi's bowl. "Good morning, Professor Snape. I hope you slept well."

"I don't sleep."

"Oh... right," she said, tucking the coin into her robes and reaching for the kettle. Surreptitiously tasting the contents of the sugar bowl

An affronted sniff.

perhaps not so surreptitiously, then, she ascertained that it was, in fact, sugar. "Tea?"

"I've had no use for such things as tea or sleep for seven years."

"Right. Sorry." She blushed and checked her watch. "I'll just drink my tea and be off, then."

She left the kitchen, heading for the Floo, feeling the idiot.

Footsteps followed and stopped in the middle of the living room. "Miss Granger."

"Yes, Sir?" she responded automatically, turning.

"Unnecessary as they patently are, I appreciate your accommodations."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "I hope you were comfortable, Sir."

"Your spare room is most adequate."

For no reason she could fathom, she blushed deeper. "Then you're welcome, Professor Snape."

A long silence.

She nodded. "Right, then." But before she tossed the powder into the grate, she turned her head. "I don't know what to say, or how to begin to say it if I did, but thank you, Professor."

"Of course."

"Of course." She couldn't suppress a small laugh. "Well, I'm off." But she didn't move. She couldn't, not knowing...

She heard him cross his arms. "Miss Granger, if you wish to know whether I plan to remain until your return, ask."

"Oh, fine, then," she said, turning fully to face her dead or something former professor. "Will you still be here this evening?"

"I've nowhere else to be."

"Perhaps by then I'll have recollected my wits somewhat."

"One can hope."

"It's all so very awkward you, here; dead, but not really and I've so many questions, all of them quite conceivably rude. It's probably best that I not speak until I've had time to sort them out a bit."

"Indeed."

Another long silence.

"I'll be leaving, then."

He exhaled loudly. "You've said as much already. Twice."

She flatly refused to blush again. "I just..." Her hands raised, empty. "There's simply no way to ask this without sounding entirely impertinent, Professor, and I hesitate to say anything after the debacle of last night's memo."

A brief silence in which he seemed to be measuring something. "Very well. You may dispense with your manners for a single question."

It came out in a rush: "Will you please promise me not to decide to finish dying while I'm gone?"

In the utter silence that followed, Hermione didn't know where to look.

"'Asking of' is not the same as 'asking', Miss Granger," he said finally.

She stood her ground. "Nonetheless, it was technically a question."

"Indeed."

"Was that an agreement?"

"Conditionally. In exchange, however..."

"Exchange?"

"You split hairs like the Wizengamot and yet know so little of Slytherins? One might wonder if you actually read any of these books of which you're so protective."

She glared into the pause.

He continued, "In exchange, I would ask a consideration of equal value."

"That's fair what is it?"

"Your light on a mystery."

Something about his tone made her shiver, and she reached for the coin in her pocket again, hearing an echo of Demetrios, saying *Mysteries involve possibility...*"

"May I know which mystery, in particular?"

He hesitated. "I shall inform you in due time."

He was hedging. She'd bet her life on it. She paused, then nodded. "Deal." She turned to the Floo, and was gone.

---

When Hermione arrived at the Library, she heard Demetrios's unmistakable warbling that and an oddly plinky-sounding piano. She tilted her head, trying to identify the song. *Still in the 1970s...* She smiled.

*"Too many broken hearts have fallen in the river.. mmm-m-mmm... Too many lonely souls.. hmmm... drifted out to sea.."*

Hermione laughed as she slung her bag onto her desk and made her way into the archive proper. "Good morning, Demetrios," she called up through the floating metal shelves, which were bobbing in time with his song, providing a rhythmic piano part as they bounced in the air.

His face appeared over the top edge of a set of still-bobbing shelves, and he hastily gestured them motionless. "Hermione, my dear, you're early this morning... oh, dear; well, my secret's out... I do like a bit of accompaniment, I confess, when the old archive is willing to oblige..."

Her eyes crinkled. "You can still do magic."

"Of course I can, dear."

"Well, I think it's delightful, Demetrios. Don't stop their dancing on my account."

"Brilliant, my dear, brilliant..." The shelves started bobbing again, and he beamed cheekily at her. "I'll be with you shortly; Florence Nightingale's stethoscope has gone walkabout again... *'And you're feeling like a part of you!..mmm... 'is dying'...*" His voice cut off abruptly, and his head reappeared, impossibly high up. "Oh, I am sorry, dear; forgive my lapse are you quite all right after last night?"

"Reasonably so, I think."

"Well, that's good, then... You're sure you don't mind the archives playing along?"

"Quite as long as it's not AC/DC!"

The shelves seemed to bow before resuming their rhythmic bobbing. She tilted her head back and watched them swing inward at the top and out again, silhouetted against the dusty skylights, and laughed.

As she made her way past the series of Reading Room return shelves, half of which were now blessedly empty, Demetrios's voice rose again.

*"Communication is the problem!.. hmmm... 'to the answer'... Well, of course it is... when is it not, I wonder?"*

Hermione chuckled, sat down and bent to work.

As she shuffled through various acquisitions forms and reading room request-slips, she didn't realize that a question was taking shape in her mind. At first its mental caress was so gentle it would not, if spoken, have measured as a whisper. It grew more insistent over the course of the morning, and as she focused intently on the translation Charms they used on several reference requests, reading their contents and forming the appropriate responses, it flitted, fully formed, into her mind.

*Where's his body?*

She set down her quill and went immediately to the shelf holding the past decade's *Daily Prophets*.

Nothing about a body.

Climbing onto a moving stepstool, she searched the ever-expanding hall that constituted the records of Hogwarts, which updated automatically, condensing once per decade via a terribly old editorial spell into new printings of *Hogwarts: A History*.

Nothing.

No body.

No portrait.

She frowned.

Several hours later, after cross-checking through fourteen volumes of finding aids, three drawers of catalog files, and wondering how she could frame a plausible-sounding inquiry of Minerva, she finally went in search of Demetrios.

She found him triumphantly extracting Florence Nightingale's stethoscope from the determined clutches of a box marked "Scientology."

"Now down, you," he scolded the box as he folded the stethoscope into his robes. "You have your space on the shelf with all the rest; why won't you leave the poor dear in peace? Her time is past; yours will come." He turned his attention to Hermione, and his eyes sparkled. "Why, Hermione! I divine by your thunderous expression you've a new curiosity... how wonderful! But you've hit a bit of a snag, hm?"

"Not just a snag, I'm afraid an enormous ruddy wall. I've tried every finding aid we have, and I've still got nothing."

"What is the nature of your search, my dear?"

"I "

He held a hand up, forestalling her response. "Don't tell me its object, just its nature."

"Wizards' subject, public records, absence thereof."

"Recent?"

"Erm... relatively."

"Oh, my dear, you're not looking for Severus Snape, are you?"

"His body, at least. Demetrios, I can't find any record of its ever having been found, never mind buried. That's just impossible."

"Hmmm... more curious than impossible, I'd say...."

"I was wondering if perhaps we have a Time-Turner?"

His eyes widened in mild surprise. "My dear, you know the Ministry's supply was destroyed."

"Well, I was there. But I also know you."

He laughed, patting her shoulder. "That you do, my dear. We do have the one, but..."

"One?"

"The first, of course. French Revolution, Overflow shelving. But, my dear..." His voice stopped her as she was turning away.

She looked back at him.

"I'm afraid a Time-Turner can't help you."

She raised her eyebrows at the challenge. "Can't?"

He shook his head. "Even with their later refinements, Time-Turners could only transport one a few hours. A day, at most."

"But surely with modification..."

He tucked a ghostly arm around her. "Oh, I am sorry, my dear, but the theory behind their creation absolutely contraindicates such a leap as you're thinking of. The paradox, you know."

She did. It had nearly torn her apart during her Third year. "I thought the paradox merely an unfortunate material side-effect."

"I'm afraid not, dear it's intrinsic to the theory, which quite unravels the spell if you push its limits too far. You'd end up standing right where you started, spinning your necklace to no effect whatsoever."

Something in his tone told her he'd tried it. "How silly you must have felt."

"Oh, quite, my dear, quite. And what a good laugh I had, too!"

Demetrios's laughter convinced her more thoroughly of the facts of the matter than any amount of cross-referencing ever could. "But without... I'm sorry, but as you have no body, perhaps... ?"

He patted her shoulder. "My dear, it simply won't work. I do admire your determination, and absolutely depend on your curiosity, but... no. Practicality aside, it won't work in theory." He hesitated for a moment, considering something. "Still, curiosity must be indulged, else... havoc, oh, my, yes, havoc..."

She looked at him quizzically.

"Follow your float."

She laughed. "Excuse me?"

"I'm surprised at you, my dear - have you not thought to try my owl?"

"Your owl?"

"The coin, dear. The coin. When I'm stymied I often follow her wisdom."

"You trust to luck, you mean?"

"Of course, dear. Follow your float although in your case, you might think 'feet' more appropriate..." He laughed. "My pretty little owl has never once led me wrong, though astray... well, everything unifies eventually, whatever the Ever-Expansionists say."

She glanced down at her feet then back at him. "So I... how do I follow my, hrm, float, exactly?"

Demetrios sighed fondly. "My dear, you overcomplicate; I sometimes forget how very young you sometimes still are... Simply toss the coin and proceed where your spirit takes you."

At Hermione's skeptical look, he smiled. "Whether or not it works, it's no less sensible a methodology than pulling at your hair."

Hermione's hand rose to her head, and she laughed. "Oh. I suppose I have rather..."

Demetrios chuckled. "I'll be around if you need me..." Humming quietly, he floated away as somewhere off to the left the Reformation Collection began a softly haunting guitar melody.



"I close my eyes... mmm... *only for a moment, and...* mmm-hmm..." He opened his arms and drifted out of sight between the Kaballah and the Cubists.

As Hermione listened, the original dueling banjos up in Ephemera: American twanged out the usually far more melancholy duet that marked the bridge.

Wrinkling her nose, she closed her eyes and tossed the coin.

---

When she opened her eyes, she was sitting at the Gryffindor table.

Her legs barely reached the floor.

She heard Minerva's voice call, "Potter, Harry."

She was eleven years old, and, as she gripped the table for balance, her gaze flew to the head table, searching.

Professor Snape was alive.

He was looking at Harry.

And his face was haunted.

---

She scarcely had time to blink, and she was back in the archive.

---

*Notes on sources and other sundries ...*

1. *The songs performed by Demetrios and the Archives in this chapter are "The Things We Do For Love" by 10cc and "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas. Merlin help Hermione when he discovers disco...*

2. *Florence Nightingale: Famous early nurse.*

3. *Scientology, the Reformation, the Kaballah six ways of looking at a blackbird. If you squint.*

4. *The Cubists six ways of looking at a blackbird occurring simultaneously.*

5. *"Dueling Banjos" a bluegrass song made famous by the movie Deliverance.*

*1-5 may or may not share a kind of thematic contiguity, if you squint at them all simultaneously. \*twirls quill\**

*Author's Endnote, located here to avoid front-loading a spoiler: What just happened will be explained in the next chapter. Believe me, Hermione wants to know just as badly as you do.*

~ A.

## Foundations

*Chapter 12 of 33*

Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my alpha-readers, Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Indigofeathers, and Lady Karelia.

We're flying Air Demetrios for just a bit longer and will be landing shortly for refueling. As the plane lands, remember, should a loss of oxygen occur, a small black kitten will be provided for your comfort. Please make sure your laptops are open to their usual positions and that your seatbelts are fastened.

---

**Summary:** *Things rise, things fall, and Hermione learns more about the coin.*



## 12: Foundations

*He was looking at Harry.*

*And his face was haunted.*

---

*She scarcely had time to blink, and she was back in the archive.*

-----

In the Potters' nursery, Harry and Ginny's infant son was spontaneously levitating the large, orange cat who was his constant shadow.

Crookshanks's face had adopted a more or less permanent look of resigned endurance.

His ear twitched, and the look vanished briefly, replaced with a flash of intent attention.

Then baby gurgled, and Crookshanks rose into the air.

Cats don't sigh, but if they did, he would have.

---

*"... 'and the moment's gone'..."*

Hermione stood in the shadowy haze of the lower archives, choking on her own breath. She reached a shaking arm to one of the shelves, which immediately stopped vibrating with song and stood firmly still.

Pressing a hand to her chest her heart would not be still she coughed out, "Demetrios!"

As the archive quieted, Demetrios floated up to her, still smiling.

"Demetrios, what just... I was *there*... I *saw* him..."

"What did you see, my dear?"

"I..." She couldn't get enough breath to think properly.

Demetrios gestured, and several ancient tomes on a nearby shelf scooted themselves aside to make room for Hermione to sit. "What has happened?"

She broke into a fit of coughing, and he hovered at her side, patting her back. "Inhale, my dear. Exhale. You've done it all your life; you can manage it now."

She nodded, and the coughing subsided. "I was at Hogwarts. Welcoming Feast." She had spoken too soon and burst out coughing again. "First year." She concentrated on breathing evenly until the strange feeling in her throat abated. "Demetrios, what does your owl *do* exactly?"

Demetrios looked at her curiously. "Why, she takes me to where I need to go."

"Through time?!"

His pale eyebrows furrowed. "Rarely, my dear... rarely... if it's really necessary, she will. She can be capricious sometimes."

"Capricious..." Hermione shot him a pale shadow of her usual wry look. "You might have warned me!"

"And she may work somewhat differently when you've a body," he answered vaguely. "I can't for the death of me recall... but, my dear, what happened?"

"I opened my eyes, and I was at Hogwarts. At my Sorting. Fifteen years ago more..."

"You relived your Sorting?"

She frowned. "Not mine, not exactly... Harry's. I was already at the House table. Demetrios, I was eleven. I was... my legs were shorter!" She stood abruptly, her eyes slightly wild.

"Well, yes, dear, that would follow..."

"I'm serious!"

He patted her arm gently. "Of course, my dear, of course. What did you see?"

"I saw Professor Snape's expression when he first saw Harry. It was... he looked..."

Demetrios waited for her to find the word, rubbing her arm.

*"... devastated? No not devastated - destroyed. Like he was dying forever in that single moment."*

He nodded soberly. "Can you think why?"

An acrid taste at the back of her throat, and she swallowed. No one certainly no eleven-year-old child should see another's soul that clearly least of all his; he had hidden so much, so very much, so successfully, for so long. To have revealed so much, before so many... oh, Merlin, she'd known; Harry had told her but she'd not realized, not *really*...

Her stomach dropped away, and she gripped the shelf.

Demetrios's voice brought her back to the moment. "Hermione, dear," he asked gently, "can you think why he might have looked that way?"

"Oh, I don't need to think; I know. It was because he'd been in love with Harry's Mum, and Harry had his mum's eyes, but he looked like his dad, and well because Harry was Harry, with everything he stood for then." Her eyes still wild, she looked at Demetrios. "I'm not explaining it well."

"Oh, no, dear, I think you've just explained everything."

She stared at him. "I have?"

"Of course, dear. This time you were eleven only physically, but tell me at your actual Sorting, when you really were eleven, do you remember seeing Professor Snape's face in that moment?"

She closed her eyes and tried to remember. "No. No, I don't. I remember Percy looking awfully impressive with his Prefect's badge, and I remember the sky and wondering how that magic was done and who had done it. And the roar, of course, when Harry was sorted into Gryffindor."

"And Professor Snape?"

"No. No, I don't remember him all."

"There you have it, my dear." He folded his hands placidly.

"Um... Demetrios... there I have *what*?"

"Athena's owl took you where you needed to go to find his body. Into the past."

Hermione frowned. "But... but that's not what I meant."

"No, dear, I didn't think it was. But think what you saw this time, and why."

She'd seen her professor through eleven-year-old eyes, but the heart and mind behind them were hers as she was now. "Oh. Oh, my." She reached behind her for the shelf, the books scooting hastily aside as she sat down again, hard, blinking slowly, clutching the front of her robes. "Oh, Merlin," she said, pressing hard on her chest. In a low voice, she said, "It hurts."

"Wisdom sometimes does," Demetrios agreed quietly. "It almost never exists independent of the heart."

She nodded. *Inhale. Exhale. Your entire life.* Finally, after many long moments during which Demetrios stayed beside her, silent, she could breathe again.

"Demetrios?" she said finally, turning her eyes to his.

"Yes, my dear?" he asked quietly, lowering himself partway into the floor to meet her at eye-level.

"Tell me again, please, what your owl does. In theory. Not practice; theory."

His eyes sparkled. "Of course, dear. But perhaps in your office? You're rather squashing *The Complete Works of John Updike* at the moment, and although he was a joyful soul and is no doubt enjoying the view, I believe you're weakening the binding."

They made their way to Hermione's office.

The archive was quiet.

---

Severus had spent the morning reading Poe, pausing occasionally to mutter a critique.

"Floorboards, now a foundation... how utterly predictable," he murmured, turning a page. "Really." He flipped a few more pages, scowling. "Bloody house could have fallen six times by now."

Mimi looked up from washing her whiskers, paw hovering in the air, and the lack of motion caught his eye.

"You're not clean yet? How very inefficient."

She looked at him in utter disbelief and set down her paw. "Meee," she informed him.

He glanced at the cereal on the side table.

"*Kitteh cleen. Baffs nyce.*"

Trying to pin her tail down for a good washing, she leapt after it several times, then fell over.

The cereal rearranged to read, "*Ment to.*"

Severus raised an eyebrow and turned back to the book, flipping the pages to the table of contents. Perhaps if he tried the poetry it wouldn't involve bricking something up in the cellar.

---

Demetrios hung in the air next to Hermione's desk. "So. The theory, you say, my dear?"

"Yes, please." She was glad to be back at her desk. At the moment, she found its rounded metal edges strangely comforting.

"Very well, my dear." He adjusted his chiton and seemed to settle himself more comfortably in the air. "You are familiar with le Comte des Horloges, of course?"

"Hrm... no..."

"Oh, dear of course not. Your parents are Muggles; I'm sorry... I'll be back in a moment."

He returned a few moments later with a tattered book and an official-looking scroll, the latter of which was already unrolling itself to a specific passage. He held out the book, which was entitled, *Stories to Enlighten Young Witches and Wizards (Illustrated Edition)*.

"Not more fairy tales," she muttered.

"Not fairies, my dear."

She raised her eyebrows but took the book.

"Page three, dear." He folded his hands and waited.

Hermione's eyes raced over "The Harrowing Tale of the Count of Horloges." When she finished, she turned to Demetrios in disbelief. "They give these stories to children?"

He nodded. "Whyever not? Le Comte des Horloges created the first Time-turner in order to save his children from the Bastille, after all. Oh, I agree, it's not pleasant reading, but compared to the Spartans... and the ending is droll, is it not? All those ducks..."

Hermione nudged the book a bit farther away with a dubious finger. "Okay, so, the Count created the Time-turner based on the legend of a coin, said to have been minted by Athena herself, which was said to guide the spirit of the person she favored across distance and, if necessary, time... without unraveling history?"

"Yes, dear."

She scowled, eyeing the coin. "The Count did change history, though."

"Well, he was using a Time-turner, not the owl, and even so, he changed it only by a very little. Every wizarding child knows the story of his daring rescue." He continued, "In any case, my dear, neither twin grew up to be terribly important, and neither had children of his own."

"You know?"

Demetrios smiled. "Of course, dear. I got curious."

Hermione thumbed back through the story, the illustrations for which were quite bloody. "I think I prefer Beatrix Potter, thanks," she said drily. "But I still don't quite understand the theory behind the coin."

He nodded, and the scroll floated toward her.

She took the scroll and read it. "Interesting... the owl was actually *her*, not 'hers.'"

"Of course. The very spirit of wisdom."

"Whereas 'Athena's owl' is actually the coin." She looked up. "Why an owl?"

Demetrios laughed. "They can see in the dark, my dear. A simple metaphor, really... For all her caprice, Athena was usually quite linear." He swept his arm back to the scroll, and Hermione continued reading.

"... *the origin of the modern owl post*... fascinating... I'd no idea."

"So often do we inscribe our spirits in our words and send them winging toward another..." Demetrios sighed happily. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Hermione remembered her memo of the night before and blushed. "Quite."

"Which brings me to the theory. You've no doubt surmised that the coin they call 'Athena's owl' is no legend, of course. You've been holding it in your hand for nearly an hour."

Hermione looked down, and, indeed, she had her fingers clenched around it as though it contained her last, best hope. "Erm..."

"Oh, yes, my dear. It's all quite true. Athena was born from Zeus's forehead after someone hit him with an axe, and... well, Muggle literature has it quite rightly; isn't it charming? that she founded the city of Athens by..." His hands fluttered, then he let them fall, chuckling. "Well, it's all fairly dense... but in essence what happened was this: she swooped in, put an end to a great deal of unfortunate nonsense, and drove a bunch of caterwauling strumpets underground, enraging contemporary feminists no end."

"Aeschylus's *Oresteia* - yes, I saw it performed in Orange one summer. But I don't remember an owl."

"Well, owls are notoriously difficult to train for the theatre, my dear. Oh, Aeschylus tried, but he had to give it up as a bad job. Eventually he just scribbled some lines, stuffed an actor into a basket, and hauled him into the air a frightful racket it made, too and called him 'Athena.'"

"I... I don't follow."

"Deus-ex-machene."

Hermione sniffed. "An awful cliché."

Demetrios chuckled. "Not the first time, dear." He hummed a few notes of something then said, "My pretty little owl moves only your spirit, not your body. Follow your float, you see." He opened his hands and beamed at her.

"So if I... follow my float, as you say, it will all come right in the end?"

"Well, no, dear, not necessarily... but things *will* unify, for better or worse. Athena always disliked dangling threads, you see oh, the rows she had with the Fates over that lovely tapestry and since she's sent you skidding around in time, and your professor has no body... I'd say there's a dropped thread involved, wouldn't you?"

Hermione's tone was guarded. "If you accept the whole premise..."

"That's the beauty of her wisdom, my dear; you don't need to accept anything. You don't need to believe in the legend of the coin, as you already know it exists. And you don't need to request Athena's favor, as it's already been granted."

"Demetrios, I... I'm really uncomfortable with this. I may be a witch, but my parents are C of E... Church of England... and... well... divine intervention just doesn't happen."

"Why no, my dear, not in this case. That would seem to be your job."

"Mine," she said flatly.

"Why yes, dear. Wasn't that your real purpose in asking for a Time-turner?" He patted her arm reassuringly. "Relax, my dear. Athena herself isn't really involved any more; her time is long past. The coin merely retains the spirit of her wisdom, minted into metal. Think of that coin you're holding so tightly as... what's the current term? Bus fare. Or perhaps a broomstick."

Which did not make Hermione feel any better.

---

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*Notes on sources, allusions, and other shinies... do feel free to skip these; there are rather a lot of them for this chapter. ~ A.*

1. John Updike: American fiction writer. I confess his works give me the heebies, but I will always love him for the look on his face in an interview when he described writing as, "It's such a joy."

2. Le Comte des Horloges: Totally made-up French aristocrat whose name means "The Count of Clocks."

3. Demetrios's account of the founding of Athens and the origins of the literary device known as "Deus-ex-machene [-machina]" is taken, at least in spirit, from Aeschylus's Oresteia.

4. "great deal of unpleasant nonsense" - The Curse of the House of Atreus which included, among other details, the Trojan War.

5. "caterwauling strumpets" - The Furies, transformed by Athena into the Eumenides (the Kindly Ones) right before she stuffed them underground.

6. "Deus-ex-machene" - "God from the machine." ("Machene" = Greek; it's usually spelled "Machina.") The "machene" was a wooden contraption whereby actors playing gods were "flown" on stage in ancient Athens. Terribly clunky business which was once acclaimed as the height of artistic achievement; now considered cheating.

7. Author's note on #6: I solemnly swear this story is not heading for a deus-ex-machina ending. The wee coin really is just bus fare; the rest is up to the characters.

8. The Fates: Weavers of the tapestry of life; another way of looking at a blackbird.

9. That slight whiff of "Post hoc ergo propter hoc" - "After this, therefore because of this." Logical fallacy that works like this: The bell rang then the sky fell. The sky therefore fell because the bell rang." It might be true, but it's not necessarily true.

10. C of E / Church of England - Yet another way of looking at that same blackbird.

Poor blackbird.

~ A.

## Limits

Chapter 13 of 33

The tides of history and the price of wisdom.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my writing partner, Anastasia, who provided the Gordian sword, and to Machshefa, who inspired the Solomonic solution. Thanks especially to my alpha readers, who bore with this one most patiently: Indy, Annie, Dicky, and Karelia, who also beta-read for me.

The chapter art is based on a photograph of Harper Library at The University of Chicago.

And loads of sparklies for you lovely readers, whose reviews tickle my fancy and touch my heart! I love hearing what your favorite moments are - it makes a writer smile, it does... \*waves\*

---

**Summary:** *The tides of history and the price of wisdom.*



### 13: Limits

"Think of that coin you're holding so tightly as... what's the current term? Bus fare. Or perhaps a broomstick."

*Which did not make Hermione feel any better.*

-----

The last of the day's Reading Room requests had been filled forty-five minutes ago "Some light reading," it had read; the archive had provided the diaries of Thomas Edison and Hermione had long since completed the daily correspondence.

Only her devotion to Demetrios and her habitual insistence on the proper order of things had kept her at her desk since her earlier... she wasn't sure what to call it... *Excursion? Mem.: ask Demetrios.* She tried pointedly not to think about the possibilities of the coin until she was done for the day.

Her quill scratched as she made final notations on the last few routing slips, redirecting some of the less valuable items with which the Bermuda Triangle section refilled itself every week. As she watched the last of these an empty bottle of sunscreen disappear from her out-Floo, she leaned back in her chair and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, opening her hand to look at the coin.

*Bus fare... honestly... what a thing to call...* Her thoughts drifted back to her professor's expression from the long-ago feast, and her throat tightened. *Examine, identify, assess, analyze; alter, re-examine, conclude...* Her research mantra did nothing to ease the feeling in her chest, but it did clear her mind somewhat. She picked up a quill and fiddled with it as she thought.

Unfettered at long last, her mind ranged through aspects of that morning's experience. Why would the coin have brought her then?

Tapping the quill on her lower lip, she looked at the coin. *A research inquiry is only as good as its initial question.*

So what had it been, exactly?

She frowned. She didn't remember formulating any actual words before she'd tossed the coin and gone reeling back into her eleven-year-old body. Just a fierce resolve to find the professor's body... No... that wasn't quite it...

She rubbed the quill on her cheek, thinking.

Not merely his body. Her inarticulate resolve had been less specific. It had been more like... more like...

*All of him.*

Complete with his soul burning through his desolate eyes.

It was probably the only time he'd been that unguarded in her presence.

She sighed and leaned her head on her hand, half-listening to faint strains of music and snatches of singing from the main archive.

Twirling her quill against her cheek, she thought some more.

The only other fact she could discern was that she'd had control of her earlier body as a child, she'd not looked at Professor Snape; she'd had no reason to. But her eyes, her head yes, she retained the memory of having physical volition.

She realized she had two sets of memories of that same moment one residing in "this morning," the other uncorrupted, unchanged lodged firmly in the past.

The possibilities were... She shook her head. The possibilities were as yet limitless.

Demetrios's voice rose, and, tucking the coin into her robes, she went to her office door to listen.

"*All my dreams...* mmmm... *'pass before my eyes, a curiosity...* oh, dear, so very dusty up here... *'Same old song, just a drop of water..* mmmm... Ahhhh..." The shelves were swaying as one, drifting slowly back and forth, and, if Hermione squinted, she could just make out a universe of small flames flickering along their tops.

"*It slips...*... mmm, quite... *'all your money won't another minute buy...* well, of course it won't; not without the right bus fare..."

He laughed, and Hermione shook her head, laughing quietly so as not to disturb him. "Dear me, what a mournful song this is! Dust, wind... Oops."

She heard a crash followed by the unmistakable sound of papers skidding across marble.

"All right, Demetrios?" she called up.

He drifted over to the top of the nearest shelf and smiled at her. "Why, Hermione, dear, done for the day?"

"Yes... but do you want me to Floo Magical Maintenance before I leave and ask them to turn up the dusting spells a notch?"

"Oh, no worries dear; I'll take care of it... but oh, dear, what a mess I've made..."

"What's happened?"

"Oh, well... I seem to have dislodged the Visigoths just now, and I'm not quite sure where they landed."

Hermione flicked her wand, and her miniature 3-D archive map appeared before her. "Barbary Coast, 16th-Century Collection."

He clasped his hands together, his eyes wide. "Pirates! How delightful!"

"You know, Demetrios, that juxtaposition could prove illuminating," Hermione offered.

"Why, so it could, my dear so it could!" He swooped down to join her, his face alight with possibility. "Brilliant! Adjacent shelves or facing, do you think?"

"Hmmm... adjacent, I think."

"A bold move... feeling a bit daring today, my dear? Why not start with facing?"

"Well," she said, slipping into the role they had so often enjoyed when she'd been working on her degree, "we'll know sooner whether the avenue will yield any interesting results. If it proves too volatile, we can always step it down a notch. If it yields nothing more interesting than that, we've not wasted time."

"Lovely, as always, my dear." Demetrios's voice sparkled happily.

"Shall we get to it, then?" Hermione said, heading for the Brig (Lower Level), but Demetrios stopped her with a ghostly hand.

"I appreciate your devotion to duty, Hermione your determination to attend to your regular tasks today was a lovely, thoughtful gift, and I cherish it greatly but my dear..."

you have your own flights of curiosity to make."

Her eyes crinkled, and she nodded.

"May I see my owl for a moment?"

"Of course, Demetrios. It she is yours."

He smiled fondly at the coin in her hand. "Such a pretty thing... do take good care of our Hermione." His eyes raised to Hermione's. "Such an experience, my dear. Do remember to enjoy it."

Although her experience with the coin thus far hadn't been what she would describe as "enjoyable," she couldn't bear to wipe the proud expression from her mentor's face, and she just nodded. "I do have a few questions, if you've a moment?"

"Only a few?" He chuckled. "Of course, dear."

"Is there a proper term for what happened earlier? When I..." she gestured toward the general area of the archive she'd been standing when she'd tossed the coin.

"Experience' will do, will it not?"

She nodded. "Quite. And your owl, it transports my... awareness..."

"Your spirit, dear."

She smiled, and a dimple appeared in her cheek. "Spirit, then; I shan't argue against such an *august* perspective as yours."

"Oh, well played, dear. My perspective *does* run somewhat deeper than July."

Hermione groaned.

He laughed. "I apologize, dear."

"I can tell from your expression that you don't mean it at all sincerely."

"Of course I don't. But you had other questions, I believe?"

"Yes... the owl transports my spirit, just my spirit, leaving the rest of me here?"

"Yes, dear."

"What if something happens to my body whilst I'm gone?"

"Why... nothing can, dear. Your spirit returns after no time at all. Hardly a blink passes between your departure and your return."

"So I shan't return to find myself missing?"

He laughed. "No, dear. It simply can't happen."

"And you're sure *quite* sure that I can't muck up history whilst I'm there... then? So much was at stake then, with the war... I don't want to inadvertently do anything - *anything* - that would tip the balance to Voldemort."

Demetrios nodded firmly. "You can't, my dear. My little owl simply won't allow it."

"You're *absolutely* "

"Certain. Yes. I tried to warn a young man about some awful weather once, and he couldn't hear me. Didn't as much as glance at the sky."

"Hrm... where was this, exactly?"

"A small village at the base of Mount Ararat, dear."

Hermione gaped at him. "Do you mean... Noah's flood actually happened?"

"Well to an extent, dear. I'm afraid that village was wiped out completely." He nodded sadly.

"So he couldn't hear you at all?"

"Oh, on some topics he could. He answered most politely when I complimented his herd."

"So it depends what you say, then?"

"People will only hear what they're prepared to hear what to have for dinner, the quality of the wine, compliments, of course; people are almost always willing to hear those. But anything that would affect the sweeping tides of history?" He shook his head. "No, my dear. They simply won't hear you at all."

Hermione blinked rapidly as she tried to amass this information.

Demetrios continued, "Research has never changed history, my dear; it only changes how we perceive it. And history almost always overlooks little things like compliments." He drifted into memory for a moment, then returned, his ghostly eyes sparkling. "Go as your spirit moves you, and rest assured that the world as it is now will be as it is when you return."

She nodded again, slowly. "Thank you."

"Of course, my dear."

She turned to leave, but his voice stopped her. "Hermione?"

He'd never sounded more serious, and she turned back, searching his face. "Yes?"

He smiled wistfully. "Do try not to let your sensibilities get in the way of your curiosity, my dear. The price of wisdom is often lower if you don't hang on to things too tightly."

# Displacement

Chapter 14 of 33

Almost nothing ends up where it started.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to the wisdom of Ana and Machshefa; this is the other half of the problem they solved for me. Thanks also to the bevy of beautiful alpha- and beta-readers whom I also have the honor of calling friends: Ana, Machshefa, Lady Karelia, Melenka, Indigofeathers, and Annie Talbot, in honor of whose birthday this particular chapter is dedicated and posted.

---

**Summary:** *Almost nothing ends up where it started.*



## 14: Displacement

*"Do try not to let your sensibilities get in the way of your curiosity, my dear. The price of wisdom is often lower if you don't hang on to things too tightly."*

-----

The rushing of the Floo woke Mimi, who'd been napping on the window ledge. She stretched her forelegs out and yawned, then hopped to the floor with a happy "Meee!" and trotted over to Hermione, who stepped out of the fireplace brushing the soot off her robes.

"Hello, there, love." Hermione eased her workbag off her shoulder and squatted to pat the kitten.

Severus eyed her clinically. She presented a far different picture than she had that morning, and he automatically catalogued the differences. Her hair a tangled web of curls wind? No; it was far worse on one side she had doubtless been yanking on it.

Filing that observation for later consideration, should it warrant it, he looked more closely at her face, which was slightly flushed.

The flush didn't match something in her eyes.

He announced his continued existence with a quiet, "Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Professor."

"An odd greeting."

"Appropriate, though." Hermione straightened and looked toward him.

The force of her gaze forestalled whatever rejoinder he might have made.

Severus was quite suddenly thirsty.

Tosh. He didn't get thirsty.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione glanced around her living room.

"I've not moved."

"I'm going to change out of my work things, and then I think a conversation is in order. A real one. Not like that awkward nonsense this morning."

Severus nodded. "Indeed."

She laughed shortly. "'Indeed.' Oh, dear." She seemed about to say something more but turned on her heel and, running a hand through her hair to loosen the snarls, disappeared down the hall.

Mimi turned her golden eyes to Severus. "Meee?" she asked.

"Your guess is quite as good as mine."

Mimi blinked at him and trotted after Hermione.

Severus turned to watch the cereal.



"Skyn!"

Severus turned his gaze toward the ceiling. This worked for half a moment before he was turning back to the table-top.

"*Snuggl kitteh?*"

Then, "*Sofft.*"

He turned his back on the cereal and stared out the window.

His own lack of reflection stared back at him. Fairly boring, that...

Within this rationalization, he gave himself permission to peek again.

"*Handz!*"

Bugger.

Eyes back to the window, and he forced himself to think about something else. Anything else. "Quoth the Raven..." his mind supplied.

He growled and turned back to the cereal.

"*Gentl.*"

Wincing, he muttered, "Ghastly grim and ancient Raven," but he couldn't remember the rest of the line.

The cereal changed to, "*Prrr.*"

"Bollocks." He cast about for something else to focus on.

The cereal scratched on the tabletop, and Mimi's, "*Daon? Nonono. Do. Not. Want!*" gave him enough warning to collect himself before Hermione returned, twisting her hair into a knot and securing it with her wand.

Immediately afterward, her hand went into her pocket and stayed.

Interesting.

He eyed the table again. "*Baff.*"

He snorted.

"Yes, Professor?"

"That cat spends half her time sleeping and much of the rest of it bathing."

Hermione smiled. "Cats do." She settled herself on the floor, and, as the cereal rearranged to read "*Wher Hermny? Prfssr?*" she laughed. "She doesn't know your name?"

Severus was taken momentarily aback and raised an eyebrow to buy himself time to form his reply before remembering that she couldn't see him. "I rather imagine she refers to me by what she has heard."

"She knows my name, I see."

He started to protest he had no memory of using Hermione's name in the kitten's presence, but *Damn*. That week he couldn't remember. He scowled, saying nothing for a moment.

When Hermione said nothing more, he drawled, "Miss Granger, I find your idea of 'real conversation' somewhat lacking."

Hermione nodded, smoothing a hand over her hair. Her other hand did not leave her pocket.

That did it. "But before we begin," he said, "a question."

"Is this the mystery you referred to this morning?"

"I don't spend my bargains so cheaply. No; there is something in your hand, and I judge from your hair earlier that it's been there much of the day."

Hermione blinked and removed her closed hand from her pocket, her flush rising.

"Playing coy, Miss Granger? If Mr. Weasley has finally proposed, you might as well put it on."

"He has, in fact; annually, for the last... but... oh, never mind Ron!" Hermione's eyes flashed.

Severus chuckled darkly. "I assure you, I've no interest in the matter."

Hermione closed the distance between them and opened her hand.

He glanced down and saw a small silver coin stamped with an owl resting in her palm. "A coin for the dead, Miss Granger? Surely you didn't ask me not to shuffle off merely so you had time to pilfer an appropriate bon voyage gift from that ark of antiquities you call a library..."

"Ark of... *Pilfer?* You're impossible," she spat.

Had she known where his eyes were and thus where to aim the look she was currently shooting through his chin, he might have quailed - slightly. As it was, however, he had her off balance and found he'd quite regained his own. His shoulders relaxed, and his cloak whispered.

"It's not a death coin, Professor Snape. An obol bears an owl on only one side. Look." She turned the coin over.

Same owl.

He shrugged, eyeing the coin with distaste. "A bad minting, perhaps."

She sighed, closing her hand. "Professor, have you ever heard of Athena's owl?"

"Children's stories, Miss Granger? Le Comte des Horloges?" He stepped away from her outstretched hand to lean on the windowsill. "What need have I of legends?"

"It's not just a legend. That's what I wanted to discuss..." Without warning, she blushed.

When she said nothing further, he opened his arms, audibly rustling his cloak. "Do continue, Miss Granger."

"The legend is true," Hermione began quietly. "I was looking for some record of... of something I couldn't find, and Demetrios suggested I use this."

"A simple locator spell wouldn't have done?"

Her expression darkened. "Not for anything this subtle, no. Will you please let me get this out? This isn't easy, you know, and I've barely had time to process it."

"Not easy" might have its uses. "Continue."

She shot a contained but somehow distracted look in his direction. "I spent several hours today trying to locate your body."

"Shirking your duties, Miss Granger?"

"Sir," she retorted, rather more hotly than seemed necessary, "pursuing my own research is part of my job. It comes with the title you won't deign to use."

"I am not a research project."

"Well, I'm sorry, but at least *part* of you is the part I can't see. Now, Professor, will you do me the professional courtesy of holding your tongue?"

Severus blinked rapidly.

"I *do* rank you academically, and..." She stopped, raising her arms and letting them fall. Her voice was lower but no less intent as she said, "And I don't thank you at all for pushing me to play *that* card." Muttering, "What's *wrong* with me? I *never* do that," she ran her free hand through her hair and walked over to her bookshelves.

Severus recovered his speech. "Miss Grang- Doct-" He couldn't say it. Bollocks the chit. "I wonder you passed your *viva*."

"They weren't nearly as... well, you weren't on my committee, were you?" She shook herself slightly. "Fine."

He waited for her to continue, but she seemed prepared to let the conversation rest on that ambiguous adverb. He crossed his arms, and she heard it.

"Shall I continue?"

"If you wish."

"Not boring you, am I?"

He rumbled.

"I should *hate* to bore you with such "

His voice low as he said, "You've made your point."

"Excellent. Having applied all the obvious and several of the more rarefied search methods to ascertain what happened to your... to the rest of you, well... There's simply no record of your body having been found, much less buried. I hit an absolute wall, so I talked it over with Demetrios. He suggested I use his 'owl' it's what he calls the coin. It sounds impossible, but "

Having had his status as her research project now down-graded to a coin toss, Severus drawled, "I revise my earlier statement never mind your *viva*, Granger; it's a wonder you passed your N.E.W.T.s."

To his utter surprise, she nodded. "It sounds daft, I know, absolutely daft but nevertheless. The coin... hm... obliged, you might say. It took me to Hogwarts."

He snorted. "I trust you gave my regards to Minerva?"

"Fifteen years ago. The Welcome Feast, my first year."

He said nothing. Clearly, she believed it to be true. "And on the basis of this..." *Hallucination*. "... evidence, you conclude that that coin is the legendary owl of Athena?"

She drew herself up and fixed his ear with a glare. "Demetrios doesn't fabricate the properties of artifacts."

"Of course not. However, it is possible that you saw what you hoped to see."

"I would never have hoped..." She stopped herself. "I can't have done."

"Can't?" he drawled skeptically. "You're so certain of your own mind?"

The eyes she raised toward his voice were calm. "Yes."

He started to retort but found he had none. He opened his hands, rustling his cloak again. "Proceed."

"And... and." She exhaled. "I'm sorry about this next part, but... I couldn't not look, as it was you I was looking for in the first place. I saw you."

"You base your deduction that the coin is, authentically, Athena's owl on the fact that I was at your Sorting? Really, Miss Gr-"

"It's more than that, and will you please stop interrupting?"

"Meee?" Mimi trotted urgently into the living room and, golden eyes wide, sat down between them.

The witch was becoming hysterical. His lip curled. He'd not been this diverted in years. "What did you see?"

"Your face. When you first laid eyes on Harry."

Her eyes were sincere. Apologetic.

He drew inward on himself, and a heavy silence lowered between them.

Mimi stared at Hermione, tail twitching.

After a long silence, he simply said, "Ah."

"I - Sir... Professor... I'm sorry," she said quietly, the slightest tremor in her voice. "I would never intentionally invade your privacy, not even in my imagination. But I don't remember you at all from the actual Feast fifteen years ago. And I could never have imagined what I saw this morning."

What had she seen? His mind raced backward.

"What I saw today was real. Demetrius concurs. But... I am sorry."

His mind stopped short. He said nothing as he stood there with his nostrils flaring, mentally staring at his one memory of Potter's Sorting. *Those eyes...*

And of those same eyes in another face...*Eyes, alive with possibility. Eyes, smiling. At him.*

How could she know about *Damn*. He closed his eyes and groaned. "Potter told you," he accused her. "About..." He couldn't finish.

"Yes."

A tide of silence before she spoke again.

"Not just me," she said quietly.

Lily's eyes were wiped from his vision by a field of searing white.

He whirled, his arm a slashing backhand not at her, but her bookcases. His magic flung outward from him in a roar; a snapping clench of his fist, and the air was full of flying, empty bindings which circled, whipping madly before falling, broken, to the floor.

Hermione stood quiet in the ruin of her library, blinking back tears. "Professor Sna-"

He opened his hand, arm still extended. "Don't."

She nodded, skirting the piles of empty covers to retrieve Mimi from under the chair.

A very quiet "Meee."

"Shhh, sweetheart," she murmured. "It's okay." She stood somehow apart from the wreckage he'd made of her living room, nuzzling the kitten.

Eventually he lowered his arm and exhaled.

Hermione's voice was low. "I wouldn't have told you, but that's not all."

"Of course it isn't."

"I'm almost certain that the coin will eventually take me to the Shrieking Shack, to the night you...." She swallowed. "It almost has to," she said fiercely.

"What of it?"

Hermione drew a deep breath, and in her eyes he saw something like the determination he'd always derided in his classroom, the determination that, when he couldn't scorn it into submission, would leap over years of training and experience to enact the most volatile of theories.

The girl's mind alone had cost him almost as much worry as Potter - an unsettling distraction when he'd least needed

Her voice interrupted his memories. "If when it does take me to that night, what would you have me do?"

---

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*Random notes on sundry things...*

1. "Viva" - short for "Viva voce" - British for what Americans lamentably and un-lyrically call "dissertation defense."

2. All that "Raven" nonsense: Severus is quoth-ing Poe's poem, "The Raven." Rather a catchy thing.

~ A.

## Corners

*Chapter 15 of 33*

Undisclosed desires.

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A/N: Very much love and gratitude to the beautiful bevy of alpha readers without whom - well, you know: Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Indigofeathers, and Lady Karelia. An extra blessing upon Karelia for her late-night beta-read; ditto upon Mr. Ari for an evening of companionable digital solitude so I could finally get this one edited.

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## 15: Corners

*"If – when it does take me to that night, what would you have me do?"*

----

"Do'?"

"Yes, sir."

She'd unconsciously gone back to calling him "sir," and something inside him cracked. "I don't see..."

"I think you do see," she said softly.

And somehow the crack seemed less sharp.

"And what do you imagine you would be able to 'do'?"

"There are several options. Option 1: thanks to you, I now know exactly how to prevent your death, and I can try."

He sighed. "You can't change history, Miss Granger."

"No," she agreed. "And it very well may be that your death and anomalous presence since that time are in some way tied into the 'sweeping forces of history,' as Demetrios calls them, and I shall find my hands tied despite having all awareness that I could have prevented your loss."

A low growl in his throat.

She stopped it with a gesture. "I know you know how that feels, but so do I, now. I could have prevented your death, Professor. I'm offering to know it twice, Professor. Twice. I'm willing to."

He had no idea how to react, never mind respond, so he merely prodded the conversation along. "And should it be the case that history requires my death, Miss Granger, then what?"

"Then... then I shall at least bear better witness to your dying than I did the first time."

"How comforting. And if my 'anomalous presence' isn't tied to the forces of history?"

"That brings me to Option 2: If your presence in your current form is one of those moments that history overlooks, then I can try to save your life. It would be the matter of a moment to do it – two spells and a potion."

He said nothing.

"Or, if you prefer to die..." She swallowed but soldiered on. "Option 3: Then I can remind you to choose when you do, to stay as a ghost or to simply leave, for real, to move on. I can try to act, in which I'll succeed or fail, or I can do nothing, as I did before, but I can be there in a way I couldn't at nineteen. I don't know if that would mean anything, but..." She paused. "Whatever you decide, I'll only have a moment – I rather suspect that I was implicated in the 'forces of history' that night. I *know* Harry was, and we didn't linger."

His eyes were wide as he stared at nothing.

"Those are the options I've identified, Professor. There may be more, but I think I'll leave you be."

She set the kitten down and stood, her arm half raising toward him. Then she let it fall. "I'm sorry." She left the living room.

A moment later, he heard the bath and, releasing a breath, stormed down the hall into the spare room and closed the door.

---

Mimi followed and looked up at the doorknob, staring at it with curious eyes. "Meee?"

It didn't open. She stretched up but couldn't reach the doorknob. She pawed at the door. "Meee?"

When it still didn't open, she curled into a ball in front of it, wrapped her nose in her tail, and went to sleep.

---

It was nearly an hour before the sound of Hermione drawing more hot water into her bath drew him back into a mind he scarcely recognized as his own.

He recalled waking up in the Shrieking Shack, and for just a moment, he remembered how he'd felt when he'd determined – however wrongly – that he was still alive. When he'd believed she'd found his instructions, acted on them, and left him in peace, to decide his life for himself.

Just as she had done that evening.

He listened instead to the sounds of her bathing.

She'd changed. No. Grown.

He closed his eyes and listened some more. The sound of the water lulled him quietly into the place where no thought was necessary.

After her bath, he heard her pad down the hall to the living room, heard the occasional rustlings and thuds that told him she was organizing her books.

Without her bath to distract him, he groped through the ambiguous maze she'd made of his death and his mind. Once or twice he thought he'd heard her voice from the living room. No words, as far as he could tell, and only once or twice, but she'd quickly muffled whatever sound she made, and he'd paid it no further heed.

She'd left him in peace and was, even now, restoring order where he had left only rubble.

Typical.

But the feeling he'd had that long-ago morning refused to be silenced by the sound of books.

Her announcement that she was in possession of the owl was... disturbing. Although he dearly wished he could fault her logic, barring the appearance of Athena herself (an event he would prefer to forgo, given a choice), an authentication by Demetrios of Alexandria carried otherwise unsurpassable authority.

He frowned, picking at a thread on the soft patchwork bedspread.

Hermione had given his half-remembered feeling of freedom its first breath in seven years, and as he sorted through the options she had laid before him, seeking any she might have missed, he grudgingly realized that he'd been breathing life into that same feeling for several hours.

Alone in the dark back bedroom of his former student's flat, he could admit a small flicker of hope – even if his admission could only be silent, made only to himself in the cramped, abandoned corner of his mind to which he'd fled some forty years before, mentally outrunning his father's anger and his mother's tears.

Before he fully knew what he was doing, he had closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard, listening as Hermione ordered her books, and he found himself drifting...

*... to stand in the corner of childhood, his eyes drawn toward a small speck of light.*

*It turned out to be a candle, and she was holding it, and it grew larger as she moved toward him from the shadows.*

*She was taller than he, and her face in the candlelight was older – far older than his own.*

*"I've come for you," she said. "It took me ever so long to find you. Do you want to come out now?" She extended her hand.*

*He looked up through the eyes of a child and shook his head, his hair falling lankly into his face.*

*"But I can see the candle reflecting in your pretty dark eyes, Severus." She smiled down at him gently. "Did you know that?"*

*He shook his head again, not taking his eyes from hers.*

*"You can see it too, if you look."*

*In her hand, a mirror. She drew herself down to his height and held it out to him, but he closed his eyes and put his hands behind his back.*

*Her laughter the soft brush of a kitten in the darkness. "It's okay; I can hold it for you. All you have to do is open your eyes. The candlelight is so pretty in the mirror, isn't it?"*

*Safe, he looked into the mirror she held cupped in her hand.*

*And the face she held was his own, and the reflected candlelight blurred, and the light shimmered, trailing down his cheek.*

*He reached a curious finger to the trail in the mirror, and his hand was his own, fully-grown, gloved in black leather, and he closed her fingers under his, and in a whisper of wings the mirror disappeared, and he was drawing her up to stand, so slight, so young, looking up at him, a quiet wisdom glowing in her eyes...*

*... and he felt himself drawn forward, out of alone, and as he slipped a finger under her chin and slowly drew her face to his, her breath a sigh of gentle laughter...*

He blinked.

Reflexively, he jerked half-upright, half expecting to find himself in the Shrieking Shack again, the morning after battle.

No. He was in a rather comfortable bed.

He checked his hands.

Still invisible.

## Reflections

*Chapter 16 of 33*

Curiosity leaves the kitten unscathed. Not so anyone else, really.

A/N: My devoted thanks to Ana, Annie, and Karelia. This one was... yes.

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## 16: Reflections

*He checked his hands.*

*Still invisible.*

-----

He heard Hermione's steps in the hall, the creak of a floorboard as she crouched down and wished the kitten goodnight.

He got up and opened the door, stopping short when he realized Hermione's closeness.

She glanced up toward him. "I was just going to bed," she said, standing up, running a hand through her hair.

It caught wisps of streetlight from the living room window, a ghostly contrast to the warm light streaming out of her door further down the hall. His gaze swept the curve of her jaw, the soft rose of her lips. He raised his eyes to hers.

They were innocent of his reflection, and he wrenched his thoughts away from his dream.

Mimi looked wistfully up at Severus, blinking.

"She was sleeping before your door."

"I need to speak to Demetrios," he said abruptly.

Hermione's eyes were large but calm as she nodded. "Shall I leave you alone?"

"I... no. It would be best if you initiated the connection." He paused. "We've not been properly introduced, of course."

For a moment, she looked puzzled, then understanding, then curious, but she refrained from asking whose name he had used when he'd Floo'd her the previous evening. "Of course."

A few moments later, and Demetrios's voice was coming from the hearth.

"Hermione, dear, what a lovely surprise."

Mimi's hair stood up and she froze, stretching toward the flames, trying to sniff them.

"Good evening, Demetrios. Anything interesting with your pirates?"

"A mill-wheel rolled out of their aisle not too long ago."

"A mill-wheel?"

"Mmm, yes, rather a large one, too. It's still rolling around over by the French expatriates they seem quite delighted, especially the Surrealists.... So tell me, my dear, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Severus shifted, rustling his cloak.

Mimi was inching toward the flames, and Hermione scooped her back. "Professor Snape wishes to speak with you."

"Ah, of course." The focus of the flames seemed to shift toward Severus. "Very wise of you not to attempt to come through the Floo. Very wise indeed."

"In my current situation, it seemed imprudent," Severus intoned.

"Quite, quite. My dear boy oh, I am sorry, but at my age, well regardless what you did for us all, for the world... unspeakably generous."

"Unspeakable, at least."

Demetrios laughed. "That too, of course. Well, the paths you followed were terribly contradictory, weren't they. May I express my admiration that you avoided their becoming paradoxical for as long as you did?"

Hermione blinked. "Paradoxical?"

"Yes, my dear. Your professor occupied... well, by analogy, did you ever play with magnets as a child?"

"Of course."

"If I understand correctly, he spent much of his life between two of them, my dear at one moment nearly torn apart by their opposite poles; at others resisting collapsing under the pressure of their complementary ones. Am I perhaps close, Severus?"

Severus nodded once, and Mimi scampered toward the flames.

"Ooo, how interesting. Could you perhaps do that again?"

Ignoring Hermione's startled glance, he nodded again, more slowly, hauling Mimi backward with his toe.

"The flames flicker how lovely..." Demetrios went silent for a moment. "My boy, since you died, have you slept?"

"Ghosts don't sleep."

Demetrios laughed again. "Either send Hermione out of the room or don't, but don't hedge. You've had a dream, haven't you?"

"That was the object of my inquiry. Ghosts don't dream, either."

"All dreams are significant, Severus, especially those we allow ourselves to hold when awake. And of course as I'm sure Hermione has already informed you, you're no ghost. You are apraxic. It means ."

"Meee!"

"I know what it means," Severus rumbled.

The flames waggled a bit, and Mimi was entranced. "But the fact remains that you've been attached by that darling kitten, have you not?"

"It seems so."

"Then you're not quite dead, not in spirit, anyway. I well, I was. I wasn't angry when I died. No, on the contrary." Demetrios chuckled quietly. "I was hopeful. But I had a judgment to make, just the same... I, too, had a dream, and it ended my apraxia I chose, I tossed a coin, and here I am."

Severus's tone was flat. "You left your judgment to chance?"

Demetrios's delighted laughter filled Hermione's living room. "Well, why not? It was my judgment to make, after all, and I *had* gone back to the library to save her, after all."

Severus frowned. "Who?"

"My owl, my boy; my owl."

"The coin," Hermione said quietly even as Demetrios continued, "Once I had secured the most valuable scrolls from the fire, I went back inside for that one last reason."

"A coin minted by a god would surely survive a fire," Severus noted.

"Of course but I wouldn't, you see."

Hermione gaped at the flames. "But fire won't harm a wizard, not unless... you died deliberately?"

"Why, of course I did." Demetrios chuckled. "Death by library. Rather delightful."

Hermione's hand had moved involuntarily toward the hearth, and Mimi rubbed against it. Cradling the kitten to her chest, she asked, "But... but why?"

"I told you, my dear. Love."

"But..." Her brow furrowed as she tried to work her mind around his suicide. "But you can't love someone if you're dead."

Severus's cloak rustled.

"It helps if they're dead too, Hermione dear," Demetrios murmured, "but it's not a requirement."

"Meee," Mimi explained.

There wasn't a trace of regret or even unhappiness in Demetrios's voice; no, it was as sparkling as ever, and Hermione frowned, confused.

"Oh, dear well, I suppose it does sound rather a sad tale, but I assure you, it isn't. And it may prove helpful to you... well... perhaps. If I may?"

"Do," Severus replied.

"You see, I died second, not first. And when my lover died, choosing to move on, I was left alone. Oh, I grieved for a time in a world that was too small, too small for my loss, but that was only half of it, really... it was dark... yes, quite..." Demetrios paused for a moment, and Severus and Hermione stayed silent. "But eventually, my ideas beckoned to me, whispering me out of my grief, and I lived, and... such lovely ideas I've had; I owe them so much, so very much..."

Mimi clambered out of Hermione's arms and crept carefully over toward the curtains, checking to see if the flames noticed.

They didn't seem to.

"After a century or so, I realized that the day was coming when I would face eternity things had gotten politically well, difficult, and after several assassination attempts, I knew it was a matter of time, really. But I was torn I wasn't sure I could bear an eternity without curiosity, but neither did I wish to abandon... well..."

"Quite the dilemma," Hermione murmured.

"Indeed, my dear. Indeed. And who knows what comes after choosing to move on? I abhorred the possibility of an eternity of nothing no love, no curiosity oh, I shudder to think on it even now. Oh, dear... where was I?"

"Your... owl," Severus drawled, somehow inflecting the pause with an entire treatise on the question of Demetrios's sanity.

Demetrios continued, unfazed. "Oh, thank you, my boy. I had stumbled on her perhaps a decade earlier, and found her quite useful in, hm, well, acquisitions. Seeking wisdom, you know; so often people don't realize the importance of their own sources..." The flames wavered side-to-side.

The curtains twitched.

"Some months previously, when I had been wrestling with a particularly difficult passage on a woefully degraded scroll I simply couldn't make it out I had the thought that it would be lovely to well peek over the shoulder of its author."

"Who?" Hermione asked, almost involuntarily.

"Pythagoras, dear. But impossible, no? Still, I was stymied, so, in frustration I tossed the coin, and..."

"You went back in time and met Pythagoras, of course." Severus snorted.

"No, Aristotle."

Severus stepped backward. "And he provided you with the missing passage?"

"Mmm, in a way. Oh, he was no help about Pythagoras, of course, but then I'd been on the wrong track, hadn't I?"

Severus sniffed. Daft.

Hermione's eyes were shining, and Severus sniffed again. Double daft.

"Well, surely you can see the solution by now... My pretty little owl, in her wisdom, had provided me with a possible answer to my larger question a loophole, a way to spend the odd moment with my lover and eternity with my curiosity."

"But... the limitations of history, Demetrios," Hermione said, her mind racing. "You can only live once, yes?"

"Well, yes, but one can be dead for eternity that's the beauty of it, you see! And yes, Severus, I can hear your cloak rustling; contain your impatience that's where the coin comes in. The gods don't think in moments; they think in aeons. With the coin, as a ghost, I can slip back for a moment and... well, pay a compliment. Discuss what to have for dinner or the quality of the wine." His voice was rounded with a smile.

Severus realized he was clenching his fists. "You cheated. With life. Death. Everything."

"Not cheating, my dear boy, *compromise*. Therein I have found everything everything worth having." Demetrios laughed, and once again the flames danced in Hermione's fireplace.

Mimi leapt out from behind the curtain, bounding for the hearth.

Instantly, the flames resumed their normal calm flickering, and Mimi sat down, glaring at them. Her tail twitched slightly.

When Demetrios spoke again, his tone was more serious. "My dear boy, one could hardly expect you to appreciate compromise... no; you lived so much of your life under such absolute conditions... So difficult, and so very unnatural. The gods may demand absolutes, but we humans are softer creatures. Under absolute conditions such as those you endured, we will eventually collapse utterly or fly apart..." He sighed again. "No, my boy. Life... or death, if you prefer... need not involve absolutes. Most people's don't, under natural conditions. Your circumstances were *most* unnatural..." Demetrios sighed. "It's a wonder a marvel, really that you resisted the paradox." He sighed again. "No, I don't wonder that you cannot see the strength in compromise."

"Compromise is weakness."

"Quite the opposite. Under natural circumstances, it's magic."

A low rumbling noise emanated from Severus's throat, and Mimi echoed him, still staring at the flames.

"Think, my dear boy, think. Without compromise, what is bread but flour and salt? What is wine but grapes and... and..."

"Moldy grapes," Severus snapped.

Hermione winced.

The flames seemed to leap as though Demetrios had thrown up his hands.

Mimi jumped backward, startled, skittering to hide behind Hermione.

"Oh, Hermione, dear, you do have your hands full with this one."

Before Hermione could react, Severus interjected smoothly, "Your loophole, however poetic, does not address the subject of your dream."

Demetrios laughed, and Severus was fairly sure his deflection hadn't gone unnoticed. He glanced at Hermione's face, but could read nothing.

"Well," Demetrios continued, "I had to make sure that my pretty little coin had stayed with me into death, of course. And then I had to test my theory. It took me a little time to work up the courage; it's not the sort of thing you can test twice.

"I was facing a momentous choice, was I not? And I doubted for a long while I doubted, and even feared not knowing what would happen. Tossing the coin was risking everything... absolutely everything."

"This from a suicide," Severus muttered.

"I risked little by dying; no, my greatest test came afterwards. Tossing the coin meant risking my lovely theory the theory I had bet my death on. Naturally, I hesitated... and I doubted."

"Cowardice..."

"Courage by any other name... my boy, you know something about that, hmmm?"

Severus said nothing. Mimi peeked around Hermione's elbow, blinking.

"Yes, well. One day, eventually, I slept, and I dreamt, and I awoke with all I needed to make my decision."

Severus's snort was unusually eloquent. "First you delayed, and then you rushed ahead based on a hallucination. Foolish."

Hermione could almost see Demetrios shake his head. "Is 'time' not the final ingredient of most potions, Severus? My dream, although it frightened me at first, and confused me more than a little, restored my hope my courage, if you prefer. I made my choice to remain as a ghost."

"Demetrios," Hermione asked quietly, "how did you know, before you died, that you'd be able to hold the coin as a ghost?"

"Oh, well, that part was a gamble, wasn't it?" He chuckled. "In retrospect, delaying that choice may have allowed me to retain just enough of substance that the coin did not slip through my fingers, enough spirit to do magic. I've never known for sure, but it all worked out brilliantly, if I do say so myself."

"Are you saying," Hermione began slowly, "that you got lucky?"

"Why, yes, my dear."

"Foolish," Severus muttered again.

"You died to have it all," Hermione breathed, then shook her head and laughed, amazed. "Not even that much for a mere *chance* to have it all."

"Of course." The flames seemed to sparkle, and Mimi's whiskers twitched. "There are worse reasons to die, my dear. Far worse. Just ask the man standing behind you."



Severus said nothing.

"You *are* standing, not floating?"

"Quite."

"Meee!" Mimi opined, proceeding to wash her whiskers as if that settled the matter.

"And you can do magic?"

"I can."

"Ah..." Demetrios said. Then, "Good luck, Hermione dear."

"My dream," Severus said.

"Isn't it obvious? Your dream indicates that your judgment has begun."

"My... judgment?"

"Yes. You will make your choice before too much longer, I should think."

Hermione cast a startled glance in Severus's general direction. She interjected, "We were discussing our options earlier, Demetrios, and... well, it's not my place to detail them, really."

"No, dear; they're none of my business, regardless."

Severus found his voice. "A practical question, if you've time?"

"Eternity."

"Can the coin transport a potion from the present to the past?" Severus chose to pretend he didn't see Hermione's sharp glance.

"A potion? Well, no, not physically, of course, but... hm..."

"But?" Severus repeated.

"Excuse me for just a moment."

The moment stretched into several, and Severus shifted his feet.

The cereal scraped on the table-top to read, "*Cloke!*" a split-second before Mimi pounced.

Severus scooped her up.

"He's gone after a reference," Hermione murmured, watching the kitten appear to levitate before her. "He had that tone."

"So I surmised." He scratched the kitten's ears, and for a long minute, all of them remained silent, isolated within their own thoughts.

Finally, Severus shifted his weight. "He will return?"

"It usually takes him less than an hour." She smiled apologetically. "Usually."

It was, however, only a few minutes before the sound of shuffling papers announced Demetrios's return. "Yes, here it is... my apologies; we've another infestation of iso-sprites under the Stockholm archway, and it took me a moment to persuade them to stabilize... a moment whilst I find the passage...." A moment of quiet mumbling, then, "Yes; it seems that my little owl might, in theory, transport something of a potion's essence."

"Its essence?" Hermione asked.

"Its spirit," Severus murmured.

"Meee?"

"Not you," Severus corrected her.

"Yes, my dear, the magical spirit of a potion. It's possible... just possible... only in theory." More rustling of papers.

"The Stockholm archway," Hermione mused, looking toward Severus. "Nobel Prize winners."

"Of course," he murmured.

"Demetrios, whose papers do you have?"

"The Curies' delightful couple, brilliantly matched, despite the scandal."

"Scandal?"

"Mmmm," Demetrios said distractedly. "I never paid it much heed. She was a student in a different college; it blew over, regardless..."

"Essences," Severus reminded him.

Demetrios laughed again, and Severus scowled. "During one of their experiments with magnetism, they unexpectedly switched the essences of two potions, and the physical results were..." More rustling. "Oh, dear."

"What happened?"

"They blew up their lab. Not to worry; that happened rather frequently. Besides, that was 1903..."

"Demetrios," Hermione said suddenly. "Is there some way to guarantee that when I toss the coin I won't be brought directly to the moment of Professor Snape's death?"

"Won't?"

She nodded. "Won't."

"The only guarantee is that the coin will take you where you will find wisdom."

Hermione broke into a grin. "Well, then, it cannot take me there straightaway."

"How can you be sure, dear?"

"Because it would be very unwise to enact a theory without the proper controls, wouldn't it? To be wise, the coin would almost have to guarantee a test run."

A rich laugh erupted from the hearth. "Oh, my dear, he would so have enjoyed your mind."

"Who?" Severus asked.

"Aristotle," Hermione and Demetrios answered together.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Of course." Completely daft, the pair of them.

"Meee?"

"The jury's still out on you," he informed the kitten, setting her down.

---

After thanking Demetrios and bidding him good night, Hermione closed the connection. Mimi sniffed at the empty hearth, then padded away toward the kitchen.

Hermione turned toward Severus. "So... your question about the potion... does that mean you've decided? What you want me to do, I mean?"

"I have."

Hermione's eyes sought him in vain, and Severus turned away and looked once more at the expanse of dark glass in the window.

Her voice interrupted, half hopeful, half scared. "Well?"

"Having been offered a chance, it would be churlish of me to refuse it."

A nervous laugh. "Manners? You're choosing life because it's good manners?"

"Forms must be followed."

She stared helplessly in the direction of his voice.

"Miss Granger, I seriously doubt anything will come of this. I spent my life ensnared by history, by my own choice and the unfolding of events. I doubt I doubt very much that you can undo my death. But unless you have fundamentally changed since Hogwarts, you won't be satisfied unless you try, and..."

His unfinished sentence hung in silence, broken only by the sound of Mimi skittering in the kitchen. He looked long into the emptiness where his reflection should be in the window.

Hermione's quiet voice intervened. "And?"

His gaze moved to her eyes. "... and neither will I."

---

---

*Random notes:*

1. *The mill-wheel is a nod to Pirates of the Caribbean: Dean Man's Chest. Naturally. :)*

2. *The Curies: Marie and Pierre Curie: Rather famous scientists who won three Nobel Prizes between them (she won two; their daughter and son-in-law each won one). (Scandal? What scandal? With five Nobel Prizes in the family? Please.)*

*\*twirls quill\**

~ A.

## You are here...

*Chapter 17 of 33*

Bon voyage, Miss Granger.

A/N: My thanks to Ana, Annie, and Karelia, for alpha-reading; special thanks to Annie for beta-ing this chapter.

This one's been waiting in the wings for a long time. Enjoy... ~ Ari

---



## 17: You Are Here...

"... and neither will I."

After a moment, Hermione nodded, her face flushed with something Severus remembered all too well the excitement of the scholar with a theory to test.

He remembered his dream and swallowed. "Your superior is quite daft."

"Well, I'm not sure he is, really... from our perspective, perhaps..."

"His logic was most irregular."

"Really?" Hermione stretched her legs before her on the carpet and leaned back, thinking. "His political situation was... difficult, and the assassination attempts were extreme; they set the library ablaze. No, I don't wonder he elected to choose the moment of his death."

"What had he done?"

"He doesn't remember, entirely; whatever it was, he did something that made his motives seem worse. I believe it was all a terrible misreading, but it destroyed his career, and... well, regardless, it's all rather a muddle."

"Imagine my surprise," he said drily.

She glared toward his voice and then continued. "He died. After that, it was all straightforward."

Severus snorted. "Straightforward?"

"Seriously think about it. Did the coin stay with me? Yes. Can I hold it? Yes. Then, of course, he quailed a bit really, it's amazing to me he hadn't before but then he dreamed, and chose to remain a ghost, and tossed the coin, and..." She opened her hands. "It worked."

"There were no guarantees. What if he hadn't been able to hold the coin?"

Hermione smiled vaguely. "I agree; the risks were enormous but one can only push calculations so far; events take over, and one has to improvise. I don't imagine he knew they would go so far as to destroy the library. He'd have removed far more of the collection, if he'd known."

"Really," Severus drawled. "Tell me... how extensive are the Classics holdings of the current collection?"

"Oh, unsurpassed." She paused. "Well, of course he did."

Her announcement was met with silence.

"Professor Snape?"

He tapped his toe. Once.

She rolled her eyes. "He did say he got lucky."

"Daft."

"He's brilliant." Hermione shrugged, her eyes sparkling.

"Really, Miss Granger. A mill-wheel?"

She nodded, eyes gleaming ever-more brightly. "The structure of the archive is an ongoing creation reshelving sometimes results in spontaneous objects."

"Dare I ask?"

"We put the Visigoths next to the Barbary Coast."

Severus rumbled. It wasn't quite laughter. "And whose idea was this?"

"Well, it wasn't an idea, really... Demetrios dropped them, and..."

"Hermione, who created the archive's structure?"

If she registered that he'd addressed her by name, it didn't show. "Demetrios, of course."

"My point stands."

"As does mine, Professor. He is brilliant. And very, very kind," she said, softly emphasizing his title as she stood up.

So it had registered after all. He closed his eyes.

"If you're trying to convince me you're not nervous, sir, you should perhaps pick an argument more worth having than this one, or a tactic less obvious than using my name. Shall we try a test run, then?"

Tactic? Ah. Severus glowered, saying nothing.

Hermione smiled, her eyes glinting with excitement. "I wonder where I shall end up."

"As do I, Miss Granger."

Severus stepped away to give her space to toss the coin. As he moved, she gasped. "Professor, wait. Stop moving for a moment?"

He did.

Hermione looked intently toward the window. "Move again? Just a little?"

Severus turned to face her.

Her face lit with wonder. "Oh..." she breathed.

"What?"

"That's so beautiful."

"Miss Granger, what are you "

"Please, sir, move again?"

He took a pointed step sideways.

"No... the other way stand in front of the window again?"

"I am not your toy, Miss Granger."

"I saw something. Please... just do it."

His nostrils flared, but he took a few steps, placing himself between her and the window.

Hermione's face nearly glowed. "Astonishing..."

"Do you plan to share?"

She smiled. "There's just the faintest outline almost invisible nearly transparent. That must be what Demetrios saw except in the flames, of course. I can't see it at all when you're in front of the wall, but against the darkness outside? It's..." She sought an apt description. "It's almost like liquid. It's almost not there at all. But it definitely is. I wonder what's causing it." Her eyes went slightly out of focus, and she tapped the coin against her lip.

Severus pursed his lips disapprovingly. She and that mad librarian were proving a dangerous pair. "You're both daft."

"Demetrios?" She laughed. "Hardly."

"Killing himself for a theory?"

Her eyes softened and her smile faded but didn't disappear entirely. "Didn't you?"

A low grumble. "Point."

"His was at least a theory of joy. That had to make it easier."

"That the theory was his own played something of a part."

She nodded, then extended the hand with the coin. "Well... shall I?"

His outline nodded.

She balanced the coin on her thumb and inclined her head toward his outline.

She tossed the coin.

"Bon voy-"

---

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art..."

The sound of his voice echoed off the stone walls, and she opened her eyes to find herself raptly taking notes as his newly familiar voice wove a hypnotic spell of power and command over the class. She listened as his introduction to class continued, his long-ago phrases entwining in her mind as she found herself anticipating each one.

She bent over her notes, not quite daring to look up lest she catch his eyes.

"I don't expect you will really understand the beauty..."

*No. No, we won't.* Her throat tightened. *Not in time... most of us, never.* She blinked rapidly, her younger hand rubbing the corner of her eye with the back of her hand.

*I can't look at him without crying. I can't.* She kept writing.

"... creep through human veins..."

A rush of awareness under her skin as his living voice warred with her memory of how he'd died. "*Look at me.*" She shook her head and forced herself to focus.

"Bewitching the mind..."

Her younger self thrilled powerfully to that phrase, and, inwardly, her awareness seemed to relax, to smile in fondness for the girl she had been ...

"... ensnaring the senses..."

She finally looked up to find him over by the Slytherins, his back to her, his face in profile.

*He's so young.* Conscious thought trailed away, and she watched him move in front of the class, his cloak swirling with restrained grace as he seemed to stalk them all.

It was...

She closed her eyes. *Oh. Oh, my.*

... primal.

Her hand kept writing as his voice coiled around her.

"I can teach you..."

She swallowed hard then remembered, *He's seen me starkers.* Her younger hand was somehow still writing. *Stop it, Granger - this instant!*

Her eyes fell on the page where the ink was blotting under her still unfamiliar quill. *This is completely inappropriate. You're eleven, and he's dead!* But her logic, however flawless, quailed before, *Did he look at me at all? I don't remember.*

His footsteps drew him closer to where she sat with the rest of the Gryffindors, and she was suddenly aware of her own heartbeat in a way that eleven-year-old Hermione could never have been.

*Merlin help me.*

"... bottle fame..."

He was coming closer.

She didn't realize she'd stopped writing. Dimly aware that her younger self was awed, she knew that was nothing, nothing at all, compared to the heavy steps, the smooth gestures, the way the air parted way before a body that was very much *here*, very much *alive*.

He stopped in front of the Gryffindors.

Close enough to touch.

Her eyes rose involuntarily to his face.

"... even stopper death."

And he looked straight at her, his gaze a sword thrust to the gut, and her heart dropped to her knees, and she felt herself blush even as her eyes filled with tears.

His eyes snapped with impatience and barely restrained disgust as his gaze flicked over her face and came to rest on Harry.

She blinked, and she was back in her living room.

"-age, Miss Granger."

His voice placed him over by the window.

It flowed insistently up her spine to curl gently under her hair, sending flickers of awareness dancing along her skin.

She closed her eyes.

She was so screwed.

---

"Well?"

"A moment, please, Professor... it's a bit... disorienting. I've two memories of a single experience now, and until they sort out, it's rather dizzy-making."

Two sets of memories. How many times had he sternly separated his façade from his spying? "I quite understand."

He waited for a moment. "Well?"

Still not looking at him, her voice strangely full, she asked, "Do you have any memory of our first Potions class?"

"Given the information Potter shared with the world, you need to ask?"

"Do you..." She hesitated. "Do you have any memory of me at all from that day?"

"None." But... *Wait.* "Unless..." *Blast it, Snape, think before you speak.* He frowned. There was something... but it was fleeting, a brush of a wing in the darkness, no more. "No."

"You're not certain." She still wouldn't look his way.

"Not entirely, no," he said clinically, shrugging.

After a long moment, she said, "I could find out for sure. I wouldn't ask that of you, of course."

"Legilimancy?" His tone was soft with warning.

"Only rudimentary. I was curious."

"And who provided your laboratory?"

"Harry, of course. After what he endured from you, we figured my clumsy efforts wouldn't cause him too much discomfort." She shrugged. "They didn't."

"Ah."

She straightened and pushed her hair away from her face. Her eyes were slightly red, her lashes damp, and a second memory leapt to his mind.

A new one.

"Miss Granger," he murmured, "although I was no stranger to sniveling, my only memory of your crying in my class involved your teeth. I catalog weakness; all Slytherins do perhaps I more than most. Tell me... in our first class, did I make you cry?"

"No. I had no reason to cry fifteen years ago that I knew of, anyway. But tonight? Can you really call it 'weakness'?"

He turned her answer through his memories and realized that he had some small, new awareness of the existence of Hermione Granger from slightly before his oldest previous memory of her. "Interesting."

"What is?"

"Tell me... was your behavior any different this time than it was fifteen years ago?"

She glanced at the floor. "Mmm, a bit."

"How so?"

She exhaled and looked back up. "It is difficult to see it all through the lens of what happened later and not be affected by it."

"If you cried, just bloody well say so. I don't bite."

A mirthless laugh, tinged with disbelief. "If you don't, it's by choice, not character."

Shocked silence.

"Anyway, I tried not to tear up. I couldn't help it."

Fluffy chit. "Anything else?"

She winced. "I might have blushed."

"Might have?"

"Professor, I'm twenty six. My reactions to you at... what were you then... in your thirties? My reactions to you well, then are bound to be somewhat different than those of a First Year."

She couldn't mean... no. The air around him took on a quality of consternation. "I don't follow."

She put her hands on top of her head and grimaced. "It's probably just the romance of it all, because really? We've almost a perfect gothic situation here; honestly, if Poe had thought of it... Oh, for Merlin's sake, sir, don't be an idiot."

"I am *not* an idiot."

More laughter.

*Daft. The both of them. Nutters.*

"Blast it, Professor Snape. I'm female, I'm alive, and you've seen me absolutely starkers and been a perfect gentleman about it well, except for the whole revenge thing. That aside, your voice is..." She laughed. "Quite. And now, in retrospect, I know firsthand that you've always used your physical presence to maximum effect it was a weapon, along with your intelligence, your perception, and your wicked sarcasm. The outcome of the war probably hung on your charisma more times than even you know. A ruddy snake charmer, you were, now that I've seen it you must have known it."

He felt a sudden urge to Apparate through the window. Where was Mimi? "What in blazes are you on about?"

"I'm saying, Professor, that when you were alive, you were dead sexy."

Utter silence, broken by her laughter. "Goodnight, Professor Snape."

She turned and headed for the hallway.

Two strides and he was behind her, gripping her wrist and pulling her to him with a force that knocked her off balance.

Her hand flew to his chest, her eyes wide, dark...

Deep. Too deep. He was over his head, but what was drowning to a dead man?

*Let go. Let her go, Snape.* His hand wouldn't obey. Rather than releasing her arm, he drew it firmly to his chest and held it there, his other hand firm at the small of her back, drawing her closer to hold her body tightly, so tightly, against him.

Her lips parted; she didn't move away.

He could feel her heart beating against him, and he closed his eyes and leaned his head back as if he could encompass her simply by breathing.

"Professor," she said, her breath warm on his neck as, unthinking, she moistened her lips.

His eyes an invisible revel in the disorder of her hair. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

At the sound of his voice, her hand leapt, aware, on his chest.

He chuckled, and she seemed to melt into him. "Professor, I I can see through your head. It's a little disconcerting."

"Then I suggest you close your eyes."

She nodded.

His gloved finger tilting her chin, and his eyes closing, and his lips brushing hers...

Soft... gentle...

*Warm.*

He drew slightly away. "I'm not making you cold, am I?"

Her hands found his skin, and she ran her fingers up his neck, through his hair, urging him closer. "No..." she murmured again his lips. "Quite the opposite, sir."

Her "sir" coiled at the base of his spine, and he growled low in his throat.

"You have twenty seconds to leave this room, Miss Granger."

Her eyes darkened in response to his challenge even as her fingers soft, in lightest gentle tracery of the contours of his face.

A fingertip at the corner of his eye, a curious thumb along his jaw, a finger along his lip and he had to taste it, it was there, and he caught it in his teeth and touched it with his tongue and her eyes fluttered closed and her face smoothed into a knowing smile and not releasing her finger he asked, "Mmmm?"

"So I was right... you only bite by choice."

Releasing her finger, he chuckled darkly. "Such is my character." He ran his knuckle along her lower lip and heard her breath catch.

He moved forward, pressing her to the wall, holding her there. "Your twenty seconds have expired."

"Mmm... damn..."

As he ran a finger down her neck, she smiled. "Gloves?"

"Yes..." he drew his finger away, a thought away from her skin.

She wrapped her arms around his back, arching her neck toward his finger. "I thought I smelled leather," she murmured, her skin begging for another touch.

He obliged, then... *Oh, hell...* ... ran his fingers through her hair and bent his head to hers, holding her head in his hand as he rested his lips on her forehead.

*Leather.*

*Leather and silver and sealing wax and... loss.*

It was him.

Her Amortentia pointed to him.

And it had been him all along.

His world exploded outward and he cradled her against him with unthinkable tenderness, the benighted spirit of a haunted murderer surging powerfully within the glorious wonder of her thoroughly impossible heart.

## Curtains

*Chapter 18 of 33*

Not what anyone was expecting, really.

A/N: Not what you were expecting, I think. But necessary.

My thanks to Ana, Annie, Indy, Karelia, and Melenka for alpha- and beta-reading. Special thanks to Melenka for a crucial insight and to Annie for coming up with the title for this chapter. :)



### 18: Curtains

*... it had been him all along.*

*His world exploded outward and he cradled her against him with unthinkable tenderness, the benighted spirit of a haunted murderer surging powerfully within the glorious wonder of her thoroughly impossible heart.*

-----

"Oi, Hermione."

At the sound of Ron's voice at her door, Hermione froze.

"Ron?"

"Yeah, 's me all right?"

"I..."

Severus stepped away, his invisible face thunderous.

Bereft of the feel of him in her arms, Hermione muttered, "I'm in hell."

An answering mutter from the opposite corner of the room, "Nor am I out of it."

Hermione raked her hair back into a quick knot and went to the door. "Ronald..." She quickly undid the locking charm.

"All right?" Ron asked again as the door revealed his open, freckled face.

"Um..." *I am so screwed.* "... all right, yes... sort of."

"Not like you to ditch without word. I stuck around and waited for a while..."

*For years*, she added mentally. A strange feeling in the back of her throat as she realized fully that she'd been seduced not by passion but by habit, by a sort of post-war... *apraxia*. She closed her eyes briefly and opened them to find Ron looking at her, his concern plain on his face. "I'm sorry, Ron... I honestly don't remember making plans for tonight."

"Well, no, but... it's *Friday*."

Mimi crept around the corner and, catching sight of Ron, froze mid-step.

Ron glanced over Hermione's shoulder. "Cheating, are you?"

Her mind stumbled haphazardly. "I... what?"

"Crooks won't like that."

"Oh... *OH*. That's just Mimi. She's... um... she's just a stray." Grateful for any reason to turn away, Hermione went to the kitchen archway and picked up the kitten. "I'm so sorry..."

He looked at her oddly on his way in the door. "It's only pub night, Hermione everyone pops in as they can, yeah? But you usually send an owl if you're working or something. I just wanted to make sure you were okay." He closed the door behind him.

"I'm fine," she said, concentrating on any sound of movement from the other corner.

Ron came over, opening his arms to embrace her.

Mimi snarled.

Hermione shot a glance toward the corner.

"Not the most friendly sort," Ron said, stepping back.

"No... Mmm, what? No... yes... well, she may have been mistreated."

"Aw. Poor thing. Put her down so I can..." He grinned, lopsided as always. "You know." A wide, inviting smile.

She held the kitten more tightly.

Mimi glared balefully at Ron.

"What's wrong, then?" Ron asked, looking more closely at Hermione. "Say... have you been moping?"

"No, Ron, I..." She stepped away from him and set the kitten down.

Mimi scampered immediately to the corner where Severus was standing.

Hermione leaned back against the kitchen archway, determined to keep Ron's focus away from that corner.

She thought she heard a rustling, but, raising her eyes to the ceiling, hoped it was just Mimi in the curtains. She spoke quickly to cover any sound. "Ron, I..."

"Been working too hard, have you? Your eyes are all funny. Maybe you need glasses. That'll be rich you and Harry will be twins."

Ron's smiling, open face was too close, and, for an instant, her chest tightened, then she shook her head. "No, Ron... it's not work. It's..." She closed her eyes, knowing what she had to do, desperately wishing they didn't have an audience for this. "I'm sorry, Ron. This isn't going to work."

"What isn't?"

Hermione nearly whispered, "Us."

His brow furrowed. "Us? Not going to work? But... we've always been... for years."

"I know." She smiled sadly. "But we're... we're better as friends." Her heart ached.

"I know this speech," Ron said slowly, backing away a step and drawing himself straighter.

Hermione's voice was soft. "I know."

"They told me this would happen... Harry and Ginny... I didn't believe them. I laughed at them. Laughed."

"They did?"



"Yeah... said it wouldn't work. That you're too swotty for someone like me. But... but years, Hermione. Everything we've done together? Been through?" He looked at her, his struggle to understand the impossible clear in his eyes.

"I know, Ron, and I've always cared for you, deeply... I still do..."

Ron paused, then looked again at Mimi. "When you thought I'd been here... Hermione... I have to ask." He swallowed, tilting his chin up a bit. "Is there someone else?"

---

Yes. Severus's eyes were boring holes in Ron's back. *Leave.*

The cereal on the table-top re-arranged to read, "*Oh noes.*"

---

"Someone else?" Hermione repeated. To her ears, her voice sounded small. She shook her head.

"Yeah. It's someone else, isn't it?" His blue eyes begged her to tell him otherwise.

*"It."* She blinked. "Ron, please. I should have said something years ago."

"You've been with some other bloke for years?!" Ron turned away, his hands flexing.

Mimi growled low.

Hermione flashed hotly. "You know that's not true Ronald."

"I don't know what I know right now," he said quietly, his voice shaking.

"I understand," she said softly.

"Is it Krum?"

A sharp involuntary laugh was out before she could stop it. "He's happily married, Ron. He and Ekaterina are perfectly suited; you said so yourself when we visited them last Christmas."

"Christmas." The color drained from his face. "Hermione, we've always been like family. I don't know how to do this with anyone else... I don't want to. How can you change all that so fast?"

Her throat tightened. "I I don't know. But I have to some of it. I just can't let you go on hoping..." Her vision blurred. "I don't want to lose everything we've had, but... Oh, I'm making a hash of this you and Harry have always been my best friends; you know that."

Ron stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked at the carpet. "If you tell me it's Harry, I'll kill you."

---

*Over my dead body.* Severus's lip curled. *Conveniently, a zero risk proposition...*

---

The cereal scraped again.

"What's that noise?" Ron said, glancing irritably at the table that held the cereal.

Hermione glanced down. "*Kil?*" She swept the cereal into her hand and pocketed it. "Nothing. Just a Charm I've been working on for George."

Ron laughed a short, broken laugh and looked at the ceiling as if there he might find air. "Please tell me it isn't George."

"Don't do this, Ron, please. We've been through too much there's no wizard alive who could mean as much to me as you and Harry and all your family. It's just not..." *not enough* "... not working."

"This is the part of the speech where you tell me it's not me, it's you."

---

*It's you. Leave.*

---

Hermione shook her head. "No, Ron. It's neither of us. It's both of us. It's..." The most important thing she'd ever had to tell him, and she didn't have the words.

Ron looked at her quizzically.

She could see the shutters falling in his eyes, the mask of lightheartedness with which he'd kept the worst of what happened in the war at bay. "I can't change your mind on this, can I," he said.

As gently as she could, she said, "No."

"Yeah, well, can't blame a bloke for asking. Every year." He shook his head roughly. "Dunno what to do now, do I? Guess I can't ask you. Well. Okay. Right now, I hate you, but... but we've always been mates, the three of us, first and forever. Just... just give me a decade or so before I have to remember that I really am your friend, okay?" He shot her a pleading look through his shaggy hair, and she nodded. "We've been best mates. Still are. I just..." He turned suddenly and started for the door. "I have to go."

Then he stopped, his back still to her. "Let me tell Harry, okay?"

"Of course."

"He won't say I told you so."

"No, he won't."

"Gin probably will."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that.

"Just... give me a decade or so. Maybe not that long. Maybe a year." Ron shot an attempt at a smile over his shoulder. "I'll let you know, all right?"

She nodded slowly. "Okay," she whispered.

Another attempted smile, a flash of his blue eyes, and he was gone.

---

At the sound of the outside door closing and Ron's retreating tread on the stone stair, Severus stepped out of the corner.

Hermione glanced at the corner, her expression hooded. She held up her hand. "I'm sorry. Don't say anything. Please."

Severus moved to stand before the window and nodded. The Weasley boy hadn't required killing after all; weak, but not without dignity. And she

"A favor, if I could?"

He nodded again.

"I'm going to bed with a pint of ice cream, a bad novel, and... and if I could borrow Mimi?" She tilted her head back and sniffed.

"Meee?"

"Of course," he said quietly.

"It's what we do. Witches, I mean. I'll see you in the morning." Without looking at him, she went to the kitchen.

He heard her open a drawer and heard her mutter an incantation or two in which the Latin word for "chocolate" figured rather prominently.

He gestured softly with his fingers and heard a soft "Oh" of surprise from the kitchen.

She poked her head back into the living room. Mimi was twining about her ankles, looking up hopefully at the bowl she held.

"Thank you for the brandy," she said softly. "I... the timing couldn't be worse. I will still be here in the morning, and I do intend and want, very much to... Just... just not tonight. I can't."

"Of course."

"Right." She stood for a moment as if she would say more, but finally just smiled half-heartedly, lifting the brandy snifter in gratitude.

He inclined his head.

A small laugh. "Thank you."

She disappeared through the kitchen; Mimi padded after her, still tracking the bowl with her luminous eyes.

Very softly, "Goodnight, Doctor Granger."

## Margins

*Chapter 19 of 33*

Heyre ther be Monstysr.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my bevy of beautiful alpha- and beta-readers. This chapter owes much to the enthusiasm and careful reading of Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Lady Karelia, Machshefa, Melenka, Mundungus, and Demetrios's fan club on LJ. I am particularly indebted to Machshefa's gentle psych!betaing, Melenka's keen eye for the details and absurdity of history, and RichardGloucester's providing the inscription on the Elizabethan medal.



*She disappeared through the kitchen; Mimi padded after her, still tracking the bowl with her luminous eyes.*

*Very softly, "Goodnight, Doctor Granger."*

-----

Hermione shut her door with her foot and leaned back against it, closing her eyes.

*What a day.*

She stood there for a moment, feeling a bit calmer for being alone.

"Meeee?"

She opened one eye and looked down at Mimi, who was perched on her hind legs, her front paws hovering in the air as she craned her neck toward the bowl.

"Silly thing," Hermione chided her softly. "It's chocolate, and some people think that's not good for kittens..."

"Meee," Mimi countered.

"Ever the optimist." She chuckled.

Mimi stretched a paw toward the bowl. "Meee!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "That's not terribly persuasive..." Realizing she sounded a bit like Professor Snape, she smiled ruefully and went to sit on the bed.

She would think about him later.

She had a bit of a negotiation with Mimi regarding the ownership of the ice cream and achieved détente by wiggling her stockinged toes to distract the determined ball of black.

As Mimi clamped teeth and claws onto her foot, which was more amusing than painful, Hermione focused on enjoying the heady counterpoint between brandy and chocolate.

The sound of her spoon in the empty bowl brought Mimi's head up from behind her toes, looking so hopeful that Hermione couldn't help but laugh. "All right, then. Give me a moment to..."

Mimi clambered eagerly over the squashy duvet, and Hermione blocked her with an arm.

"Just a moment, greedy thing..." She Transfigured the melted ice cream into vanilla and set the bowl down on the floor. "There."

Mimi leapt down and her face disappeared into the bowl, looking so much like she was using a Pensieve that Hermione chuckled despite the heavy feeling in her heart. She swirled the last bit of brandy in the snifter and closed her eyes as her own thoughts began to drift to the surface of her mind.

*Ron...* Her heart gave a pang, but it wasn't as sharp as she'd feared more that of an old ache that had at last been given a chance to start healing. *Poor Ron...*

She took a sip of brandy and leaned her head back against the wall. *Must do something about getting a real bed one of these days...* she thought idly, mashing her pillows into better position with her elbows. *Worry about that later.*

For a while, she focused only on her breathing, which seemed to flow in time with the rhythm of a swirling cloak in the long-ago Potions classroom.

She shifted on the bed. It was disgraceful, she told herself firmly, to fantasize about Professor Snape under the circumstances.

*Ron...*

She knew she'd miss him, and the prospect of an indefinite period without his steady companionship was sinking in heavily despite her certainty that she'd done right by them both, but...

*His voice.*

... but somehow all she could see was Professor Snape's eyes, snapping and vital; all she could hear was his voice, low and dangerous in the classroom; all she could feel, his hands in her hair, his breath on her skin, his touch, his...

*Stop it.*

She focused on her breathing again.

*But...*

"Meee." A soft thump as Mimi hopped onto the bed and curled into a ball at her hip.

She set the empty snifter on the floor next to the bed and curled around the kitten, her hand seeking the soft fur behind Mimi's ear.

Mimi's purr deepened.

However comforting it was to cuddle a kitten after a break-up, Mimi's purr wasn't at all the reason for the softly knowing smile that played on Hermione's lips as she drifted toward sleep.

Her smile was as old as time. Athena, could she have seen it, would have recognized it instantly.

---

From the kitchen, Severus heard the bowl touch the floor and, a few minutes later, the snifter.

A new box of cereal stood open on the table, a few bits of cereal having spelled variations on "Iz for kitteh? Bole myn? Want! Waaaaannnt!" then "Toez! Kil!" then "Ooo" then, briefly, "Handz" and "Seepy" before "Prrrrzzzz."

He'd told himself he was guarding her, but from what, he couldn't have said.

When he realized the kitten was fully asleep, he swept the cereal into his hand and, pouring a brandy for himself, he went into the living room.

He stretched out in the armchair by the window, crossed his ankles, and leaned his head back on the tufted leather.

She'd handled the Weasley boy rather well, all things considered especially given his own unwelcome presence... and then the thought came unbidden that had he been absent she'd have played it no other way.

He lifted the brandy and inhaled, enjoying its scent... sharp, smooth, smoky... he wondered how it would combine with the taste *of her*...

He swallowed and shifted in the chair, his thumb playing along the thin edge of the snifter, enjoying the round smooth weight of it in his palm, testing its size and shape against his memory of her naked breasts as she held the kitten...

Mmm. Indeed.

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, and he closed his eyes, swirling the brandy deliberately, imagining the feel of her skin in the motion of liquid in crystal, her personality, her mind, her honesty contained within...

*We require the anti-venin.*

He blinked, and, with his eyes open, the snifter was just a snifter once more.

His hand felt empty.

---

"*Imagine me and you... I do!*... Mhmm... first, a chart..."

From somewhere near the back corner of the Archive, an oddly muted, slightly twangy guitar, accompanied by the shelves in an oddly bouncy drumbeat.

Demetrios gestured, and an ancient parchment naval chart the size of Speakers' Corner appeared on the magically expanded floor.

"Now for some water..."

An enormous wave broke from the center of the chart, rose halfway to the ceiling, and crashed into the rocky coast, sending spray in every direction.

"Oh, dear... a tad enthusiastic of me..." Demetrios laughed as the drumbeats were subsumed by syncopated splashing. "Mhmm... *'Ease my mind'!*..."

The water settled to lap curiously at the blank parchment margins.

"Hm... not quite accurate... *Imagine how the world could be!*..." He gestured, and a banner unfurled in the blank space, reading "*Heyre be Monstys!*"

"Oh, my word, yes; so much more historical..." He clasped his hands together and surveyed the results of his labors: a to-scale replica of the English Channel over which hovered dozens of miniature galleons and several ships flying the cross of St. George.

A small figure on the English flagship was waving frantically.

"Mmmm?" Demetrios leaned closer to the ship, cupping his ear.

"Thou dast, o freakish spectre, o'erlarge? This battle was settled lo, these ages past!" came a tiny voice from the aft deck.

"Of course I dare, my little sir... I thought perhaps you might enjoy joining the refrain."

"Sing? In this dread battle?"

At Demetrios's placid nod, the figure grumbled, "As our Queen commands."

Chuckling quietly, Demetrios bobbed with anticipation. "Excellent..." He gestured, and the miniature Navy Royal scattered to positions of historical significance on several nearby shelves, one of which gave an emphatic bounce to mark the beginning of the musical bridge.

"I say," the small voice protested as the flagship teetered precariously on its keel on an overstuffed file box, "this perch be most unnatural!"

Demetrios hummed distractedly. "Mmm? Do ready your fleet, my little lord. Your entrance is coming..."

"¡Válganos Diós!" came a wail from one of the galleons as they took position in the water.

"Relax, Señor... this was all over a long time ago, and it can't hurt you if you're not real, you know..."

If there was further protest from the Spaniards, Demetrios ignored it, turning his face toward the ceiling. "Now... once without the storm, and once with, I think..." He lazily gestured several stormclouds onto the horizon. "Oh, yes... *'So happy together!'*..."

"Have you no sense of irony, sirrah?" came the slightly tinny, miniature voice of Sir Francis Drake.

Demetrios laughed. "Merely curiosity, my lord... *'Baby, the skies'll be blue!'*..."

Bobbing contentedly, Demetrios watched with rapt attention as the Spanish Armada sailed with clear skies and favorable winds, avoiding the English fire-ships and skirting the blank spaces at the edges of the chart.

No sooner had the fleet made open parchment than the surface rippled alarmingly. The "*Monstys!*" banner changed to read, "*Told thee!*"

The Kraken arose from the parchment's depths and swallowed the entire fleet.

From atop the collected works of Gilbert and Sullivan, Elizabeth's Navy lifted its collective voice: "*Ba ba ba ba!*"

"Oh, dear... mmm... *'No matter how they toss the dice!'*..."

Demetrios spotted a flash of pink near the shore and swooped in for a closer look.

---

However daft the business with the coin sounded, Severus found himself as committed as he knew the unruly witch to be to the... plan? A gamble was hardly a plan.

*We need the anti-venin, and I should be the one to brew it.*

He blinked again, but he knew it was true.

There was no reason that the addition of one more crying First Year to the vast annals of his teaching years should have awakened in him a kind of resolve bordering on... well, not faith, exactly. More like conviction.

He reviewed the components of the not-quite plan.

Item: The Coin. A vestigial artifact of a fickle, and, of course, entirely mythological goddess (Caveat: the existence of the coin did not prove that of Athena, about which Demetrios could be no more sure than he...). Proven to work because it had already done.

He frowned. That sort of proof did not satisfy...

Item: The Anti-venin. More accurately, a theory regarding transporting the essence of a potion backward in time... based on an experiment gone explosively awry a dim century before.

He batted aside a Nobel Prize or two and kept thinking.

Conundrum: Possession. The intentional possession of a child for what was her intention but possession? ignoring that both body and soul were technically Hermione's to do with as she saw fit. No, not soul; spirit. Much more comfortable.... Still. A skidge too close to the Imperius Curse for his liking.

He scowled, a scowl etched deeply into his spirit through long practice.

The whole thing was daft. Worse than daft.

It was mad.

It should be criminal but the young Miss Granger would, presumably, be safe in her older spirit's hands.

It should be dangerous but he was already dead, a hair's breadth from a permanent choice; what did he have to lose?

*Her.*

The scent of her hair filled his mind, and, briefly, he lost himself in the memory.

For her Amortentia to have pointed to him since the night he'd delivered the sword...

The implications were terrifying.

He summoned his mental discipline and forced himself to continue his examination of the problem.

It should be... it should be what?

It didn't matter. It couldn't work.

Could it?

If it did, or could, or might, he stood to gain...

*Her.*

The coin was the same on both sides.

*Too damned ambiguous.* Whether he meant Hermione or Athena's wisdom, he couldn't say.

He mentally added Demetrios to the list and downed the rest of his brandy in a single swallow.

He settled more deeply in the chair.

In order to try, they'd need the potion; he'd be the one to brew it, and for that, he'd need ingredients and a lab.

He folded his hands in his lap and absently twisted a small, tarnished silver ring around his little finger.

The ring was terribly worn, but it still bore a faint tracery of the initials *E.J.P.*

His mother's middle name had been "Joy."

That irony had never ceased to sting.

He'd kept it in his pocket throughout his short life; when it had ended up on his pinky, he didn't know. Sometime after his death, he supposed...

He snorted, clenching his jaw.

Mad, the lot of them.

But his fingers continued toying with the ring, smoothing it around his finger, and slowly, his jaw relaxed.

They were all mad. Himself included.

This didn't bother him nearly as much as it should have.

Which was unsettling.

---

As Demetrios watched, an impossibly small Spanish sailor swam for shore, a single rose clamped in his teeth a tiny beacon of pink in the gathering storm.

A lone archer arose atop a cliff and notched an arrow, aiming at the spot of pink on the darkening water.

Demetrios spotted the archer and shook his head. "Oh, dear. Mmmm. Perhaps a different locale..." He tilted his head. "Scotland, I think." He fluttered his ghostly fingers.

The shelves stopped bobbing, drawing themselves upwards as the coastline reshaped itself tectonically.

"Oh, islands, of course! How silly of me..."

Demetrios's afterthought slammed the Orkneys into the shelves containing the "City-states: Italian" collection, toppling a box marked "Pisa" onto a fragile-looking cloth tagged, "Turino."

"Oh, dear." Demetrios righted Pisa.

As the Spanish Armada popped to the surface near Aberdeen, the disappointed Kraken sank sullenly back into the blank parchment. The disconsolate banner changed to read, "*Wyn somme, lose somme.*"

"Let's take it from the top."

As the Archive provided the opening chords, Sir Francis Drake peered down over the rail of his flagship. "The breath of God sings most mysteriously."

"Once more, with feeling, Francis..."

---

She'd cried in his classroom.

He found that strangely... strangely what?

Comforting.

And he found *that* profoundly problematic.

What had she seen?

He raised his hand toward the window.

His troubled outline melting against the darkness; his invisible ring seeming to glint in the streetlight.

He exhaled carefully, dropping his hands to his lap.

It couldn't work.

He sat twisting his ring in Hermione's living room and waited for morning.

---

*Margin Notes:*

1. *Musical Score: "Happy Together," by The Turtles.*
2. *Speakers' Corner: The north-east corner of Hyde Park, in London. A place of rhetorical spectacle.*
3. *Sir Francis Drake: Commander of the English fleet against the Spanish Armada. That he speaks in blank verse is purely a frivol of Demetrios's invention.*
4. *Navy Royal: Archaic name for the Royal Navy.*
5. *The route taken by Demetrios's Armada is based on a map prepared by the History Department of West Point.*
6. *Cross of St. George: Flag of England prior to ascension of James VI of Scotland to English throne in 1606. A period illustration can be found here: <http://crwfflags.com/fotw/images/g/gb~frobi.jpg>.*
7. ¡Válganos Díós! "God save us!" A million thanks to Hechicera for providing an historically accurate phrase! \*blows kiss\*
8. *The Kraken: Mythical Beastie.*
9. *"Eileen Joy Prince." Because torturing Severus is such fun, really.*
10. *Pisa: Home of a gravitationally challenged bell-tower.*
11. *Turino: Home of a highly controversial (but quite beautiful) shroud.*
12. *"The breath of God" from the medal Elizabeth I had minted after the defeat of the Armada. The inscription translates to, God breathed, and they were scattered. The blackbird seems, temporarily, to be a seagull.*

*\*twirls quill of excessive time on Wikipedia\**

~ A.

## Nexus

Chapter 20 of 33

Compassion requires some time to brew.

extremely late-night final beta passes and to Ana for her patience with art!betaing an ant.

Additional thanks to Scoffy and Emmacrew for assistance naming "Vinum Caritatis" and to the "Choose Your Own Potions Ingredients" participants on LJ, especially RichardGloucester for mentioning calvados. It won. \*smiles\*

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20: Nexus

*Her smile was as old as time. Athena, could she have seen it, would have recognized it instantly...*

*He sat twisting his ring in Hermione's living room and waited for morning...*

*"Once more, with feeling, Francis..."*

----

At the sound of Hermione's door opening in the flat's back hallway, Severus stood up and walked audibly to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Professor," she mumbled through a cloud of tousled hair.

"It is," he said quietly.

She shot him a half-asleep smile, and his breath caught.

A light thumping in the hall, and Mimi bounded enthusiastically into the kitchen. "Meee? Meee!" She wove a figure-eight around Hermione's bare feet and Severus's invisible ones. "Meee!"

Hermione laughed. "Think she's expecting two breakfasts?"

"That cat is an optimist."

"Can't blame her for trying," Hermione said, reaching for the cat food.

"Never," he said quietly, and something in his tone made Hermione's hand pause mid-air.

She straightened and pushed her hair away from her face, her eyes searching the kitchen for something she knew she couldn't see.

A rueful smile crossed her face. "I can't see you in the daytime."

"No," he concurred, his voice still warm. "I lost sight of my outline with the sunrise."

Hermione blinked sleepily. "You can't see yourself either?"

"No."

"Well, it's beautiful while it lasts," Hermione said, with an echo of her falling-asleep smile.

Severus rumbled skeptically.

"I'm serious, Professor. To see someone you in a transparent, fluid outline well, do we ever truly see more of another person than that?"

"I have seen rather more of you than that. As you noted to your advantage not two nights ago."

Hermione laughed, and her smile transformed into a new variation.

He found himself involuntarily cataloging her smiles. "However deceptive an exterior can be, it does have its..." ... *merits*. He coughed.

"Uses?" A single dimple appeared in her cheek, and her eyes sparkled.

He rumbled incoherently.

She laughed again. "Rather." She bent to fill Mimi's bowl and reached for the kettle.

As she moved to the cook-top, he stepped aside.

"You don't have to do that," she said, then blushed.

"In light of Mr. Weasley's timing, I am uncertain as to the state of... things. I've no idea what is and is not..." ... *welcome*... "...appropriate, under the circumstances."

Her eyes automatically sought his face in vain. "I'll let you know," she said.

"Very well."

"I wasn't finished." She lit the flame under the kettle. "I'll let you know if we cross into something too soon. I can't promise I'll always know in advance, but I will do my best."

He said nothing.

"Fair?" she asked, her color deepening as she started to reconsider her frankness.

"More than. I'd call it... generous."

Yet another smile.

He raised his hand under her hair, lifting it away so he could cup her cheek.

"Oh," she said softly, her eyes fluttering closed as she moved her cheek in his palm. "No gloves this morning."

"No."

"What's this?" she asked, her hand coming up to his. She rubbed her thumb on his mother's ring. "I don't recall your wearing this..."

"A ring," he said, unnecessarily, reflexively shying away from the thought she must have scrutinized him while still a student. "It would have been in my pocket when you knew me."

"Your mother's?" she asked.

His rumble affirmed her question.

"You said you'd sealed the wax with a ring; your mother's initials, yes?"

"Yes," he said curtly, and Hermione removed her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No need." But he sounded flustered, nonetheless.

"Too soon." She smiled again. "I understand."

For a while, there was silence in the kitchen. The water boiled, and Hermione set about making tea. "Would you, hrm... care for any?"

"Please."

She looked up, mild surprise playing on her features, but she got another mug from the cupboard.

When it had steeped properly, she took a long sip and tried not to stare too openly at the as-yet untouched mug on the table.

A chair slid back and the mug slid toward it. Then it rose, tilted, and, to her astonishment, disappeared.

"What did you just do?"

"Sipped my tea."

"The mug disappeared."

The silence that met her announcement contained an unmistakable aura of cocked eyebrow.

The mug reappeared.

"What did you do?"

"Removed my other hand."

Her eyebrows rose. "Fascinating."

A small silver ring appeared in mid-air and hovered there for a moment. Something hung in the balance in its stillness; something important.

Something shifted she couldn't say how she knew; the ring didn't move, and Severus made no sound. But she knew a moment before it happened that something was about to change.

The ring started to lower in the air.

Hermione didn't breathe as she watched. She could almost see his hand tilting under it as he let it slide gently to the table.

It was facing away from her; she couldn't see what she knew must be there the initials he'd pressed into sealing wax on his instructions. She stared at it. It was visible proof of... of him.

Visible proof of what she couldn't really see.

Her hand longed to hold it.

"Meee?" The kitten leapt to the table top and sniffed the ring.

"I wonder..."

"Mm?"

"I wonder why Mimi doesn't disappear when you hold her."

"She has her own personality."

"Quite..." Hermione frowned. "But the quill..."

"I write one-handed."

"Interesting... so visibility may depend on the degree of..." Hermione gestured vaguely, searching for her own meaning.

"In the absence of identity, it perhaps depends merely on the degree of contact."



"Perhaps... I was thinking more conceptually."

A chuckle resonated in the kitchen. "Of course you were."

The ring disappeared again.

"Did you pick it up or put it on just then?"

"It remains closed in one hand." Severus opened his hand, and the ring reappeared.

"Amazing," Hermione breathed. "I wonder if..." She blushed.

He chuckled again. "If what?"

"You know."

"I assure you, I do not know."

"If I disappear when you... when we..." She shook her head, suddenly fully aware of how absurd she sounded. "Last night. When we kissed."

"You do not."

"You peeked?"

"Your individuality is no less than hers." Mimi's fur flattened, and the kitten arched into the invisible hand.

"Hm," Hermione murmured noncommittally, remembering the sharp contrast between the strength of his arms and the awe of hushed reserve with which his lips had brushed hers... *If I had a separate identity when you kissed me, Professor, you couldn't prove it with a Pensieve.*

A corner of her mouth lifted slightly.

Severus frowned and shifted in his chair.

Something caught Hermione's eye as he moved, and she peered intently across the table, her eyes going slightly wide.

"What?" he asked irritably.

Her smile deepened, and a slight satisfaction glinted in her eyes.

He crossed his arms. "Do share, Miss Granger."

At the rustling of his robes, the corner of her mouth twitched she well knew what that rustle meant but she said nothing. Under no circumstances would she tell Professor Snape that under romantic scrutiny, sunlight be damned: his outline turned faintly pink.

Athena would have approved.

"If you're done playing..."

*Oh, not done, Professor. Not even close...*

"... then we've a logistical problem to consider."

She sighed but didn't stop smiling. "Of course we do."

"Despite my serious reservations regarding the efficacy of a time-transported potion, if we are to test your theory, the anti-venin requires brewing. I presume you've no laboratory facilities here?"

"No... I didn't advance in Potions after Hogwarts. Just Charms."

*Charms... indeed...* His mouth twitched. "Quite," he said, forcing as much disapproval as he could into his tone. Why, he didn't know.

She laughed. "Thank you."

Flustered again, he growled, "I did not intend that as a compliment."

She laughed again. "Of course you didn't. Nonetheless... logistics. You need a lab and ingredients, yes?"

"Indeed." He paused, but she seemed to be done laughing for the moment. "This is serious business, Miss Granger."

The eyes she turned toward him were both analytical and, somehow, dancing. "Of course... but does it therefore follow that there should be no joy in it?"

He had no idea how to reply.

"I'll need a list of ingredients those are easy enough, I think. Equipment, however..." She frowned and leaned her head on her hand, thinking. Somehow she ended up nibbling on her thumb, and he found he was quite content to watch her do that.

"Where might have adequate facilities?" she asked.

He forced his gaze away from her mouth. *Right.* "In London, any number of apothecaries' societies. My memberships have presumably lapsed."

She nodded. "Probably although given the utter lack of attention paid to your... hrm... death... well, the oversights are maddeningly inconsistent. No portrait, no Floo recognition... and yet..."

He snorted his displeasure at that. "There is also Hogwarts."

"Oh, of course... But well, you can't Floo. Can you Apparate?"

"I've not tried."

"Then how?"

"I can walk."

She shot him or, rather, his side of the kitchen an exasperated look. "It's a bit far."

"The route is not unpleasant."

"When you've all the time in the world..."

"Your point?"

"We may not have that much time, Severus."

He blinked rapidly. He was fairly sure she'd not called him that before. He opened his mouth to speak but couldn't. So he coughed.

"Oh. Right. Professor Snape."

Damned if the witch wasn't laughing again.

It wasn't long, however, before the seriousness returned to her eyes. "Demetrius said that your having a dream indicates... well, I'm not sure how to interpret what he said, but I'm not inclined to waste time."

"Nor am I. I do take your point."

"We could Transfigure the equipment from "

"No."

"I'm sorry?"

"The balances are too delicate. The cauldron and knives must be first-forged metal."

"Then I'll have to go shopping. How long will the potion take to brew?" she asked.

"Several days." At her astonished look, he continued, "Other variations required more time; I limited the specifics for what I imagined were your probable circumstances."

She laughed softly.

"What now, Miss Granger?"

"Just wondering how I was supposed to have found a first-forged cauldron while hiding in the woods."

He was quiet for a moment, absorbing again the truth of how thoroughly illogical his vengeful intentions had been. "Quite."

She nodded, her eyes soft. "I'd have found a way, Severus."

"It was a long shot, Miss Granger."

She nodded again.

---

A few hours later, Hermione returned to the flat with the ingredients. As she closed the door, he rose from her armchair.

Mimi looked up from her perch on the windowsill and stretched, yawning. She leapt into the armchair and curled into a ball.

"Did you have any trouble acquiring the ingredients?"

"Not really. The calvados was a bit challenging, but a specialty shop off Tottenham Court Road had some in stock. Posh, and horribly overpriced, but they do carry an excellent selection."

"Muggle?"

She nodded, removing her cloak, catching her hair and necklace on a button. "My father used to shop there at Christmastime." The cloak-rack wobbled, and she steadied it with an elbow as she tried to untangle hair, button, and necklace without dropping her parcels.

"Allow me," he said quietly, crossing to her.

She stood very still as the necklace chain lifted and disengaged from button, then, strand by strand, her hair.

His finger brushed her neck, swept lightly across her cheek, and then went away.

"Shall we get started, then?" The largest of the parcels floated toward the kitchen.

"I rather thought we had," she said, following with the rest of the packages.

"Mmm."

---

Hermione sat at her table and watched as he prepared the ingredients. Already, the scent of fermented honey and milk thistle extract was emanating from the small cauldron she'd purchased, infusing the air with a sense of... surely kindness didn't have a scent.

"Professor," she ventured, not wanting to interrupt his concentration.

"A moment."

As she watched, a peony root rose in the air and shot forth several pale, reddish shoots. Slowly, the shoots turned green, and he set the growing plant on the table, where it sprung forth with new leaves and buds.

The parcels shifted on the table. "The ant?"

"Right. Sorry." She reached into her pocket for a small box and held it out. "Why an ant?"

"The action of its feet will encourage the bud to open properly."

"Ah. Symbiosis?"

"No. The ant does not need the peony."

She leaned in to watch the tiny insect as it waggled its antennae, then followed its instincts, intent on the nexus where green met green. "I've never seen this before. Such rapid acceleration from dormancy to bloom, I mean."

"I believe the technique was first developed by a singularly underfunded American researcher somewhere in the Middle West. It set the Potions field ahead several decades to be able to acquire fresh blooms no matter the season or geography."

"Fascinating," Hermione said, watching the ant's progress as the hard bud burst forth in a lush bloom, dislodging the hapless ant to the tabletop.

Its feet wiggled in the air for a moment until it righted itself.

Severus made to remove the plant to the dustbin, but Hermione held up a hand. "Give me a moment."

She disappeared to the storage area off the back hall and returned levitating a large, dirt-filled terra-cotta pot. "Put it in here."

"We only need the one bloom, Miss Granger. This mad scheme will either work or not." His tone left no doubt as to which he believed.

"Regardless," she said. "We've forced it to bloom out of season we can at least give it a chance, yes?" She held out a finger to the ant.

Severus snorted, but made no attempt to dissuade her.

The ant's antennae wavered, a thin filament of hesitation, before it marched onto her fingernail.

She deposited it on the plant and levitated it all into the living room, returning to the kitchen wiping her hands on her jeans. "There. The ant seems happy."

Intent on removing the flower's thin, round petals without tearing them, Severus said nothing.

Hermione stared, fascinated, as one by one the petals levitated from Severus's hands to the cauldron.

When the first petal touched the liquid, the calvados sighed, releasing its breath in a misty plume.

For a moment, the rising mist surrounded Severus's outstretched hand, and Hermione saw the shape clearly.

She swallowed hard, and he turned toward her. The empty mist furled inward where his hand had been, curling as it rose toward the ceiling.

"Don't die," she said, scarcely aware that she was speaking.

"I already have done, Miss Granger, as you pointed out so bluntly."

"Oh, I'm sorry about the memo, really. I was quite distracted, as you can well imagine."

"I cannot."

She arched her eyebrows. "No?"

"No. Any ill-timed distraction might have meant failure, Miss Granger."

"I plagued you no end, didn't I? As a student, I mean."

A low cadence of surprise issued from the air around him, followed by what she assumed from the sound was a nod. "The dangers of over-competence without the judgment to mitigate it were somewhat more than usually bothersome in your case."

Her laugh was quiet but rich. "Is 'yes' such a difficult word?"

The air around him seemed to strangle.

The dimple in her cheek deepened. "I rescind the question."

"I expect six more will arise in its wake."

"Probably... what's the history of this particular potion?"

He raised his invisible eyes to the ceiling. "The Vinum Caritatis, or 'Wine of Kindness,' originated in Ancient Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero. Scholars speculate that it was developed as a countermeasure to some of Nero's more extreme..."

His hands worked as he continued speaking, and Hermione found herself transported as her memories of countless Potions classes in a dungeon classroom blended with the sound of his voice in her kitchen. The first doubled memory gave way to a single long strand of continuity, ending abruptly in seven years of absence.

If she hadn't been determined before, by the time he finished, she was fingering the coin.

"... choosing its aspect and its name 'caritas,' often mistranslated as 'charity' from amongst the known virtues, singling out the one thought to hold the most power against pride."

"So the peony?"

"Is said to represent compassion," he said shortly, before clearing the work surface. "It will need to steep for several hours. The next steps are somewhat involved; I shall require complete concentration."

Hermione pushed the chair back from the table. "I'll leave you be, then." She paused. "Thank you, sir. I this was..." She shook her head, the sentence hung unfinished. "Thank you."

He nodded as she left the kitchen, and somehow she knew it.

As he reached for the jar containing the next ingredient, the Floo sprang to life, and he froze.

"Hermione," came a light feminine voice from the living room. "Ron's just now left Harry's taken him and James to the park for some air, and Mum's got the baby for the day. Can I come through?"

"Why don't I come to you, if it's not too inconvenient? It's been ages since I've seen Crooks."

"Okay, then..."

The Floo made a rushing sound, and Severus was left alone in the flat.

"Meee?"

Or perhaps not.

Mimi spotted the peony bush and bolted behind Severus's ankles. A very quiet rumble as she peered out from behind his invisible cape became a full-throated "Rrrr" as she growled at the plant.

He chuckled.

"Meee?" She blinked up at him.

"Who else?" He gestured toward the living room. "There's an ant somewhere in there. Go. Hunt."

Mimi stared at him in blank astonishment for a moment then started washing her paw.

"Ridiculous cat."

---

*Notes on Feet and Other Important Things:*

1. *That peony buds require the action of ants' feet to open is an old wives' tale. Any similarities between the wee ant on its pink flower and the tiny Spaniard with his lovely pink rose in the last chapter are purely the result of your imagination. (But just because it's happening in your imagination doesn't mean it isn't real...) See also: Authorial Intention: Whimsical Parallelism; see also: Ari-herring.*

2. *Caritas: One of the three "Theological Virtues": Fides, Spes et Caritas (Faith, Hope, and Charity/Kindness). That caritas stands in strongest opposition to pride has no theological basis that I'm aware of. We'll leave the question of whether or not it should up to the blackbird...*

3. *Emperor Nero: A passably good violinist, albeit one with terrible judgment and abysmal timing; see also "Megalomaniacal Bastards: Classical."*

*\*twirls quill\**

~ A.

## To Learn...

*Chapter 21 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

*Summary: Hermione visits Ginny, tests her theory, and expands her understanding, if not her comprehension. Meanwhile, Crookshanks's vigil continues, Severus's eyebrow makes a brief appearance, and Demetrios seems to be up to something.*

A/N: My thanks to everyone who helped me through the long, slow recovery period, especially Anastasia, AnnieTalbot, RichardGloucester, Lady Karelia, Machshefa, Melenka, AriMom, and Mr. Ari. Thanks to their TLC and the generous gifts of several pairs of gloriously comfy jimjams, not to mention several miracles of modern medical intervention, I'm back.

Miss me? :)

Thanks to my alpha- and beta-readers, Ana, Annie and Karelia.



"There's an ant somewhere in there. Go. Hunt."

Mimi stared at him in blank astonishment for a moment then started washing her paw.

"Ridiculous cat."

---

Hermione hadn't finished brushing the soot off from the Floo before Crookshanks lumbered over and sat, somewhat successfully, on her booted foot.

"RROW," he informed her. "RrrrrOW. RRR."

"Oh, Crooks, I've missed you." Hermione scooped him up in her arms and buried her nose in his ruff, inhaling deeply. For a moment she stood with her cat, oblivious to everything but the scent of his fur.

Crookshanks tolerated this for but a moment, then he grumbled, twisting firmly in her arms, his tail lashing against the back of her hand.

"Cheeky old man," Hermione muttered. "I shall put you down when I'm ready, grumpy thing." Hermione said, nuzzling him. "I *said* I've missed you."

"RRRRRRR."

"I'm in the kitchen, Hermione," Ginny called. "Come on back."

Firmly hugging her impatient Kneazle, Hermione made her way toward the back of the house, narrowly missing twisting an ankle on a brightly-colored set of self-building blocks which seemed determined to block the narrow passageway.

"Watch out for the blocks, Mudblood," Mrs. Black sneered from her frame in the hall. "They sent Potter sprawling this morning, and if you think you're his equal in "

"Oh, do shut up," Hermione shot back casually. "I can always brew more turpentine."

"No need to get huffy," Mrs. Black muttered, her hand moving reflexively to draw her lace shawl closed at her throat.

Hermione's laugh changed abruptly to a yelp as one of the blocks zoomed between her feet. *Finite*, she thought, but the blocks continued stacking themselves between the walls, and she had to step over them.

Shoving the kitchen door open with her hip, she spied Ginny up to her elbows in soapy water. A large Weasley clock bearing an impossible number of arms covered most of one wall. "Seems the Charm in the blocks is misfiring a bit," she said as Crookshanks finally escaped her arms to bolt back down the passage. "Do you want me to check them for you?"

"Hm? Oh, those..." Ginny said vaguely, finishing up at the sink and glancing at the clock.

"Has George been giving the boys the prototype toys again?"

"No well, actually, yes, but we toss those in the bin straightaway." She dried her hands on a tea towel and gestured with her chin toward the hallway. "Listen."

Hermione obeyed. She heard Crookshanks's low growl and, as if in answer, bagpipes, followed by a crash.

"Bagpipes?" she laughed.

"They're from Minerva. Hadrian's Blocks, she calls them. They automatically block whichever passage they're in that's part of the design but they're absolutely useless at containing anything."

Hermione looked back down the passage, where the determined blocks were sturdily re-stacking themselves into a low wall, oblivious to Crookshanks's baleful glower.

"They bored James in ten minutes, but Crooks seems to enjoy them, so we've left them out for him. Growl, bagpipes, crash, repeat." Ginny smiled. "Bit like having another toddler, really."

Hermione raised her hands uselessly. "If he's a bother "

"No, no. Albus has been much calmer since he stopped yowling for him through the Floo. No, Crooks is no bother, except..." Ginny hesitated.

"What?"

"Well, he was a bit fussed last night tore around the nursery like a wild thing for a full minute, knocking piles of nappies in every direction, then just stopped and went straight back to watching the baby like nothing had happened."

Hermione shrugged. "Cats."

"Quite. Startled me a bit; I was putting the washing away and found myself juggling self-changing nappies." She shook her head. "Anyway. Tea? Or something stronger?"

"Tea's fine, thanks..."

Uncharacteristically, both witches were silent whilst Ginny prepared the tea.

"There," she said, setting a cup of steaming tea in front of Hermione before sitting down next to her. "So."

"So," Hermione repeated.

"You don't have to explain, you know. We've been expecting it."

"I... Ron told me. I just..." Hermione looked into her friend's eyes and smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry, Gin."

"Yeah, I know. But don't be on my account on ours, either. It'll smooth over fast enough."

Hermione sought words, but Ginny waved her hand. "If you want to talk, we can talk. You can tell me what a prat my brother is, and I can match you story for story. You can sob I hope you won't, but if you need to... of course I'll have to examine you for traces of Dark magic if you do, because you're not the crying sort, are you?"

"Ginny, I "

"No, seriously. You're fifty times smarter than the rest of us. As long as you were happy with my brother, or at least seemed to be, fine. But we didn't expect it to last. None of us did. George even had a pool going."

"A pool?" Hermione's eyes flashed, and Ginny laughed.

"Well... yes. You expected 'civilized' from George?" Ginny snorted. "Really?"

"Well, no, but "

"Listen. The two of you have been stuck in this..." Ginny frowned, searching for the right word.

Hermione's mind supplied "*Apraxia*," and she closed her eyes.

"... I don't know; just stuck. If you two had been anything really serious, that great ball of ginger fluff in there would be guarding your babies by now rather than tripping me in my own house."

"Erm "

Whatever Hermione might have said was cut off by a sudden hug.

"I'm *so glad* you finally snapped out of it, Hermione," Ginny whispered fiercely, squeezing her tightly. "Ron. Honestly. What were you thinking?!"

The hug ended, and Hermione caught her breath, looking up to see Ginny's eyes sparkling at her.

"Now maybe the two of you can start, you know, *living*."

Another crash in the hallway.

Crookshanks ambled in smugly. He leapt into Hermione's lap and started mashing her legs with huge paws. "Rrow," he told her.

"Yes, yes, you're very brave," Hermione told him, scratching behind his ear.

He turned his head and stared at her as if to say, "You don't know the half of it."

Ginny laughed.

"So who won the pool?"

Ginny made a face. "Percy."

"Percy?!"

"That alone should tell you what a bad idea the whole thing was."

In spite of herself, Hermione laughed. "Ginny! That's enough!"

"You're sure? I can go on." Ginny's expression was light, but her eyes were serious.

"I'm going to miss him," Hermione said softly.

Ginny nodded. "I know."

"It sounds stupid."

"It doesn't." Another hug.

And another fierce whisper: "You'll get over it."

Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed.

Then she nodded, and their conversation turned to the mundane.

After an hour or so, during which Ginny had rather too casually mentioned several of their unmarried Hogwarts friends, the kitchen clock made a burping sound as the hand bearing Albus's name moved to "traveling."

"Erm, Hermione, Mum's on her way."

Hermione understood immediately. "She wasn't part of the pool."

Ginny bit her lip. "Well, um, no... not exactly."

Hermione pushed her chair back and reluctantly set Crookshanks on the floor, sighing. "Do I want to know?"

Ginny set her lips firmly and said, "Don't take this the wrong way, but..."

"Yes?"

"Ron'll recover quickly he's not deep, you know and the next witch won't get away. Mark my words: However glum he'll be for the next few weeks, he'll find someone new, and Mum'll have a new grandchild within a year and a half. She'll be fine after that."

Hermione's throat tightened and a small ache echoed in her chest, but she recognized the probable truth of Ginny's prediction. "You going all Trelawney on me?"

"It's the Weasley curse. We breed like rabbits." Ginny's eyes sparkled. "It does have its benefits, you know."

"Okay, now you sound like Draco."

"'Draco,' 'Trelawney' and 'benefits' in the same thought? Too nasty!"

Hermione grimaced. "Thanks a lot, Gin; now I have the same image."

"Get out of here." Ginny hugged her.

Hermione headed for the fireplace, and, after a last wistful look at Crookshanks, stepped in, saying, "The Archive."

"Always working..." Ginny's voice was swept away in the rushing of the Floo.

But Hermione's thoughts, when she swept herself off, had nothing to do with work. "Demetrius?" she called, heading into the main chamber of the Archive.

"Over here, dear," he called from a remote corner she'd never had the opportunity to explore.

She found him hovering half a story up between two lines of shelves containing a riot of flowering plants. Only his lower half was visible, and she heard him muttering to himself. Craning her neck, she said, "Hullo up there... botany or herbology today?"

Demetrios pulled his torso out of an impossible tangle of fuschia hedge roses. "Ouch. Stop that, you." He frowned at the roses. "You're not even pretty. Not you, dear," he smiled down at Hermione. "These beastly things. You'd think their thorns wouldn't scratch me, but... well." He glared at the roses.

"May I ask?"

"I'm trying to track down the origins of a particular rose, one I find is not catalogued anywhere."

"How frustrating."

"Oh, no, on the contrary... but never fret, dear, never fret... I shall uncover the right of it eventually. I always do, even if I have to..." His voice disappeared as once again he inserted his upper half into the tangled hedge.

He sounded more than usually determined, and Hermione peered at him closely. "What's the urgency? Do you require assistance? I can "

He yanked himself sharply out of the rosebushes. "In Athena's name, no!"

Hermione took a step back, bumping into a planter of culinary herbs. She tried to recall if she'd ever heard him utter the word "No." "No?"

"Follow your own float, Hermione, dear; I shall follow mine. Oh, yes, I shall." He blew his wispy hair out of his eyes as his gaze swept the shelves.

A nearby plant tangled in Hermione's hair.

"Stop that," she said, swatting it away. "Demetrios... whatever has happened?"

With an air of grimness the like of which she'd never seen from him, he said, "The Armada, my dear. *The Armada.*"

"The Spanish Armada?"

"Which else? I relocated them to the coast of Scotland, you see."

"Scotland? I presume they still lost..."

"Of course they did, of course, but things ensued nonetheless."

"I presume the Navy Royal survived?"

"As history decrees, my dear, the Archive follows; the rocks got the Spanish this time. But one stalwart fellow was determined to make it to shore..."

Hermione waited for Demetrios to continue, but he kept searching the shelves with determined eyes. "Okay," she said finally. "One sailor..."

"Yes, yes, the sailor. No matter what I did rain, sleet, Kraken... no difference at all; there he was, swimming, with his little flower..." Demetrios's muttering became inaudible as he suddenly swept to the top reaches of the Archive nursery.

Hermione leaned her head all the way back. "Demetrios?" she called.

His voice drifted down. "But a moment, dear..."

Hermione waited, occasionally slapping away the wandering tendrils of Italian fennel that seemed intent on caressing certain parts of her anatomy which she considered private. "I don't even like you," she informed the fennel, stepping pointedly away.

Undeterred, the fennel continued to wave at her suggestively.

"Did you say something?" Demetrios continued rummaging in the upper-reaches of the shelves.

"I don't like fennel," she called up.

"No more should you... so cloying..." came the reply. Then, "Ah, excellent; excellent!"

Demetrios floated back down to her, beaming.

"You found what you were looking for?"

"Yes or, more to the point, no." He clasped his hands tightly around an exceedingly dirty volume and chuckled. "Quite a merry chase you led me," he chided the book fondly, opening it and scanning its thickly-set columns.

Hermione glimpsed the book's title: "*Systema Naturae*? You're looking for the rose, I presume?"

"Yes! And it doesn't exist! How perfectly charming..."

"You're certain?"

"Oh, quite, my dear, quite." He extended the volume toward her. "Linnaeus was the last source I needed, and he has no mention of it, none at all. No, that particular rose died with the sailor, didn't it?" He chuckled. "How marvelous."

"So the rose is a spontaneous creation of the archive?" Hermione breathed, leaning closer.

"More a resurrection, I should say." Demetrios's eyes gleamed. "And you know what this means."

"No... no, I confess I've no idea." The look Demetrios gave her reminded her a bit of Crookshanks having smashed Hadrian's Wall.

"So... erm... how does Scotland fit in?"

"That's the one location in which he could have survived." Demetrios looked at her intently. "You don't happen to have my little owl with you, my dear?"

Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out the coin. "Actually, I wanted to ask you..."

Demetrios's eyes sparkled "Could I perhaps borrow her for one moment? Less than a moment, really..."

"Well, she *is* yours..."

As Hermione watched, Demetrios tossed the coin and caught it, his face radiant. "Delightful!" he exclaimed. "Absolutely delightful." He swirled around happily. "Here you are, my dear." He handed the coin back to Hermione and folded his hands across his middle, bobbing with the complacent air of a job well done.

"Erm... may I inquire where you went?"

"Oh, no, I think not. Not just yet, anyway. Was there something you wanted to ask me, dear?"

Hermione shook her head helplessly sometimes her boss's flights of float were completely beyond her. "Right. Well. I was going to ask you if you thought it wise to test my theory as to the wisdom of the 'control trip.'"

"To be wise, Hermione, dear, one sometimes has to fall." He laughed. "Oh, my word."

She blinked. "Is that a yes?"

"Well, I think it is, dear, but what I think is of no matter. No more am I." He giggled.

Hermione blinked again. "Demetrios, are you by any chance... erm... drunk?"

His delighted laughter rang through the Archive. "Just high on my float, my dear, just high on my float." He looked at her and seemed to be waiting for her to do something.

"Erm..."

"Well, go on. I'll wait..."

She tossed the coin, and found herself stumbling frantically up the rough wooden stairs that led to the Staff Box at the Quidditch pitch.

The crowd was gasping with shock and fear, and she felt a sinking feeling in her stomach as she glanced down at her legs.

Knee socks.

*Oh, no.* She glanced down at the jar she was carrying in which there twinkled a small fire in an unmistakable shade of blue. *Oh, no. I do not want to do this.*

But she had no volition; try as she might she could not stop her younger self's steps as the forces of history hurtled her inexorably toward the underside of a bench, behind which draped an unmistakable set of black robes.

She glanced up and found herself facing Severus's backside.

*Taut...* came her unbidden thought, but her younger hand was already loosening the lid of the jar.

*No, no, no...*

She tried to stop her hand, but couldn't. She tried at least to close her eyes. She didn't want to watch but there was nothing she could do.

As Hermione's older spirit was held transfixed by the forces of history, her younger hand tilted the jar, pouring the flame out onto Severus's *Professor Snape's* - cloak.

*Bugger.*

Her younger body drew backward into the shadow of a sturdy oaken beam.

Within moments, Severus's robes were aflame and he leapt up, knocking Professor Quirrell sideways, thus (she now knew) breaking the eye-contact necessary for the curse on Harry's broomstick.

And suddenly she was again in control of her younger body. She whipped behind the support a moment before Severus *Professor Snape* - exited the seating area, massaging his still-smoking rear with a gloved hand.

Vaguely aware of her younger self's fearful trembling, Hermione's older spirit burst into a fit of slightly hysterical silent giggling.

*Oh, sweet Merlin I set his arse on fire! And a nice, firm one it is, too.* Then, *Stop that. You're twelve.* Then, *I am not.*

The crowd roared as Harry regained control of his broomstick, bringing her back to the moment. She paused to see if she felt compelled to do anything or to go in any particular direction, but she felt no impulse to rejoin the Gryffindor crowd as she once had done.

Smiling slightly, she slipped through the underside of the stands, deciding to see where he had gone.

*I'm acting like Mimi,* she thought randomly, *chasing after his cloak.*

She saw his cloak disappear into the Forbidden Forest, and she followed carefully, her desire to follow him warring with her too-small stride and the very real need for stealth, arguing with herself as she went.

*This is stupid. What if he catches me?* she asked herself.

*Well, one detention, more or less, won't change history. It won't happen if it did... oh, bugger these verb tenses,* she thought as she reached the edge of the Forest. *It's not as though I'm scared of him any more, after all.*

Her younger self seemed oddly quiescent present, but unaware. *This must be one of those unimportant moments Demetrios mentioned dinner, a compliment, the quality of the wine...* She stifled a snort as she imagined her twelve-year-old self discussing a vintage Beaujolais with her slightly singed Potions professor.

Something snapped behind her, and she whipped around, startled.

"And what is your purpose in the Forest, Miss Granger?" He stepped out from behind a tree, in his gloved hand a broken twig which he pointedly let fall.

"Um..." she squeaked. *I do not squeak.* "I saw you leave and wanted to..." *What? What do I want? Think, damn it... think!*

"To...?"

"To see if you were injured, sir."

---



In Hermione's London kitchen, Severus's concentration faltered, and he steadied his stirring hand. What in blazes was going...

His memories were multiplying, and he swore softly.

---

In the Potters' nursery, Crookshanks suddenly arched his back and hissed.

The baby gurgled.

---

His eyes narrowed. "Were I in fact injured, Miss Granger, whatever assistance do you imagine *you* could offer?"

*Oh, right I'm a First Year. Think faster.* "None, sir." *There.* Certain that punishment was imminent, Hermione raised her chin and looked him in the eye.

He'd been about to speak, but at her movement, he went very still, and his eyes narrowed. "Quite."

*What just happened? Does he know? Does he suspect? I must've given away somethi* oh, bloody Hell. *I looked him straight in the eye. Brilliant, Hermione. Just brilliant.*

Twenty-six-year-old Hermione made herself look down and shuffle her feet. Her cheeks, however, grew hot of their own volition.

"Hmmm," he drawled.

*Here it comes.*

"Ten points from Gryffindor for entering the Forest."

She was so startled by the lack of the detention she'd been certain was coming that she didn't bother to wonder at the very low number of points she'd just lost. She might have thought to wonder about it sooner had she not been even more startled realize she was disappointed disappointed that there would be no detention with Professor Snape, a Professor Snape she could not only hear but also see, and also

*Perv! But no wait. Twenty-six. Not a perv. Oh, just think, dammit think!*"Yes, sir." *There. That was safe enough...*

His voice seemed somehow hollow as he murmured, "Go rejoin your classmates, Miss Granger."

And he seemed to herd her out of the Forest with the force of his gaze alone.

But as she reached the edge of the trees, she remembered herself and turned, her school robes swirling shortly around her legs, her eyes seeking his once more. "Your dignity is safe with me, sir."

He stood, his face impassive.

She ran.

She had no idea if he'd heard her.

---

In her kitchen, Severus lifted an eyebrow.

He had.

---

In a blink, she was back in the Archive, whereupon she immediately burst out laughing.

Demetrios chuckled. "Welcome back, my dear."

She turned to him, her eyes shining with knowledge. "You were right."

"I do have that habit..."

"You can't change history," she babbled happily, feeling absurdly like she wanted to sing. "But you can... you actually *can* pay a compliment!"

"You're not drunk, are you, my dear?" Demetrios twitted her.

"Yes. No. It doesn't matter! This can work. This *will* work."

Raising the coin in her fist in cheerful salute, she turned and headed for the Floo.

Demetrios exhaled softly, his translucent face dimpling as he beamed after her. "Well, yes, my dear, of course it will," he mused, absently turning *Systema Naturae* over in his hands, "but which 'this,' I wonder? Ah, well, Athena, in all her bright wisdom..."

His sentence unfinished, he started humming as he headed decisively toward Theatre: Elizabethan.

The Archive shelves perked up, ready to pick up the tune.

*"Each and every heart.. hmmm, how do the lyrics go? And the... hmmm... something... coming through... hmm... already falling... the one that it's calling.. oh, my... is you..."* He laughed quietly. "Rather."

The shelves swooped and spun dramatically, forcing Stringed Instruments: Stradivarius into close harmony with Batteries Not Included: Plastic Keyboards.

"Oh, there you are," he said to Shakespeare's favorite bed. He lay down and crossed his ankles, drawing a single pink rose from the folds of his chiton. Twirling it, he continued the song... "*Understand the voice within... mmmm... a change... already...*"

---

*Notes on Matters of No Importance Whatsoever:*

1. *Hadrian's Wall: A charming arrangement of stones whereby the men in skirts stayed separate from the other men in skirts, despite the snow.*

2. Linnaeus: Author of Systema Naturae, published 1735, in which "binomial nomenclature" was established. A particularly hierarchical way of looking at this annoyingly recurrent blackbird (*Turdus merula*).

3. Italian Fennel: Tastes of licorice. Enough said.

4. Shakespeare's favorite bed: Given that he bequeathed his second-best bed to his wife in his will, the Archive seemed an appropriate location for the best one, yes? See also: Mysteries: Literary.

5. Antonio Stradivari: Italian luthier who may or may not have heard the music of the spheres and created one or two violins (and other things) in its image.

6. "Batteries Not Included": A phrase that should never, ever have anything whatsoever to do with keyboard instruments.

7. The deal with Demetrios's rose: Well, so far, it's pink. \*eyes twinkle\* \*waves to Droxy\*

8. Demetrios's soundtrack for this chapter is "The Voice," by the Moody Blues. Apt? Nah...

\*twirls quill\*

~ A.

## Archways

Chapter 22 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** Severus is angry, Hermione is determined, and Mimi is all about the shiny.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to my alpha- and beta-readers, Anastasia, AnnieTalbot, Lady Karelia, Machshefa, and Melenka. And a heartfelt thanks to all of you for reading and enjoying the story. \*blows kiss.

Demetrios and Mimi are thrilled to have been honoured with an Order of Merlin, First Class, for "Best Original Character(s) in the 2009 OWL Awards. They send their thanks, too :)

The Petulant Poetess Edition of this chapter is dedicated to Lady Karelia and Blue Paris - may their journey bring them where they long to be.

~ Ari



### 22: Archways

"Yes. No. It doesn't matter! This can work. This will work."

Raising the coin in her fist in cheerful salute, she turned and headed for the Floo.

Demetrios exhaled softly, his translucent face dimpling as he beamed after her. "Well, yes, my dear, of course it will," he mused, "but which 'this,' I wonder? Ah, well, Athena, in all her bright wisdom..."

-----

Hermione arrived home breathless and exultant. "Profes- Severus!" she called, only to jump out of her skin when he answered far too close to her ear.

"Miss Granger, what the bloody hell do you think you are doing?"

She took a step backward, only to be met with a cry from underfoot.

Mimi darted under the lounge.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione's eyes flashed as she stepped neatly away from the wall.

She heard Severus's boots creak and surmised he was drawing himself taller. *Uh-oh.*

"I do not enjoy having my memory tampered with. But that's rather your specialty, isn't it?"

She blushed furiously. "Wha my parents? How did you kn"

"Phineas," he said dryly.

"How did *he*"

"You talk in your sleep."

"The old relic," she spat as the adrenalin, which had so recently coursed through her at her certainty that their plan would succeed, flowed into a different path. "My parents are perfectly well, thank you very much."

Severus's boots creaked again. "I'm so glad to hear it," he said softly, his voice carrying a current of growing anger. "Do let us stay on topic, *Doctor.*"

"You were the one who oh, what *is* your issue?"

"What were you doing in the forest?"

She sniffed. "Following you, of course."

The empty space near her front door said nothing.

Hermione waited, her eyes narrowing.

She didn't need to hear his eyebrow rise.

"Oh, don't go raising your eyebrow at me; you know I can't see it. Try to save your life... death... whichever..." she muttered, going over to the lounge to try to coax Mimi out from under it. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Just because he surprised me, I trod on your poor tail..."

The tail in question twitched, affronted, and Hermione burst out laughing. "You two really are a pair."

"Meee," Mimi complained, turning around to blink at Hermione.

"Oh, for pity's sake. Do come out." Hermione sat cross-legged on the floor, her back to where she assumed Severus was still standing.

Only then did she bite her lip.

"As gratifying as that particular expression is, I repeat what are you playing at?"

She glanced up toward his voice. "Playing..." She shook her head. "I took the opportunity for a control trip to confirm Demetrios's assertion that history *can* be altered, at least slightly, if one works around the edges."

"You," he drawled derisively.

Mimi poked her head out from under the lounge. "Meee?"

"Not you, her."

Hermione extended a finger toward Mimi's ears. The kitten stared toward Severus for a moment, but soon was arching the rest of her body out to lean awkwardly into Hermione's hand. Hermione exhaled. "What about me?"

Severus exhaled softly. "You, Miss Granger, felt you had to confirm Demetrios's 'assertion'?"

Hermione blushed.

"Fetching," Severus murmured.

Her blush deepened. "Oh, do stop... well, no, don't; I rather like it but I... oh, I know, it sounds ridiculous, *me* cross-checking Demetrios's eons of experience, but he's not the one who will have, oh, point-oh-four seconds whilst Harry is distracted by receiving your memories to try to save your life. I had to be certain, for myself, that the coin works the way Demetrios said it would."

An indeterminate muttering as he crossed the room.

Mimi's eyes tracked him toward the window, and Hermione turned. "Severus, I imagine it must be disconcerting to suddenly feel your memories... erm..."

"The word you seek is 'doubling.'"

"Doubling, then, but..."

"It is. That is not the problem."

"Then what is... oh! You were brewing, weren't you? Oh, I *am* sorry; is the potion..."

A soft snort. "My concentration was sufficient to the task."

"Then I don't understand."

A burst of anger from in front of the window: "Your behavior in the forest was most unseemly."

Hermione blinked. "Unseemly?" She held her breath. Surely she hadn't betrayed... well... *that.*

"For a first-year to display such..."

As he sought the next word, Hermione swallowed carefully. She could only imagine the sneer that was building.

"... such *concern* for a teacher is... was? ... *most* unseemly."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I wasn't really twelve, Severus."

"I know that *now*. I didn't *then*."

"And I was lying."

"That I knew."

"Liar."

A soft hiss as his robes moved closer to her.

Mimi lifted her head at the sound, the tip of her tail starting to twitch.

"Liar? You use that word very casually."

"If you'd known I was lying," she shot back, "you'd've taken far more points from Gryffindor, sir." She shook her head. "Severus, I mean."

The silence roiled.

"Just out of curiosity, why did you take so few points?"

The roiling quality fled, leaving the silence baffled in its absence.

She instinctively pressed the point. "An out-of-bounds violation should have been fifteen, at least, plus a detention."

"I was and am aware of Hogwarts' rules, Miss Granger."

She opened her hands curtly. "Enough of this 'Miss Granger,' really."

"We are talking about your first year; you were 'Granger' to me then..."

She nodded. "When I wasn't 'Potter's swotty sidekick'?"

"Nothing that complimentary, I assure you."

Hermione ignored that. "Why so few points?"

He said nothing.

"Do you even know why?"

After a moment, he rumbled. "I do not. And I find that disturbing. Very disturbing, indeed. I should have taken far more."

"You knew something was off."

He rumbled, confirming without conceding ground. "You should not have dared follow me, Miss Granger. Or to speak so to a teacher. Especially not to me."

"Granted, but, if you recall, I did *neither* when I actually *was* twelve. Besides on whom should I have tested the coin's abilities, then, as your history is precisely the one we're trying to affect? Really, Severus popping up behind you to ask if you'd ever heard of Athena's owl would have given the game away entirely "

He interrupted, muttering, "I doubt I'd've heard you."

"Regardless; I think I did rather well."

"You should *not* have done it, Hermione!"

At his tone, Mimi started.

"Whyever not? I was testing the process, and it worked. It's not as though I altered the course of the war."

"You were a first-year!"

She felt his glare and pressed her fingers to her temples. "I didn't choose to go back to first year, Severus. The coin took me there."

"I should not..."

"Should not what?"

A wordless silence threatened to explode between them.

"What, Severus?" She glared a challenge toward the window.

He bit his next words: "I've memories of a twenty-six year old woman lurking in the eyes of a child."

"Did you know that then?"

"What matters is that I know it now. Whatever you may have thought at the time, you rarely registered as more than..."

"Harry's swotty sidekick."

"That will serve. I would prefer not to remember your childhood any better than I already do."

Hermione turned that over in her mind for a moment, and a dimple appeared in her cheek.

"Stop smiling," he snarled.

"No, Severus, I don't think I want to."

He said nothing for a while, then, "It's bloody awkward."

Hermione longed to laugh, but bit her tongue. "Try being stuck as a twelve-year-old, admiring your arse as she set it on fire."

A strangling noise.

"I assume you figured out it was me eventually," she said, tilting her head.

At her movement, Mimi batted at her necklace, drawing it into her mouth with her paw.

A crisp rustle indicated his sharp nod. "Afterwards, yes. Not then."

Hermione removed the necklace from Mimi's mouth. "I was terrified you'd discover it was me."

A soft snort.

"Well, you were rather scary, Severus, especially first year."

"I intended to be." A sound that she assumed indicated his leaning against the windowsill. "Perhaps your lack of fear is why I deducted so few points."

"I should think that'd've had the opposite effect Harry's courage lost Gryffindor more points than I can count."

"His, yes. Yours, no; that was not your hallmark."

"Perhaps you were surprised less by my courage than by my compassion."

The silence froze, and she knew she'd hit the mark.

*Compliment him quickly.* "Oh, do sit down. Even now, you're a bit intimidating when you loom about like that."

He rumbled again, but she saw the lounge cushion yield as he complied. She refused to show the smile she was feeling. *Wizards.*

"In my experience, Hermione," he began quietly, and something in his tone dispelled any thought of smiling, "compassion and courage were always synonymous, and never directed toward..." He coughed.

His hand came to rest on her shoulder, and her throat tightened.

"Never..."

She covered his hand with her own and nodded. "I know."

They sat that way until Mimi, in the absence of Hermione's stroking, reached again for necklace, catching a claw in one of its links.

"Poor thing," Hermione crooned, sorting out the tangle.

"Meee," the kitten responded, reaching determinedly for the necklace with her other paw.

"No, Mimi."

Mimi's eyes stayed locked on the necklace as Severus's hand left Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione felt him reach down, saw Mimi's fur compress slightly, then heard him lean back.

"And I dislike having my thoughts altered for any reason."

He left Dumbledore's and Voldemort's names unsaid, but she nodded quietly. "I quite understand. I am sorry, Severus."

She heard him exhale and then a soft rustle she assumed was a nod. She continued, "But "

A sigh from the lounge.

"I am sorry to go on, but it's too important, because well I am planning to 'alter' a great deal more than your thoughts, after all..." Her voice trailed away.

"Indeed but not without with my prior knowledge and consent nor without my assistance." A soft rustle as his invisible gesture indicated the kitchen arch, through which Hermione saw the hazy pink steam from the potion hovering near the ceiling.

"Of course."

The silence between them eased into smoother lines.

Hermione leaned back against the lounge. "Now that we know slight changes to history are possible without any ill effects in the future... erm... present, I mean, saving perhaps to your temper, I've no need to go back again until you've finished brewing the potion." She shifted Mimi in her lap and fished the coin from her pocket. "Here, you keep it. We'll call it earnest mon "

As the coin flashed in the sunlight, Mimi pounced, batting the coin from Hermione's hand.

"Mimi, no!"

The coin spun upwards, and Hermione lunged to catch it.

---

From one of the shelves back in the ever-expanding Hogwarts section of the Archive, Demetrios heard a soft, tentative guitar melody.

He stopped twirling the rose and listened.

The melody repeated, this time with increasing self-assurance as another shelf joined in counterpoint, providing a steadying but somehow wistful harmonic line.

At the sound of two file-boxes falling in quick succession to the floor, his eyes sparkled.

The melody began a third time, and he drifted through the Archive, eyes closed, head back, singing, "*On a dark desert highway...*"

---

"Mimi, no!"

As Severus watched, Hermione rose, spilling Mimi out of her lap as she reached for the tumbling coin.

Her fingers closed around it.

He saw her eyes lose focus the moment before she collapsed facedown into his lap.

---

*Demetrios's soundtrack for this chapter is "Hotel California," by The Eagles. Because Ari is wise and listens to Ana.*

~ A.

## The Exact Art...

*Chapter 23 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *Hermione wakes up not in Severus's lap, but in her bed at school... but when? Meanwhile, Severus gets all hot and bothered. Demetrios isn't much help with that, really, but he does provide an actual explanation. How astonishing of him.*

A/N: As always, my thanks to the Furies: Ana, Annie, Indy, Karelia (who hasn't seen this one yet), Machshefa, and Melenka. With everyone in transit, any comma mistakes are my own...

In celebration of the first blooms at Chateau Ari, all hail Spring.

~ Ari

---



### 23: The Exact Art...

*He saw her eyes lose focus the moment before she collapsed facedown into his lap.*

-----

The feeling of something soft butting her hand brought Hermione back to herself.

"No, Mimi," she mumbled, "you really shouldn't "

"Oh, do shut UP, Hermione," came Parvati's voice from across the room. "You've been talking ALL NIGHT."

Hermione's eyes flew open. *Buggering hell that's not my ceiling it's my bloody canopy at... shite... shite shite shite...*

"Who's Mimi?" Lavender's voice was muffled by sleep and, Hermione remembered, by her pillow, in which she always slept face down.

"Hermione's dream lover, Lav. Go back to sleep."

Lavender lifted her face from the pillow. "Hermione's gay?"

"I'm not," Hermione mumbled, her mind racing frantically for some clue as to which year it might be, "but so what if I were?"

"More for us, then." Lavender bedsprings creaked as she rose to one elbow. "Who's Mimi?"

"She's uh... kitten. In my dream. Sorry."

"Cheat on your familiar on your own time, luv," Lavender grumbled, punching her pillow higher before dropping her head back into it with excessive drama.

"Shut it, girls, please," Parvati whined.

"Rrrrr."

Hermione swallowed. "Crooky?" she whispered, peering through the pre-dawn twilight to see his familiar ginger bulk sprawled over her chest. "Hey, old man..." He turned his head into her hand, but when their eyes met, he arched his back and hissed, his tail bushing out to three times its normal size.

---

Severus stared bug-eyed at the back of Hermione's head in his lap, all thoughts of her earlier unseemly behavior dissipating as he felt her breath warm through his trousers.

He looked uncomfortably at the ceiling. "Hermione."

No response from his lap.

Strictly speaking, that was a lie, but there was none from Hermione.

"As pleasant as that sensation is, your timing is..." He coughed.

Hermione didn't move.

The eyes of Athena's owl were visible between her fingers.

*Blast.*

---

Hermione tried to calm Crookshanks, giving him her hand to sniff.

*It's me, silly. I look like me, I smell like me... at least I assume I do... oh, buggering hell, when am I?*

Crookshanks glared at her hand but deigned to sniff it cautiously, glancing wide-eyed from her face to her hand several times as he repeated the process.

Her mind provided nothing more helpful than inchoate static as it raced in pointless circles. *Severus... Mimi... the coin... I didn't toss it... Mimi... Severus... surely I'll return soon.*

She closed her eyes and waited to return to her flat.

---

After a seriously awkward several minutes during which Hermione's position grew ever more untenable, Severus gave up trying to conceal the fact that his breathing had grown very strained, indeed.

He moved his leg and eased her gently to the floor.

She lay still, her eyes closed, the coin still grasped firmly in her hand.

He unclenched his jaw and exhaled.

Mimi looked up at him, her golden eyes luminous in the late afternoon light.

"And?"

Her tail lashed once in response.

As his breathing returned to a rate he deemed more appropriate for the circumstances, he crossed the room in two strides and tossed a handful of Floo powder into the hearth.

"Get me that buggering ghost."

"Demetrios of Alexandria is currently at the British Library (Wizards Branch). Who shall I say is calling?"

His mind latched onto a name at random. "Charlemagne, you disembodied excuse for "

"At once, Your Majesty."

Severus's invisible eyebrow flew skyward.

"Connecting you now..."

The flames flickered, and Mimi scampered across the floor, miscalculating her speed and sliding into Severus's leg.

"Not now, Mimi," he admonished the kitten, who was craning around his leg, eyes fixed on the low flames

The flames leapt high as the connection was established, and Mimi hid behind Severus's cloak. "Severus Snape, I presume?"

"I'm not buggering Charlemagne," Severus snarled.

"No more would you want to, my boy... to what do I owe..."

"She's gone."

"Gone?"

"Hermione," Severus explained.

"Well, of course Hermione, my boy I didn't imagine you meant your familiar."

"She's not come back."

"If you would take but a breath so to speak do you draw breath, I wonder?"

Severus's nostrils flared. "She flipped your foolish toy and hasn't returned. *Where has she gone?*

"Meee?"

"Ah, the delightful Mimi," Demetrios said.

The shape of a hand appeared in the flames, wiggling its fingers toward the kitten.

Mimi edged around Severus's leg and sniffed the hearth.

Then she sneezed.

"Charming!"

*"Will you stop playing with my cat and"*

"I am merely paying my respects to your familiar."

Severus sputtered.

"Oh, dear. He's in state, is he, Mimi?"

"Meee," the kitten said sadly.

*"Answer my question."*

"Then do take a moment and at least aim for coherence, my boy..."

Severus clenched his fist but found himself obeying.

"Now. What seems to have happened to my owl?"

"Not to your owl, to Hermione, you "

"Buggering ghost, yes; the Floo told me..."

The flames sparkled, and Mimi crept out from behind Severus, entranced.

"She tossed the coin and is now lying unconscious on the floor."

"Did she perhaps hit her head on something?"

"No..."

"Then I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Meee," the kitten informed them.

Severus struggled to maintain what equilibrium he yet possessed. "She is lying. Unconscious. On the floor."

"Yes, hm, how worrisome..." The flames swayed from side to side. "But it cannot have happened as you described. She tossed the coin, you said? Back up, and start again..." The flames swept to the left and waited.

Mimi raised on her hind legs and prepared to pounce on the flames. Severus scooped her into the air and placed her on his shoulder.

"Meee!" she complained, digging her claws through his hair for purchase.

Severus mentally replayed the scene. "Mimi was playing with her necklace and knocked the coin out of her hand."

"And Hermione caught it?"

"Yes."

"Did it bounce?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

Severus nodded. "Quite."

The flames whisked to the center of the hearth. "Smashing!"

*"Where has Hermione gone?"*

"Why, she's right there with you, of course." Demetrios chuckled. "The question is when, and I've no answer for that."

"Why isn't she returning?"

Demetrios laughed again, even more happily than before. "Obviously, my dear boy, she isn't returning because it's not her float she's following."

"Strive for coherence, Librarian."

"Oh, my word, he would have enjoyed you."

Severus shuddered involuntarily. "Aristotle?"

"Heavens, no; you're not his type. Galileo. But as I was saying..."

"Your point, if indeed you have one."

"Hermione hasn't returned from the past because she didn't toss the coin; she merely caught it."

Severus turned to glare at Mimi. "You did this."

She butted her head against his cheek, purring. "Meee," she said happily.



The flames flickered calmly. "Of course she did... how fascinating... oh, my, yes, the theoretical implications..."

Having no wish to remain by the Floo for an hour whilst Demetrios rambled about checking footnotes whilst Hermione lay insensate behind him, Severus intervened. "So she'll remain in the past until..." He had no idea how to finish.

"Until Athena grants her the wisdom Mimi was seeking, yes..."

"Mimi. Seeking wisdom."

"Quite, quite. Our little Hermione is not following her own float, she's following Mimi's." The flames went still.

"Cats don't float."

"Of course they do. How else do you suppose they land on their feet?"

A noise from Severus's throat said nothing but communicated a great deal.

"Relax, my boy. Keep her present self comfortable, and perhaps pour yourself a nice stiff drink. You sound as though you could use one."

---

Hermione was staring at her pumpkin juice. *I hate pumpkin juice. I want my tea. When can I go home?*

Her textbooks had informed her she'd landed squarely in fourth year.

That she'd completed the course exercises through Yule informed her that it was September.

September the second, to be exact.

Harry's face was alight with excitement at the thought of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He and Ron were on about it now.

Fighting the urge to look toward the head table lest she inadvertently create more memories *Unseemly...* she closed her eyes, pushing a rasher of bacon around her plate, thinking distractedly in another corner of her mind about house-elves. *Please, please, please let me go home soon.*

Crookshanks leapt onto her lap and stared balefully at her.

Sighing, she fed him the bacon.

He'd not taken his eyes off of her all morning. She didn't recall his ever acting this way before.

She whispered a silent Charm at her reading notes.

The letters rearranged to read, "*Spirrit smel lyke Hermny. Want spirrit owt. Want Hermny bak.*" Then, "*Kitteh halp spirrit.*"

"Thanks, Crooky," she whispered, turning her face away from Harry and Ron to hide unbidden tears.

Her gaze fell on Severus's place *Professor Snape's* at the head table. *Empty.*

Harry and Ron, still speculating about what the tournament might entail, grabbed their books and headed for class. Ron was gesticulating broadly; Harry was laughing. Neither spared her a glance.

Hermione wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, stuffed her notes into her bag and followed, with Crookshanks padding silently behind.

## And Subtle Science...

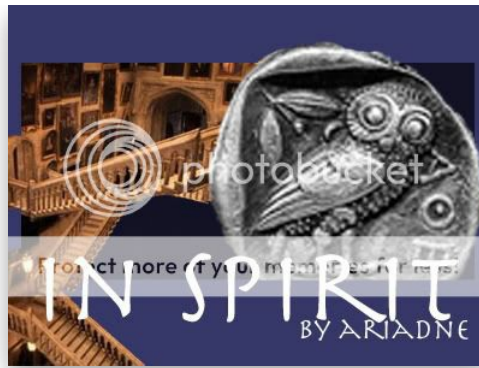
*Chapter 24 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *Two times two cats = doesn't bode well for Severus's sanity or Hermione's permanent record. Demetrios, however, takes Severus's imperatives in stride. Float. Whichever.*

A/N: My humble thanks to my alpha and beta readers for this chapter: Anastasia, Indigofeathers, and Mia Madwyn. They saved me from many a splendid pratfall. Annie, Karelia, and Machshefa have time off for good behavior; Melenka - well, I bothered her too much already today. \*blows kiss\*

---



#### 24: And Subtle Science...

*Hermione wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, stuffed her notes into her bag and followed, with Crookshanks padding silently behind.*

-----

As Professor Binns droned on about the discovery of the magical properties of dandelion seeds, Hermione stifled a yawn.

Her hand kept taking notes which had been more or less automatic long before fourth year anyway and she peered at her classmates through her eyelashes.

Parvati was examining her manicure beneath her desk.

Lavender was doodling hearts on her parchment hearts containing her initials paired with that of every boy in their year. Every so often she'd tap the parchment with her wand to set the charm going which would foretell future happiness. Thus far, Hermione noted in a bemused corner of her mind, her best prospect seemed to be Vincent Crabbe.

Harry's head was on his hand as he pored over a Quidditch magazine in his lap, his other hand making vague writing-like gestures with which he would successfully hoodwink Binns throughout his years at school.

Ron's head was tilted back as he stared out the window, his mouth slightly open.

*We're all so young... so very, very young...* she mused.

Then, *Well, of course we are. Focus, Granger.*

Trouble was, there was nothing to focus on. Even Crookshanks's thoughts were narrowed to one item: "*Want Hermny bak.*"

Her hand still moving, her mind skittered around every possible reason she could imagine for her having ended up in fourth year, but none satisfied. She kept coming back to Mimi. Who could tell what, if anything, had been in her fuzzy little mind when she swatted the coin?

Hermione stifled a very adult sigh and reached for a fresh piece of parchment.

*Why fourth year? What in Merlin's name can Mimi have to do with fourth year?*

Giving up on note-taking which the sweeping forces of history were happy to let her do she decided to start a list:

Cedric

She closed her eyes. No. There was no point in making a list. What would happen would happen.

Crookshanks shifted on her foot.

---

Keeping part of his awareness tuned to the living room where Hermione's still immobile form now rested on the lounge, Severus examined the potion for the first sparks that would mark the completion of this particular brewing cycle.

If the ingredients had been sufficiently pure, the sparks should start in one... two... three... *Ah.*

A cadence of small sparks arose from the potion's depths and hovered delicately over its surface.

He rested the stirring rod on a lump of perfectly clear glass and stood straight, glancing down his nose at the kitten.

She was industriously washing her tail.

"You do not float."

She spared him an unperturbed glance and went back to her bath.

"You're clean enough. Come." He bent and scooped her with both hands onto Hermione's kitchen table.

"Now," he said, reaching for the box of Typo-Bits and scattering a handful in front of Mimi. "Let's try this again."

Mimi sniffed a piece of cereal and opened her mouth to taste it.

"No," Severus said, moving it out of reach. "Where is Hermione?"

Mimi hopped off the table and trotted through the archway.

Severus pursed his lips and retrieved her.

Placing her back on the table, he tried again. *When* is Hermione?"

The letters zoomed around the table-top. "N-A-O-W."

He snorted. "Let us do skip the obvious. Where and when did you send her..." he hesitated. "... her spirit?"

The letters moved more slowly this time. Finally, he read, "SPIRRIT AT HOGWRTZ."

"Hogwarts," he repeated.

Mimi looked at him as if asking a question.

Feeling quite the fool, but having no better plan, he pulled out a chair and drew it briskly to the table. "Can you narrow down which year for me, little one?"

Mimi made a low noise that might have been a growl.

"4F YEER. DAY 2. FURST CLAS: STOREE OF MAJIK."

He blinked rapidly as Mimi, her tail twitching, batted the cereal around the table.

He hadn't expected anything nearly that specific.

"Why?"

"Meee?"

"Why did you toss the bloody owl?"

Mimi trapped the moving cereal beneath her paw. "OWL BURD. KITTEH HUNT."

Severus scowled. "The coin." *Dratted librarian's contagious.* From between clenched teeth, he muttered, "The coin, kitten. The coin."

The letters did not move.

Severus picked Mimi up and carried her to the lounge, aiming her face at the coin that remained in Hermione's hand.

"That coin."

He heard the cereal move.

"Meee," Mimi complained as Severus carried her back to the kitchen.

The cereal read, "WHY?"

"That's *my* question."

"MEEE?"

"WHY?" the cereal repeated.

Severus snapped, "Why what?"

"MEEE!" Mimi yowled, twisting into Severus's grasp and raking her claws across his hand as she leapt to the table top, sending the loose cereal scattering to the floor.

She turned on the cereal box and swatted it, claws extended, toppling it to its side.

More cereal rained down.

Severus closed his eyes and sighed then bent to retrieve the cereal.

Then he froze.

"WHY SPIRRIT CRY? WHER HERMNY? WHO IZ MIMI?"

Severus backed away from the cereal slowly. *What in Merlin's name...*

His glance fell to the table-top.

"WHO IZ CRUKSHANX?"

He didn't realize he was still backing up until the edge of the counter caught him on the rear.

---

"Rrrrrr," Crookshanks growled at her feet.

Automatically, Hermione reached her hand down to stroke him, but it had the opposite effect.

"RRRRRR!" he growled.

Professor Binns stopped mid-sentence, peering hazily toward Hermione. "Miss Evans..."

"Granger, Sir," Hermione corrected him quietly.

"Well, yes, whoever you are, if you cannot keep your familiar under control, it will have to leave my classroom."

"RRRRRR!" Crookshanks repeated.

Grateful for any excuse to leave, Hermione collected her things. "I'm sorry, sir."

Ignoring the envious glances from her classmates, Hermione and Crookshanks left the classroom and headed as quickly as she could for Gryffindor tower.

As she waited for the stairs, she heard a voice from the floor below. "Hey, Hermione heading to the library? Wait up; I'll walk with you."

Hermione stopped, her throat closing. *Do not look down, do not, do not...*

She couldn't help herself.

Cedric Diggory was bounding up the stairs two at a time. "Hey." He smiled. "Aren't you usually in class right now?"

"Hi, Cedric," she whispered, her throat too dry for voice.

"You okay?"

Not trusting words, she nodded.

"Binns kick you out 'cause of your familiar?"

She nodded again.

Cedric laughed. "Aw, cheer up. That happens to me all the time. He hates cats."

"Kneazle," she murmured, trying to look away.

"As if Binns knows the difference. C'mon... might as well make good use of time, right?"

Assaulted by memories of his lifeless body... Harry's terror... his father's anguished cry... Hermione could only stammer, "Time..."

Cedric tilted his head as he laughed. "I always bring Clementine to Binns's class if I need an extra hour." He tapped his head with one finger, his eyes warm with humor. "I bet I know what you're thinking."

Unable to speak, she shook her head weakly.

"So clever - why isn't he in Ravenclaw? That's it, isn't it?" He grinned at her. "I get that all the time. But nah... someone has to take care of my House, right? Why not me?"

---

In the recesses of the Archive, Demetrios hummed distractedly to himself, contemplating the two file boxes that had fallen off the Hogwarts shelves a few hours before.

He hadn't had to look at their labels to know which two they were. No, that much had been obvious; besides, he'd thoroughly scrutinized the contents of one of them several years before.

The box labeled, *Snape, Severus (Potions Master [Potter Years])* was, for the moment, quiescent.

The box labeled, *Granger, Hermione (Student)* was quiet as well, but he rather suspected that any time now...

"*I could feel at the time... Any time, now... There was no way of knowing...*"

The box quivered slightly.

He stopped singing and peeked inside. "Excellent, excellent." A new file had appeared in the box: "Fourth Year (x2): Minor Infractions." He pulled out a single slip of paper and read, "Dismissed from class: inappropriate familiar management."

He sniffed. "Binns of course what a prig. Ah, my dear Hermione, how times have changed since my student days... and yours, of course... how much, though... how much... Hmm... fourth year, you say..."

He floated, still humming, toward the Floo.

"Hermione Granger, if you would be so kind," he told it.

"Dr. Granger is in her flat. One moment please..."

"Thank you."

After a moment, Demetrios heard footsteps. "Severus, my boy, are you there?"

The flames flickered curtly. "Where else would I be?"

"Quite, quite... I've just ascertained Hermione's whenabouts."

"Fourth year."

Demetrios bobbed slightly. "How did you know?"

"The cereal seems somewhat promiscuous."

"I'm sorry?"

"Initial consideration of the matter seems to indicate that somehow your ruddy toy opened a connection between Mimi and that cat of hers."

"The venerable Crookshanks?"

"Somewhat less than venerable, I believe."

Demetrios shot toward the ceiling in search of his eyebrows.

"Librarian?"

"But a moment, my boy... my eyebrows, you understand..."

"I do not, of course."

Demetrios located his eyebrows near an air vent. "Ah, there you are." He floated back down. "Shocking, how very shocking. Mimi is somehow hearing Hermione's familiar from the past?"

The flames went flat. "So it would seem, despite an utter lack of logic and reason."

"Tut, tut, Potions Master... there is much that is ineffable, you know."

Silence from the Floo indicated Severus's opinion of "ineffable."

"Eloquent as always, Severus."

"Indeed. One assumes, Librarian, that your own source is somewhat less..." Inarticulate rumbling.

Demetrius laughed. "I have her student file, of course. That young whippersnapper kicked her out of class for inappropriate familiar management."

The flames bristled. "She'd best not bring that beast into my classroom."

Through the Floo, Demetrius heard, "Meee?"

He shook his head. "She may have no choice, Severus. I've no doubt her familiar senses that things are not quite usual with our little Hermione."

"Tell that to me then, not now." The flames shot out of the Floo, straight through Demetrius.

"My dear boy, you simply must relax. Tension will cloud one's judgment so... You must know I cannot tell your past self anything. Hermione has the coin, my boy."

The coals gleamed. "Then she's in for a rough time of it in my class."

"Yes," Demetrius said softly. "I rather suspect she is."

The folder behind him flipped open with an annoyed snap as several more pages appeared in it. As he turned to examine it, he heard, "Buggering hell I've just assigned her detention."

"So I see... oh... oh, dear." Demetrius laughed quietly as another paper appeared.

"Blast bloody hell, *two* detentions."

"Yes, yes; her file just expanded."

Severus was sputtering. "One for not returning to Binns's class and one for blast inappropriate familiar management."

"I'm reading it now."

The flames flickered violently. "Make this stop, Librarian."

"!? Why, I can do nothing, my boy. I do hope you'll go easy on her, Severus."

"I never do."

"I think she knows that."

A brief silence, then, "Buggering memories..."

"Mmm, I can see how they might be a bit of bother..." Demetrius watched the flames speculatively, but they ceased all movement instantly. He smiled. "Hmmm... quite. Just remember, my boy in the present, I mean that detention going to be much harder on her than on you."

"As it should be."

Demetrius waited.

A longer silence, then the flames went very still.

"You perceive my point... whatever you devise for her detention won't matter an iota to the good Doctor. All she will care about is that she watched you die when she could have saved you."

The silence brooded, then the flames nodded.

"I'm sorry, Severus."

"What can that blasted cat have been thinking?" His words were sharp, but the flames were quiet.

"I've no idea, of course... we may never know."

"That does not satisfy."

"Well, no..." Demetrius raised his hands helplessly. "I would be happy to check the Bast collection, but Hermione is really the..."

"Do so."

The connection ended.

"... expert... oh, dear." Eyeing the file once more, he tilted his head. "So dolorous, this decade... but perhaps... yes. A change of tempo... just the thing..."

At his gesture, the floor lit up and a mirrored ball appeared, spinning slowly on the ceiling.

Demetrius spun once, struck a sudden pose, and swept into Hermione's office.

---

*Nonsensical notes:*

1. Demetrius's soundtrack for this chapter is Roxy Music's "More Than This." (Merlin help Hermione; I think he's just discovered disco.)

2. Regarding the subtle science of cross-temporal feline communication: call it "cats," call it "magic," call it "messages from the mother ship" ~ whatever best pleases you. (You didn't actually think I was going to invoke Descartes, did you? Oh, fiiiine. Here's how it works: The limit of  $x$  for values unequal to zero as  $x$  approaches infinity from both directions simultaneously is equal to the square root of  $-1$  over two cats to the power of the written word. "grins")

\*blows kiss\*

~ A.

# Of Potion Making.

Chapter 25 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *Hermione casts a pebble into the tides of history. Ripples happen.*

A/N: My thanks to everyone I pinned down for this one, especially and as always Ana, whose influence is also evident in the chapter art.

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## 25: Of Potion Making.

"... expert... oh, dear." Eyeing the file once more, he tilted his head. "So dolorous, this decade... but perhaps... yes. A change of tempo... just the thing..."

At his gesture, the floor lit up and a mirrored ball appeared, spinning slowly on the ceiling.

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----

The boys were still speculating wildly about the Tournament that night at dinner, apparently requiring only the occasional disapproving sniff and priggish comment regarding "finding out soon enough" that her 14- and 26-year-old selves were both quite happy to supply.

This left her with her reading notes now covered with pages of *Want Hermny bak* - and her dinner to occupy her mind.

Both were, unsurprisingly, insufficient.

She sighed and reached for the top book in her satchel. Which it was didn't matter, really; it wasn't as though anyone would notice or care.

She twirled her fork idly through her shepherd's pie and reviewed her day.

*Kicked out of class... thanks, Crooky although I can hardly blame you; you must be beside yourself, for all your stodgy dignity. Cedric in the stairs... then Severus (Professor Snape, Granger. Professor Snape...) in the corridor detention and again the second Crooky's paw crossed the threshold into Potions... another detention... I don't even think he looked at me... I hope he didn't, anyway...*

She concentrated on stabbing one pea onto each of her fork tines and contributed another priggish sniff to the boys' conversation.

She was wondering morosely how she was to get through two detentions with Professor Snape without any eye contact when, with no warning whatsoever, she felt her elbow fly into Ron's ribs.

*What the...*

"Oy, Hermione, whassat for?" Ron said, swallowing a mouthful of potato.

"The students from Beauxbatons," she found herself saying, "are quite superior in their understanding of Charms, and..." Even as the words were spilling out, she wondered what the forces of history found so important that she was compelled to utter them. "... however *physically attractive* any of them might be."

She found herself dragging her satchel from under the bench, stuffing a book into it, and stalking out of the Great Hall, whereupon the forces of history left her quite suddenly once again in command of her own feet, standing in the Entrance Hall.

*Lovely. Didn't even get to finish my dinner, she thought. Might as well go back to Gryffindor tower. Hm... I wonder...*

She turned over why history obliged her to bruise Ron's ribs as he yammered about how beautiful the Beauxbatons girls were rumoured to be. *Something to do with Fleur, perhaps? How could that have affected the outcome of the... oh, no.*

She stopped halfway up the stairs and blinked.

Her budding relationship with Ron. Of course. Had the outcome of the war really depended on *that*?

She chewed her lip, seeking to connect invisible dots. *If we'd not had feelings for each other, what would have changed? The Forest of Dean, perhaps... he had to desert us so he could come back just as Harry found the sword... his jealousy... oh, grand, just grand.*

Unenthused about spending the next who knew how long responding stupidly to Ron's... well... stupidity, she stood for a moment in a minor dudgeon, then brightened, remembering that she'd soon be back and forth between the quarreling boys. Once Harry's name had come out of the Goblet, and for as long as their fight lasted, she and Ron had tacitly set aside their hormonal what-have-you for a few weeks.

*Well, that'll be a reprieve, anyway. Of course, I should be back in my own time by then... Mimi, I hope you had a good reason for this.*

Crookshanks twined about her ankles.

"Oh, I know, poor thing; you're still hungry. So am I..."

Adjusting her the strap of her bag on her shoulder, she made her way through sparsely populated corridors.

One day at Hogwarts and three new black marks on her permanent record...

*Well... no sense wandering about aimlessly. Best put time to good use. It's not as though I actually need to study; I could sit N.E.W.T.s tomorrow, probably...*

But the thought of settling in for an intensive revision of material she'd long considered elementary didn't inspire her to stay still for long; after a half an hour in the library, putting time to good use seemed to involve a lot of aimless wandering, a bit of reading, and surreptitiously letting Crookshanks satisfy his frequent urges to sniff her hand and stare at her with large, mournful eyes.

With three days to kill before her first detention Friday night, after double Potions with the Slytherins for the first time in her life, Hermione Granger was bored.

---

Severus leaned back in Hermione's armchair, holding an empty snifter.

He'd remembered assigning detentions, but he could recall no clear visual memory of her. Her presence in the stairs when she ought to have been in class had merely registered as "out of place"; her ruddy cat's paws in his dungeon even more so; both times, he'd responded more or less automatically and continued his day.

Perhaps his past self would be wise and assign her cauldron scrubbing.

No. She would be doubled over for cauldron scrubbing.

Ingredient sorting, then.

Worse. That would involve proximity. Her eyes they would trouble him. And although, strictly speaking, he didn't so much mind if his past self had a bit more trouble the limit to what he could endure had been reached and surpassed a thousand times before he would very, very much prefer to keep child Hermione in the past, where she bloody well belonged.

For the third time that hour, he muttered, "Oh, do wake up."

His admonition didn't work any better than it had the first two times. Hermione lay on the lounge, breathing softly.

More brandy.

He had no idea how quickly time was passing in the past -*Was it Friday morning yet? Afternoon?* - but the more brandy he could get in his system before his memories started doubling, the happier he'd be about it.

*Double detention with Hermione Granger.*

He groaned.

---

By Thursday evening, Hermione had concluded that she'd had no idea she'd been influencing history so much. Her constant low-level bickering with Ron required. She'd sorted that out. Helping Colin Creevey with his D.A.D.A. homework obvious. A quick smile to a Hufflepuff whose name she didn't know he later fought in the Battle of Hogwarts. *His bravery was somehow my doing?*

Most of them she could figure out, but when the "sweeping forces of history" required that she repeat her thrice-daily refusal to let Lavender and Parvati practice their make-over Charms on her, she gave up, the "sweeping forces" becoming, in her mind, "the pervying tides," as they seemed far more interested in her personal life or what amounted to it at 14 than in whether or not she paid attention in class.

She found this more than mildly offensive.

So although she'd made it through the next two days without real incident, she was no closer to understanding why she was in fourth year and more to the point, for how long than she had been right after she face-planted into...

*His lap. Oh, sweet Merlin.* She felt her face redden. *Go to sleep, Granger. Thinking about him won't make detention any easier. And who knows? Tomorrow morning, I might wake up in...* She shut her eyes hard, but her mind continued, ... *Severus's lap. Professor Snape's. My flat, my flat in London. Oh, bugger all this for a lark...*

But Friday morning, she opened her eyes once again to her faintly moth-eaten Hogwarts canopy.

"Oh, screw me sideways, enough of this," she grumbled, getting out of bed.

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione, could you just go and have a morning pee without announcing it for once?"

"Sorry, Parvati." Hermione yanked her jumper over her head and left the dormitory, Crookshanks slipping into stride alongside her, making for the dungeons.

Crookshanks would follow her to Double Potions this afternoon there was simply no stopping him and she had her permanent record to consider, even if it didn't count.

Would it count?

She paused halfway out the door, her mind racing. She'd no doubt Demetrios would still hire her, but her application for advanced study... was that guaranteed, in her future?

She stood there worrying that question, brow furrowed, until Parvati interrupted, begging her to shut the door, "For pity's sake you're letting half the draft in the castle in."

Hermione slipped out.

She had to talk to Professor Snape. Severus.

Whichever.

---

Halfway to the kitchen, he stopped short, nearly stepping on Mimi.

He remembered a new knock on his door on the door to his private study, to be precise.

*No student ever dared bollocks what in blazes are you thinking, Granger?*

With a reflexively professional glance at the cauldron - *"The glow should emerge after six hours, beginning as a slight effervescence..."* Check. - Severus reached grimly for the brandy as he remembered the knock repeating.

---

Frowning, she knocked again.

His voice was muffled by the thick planks of the iron-bound door. "Identify yourself."

"Hermione Granger, sir."

The door didn't open. *Well, fine; I've no choice.*

"Your class is not until this afternoon. Do recall the rules for my classroom and leave your familiar in *What do you mean by entering my office without leave?*

*Whoops. Perhaps I had a choice after all. Shite.*

*"Explain yourself."*

*Well, I'll try; let's see if this works...* Hermione was careful not to look at him as she closed the door. "I'm dreadfully sorry to interrupt you, sir, but that's precisely why I need to speak to you."

She heard him draw a breath, no doubt to blister her severely. Quickly gathering her muster, she turned and looked him straight in the eye.

---

In London, Severus's hand tightened hard on the bottle.

---

He towered over her, his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "Your impertinence is..."

She kept her eyes locked on his. *He's so tall... or I'm still shorter... oh, stop it, Granger!* She spoke in a rush: "Forgive me for interrupting you, sir, but I haven't much time... well, that's not precisely correct; it's more that I don't know how much... but regardless..."

*"...inexcusable and will you stop babbling?"*

She shot him a reflexive glare and saw him stiffen. "I *know* it's inexcusable, and yet I seem to be able to do it anyway, which may be precisely why I'm here; don't know regardless I can't help Crookshanks's following me. He *will* keep on, and there's not a bloody thing I can do about it, and I don't blame him, not one whit, poor thing, because..."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Because Professor, have you ever heard of Athena's owl?"

---

In Hermione's kitchen, Severus was chanting, "Send her to Pomfrey... send her to Pomfrey... she's distraught, you fool, just just get her and her eyes out of your office "

---

Demetrios floated a few inches above Hermione's desk chair, his ghostly feet hovering over the desktop.

Her student folder snapped open before him and he picked up the latest parchment. "Ooh, insubordination! My, my..."

He leaned back and watched the mirror ball spin lazily on the ceiling.

The box containing Hermione's permanent record changed color from pale gold to vaguely...

"Peach! And... perhaps with a tinge of apricot?" He peered more closely, then shook his head. "Too soon to say; too soon to say."

He settled back and stared dreamily at the ceiling, murmuring, "He'd be so proud of you, dear... so proud..."

---

She had no idea if he'd heard her; the words "Your detention is extended from Saturday afternoon to after dinner Saturday night" hung in the air.

*It's a date... do not say that do not say it, oh, for Merlin's sake, his eyes...*

She could not see anything in them beyond sharp annoyance, which she found rather amusing, and, she had to admit, vast indifference, which she didn't like at all. *Grow up, Granger he's distracted; the Mark must be getting darker now, but he doesn't know what it means; not yet...*

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, sir. I'll see if I can leave him with Hagrid."

"And on Saturday," he snarled, "I shall expect you immediately after lunch and again immediately after dinner."

She wanted to laugh. To sing.



And more than anything she wanted him to touch her.

She dropped her eyes and feigned fourteen. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Indeed."

And she remembered, and her heart fell. *You have no idea how sorry, Severus. None at all.*

She had no voice. Her eyes raised to his once more.

He almost flinched, and his eyes narrowed. "Get out."

She nodded.

Then she thought, *Granger, you're pants at subtlety. And a first-class perv.*

---

*Hermione, Hermione, what are you doing?*

It was her eyes, but more than her eyes.

He could read every emotion in them now, including what he'd seen at the last.

Apology.

On that Friday morning that had never really happened, he hadn't known what it was, but that was beside the point. He'd been distracted by the Mark, and besides, she was a child.

He leaned against the counter and frowned.

He'd been stupid and blind far, far too many times for his own liking, but soon, in the past, he knew the Mark would have his every nerve-ending thrumming with awareness, his eyes and ears recording the smallest anomalies, his mind replaying them endlessly for any indication, any sign...

... and the right and wrong of stupidity and blindness blurred with the passage of time.

*Damn her eyes.*

She'd seen too much, and there would be no hiding it. Not then, for her; not from him, now.

She'd watched him die.

She was no actor.

It was only a matter of time.

He hoped he'd send her to Pomfrey. To Dumbledore.

Away.

"Wake up."

## He Began

*Chapter 26 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *Hermione attends Potions class. And so does everyone else.*

A/N: Special thanks, as always, to Anastasia (she without whom no words would happen), AnnieTalbot, Indigofeathers, and MiaMadwyn.

---



## 26: He Began

"Wake up."

-----

"Just... just keep him inside, okay?" Hermione slipped out of Hagrid's door before he could question her any further and ran for the castle, ignoring Crookshanks's yowls of protest which were audible even through the thick walls of Hagrid's hut.

As she raced across the grounds, stomach growling furiously, she had the completely inane thought that if she missed too many more meals her younger self would discover that her uniforms no longer fit properly.

She skidded to a halt before the door that marked the entrance to the castle's lower levels. *Bugger.* She hadn't been studying properly; her older self knew the material but would her younger self be prepared for exams?

No time to think about that now.

Smoothing her hair as best as she could and adjusting her tie so she didn't look as though she'd arrived by Thestral, she took a moment to let her breathing even out before braving Potions class.

She joined the other students who were chattering in the corridor as they waited. *Was Neville always so pale before class?*

The door opened, and the students hushed, filing quietly into class.

She took her accustomed spot and removed everything she'd need for class from her school bag.

Well, almost everything.

She didn't suppose that she'd find an extra measure of courage in her bag. Or a draught of don't-look-him-in-the-eye. Or a... oh, hell.

"Miss Granger, unless you are attempting to hide your familiar in your satchel..." His voice was softly dangerous.

She shook her head and straightened in her chair, careful to keep her eyes on her textbook. She dipped her quill and willed her hand to be steady as he began the lesson.

She managed to keep the tell-tale feather from quivering overmuch as he outlined the potion they would be brewing that day, and she forced herself to keep writing.

Her younger self would need the notes, and it was an excellent excuse not to look up lest she find him watching her.

Or paying her no heed at all.

She didn't know which would be worse.

She kept writing, wondering whether the Slytherins had always made this much of a murmuring, shuffling racket or whether her nerves were just doing a good impression of piano wire.

"No answer, Miss Granger?"

She heard him cross his arms the sound of wool on wool almost a shriek in her mind *Definitely piano wire. Damn. What was the question?*

She didn't need sound to tell her that, when she'd had no response, he'd lifted a scathing eyebrow.

Or sneered.

"Very well. Malfoy, what are the four uses of..."

*Bugger, bugger, bugger.*

She focused very hard on his every word for the rest of the introductory lecture, but he asked no more questions.

As the students moved to collect ingredients and set up their cauldrons for brewing, she cast a careful look toward the front of the room.

He sat, stone silent, as the students milled about, his eye flicking professionally from student to student, his watchful gaze cataloging their every move, already calculating their marks for the potion.

She'd never realized how difficult it was to behave naturally when you were trying to behave naturally.

*How did he survive all those years as a spy?* she mused, waiting for Pansy to finish with the dragonfly wings.

Draco muttered something to Pansy and they both shot her a look and smirked.

*What was that about?* she wondered, her hand going automatically to her hair.

"Miss Granger, need I remind you what a single human hair will do in this particular potion?"

"It will render it useless except as a base for Felix Fe" *Shite*. She wasn't supposed to know that yet.

He interrupted her even as she broke off. "I did not ask you for a treatise, Granger. Yes or no would suffice."

"Yes, sir. No, sir."

"Yes, sir. No, sir." Pansy echoed in a high-pitched, overly tremulous voice.

The Slytherins laughed.

Their laugh cut off as it always did whenever the professor shot them a mild glance.

Silence followed, and she had no choice but to look up.

He seemed to be awaiting something.

She was careful to look at the bridge of his nose as she said, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Tie your hair back." He turned to inspect the layout of Parvati's ingredients, his cloak rippling a remonstrance behind him.

She hastily counted dragonfly wings and hurried back to her seat, trying to remember whether he'd ever told her to tie her hair back before.

He'd probably never needed to.

She twisted her hair back and stuck a spare quill through to hold it.

---

His hand paused on Mimi's fur as she slept, curled, on his lap.

*Her hair...*

Just an impression of it slipping out of a knot at the base of her neck, falling forward toward her cauldron.

His fingers twitched, waking Mimi, who blinked sleepily and stretched.

"Tie it back, Hermione," he whispered to her empty living room. "Tie it back."

---

Hermione was counting counterclockwise stirs when a shadow fell across her lecture notes. She held her breath, fearing that the professor had decided to haunt her brewing.

Then she noticed the shape of the shadow.

Unless Professor Snape had suddenly sprouted a pair of pointy ears... she glanced at the high window.

Crookshanks was meowing silently behind the glass.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, blowing a long strand of hair out of her face. She'd known Hagrid was too soft-hearted to listen to his yowls for long.

Hoping that the professor wouldn't notice *As if he doesn't notice everything well, technically, Crooky isn't exactly inside...* she bent to her lecture notes to double-check the next few steps.

"*PERFSSR SEZ 2 TYE IT BAK*."

She stared at her notes then glanced back to the window, where Crookshanks was trying to climb the glass.

How did Crookshanks know?

Blindly, she fumbled in her bag for a hair tie and straightened to find Professor Snape reaching into her cauldron with a bare finger.

Her breath caught at the memory of those hands in her hair.

Those hands...

He pulled a long, curling strand from the potion.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," he said softly, yet with enough power that the entire class fell silent. "You failed."

She nodded, her throat closing against tears. "I know," she whispered.

His hands...

She hugged her arms to her chest and hunched in her seat. *I know.*

---

Severus exhaled and took a long sip of brandy.

Mimi climbed to his chest, sniffing the vapours and drawing her head back.

"When are you going to let her come back, little thing?"

"Meee?"

He glanced at the cereal on the side-table.

The letters shuffled around to read, "*KITTEH HALP SPIRRIT*."

"Is that you or her blasted Kneazle?"

"CRUKSHANX."

He blinked slowly, his mind quietly formulating a plan.

After a moment, he spoke very softly. "Mimi, I need you to pay very close attention."

She peered at him with adoring eyes.

"Tell Crookshanks to tell Hermione..."

---

As her classmates continued their brewing, Hermione scratched endless repetitions of "I will tie my hair back properly" on the four-foot scroll Professor Snape had handed her with instructions to cover it by the end of the period.

*"I will tie my hair back properly. I will tie my hair back properly. I will tie my hair back prFSSR SEZ 2 AD BAMAYTO SEED."*

Hermione shoved her chair back. *What the...*

*"BAMAYTO SEED WIL FIX POSHUN. PRFSSR SEZ 2 SMASH WIF SILVUR KNYF. MIMI SEZ PRFSSR LYKE UR HAYR BUT NOT IN POSHUN."*

Her eyebrow arched and she turned her head to the window.

Crookshanks was staring at her as if he could melt the window glass by force of will.

"Mimi?" she mouthed.

He blinked at her.

"You can hear Mimi?"

Her punishment lines unfurled to read, *"KITTEHZ HALP SPIRRIT."*

Her heart swelled, and she mouthed, "Tomato?"

Crookshanks blinked again.

Hermione's eyes mouth twitched, and, glancing around the classroom to make sure there was adequate motion to cover her, she slipped from her seat and headed for the shelves that held the seeds.

---

Demetrios was humming softly, conducting the Archive with fluttering hands and a fennel frond, when he heard a small shuffling from Hermione's permanent record.

He opened his eyes and peered through the rainbows of light dancing off the mirror ball and reached for the "Minor Infractions" file.

Nothing new.

He put the fennel down and rifled through the file box.

The fennel continued to twitch rhythmically on Hermione's desk.

"Oh, do stop," he murmured, looking for something new in the box.

No new files.

Frowning, he floated upward, twisting himself upside down for a better look.

"Ah, there you are..." Shoving both hands to the bottom of the box, he pulled out a small, tightly folded parchment to which was affixed a rusty paper clip.

---

"Notice of Special Merit:

Dear Miss Granger,

Professor Snape has notified the staff that you are to be awarded this Notice of Special Merit for your discovery of the counter-active properties of *Lycopersicon esculentum* (common tomato) to human hair contamination in low-acidity potions.

He refuses to convey his respects in person; this note will have to suffice.

Sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

P.S. If I may add my personal congratulations, my dear? I am delighted in your achievement and wish you continued success in your fourth year."

---

"Oooh, the love apple... how charming! How utterly, perfectly charming...."

Demetrios swept to the Floo, chuckling.

"Dr. Hermione Granger, please."

"One moment..."

Footsteps.

"Well done, Severus."

A small chuckling movement from the flames. "I rather thought so."

"I assume that the wondrous cereal is still conveying past thoughts from the most excellent Crookshanks?"

"Indeed."

"And what means are you using on her end?"

"It seems I set her to writing lines as punishment."

"For her untamable hair?"

Silence. Then, "Obviously."

"How excellent!"

A grumbling noise.

"When did you discover the properties of the tomato seed?"

"During my tenure as Headmaster, I conducted what private research I could."

"As your duties allowed, mmm?"

"I was unable to publish the results for obvious reasons."

"Death will sometimes do that," Demetrios agreed tactfully.

The flames acknowledged Demetrios's tact with a slight nod. "The diversion proved welcome."

"I'm sure it did, Potions Master."

Another silence, followed by a quiet, "Librarian..."

Demetrios murmured, "Yes?"

"We will get her back, of course."

He smiled softly. "I've no doubt but that we will... in due time..."

"Has this sort of... inadvertence occurred before?"

"Mimi's intervention with my owl, you mean?"

"With that blasted coin, yes."

"Mmmm, no, not to my knowledge."

"It's been in your possession for..."

"Aeons, of course."

"Ah."

Demetrios watched the flames flicker hesitantly. He waited.

Finally, he said, "Was there something else, Severus?"

"No. Nothing."

Demetrios sighed. "For a former spy, you're a terrible liar."

"I simply want to know when."

"Athena's wisdom will prevail."

"Athena." A snort from the Floo.

Demetrios chuckled. "Contemporary wizards ignore the things of the gods sometimes at their peril. They do make life..."

Another snort. "Easier?"

"Great Apollo, no, not easier; quite the opposite, in fact... but in the face of the unknown, I at least have my gods, whereas you..." Demetrios opened his hands.

"I'm a wizard, not a polytheistic relic."

"Well, of course you are, my boy... but which of us is happier, I wonder?"

A consternated silence from the flames, then, "One wonders how she refrains from strangling you."

"I'm sure it helps that I am already dead, Potions Master, whereas you..."

The connection ended.

Demetrios shook his head, his hair trailing softly around him like a psychedelic halo. "... are also dead. And perhaps you'll stay that way. But perhaps..." He laughed, and the Archive swelled with sound.

He spun in place, bobbing in time with the low bass beat. "Mmm.... *'Whether you're a brother, a wife or you're a...'* polytheistic relic... oh, my word... well, no time but the present... not without my owl, anyway... to examine the Bast files... there's nothing relevant there, of course; still... *'I'm goin' nowhere... somebody help me...'*" He stopped and hovered at the threshold to Hermione's office. "Hmmm..."

He spun and zoomed toward the Herbology section, where, as he'd suspected, several recently extinct heirloom tomato plants had reappeared, laying vigorous claim to several extra feet of space, jerking their branches back and forth with exaggerated self-importance.

He threw back his head and laughed.

---

Floatnotes:

1. Demetrios's soundtrack for this chapter is "Stayin' Alive," by the BeeGees. Egad.
2. The tomatoes are a gift for Droxy. They were called "love apples" during the Renaissance. They have nothing to do with the blackbird.
3. You didn't think I'd forgotten the blackbird, did you?

~ A.

## Barely More Than a Whisper

Chapter 27 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *In which finer points are lost in translation and detention is served in unusual ways.*

A/N: About a bazillion thanks are due for this chapter. First, to J.K. Rowling for writing the first year Potions speech and to Alan Rickman for his brilliant delivery of it. To Indy and Ana for alpha-reading the last versions of this one when it threatened to do me in and then looking at a million versions of the art. To Melenka for listening to me whinge about writer's block. To my students for being such honest, sharp, funny writers and social critics. To everyone who heeded my call for introvert recharge time. To the group Skillet for the song "Awake and Alive," which provided the writing soundtrack. And finally to Hermione, for knowing better than I did where this chapter would find its center. Clever, clever girl.



### 27: Barely More Than a Whisper

He spun and zoomed toward the Herbology section, where, as he'd suspected, several recently extinct heirloom tomato plants had reappeared, laying vigorous claim to several extra feet of space, jerking their branches back and forth with exaggerated self-importance.

He threw back his head and laughed.

-----

In the very little time between the end of Potions and dinner which she was determined to eat plenty of, no matter what history had to say about it Hermione raced for a private corner of the library, Crookshanks bounding behind. *If he can communicate through Crooks, then I can... maybe..* She barely kept her feet to a civil pace as she wove her way through corridors filled with students, all of whom seemed to be in her way.

No sooner had she reached her favorite study table than Madam Pince arrived, delivering a note from Professor McGonagall.

"*Notice of Special Merit..*" Hermione crumpled the parchment to her chest. *Breathe. Breathe, dammit.*

As the librarian walked away, Hermione whipped out a sheaf of notes. "Crooky," she whispered, "please tell Mimi to tell him 'Thank you.'"

Crookshanks leapt to the desktop with a "Rrrr" that was borderline smug.

"U WILCOM."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a full breath for the first time since waking up in her fourteen-year-old life. "Oh, Crooky... such a clever, clever boy you are..."

His "Rrrr" left no doubt as to his agreement on that matter.

Scratching the puff of fur behind his ear, she murmured, "How fast can you translate, old man?"

He stared intently at her as she whispered, "Ask Severus whether he has any idea why I'm here now?"

---

"Meee?"

"Precisely. Tell Hermione that spectral excuse for a librarian says..."

---

"*GOST SEZ MIMI FLOTZ*." Crookshanks looked at Hermione as if to shrug, plainly telling her not to blame the messenger.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. Demetrios. Of course.

She kept whispering. "What wisdom can she be seeking in my fourth year? She's only a baby! She wasn't even born yet!"

A moment later, her notes informed her, "*MIMI LYK HERMNY*."

Hermione let out a soft laugh that might have been tinged with a bit of panic. "That helps not at all, Crooky."

Crookshanks's tail twitched, and his look accused her of missing the point entirely.

---

If Severus had known how eagerly he was leaning over the cereal, he'd have been appalled, even with no one but Mimi to witness it.

The letters shuffled around to read, "*WIZDUM? WHUT IZ?*"

His brow furrowed. "That is your question, I presume?"

"Meee," she chirped, rubbing her face against his cheek.

"You sent Hermione careening back into the past seeking wisdom... and you don't even know what wisdom is."

"*WHUT IZ?*" She stared at him with trusting eyes.

Severus exhaled. How to explain wisdom to a cat? His mind frayed just a bit as he realized he was actually wrestling with that problem.

Mimi gazed up at him as if he were the repository of everything of any importance in the world.

This made him only marginally less uncomfortable than the memories of Hermione's too-wise eyes.

He stroked her cheek. "I wish I could explain it to you, little one."

"*U NO CAN XPLAIN?*"

"No."

"*STOOPID WIZDUM*."

Mimi rubbed against his hand in an ecstasy of faith.

"*PLAY WIF KITTEH?*"

He swallowed a strange lump in his throat.

"Mimi, little one, please tell the Kneazle to tell Hermione..."

---

"*U HAZ PROBLIM*."

"No shit," she muttered, placing a hand on Crookshanks's back to maintain some kind of equilibrium.

*Okay. So Mimi has no idea why I'm here either. Or Severus can't get her to understand the question. She remembered Crookshanks's baleful looks as she'd tried variation upon variation asking him what was wrong with Harry and Ginny's son, only to be met with "BAYBE NEEDZ KITTEH."*

"But why?" she'd asked, countless times in countless ways.

The cereal's message had never changed.

Crookshanks butted her hand. "*MIMI KITTUN*," her notes informed her.

"Yes, I know. That's the problem."

"*IZZINT*."

"What do you mean, Crooky?" How she knew when she was reading Crookshanks's thoughts instead of Mimi's, she couldn't say; she was nonetheless certain of it.

Crookshanks blinked at her as if he couldn't believe how thick she was. "*KITTUNZ GRO UP*."

Hermione swallowed. She really didn't want to wait that long. Even Crookshanks's grasp of subtle concepts was fairly limited, and he was both fully-grown and part-Kneazle. Mimi was just a cat, and only a kitten...

Hm. How fast was time moving when she was versus Severus and Mimi?

She asked the question, and Crookshanks relayed it.

"U IZ GON FOR SOM HOWRZ"

Time was moving much more slowly for them, then. Well, even assuming cats could properly appreciate the concept of wisdom, she definitely did not want to wait for Mimi to grow up before learning why she was in fourth year. Definitely not.

"RRRR," Crookshanks insisted, and she turned her attention once more to the page.

"WHUT KITTUNZ WANT?"

"I don't know what she wants, Crooky."

"ALL KITTUNZ."

Hermione blinked. "Erm... any kitten wants food, warmth, toys... she has all of those."

Crookshanks very gently bit her hand.

Oh. "Love."

Crookshanks stomped across her notes, flopped down on them heavily, and set to washing his huge paw.

So, she wants love... which gets me where, exactly?

---

"LOV?"

Severus blinked and coughed roughly, gesturing to the word. "You again?"

"Meeee," Mimi affirmed, rolling onto her back and grabbing his hand with her front paws, batting insistently at his wrist with her back legs.

"Silly thing..."

He allowed her to wrestle with his hand for a while.

The silly thing purred.

---

All through dinner, Hermione wrote furiously in order to hide her communication method, sounding the words as softly as she could so Crookshanks, who now refused to leave her lap, could hear.

"All right, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I'm trying to finish this before detention."

"Yeah, okay." He and Ron both flashed her sympathetic looks with only mild undercurrents of "better you than me" and left her more or less in peace.

Glancing around as if history might be as visible as the castle's ghosts, she muttered, "You too, sweeping forces of history, wherever you are. You keep your perving tides away from me for one meal, understand?"

History didn't reply. She hadn't really expected it to.

"How am I supposed to get through detention without creating more disturbing memories for you?"

---

Underneath the kitten, the cereal moved. In one awkward roll, Mimi disengaged her paws from Severus's wrist and flipped over to sniff it.

Severus read the question then dictated, "Do the best you can."

---

"NO CLOO."

Hermione gritted her teeth and muttered, "No throwing myself into your arms, then. Check."

"What'd you say?" Ron asked, turning toward her, his eyes a little wide.

"Huh? Oh... uh... just working on an Ancient Runes translation, Ronald."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Bit racy for homework."

"Veela poetry," she temporized.

Ron cocked an eye to her parchment, which she covered with her arms. "It's a very sensual language, you know it's designed to evoke a physical sensation in the listener when read aloud."

Ron visibly paled, and he turned back to Harry's Quidditch talk.

The part of Hermione that was Dr. Granger chuckled.

---

"HERMNY WANT SNUGGL."

Severus blinked. He could only hope something had gotten lost in translation.

---

"What will detention entail, Crooky?" she whispered.



---

The cereal queried, "*WHUT IZ TENSUN?*"

"Tension?" He scowled. Too bloody apt. "One assumes you mean 'detention'?"

Mimi batted a "D" into place.

"Torture," he muttered. "It's torture."

---

"*CRUSHYO*," Crookshanks provided helpfully.

"Paying attention in DADA, were you?"

"Rrrr!" He blinked proudly.

Hermione put her notes away and leaned her forehead on her hands in frustration. Somehow she didn't think her failure to manage her familiar merited Unforgivables.

That said, there was no telling what recourses might seem advantageous if this situation persisted for too much longer.

Her lip twitched wryly.

---

The cereal stopped moving, and Severus refilled his brandy.

Nothing to be done.

---

Try as she might, Hermione had been unable to convince Crookshanks to follow Harry and Ron back to the common room when they parted ways after dinner.

"Fine, then. Destroy my permanent record," she said through gritted teeth, wondering with every fiber of her being how to get through the next several hours without incurring detention for the remainder of her career.

She knocked on the door to the Potions classroom.

"Enter."

She stepped through the doorway, and a light flashed behind her, the oaken door swinging shut on Crookshanks's wide eyes.

Professor Snape sat at his desk, marking essays. He barely looked up as he said, "As you are incapable of managing him properly, I have warded my classroom against your familiar."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." She stood in the doorway, not knowing where to look and whether or not to move.

"Leave your satchel by the door. You won't need it this evening."

With that went any hope of any external assistance.

She'd have to get through this on her own.

She nodded, setting her bag down.

"Sit in your usual spot and place your hands palm down on the desk."

This reminded Hermione uncomfortably of a Muggle film she'd seen once. *What the...*

"Do not move, and say nothing for the next hour." He returned his full attention to the stack of essays.

Hermione sat obediently still. *This is it? This can't be it.*

But before ten minutes had passed, she realized that he'd devised the perfect punishment for her a punishment as effective at 26 as it would have been when she was 14:

Nothing.

---

*Well done*, Severus congratulated his past self. *Well done, indeed.*

---

In her effort not to stare at her very visible, very much alive Potions professor, Hermione forced her eyes to stay focused on her own hands.

She heard a hush of parchment on wood as he slid the next essay toward him. The creak of his chair as he leaned slightly, freshening his quill. The sudden scratch of quill on parchment, growing sharper. Harsher. Faster.

The brush of wool on wood.

A final sound, barely a whisper as another a completed essay was placed aside.

The sounds recommenced and she listened to the hush, the creak, the freshening, the scratch.

Harsher. Faster.

A brush.

A final whisper.

*Look at me.*

Even as she realized he hadn't spoken, that it was just a memory, she was glancing up, no way to stop her eyes, to keep from seeing...

He was still marking parchments, leaning his head on one hand, his eyes flicking rapidly as he read, his hair falling between his fingers, and her breath quickened.

*Steady...* she told her unruly mind, but she nonetheless stared, transfixed, at the wizard before her.

Even his most simple, mundane movement unrolling a scroll, refilling a quill revealed contained force, power of mind and magic held deliberately and overtly in check. His bearing was calculated, she realized, to raise the hairs on the back of anyone's neck and, moreover, to pose a measured, palpable challenge to anyone with wit enough to spot it.

For good or ill, Dr. Hermione Granger had that in spades.

In the flickering light of torches and oil lamps, her gaze came to rest on his free hand, on the sudden, sharp line where pale fingers met black hair, and her skin felt the memory of his touch, of the strength of his hands in her hair, drawing her forward, her face to his, her eyes closing (nothing to see), his lips, warm, on her own (only feel), her hands sliding into his hair, seeking...

Her hands twitched of their own volition, and his eyes flickered to hers.

"Five points from Gryffindor. Do not move again."

She blushed, swallowing, trying to breath normally.

He returned his attention to his grading.

Their eyes had met for only a moment, and she saw that they weren't yet as empty as she'd once thought them.

Hard, yes, but she thought she detected a flicker of worry.

She wouldn't have seen it had she not known to look for it, had she not already known that the Dark Mark was growing clearer with each passing day.

Why of all times was she here now?

---

A memory of her skin, coloring softly in the torchlight.

A trick of torchlight wherein she could have been fourteen or forty.

Her eyes, full with knowledge.

Severus shifted in her armchair, muttering darkly, "Don't look at her, you fool."

It didn't matter now that he hadn't thought anything of her then.

She knew too much now for him to miss it in the past.

It was only a matter of time...

He leaned his head wearily on his fist.

*Look away, Hermione. Look away.*

---

*Look at me.*

It was just a memory only a memory of blood, of terror, of hands, his hands, red with shining blood, clamped over his throat, his boot heels scraping spasmodically on the dry, rotted floor, out of rhythm, out of time...

... of his summoning his last strength to reach with unspeakable urgency for Harry, pulling him roughly closer, his eyes sharp, glittering, boring into Harry's as ghostly tendrils of memories began to rise from the cold sweat of his poisoned skin...

She closed her eyes.

There, in but a moment, she could have saved him.

She hadn't known and had looked away, her shaking hands searching for a phial to receive the memories it was worth his life to give...

Whatever he was giving Harry was raw. Desperate. Final.

And private.

She looked away.

As she turned back, the hard, dark glitter was fading.

She closed her eyes in the Potions classroom.

"Eyes open, Miss Granger," he said in a bored monotone. "This is not nap time."

She looked up.

---

In London, Severus saw his death in her remembered eyes, her helpless understanding a blow to his soul.

For himself, he felt nothing.

But her to be unable to hold her, to whisper comforting nonsense into her hair.

His gaze fell on her recumbent form on the lounge.

He stood slowly and moved to kneel beside her, brushing a stray hair from her forehead.

She didn't respond.

He groaned.

---

The torchlight blurred into golden prisms and she inhaled, choking on her own breath, willing her tears to stop.

Professor Snape smirked and continued grading.

---

*Source Note:*

1. Severus's thought, "Nothing to be done." ~ The opening line of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a bit of light-hearted existential fluff in which Godot takes longer to arrive than the play takes to perform. Pretty fair assessment of how Severus and Hermione are starting to feel about her current temporal predicament, really...

*\*twirls quill\**

~ A.

## Caught

Chapter 28 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *In which everyone seems to know what Hermione is thinking, including (finally!) Hermione.*

A/N: In celebration of Ari's and Professor Snape's both finishing marking a set of essays, a rather longish chapter for you. My thanks, as always, to my alpha readers, Anastasia, Indigofeathers, Mia Madwyn, and Annie Talbot (who also beta-read this chapter, saving me from many a rampaging Hippogriff). A huge welcome home to Lady Karelia.

---



### 28: Caught

*Professor Snape smirked and continued grading.*

-----

Severus's senses were attuned to the potion, and regardless of Hermione's continued absence, Athena's dubious wisdom, should she exist, or Mimi's fondness for shiny things, it needed attention. He arose from Hermione's side, and, after a lingering touch on her cheek, he went into the kitchen.

---

"You are dismissed. Return tomorrow, immediately after lunch."

Not daring to look at him, Hermione nodded and collected her things. "Goodnight, sir."

He hesitated before replying. "Goodnight, Miss Granger."

That pause, that "Goodnight, Miss Granger," nearly proved the undoing of her ability to leave his classroom, but she insisted, and her feet obeyed. As she made her careful way through the darkened dungeon corridors and began the long climb back to Gryffindor tower, his voice seemed to follow her, padding as softly and insistently behind her as Crookshanks.

The Kneazle darted lightly up the stairs; she, only human, climbed them wearily, her mind full of the echoes of his silence and his voice.

Something felt off his hesitation before he replied to her leave-taking.

She paused on the stairs.

She was no actor, she knew. Unlike her professor, she had no way of keeping her thoughts to herself; just managing not to blurt them out as soon as they occurred to her was itself an accomplishment, and one that pushed the limits of her discretion as far as they could reasonably be expected to reach. Especially at fourteen.

At the top of the stairs, she leaned against the banister, adjusting her heavy bag on her shoulder.

In her mind, she heard it again the pause, then "Goodnight, Miss Granger."

Why had he paused? What was he thinking?

Did he suspect something?

She shrugged slightly. There was no help for it; he was simply too observant, too perceptive and probably too paranoid not to realize that all was not as usual with Miss Hermione Granger, Hogwarts Fourth-Year.

She stood for several minutes, lost in musing on the obscure silences and devastating voice that together comprised Severus Snape.

An accusing shriek brought her back to herself, and she started, pressing her back instinctively to the wall.

"You!" A bespangled figure draped with several moth-eaten velvet shawls was staring at her from the grand stair, eyes owlish behind over-large spectacles.

*Oh, fuck me.* "Good evening, Professor Trelaw"

"You!" Professor Trelawney repeated, taking a cautious step. "I felt some disturbing Presence as I cast the crystals in my silent tower, so I descended into the mundane halls, seeking its source..." She took another step. "My Sight led me to you," she finished in a theatrical whisper.

*Merlin on a muffin.*

"Your aura is conflicted... never before have I Seen such marked disturbance on the Inner Planes..."

*Must she capitalize every word?* Hermione wondered, locking her jaw against whatever she might say, her eyes darting about for an alternate route toward her common room.

Professor Trelawney descended the grand stair as rapidly as her multi-layered robes would allow. Stopping several steps shy of Hermione, she raised her hands and intoned, "Begone, Spirit! I Cast you out! Return, return to the Dark Places whence you Manifested!"

That sounded a fine idea, but Hermione had barely time to blink before a low, even voice floated up the stair behind her.

"What is this caterwaul?"

*Professor Snape.* Hermione closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the stone wall, silently reminding the perving tides that now would be an excellent time to send her home. Or... wait. No. Fourteen-year-old Hermione Granger would have no idea how to

"Severus... stay back stay back!" Professor Trelawney held her hand in a warning.

"From what, you twittering idiot?"

*Don't mince words, Professor,* Hermione thought wryly, not moving.

"Some Dark Spirit has Possessed the unfortunate Miss Granger... I must Cast it out."

"You couldn't cast a budgie off your table with a Beater's bat."

Hermione tried not to smile. *Too right.*

"What seems to be the trouble?" another voice called calmly down from an upper gallery.

*Professor McGonagall. Help.*

"Sybill is having an episode "

"Our poor Miss Granger's shuttered Inner Eye has made her vulnerable to Spiritual Invasion some dread Spirit Possesses her even now!"

"Oh, surely not," Minerva said briskly, coming downstairs. "Miss Granger, curfew is moments from now. Off to bed with you."

Hermione stepped away from the wall with relief.

"One moment, Minerva," Professor Snape said. "Stay," he ordered Hermione.

*Woof,* she mentally snarled.

"The Spirit must be exorcised, and, as I am the only one who can See ..."

"Hush, Sybill," Minerva said. "Severus, what did you need?"

"Despite tremendous reluctance to grant an iota of credence to this "

A wordless protest from Professor Trelawney.

Professor Snape added a distinct edge to his voice and finished, "there are one or two items that warrant discussion with her Head of House."

"Stand back save yourselves! I shall Cast it..."

Hermione, caught at the epicenter of two of Hogwarts' most powerful professors and one of its loudest, merely intensified her plea to the perving tides, any awkwardness for her fourteen-year-old self be damned.

Professor McGonagall ignored Professor Trelawney. "Yes, Severus?"

"Miss Granger has demonstrated knowledge beyond what is appropriate to her year and seems suddenly unable to manage her familiar. As intractable as felines often are..."

Minerva's eyes narrowed.

"... there is something distinctly odd about her behavior."

*Rather*, Hermione thought sourly, although she did not move.

Apparently deciding to let the feline remark pass without comment, Minerva pursed her lips and turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger. Are you feeling quite well?"

"Reasonably well, thank you, Professor," Hermione said.

"The Dark Spirit speaks!" Professor Trelawney made to step forward, to do what, Hermione could only guess, but Minerva stopped her with a firmly outstretched arm.

The gong announcing curfew sounded loudly throughout the castle, drowning out Minerva's "Stuff and nonsense."

The professor waited for the echoes to die away before continuing. "It is only natural for students to mature and change over the summer holidays, and it's not remotely unusual for Miss Granger to read ahead in the curriculum. Only today you yourself awarded her Special Merit for her work in Potions..."

"Merit she can hardly have earned unaided, Minerva, as I told you," he said smoothly, "given that she has no particular aptitude."

*Unaided? Hardly.* Hermione firmly squelched an ironic and slightly hysterical laugh, which was threatening to erupt at any second.

"Furthermore," Professor Snape was saying, "the Felix Felicis potion *is not* part of the standard curriculum, and she has not received my permission to access the Restricted Section for Potions texts."

"Of course she hasn't. Oh, very well." Minerva turned to Hermione. "Where did you hear about the Felix Felicis potion?"

"I read about it over the summer, Professor."

"In what text?"

Hermione visualized the appropriate section of the Archive and named one of several volumes Demetrios had shelved between four-leafed clovers and the White Rabbit.

Professor Snape drawled, "Murphy's *Fortuna* was lost three centuries past."

"His original notes are kept at the Archive," she blurted out, startling all three professors into momentary silence. Instinct told her not to lie. "I... I've been to the Archive."

"It speaks... the Dark Spirit speaks..."

"Hush, Sybill."

Professor Snape smirked. "Untrained witches or wizards are not permitted in the Archive without a magical guardian. How do you even know it exists?"

"The Dark Spirit Speaks through her!" Professor Trelawney intoned.

"Cease, both of you," Professor McGonagall commanded. "Severus, you're interrogating the child pointlessly; no doubt she's heard of the Archive. Several of our older Muggle-born Ravenclaws have engaged Filius as temporary guardian when doing advanced research; he often accompanies them over holidays, and she must have heard them speak of it."

"Ignore my warning at your peril, Minerva... peril..."

Professor Snape cut Professor Trelawney off. "Miss Granger is not in Ravenclaw."

"To Filius's lasting dismay."

Crookshanks grew bored and tried to climb Hermione's leg.

She reached down to pat his head.

"There," Minerva said, gesturing toward the Kneazle. "Were Miss Granger truly, hm, possessed, her familiar would not behave so."

*Thanks, Crooky.*

"Rrrr," he replied, stretching toward her hand.

"But I must insist " Professor Snape stepped forward.

"Have you ever had a familiar, Severus?" Minerva asked gently, so gently that Hermione assumed her Head of House already knew the answer.

He stopped. "You know I have not."

"Then you must take my word, regarding felines particularly. The bond between wizarding kind and their familiars is allowed as evidence even by the Wizengamot."

"Which does not explain how she was able to enter the Archive."

"My parents appreciate the Muggle branch of the Library," Hermione said carefully, fighting the childish urge to cross her fingers in the folds of her robes. "And I... well, I've found the entrance to the Wizarding Branch." *Once a day, for several years*, she finished mentally.

Professor Snape's eyebrow twitched skeptically, and he crossed his arms. "And where is the entrance located?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's not a 'where,' it's a 'how.' There's a passage on the Rosetta Stone which, if read aloud by a witch or wizard, reveals the entrance."

A long silence. "You expect us to believe you accidentally discovered that knowledge."

*Shite. Don't lie.* "We studied Hieroglyphics in Ancient Runes, sir, and I..." Hermione dropped her gaze from his buttons to his boots. "Sometimes I show off. A bit." *There. That you'll believe.*

His voice lowered. "And how is it you were allowed to examine the actual holdings?"

She reflexively raised her chin and caught herself before her defiant look could reach his eyes. Staring determinedly at the bridge of his nose, she said, "The curator is very kind, sir, and he proved willing to indulge my curiosity." *Which is exactly what landed me here.* Making a mental note to blast Demetrios across the Archive with a forge bellows should she ever return to her own time, Hermione waited as if for a verdict.

"Kindness and curiosity - that is Demetrios to a T." Minerva chuckled. "Is he still enamored of Elizabethan tavern songs?"

"I... I don't know, for sure." Hermione cast about for a random musical form. "He may have mentioned light opera... Rossini?" Considering that Demetrios mentioned almost everything that had ever existed several times a fortnight, she hoped her answer would both satisfy Professor McGonagall and pass for truth given Professor Trelawney's entirely unwelcome newfound acquaintance with accuracy.

Professor Snape shifted his weight, his robes rustling softly in the silent Hall.

Knowing herself unpracticed at evasion and feeling keenly that despite her truthful words he knew he must know she was hiding something, she was suddenly very conscious of not looking toward the source of the sound he'd made. *It would have been natural to look*, she chided herself, but nonetheless, she instead found herself facing Professor Trelawney, who was staring at her with myopic wonder. "A Dark Spirit cannot speak truth... yet it does not lie... what strange Portent is this... some Portent of Doom, when a Spirit walks amongst us yet does not lie!"

Professor Snape snorted and started to speak again, but Professor McGonagall held up a slender hand, forestalling further discussion. "Come along, Miss Granger. It's past curfew. I shall escort you up to Gryffindor Tower, and..."

Professor Trelawney drew breath, and again Professor McGonagall intervened. "I shall have her see Madam Pomfrey tomorrow morning for a full work-over. I trust that will be acceptable to you, Severus?"

He nodded shortly. Turning abruptly, he slipped into the darkness of the stair.

The hairs on the back of Hermione's neck told her he was still listening.

"The mediwitch can only see the mundane," Professor Trelawney began.

"Poppy knows the standard tests for Darkness. There is nothing wrong with this child except that she is out after curfew and falling asleep on her feet." Professor McGonagall cast Hermione a sly look out of the corner of her eye.

Hermione let her eyelids droop in what she hoped was a reasonable facsimile of "tired."

"Goodnight, Sybill."

Still moaning about portents and doom, Professor Trelawney wafted away in a flutter of spangled shawls.

To Hermione's surprise, Professor McGonagall emitted a small, satisfied laugh. "Oh, dear, Miss Granger. To be caught between those two I'm glad I happened by when I did."

Hermione heard Professor Snape tread fade away in the corridor below-stairs, and she smiled faintly as relief made her knees wobble. "Thank you, Professor. It was rather... awkward."

"Of course, Miss Granger. Of course." Professor McGonagall gestured companionably and they headed for the stair. "Your familiar is looking particularly smug this evening."

"Perhaps he believes himself responsible for my, hrm, rescue?" Hermione ventured politely.

"No doubt he does."

---

*"... there is something distinctly odd about her behavior."*

Severus grimaced and continued stirring as his memories doubled. He forced himself to finish stirring, adding powdered yarrow from the height of his heart.

The potion surface yielded, and the yarrow disappeared into its depths.

Its color did not change, and Severus nodded, glancing automatically at the kitchen clock.

Only then did he move slowly to sit at the table.

*Something odd about her behavior, indeed*, he thought, replaying the memory of the scene in the Entrance Hall, wondering how long it would take his former self to connect her damnable eyes with her knowing things she shouldn't.

He remembered the feel of her in his arms, and he flinched.

Mimi's ears appeared over the edge of the table-top, and she put a delicate paw on the table. "Meee," she said softly.

He nodded, distracted. "You're right, kitten." About what, he didn't think to wonder.

Forcing himself to focus on his memories of her eyes she was looking at his past self rather too often for comfort he tried to pinpoint what about them, exactly, he found so very disconcerting.

Brown. They were brown. That wasn't it.

*Stop flinching*, he told himself.

There was a lightness to most students' eyes that was missing from hers.

They weren't as... shallow, for want of a better word. Nor could they be as easily as read as other students'. In his first years as a teacher, he'd quickly learned to recognize duplicity, fear, shame, the occasional spark of intelligence as one or another of the older ones grasped a concept for the first time.

He adjusted his seat, stretching his legs out before him.

Mimi padded to his hand and butted it. "Meee," she said again, very quietly.

He rubbed a knuckle along her whiskers, reviewing his newest memories.

As Hermione had leaned against the stone wall, her eyes closed, she could have been the Miss Granger of his original memories. It was only when she opened her eyes and stepped away from the wall that...

Ah.

Then...

*You bloody fool.*

For once, this was directed at himself in the present, not the past.

He'd missed seeing it before.

As Hermione stood between Minerva and that lunatic Divination professor, he realized that she looked no different than she had yesterday. Sometime between third and fourth year, Hermione Granger had grown up.

He doubted she was a hair's breadth taller now.

Still stroking Mimi's cheek, he shifted slightly in his chair.

He'd had it backwards. It wasn't that her eyes didn't fit her physical body; it was that they *did*.

He supposed he could be forgiven for paying little heed to the inevitable maturation of his students. Children grew; it was a natural process requiring neither his assistance nor his supervision, and he'd been more concerned with herding them through seven years of increasingly volatile potions than with their physical changes. That was neither his purview nor his concern; he'd reserved his attention for rather more urgent matters.

He rifled through his memories.

Boys, he recalled, almost inevitably went through a clumsy phase all elbows and splashed potions as they grew accustomed to limbs that seemed to grow overnight.

Girls well. He'd heard the faculty whose classrooms required wand use chuckle as young witches experienced the inevitable odd burst of unpredictable magic, but that usually settled out within a few months. No, girls...

He quirked his lips.

Girls seemed to grow into their elbows more smoothly than boys.

He again recalled the image of Hermione as she'd she'd turned away to avoid looking at him.

His past self had merely cataloged her evasion, but he saw rather more now: that between her third and fourth years, Miss Granger had grown into her elbows.

He'd no doubt that, were she to suddenly arise from the lounge and appear before him in her school uniform

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

should she appear before him in her school uniform, it would fit, and there would be little difference between the student whose record he was systematically destroying and the mature Hermione Granger, whose breath he'd felt soft on his skin not twenty-four hours before.

*Blast.*

He stood abruptly and paced her floor.

He knew that his past self, his attention having been sparked, would remain forever attuned to whatever object had ignited his instincts. Especially then, with the Dark Mark intensifying on his forearm.

He would, he knew, be watching Hermione Granger for the slightest, most subtle clues.

To what scarcely mattered. It had never been his role to interpret clues, merely to catalogue them, assess them for potential threat, and use them to his advantage whenever possible.

"Be careful, Hermione," he whispered.

Mimi trotted past him, heading for Hermione's bedroom.

Without thinking, he followed, lighting the lamp at her bedside with half a thought.

His eyes swept her empty bed, the white counterpane still slightly rumpled from when she'd last arisen, and he swallowed hard, his mind awash with vague notions and sounds of unimaginable softness.

"Don't be daft," he muttered.

Mimi glanced up at him and leapt onto Hermione's pillow.

"You are not helping."

Drawing himself imperceptibly straighter, he glanced at the magically shrunken wardrobe and began the Charms that would unlock and enlarge it.

The bubbles appeared, swirling slowly before him.

He knew their secrets and, without stopping to question his intent, he initiated the unlocking sequence, and seven bubbles wafted into line.

*Parchment. Ink. Sealing wax. Silver...*

He closed his eyes and breathed in the scents she'd long ago unconsciously associated with him, scents from the night he'd called Potter with his Patronus and hidden the sword.

It was almost unthinkable that she'd created this sophisticated locking Charm and remained unaware of its basis in Amortentia.

But then she'd never been talented in Potions.

Capable, yes.

Talented... no.

And besides, why would she have wanted to examine too closely her own desire? Why, indeed, when the wizard she desired was dead?

He popped the last three bubbles, inhaling their scents.

In the last day, pine had become peony, and old canvas, leather.

But loss remained.

---

In bed at last, and at last alone save for Crookshanks, Hermione drew out her reading notes.

"Mimi?" she whispered.

"*PRFSSR SAD.*"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"*KITTEH NO LYK.*"

"What's he doing?"

"*BUBBLZ.*"

"Oh? Oh."

Hermione closed her eyes and recalled home. Her things. Her wardrobe, all chaos save for her school uniforms, which she'd kept in painstakingly perfect order. Her locking Charm.

"Parchment, ink, sealing wax..." she whispered, a comfort in the darkness, "pine, silver, *bloody Hell!*"

"Hermione, shut it; do... can't you study silently for once? The quiz isn't until Tuesday week."

"Sorry, Parvati."

Hermione buried her face in her pillow.

*Amortentia. Of course.*

It all made sense now.

The night in the forest when Ron had returned. She'd known the sword had to have been Headmaster Snape's doing as soon as she'd seen it. She'd said nothing to the boys, of course saying anything might have disturbed the fragile truce they'd reached in the woods.

No, best not to tell them that the only person with access to the sword, the only person who made any sense at all was Headmaster Snape.

The appearance of the sword had confirmed her privately held suspicion that he and Professor Dumbledore had hashed out a plan, probably long before, and...

It had always been her role to interpret clues, and she was usually right.

She'd built her entire career on it.

That said, it usually didn't take her quite this long. Several years ago, she had based that locking Charm not only on remembered scents, but also, she now knew, on Amortentia.

She swore silently. Why must she realize this now, and not after she returned to her own time? Or if not then, why not before?

Well, she had been a bit distracted, what with being first haunted and then kissed passionately, and finally ending things with Ron.

She stifled a groan. She did not want to live through the Ron business again, especially knowing that she would refuse to marry him because she'd been in... well, enamoured with the memory of Severus Snape, double agent, murderer, and their past her *current* Potions professor.

Too bugging ironic to realize about the Amortentia now. Of course, it made a kind of twisted sense that since she could see him she could also see her own heart.

How superbly literal. The irony was almost Greek in its...

*Oh, right Athena.* Not "almost" Greek; it was Greek.

Lovely.

She wrinkled her nose and silently told the Goddess of Wisdom to bugger off; she needed to sleep.

She drew the covers over her head and mentally repeated the locking scents.

*Parchment. Ink. Sealing wax.* His memo. She'd not known it consciously, the scents mingling with those of her own supplies. *Pine. Old canvas.* Those were obvious.

*Silver.* The sword itself, a silver so pure it smelled faintly cold, faintly sharp.

*And loss.*

That had come later.

She wouldn't let it happen again.

She opened her eyes. "Crooky... is Mimi still there?"

---

Severus heard a plaintive "Meee" from the kitchen and, leaving the wardrobe fully expanded, joined the kitten by the table.

The cereal had moved.

"*PRFSSR?*" it read.

"I'm here."

"*SRY 4 BUBBLZ.*"



So, she'd realized. Well, of course; in her temporal location in the previous decade, he wasn't yet dead, so there was no real impediment to...

He coughed.

... excepting, of course, that he was her professor, and she was his fourteen-year-old student.

---

"IN A MINNIT PRFSSR CHOK"

*I rather imagine he does...* "Tell Mimi I didn't realize about... about the bubbles," Hermione told Crookshanks. "Not until just now."

---

Mimi blinked at Severus, amused.

"Quite."

Mimi looked at him curiously.

"Tell her that I did."

---

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"NO NEED."

---

*Notes on Sources and Other Things:*

1. Any perceived allusions to Trelawney as a kind of Cassandra are entirely Greek to me.
2. Four-leafed clover: Supposedly a bringer of luck, perhaps because anyone looking that closely at the ground might reasonably be expected to wander heedlessly into the path of a rampaging Hippogriff.
3. The White Rabbit: Character (created by Lewis Carroll in Alice in Wonderland) who, like Hermione regarding the small matter of Severus's death, always perceives himself as "too late." Nonetheless, he always makes his narrative entrances spot on time. Hm.
4. Murphy's Fortuna: Imaginary tome based on Murphy's Law, which states that "Anything that can go wrong will." Double hm.
5. Rosetta Stone: Stone tablet located in the British Museum that bears the same text in three written languages. Not so much three ways of looking at a blackbird; more three ways of saying the same thing.
6. Yarrow: Flower associated with healing.
7. Hermione's locking Charm first appears in the story in Chapter 4.

~ A.

## Every Word

*Chapter 29 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *From I miss you to I miss you, with a smallish explosion.*

A/N: My thanks to my alpha readers for this chapter: Anastasia, AnnieTalbot, and Indigofeathers.

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## 29: Every Word

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"NO NEED."

-----

When she opened her eyes the next morning, her first thought was, *I miss you.*

Neither history nor her Hogwarts canopy had any comment.

Sighing, Hermione slipped quietly from under the covers, dressed quickly and, grabbing her school bag and holding the door for Crookshanks, managed to leave without waking Lavender and Parvati.

After an exhaustive but thoroughly unremarkable examination after which Madam Pomfrey announced, to no one's real surprise, that Miss Granger was not suffering from any known affliction, curse, or identifiably Dark influence, Hermione made her way to the Great Hall for lunch.

History refused to let Hermione sit between Harry and Ginny. Hiding a resigned eye-roll behind her hair, Hermione obediently followed her feet, taking the open place next to Ron, who grinned at her.

For reasons she couldn't fathom, she found her twenty-six year old self roughly shoved aside for the entire meal, watching in idly detached bemusement as her younger self participated in the Gryffindor table's ongoing speculation regarding the forthcoming visit from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang.

Only once during the meal was she able to wrest control away from the sweeping tides of teenaged hormones and steal as much as a glance at Professor Snape.

He was ignoring whatever Madam Hooch was saying to him and looking straight at her.

*His eyes.* Her breath caught, twisting sharply in her chest, and she couldn't look away. *Not so different from teenaged hormones after all.*

History then insisted that she instead turn and notice Ron's hair.

---

"Leave your bag by the door and take your usual seat."

"Yes, sir." Hermione watched as the door to the Potions classroom swung shut on her familiar and moved to her seat, awaiting Professor Snape's injunction to neither move nor speak.

He remained silent, however, and as on the previous evening, she did not know where to look. Anywhere but at him would be safe, she supposed, excepting that they were alone in the classroom and looking anywhere else would seem evasive....

*Fine.* Sighing inwardly, she looked up.

He stood behind his desk, examining her through slitted eyes as though she were a potentially volatile potions ingredient.

*Uh-oh.*

She endured his silent scrutiny for as long as she could, but finally had to speak. "Sir?"

"Your Head of House informs me that you were examined this morning, as arranged."

"Yes, sir."

"And that Madam Pomfrey found no cause for alarm."

*That level of skepticism must cut...* Hermione nodded.

"Be that as it may," he said, his tone revealing continued suspicion, "You are aware of the..." He paused, appearing to consider his wording.

Hermione sniffed inwardly. *Theatrics. He knows exactly what he's going to say.*

"... the unpleasantness concerning Miss Weasley during her first year?"

At "unpleasantness" she suppressed a snort. Instead, she nodded. "I am, sir." *Bloody Hell, he thinks I've got Voldemort in my head.* Then, *Well, of course he does.*

He moved out from behind his desk. "Despite Madam Pomfrey's assessment, I spoke with the Headmaster this morning."

She didn't know what to say, so she concentrated on looking attentive.

"There are limitations to what a mediwitch may do; more subtle forms of Dark magic require more experienced handling. I thus proposed to the Headmaster that you be subjected to Legilimency."

Hermione said nothing aloud, but her skin came alive with remembered intimacy and the scents from her Charm. Legilimency didn't necessarily require touch, but... *I wonder if you'd like what you saw, Professor? Oh, keep your knickers on, Granger. History doubtless has other ideas...*

He was still speaking. "Have you, in your extracurricular reading," his tone lent that innocent phrase an air of perversion "ever happened across Legilimency?"

*Shite. Don't lie.* "Erm..."

"An answer."

"I'm familiar with it, yes, Sir."

"Familiar." His gaze darkened, his eyes relentless in their focus on her own. "No Muggle-born Fourth Year could possibly be *familiar* with advanced magics."

She felt rather than heard some deeper challenge in his words, and the air grew sharp as though in presage to a duel, raising the hair on the back of her neck. "Sir, it's not what you think."

His voice coiled dangerously around her. "You presume to know what I think?"

*Enough.* She touched her wand, and a bottle of Veritaserum shot from his shelves into her hand.

His wand flashed into his hand in response.

Almost without thinking, she was on her feet and casting a reflexive Shield Charm, shattering his equally silent Summoning Charm, a burst of ice-colored light exploding between them. Shards of magic shot outward, smashing several jars and bottles and knocking a set of heavy shelves hard against the stone walls, rattling their contents.

In the shock of light, she caught his eyes a hard darkness, betraying no hint of emotion, only determined power and absolute dominance.

A last stray spark caught the edge of his inkpot, sending the silver cover off its hinges with a ring of metal on crystal, igniting the long pheasant quill he used for marking.

Hermione held her breath.

His voice cut the air. "You dare..."

He tried again to summon the potion bottle, but she held her Shield firm, thumbing the cork from the bottle.

"Release your spell!" he ordered.

"Sir, I promise you, I do not have Voldemort in my mind." She let the cork fall to the table, her eyes holding his.

He kept his wand trained on her. "So the Headmaster seems to believe."

The cork rolled to the table edge and fell with almost inaudible softness to the stone floor.

The shadow of a smile crossed her face. "You don't trust him even now, do you?"

Professor Snape said nothing. She couldn't tell if he'd heard her.

*Did Dumbledore hear him, I wonder?* "Sir... did Professor Dumbledore explicitly refuse permission to use Legilimency on me, or did he just not hear you?"

He ignored the question, his face hard. "Release your spell and put that bottle down at once!"

With an outward calm she could not possibly have managed at fourteen, she repeated, "Did he actually refuse? In so many words?"

His eyes glittered with anger. "Conversations with the Headmaster are none of your business."

His refusal to answer sent her mind racing toward understanding. *The coin prevented it. But why? No time now...* "Professor Snape, if he didn't seem to really hear you, although you were speaking clearly, please, please, sir, just tell me? It pertains; I promise. If he did hear you, then I'll submit to whatever additional punishment I've earned, of course but I'm nearly certain he didn't." She waited, resisting the urge to cross her fingers for luck.

Professor Snape didn't respond, but nor did he not repeat his order to drop her Shield.

*Hm... thought so. Take your time, then,* she thought, willing tension out of her wand arm lest it visibly tremble.

A long pause in which he seemed to be weighing his personal and, she supposed, his political suspicions against his obligations as a teacher.

Finally, his wand still at the ready, he nodded once. "He did not seem to hear me, no."

She nodded slowly, analyzing her sudden insight. *So... if Dumbledore knew about my "possession" no, not about me, just about the coin... if he knew about Athena's owl, he would try to use it... of course he would; he used everything... he'd see it as a weapon; he'd see that instantly. I think he'd be wrong, but would he rest until he'd exhausted its possibilities?*

"If you are possessed of particular wisdom on this matter, Miss Granger, do share."

"Professor, I know this will sound mad, but... but have you ever heard of Athena's owl?"

No response.

"You didn't hear my question, did you, sir?"

His eyebrow twitched. "Unlike the Headmaster, I am neither conveniently nor even temporarily deaf." But something in his tone indicated that no, he hadn't heard her.

*Which leaves me only this option.* She lifted the potion and drank. She exhaled nervously; however twenty-six she might be, she had become, she knew, something of a wild card, and he held all power here. Finally releasing the Shield, she lowered her arm and placed her wand on the desktop. "Very well. Ask me anything."

Professor Snape's eyes widened slightly, and he stared, motionless.

*Your move...* Hermione thought wryly, then, *Oh, sweet Avalon, I hope this wasn't a stupid idea...*

"I do not have the Headmaster's permission to interrogate a student under Veritaserum. I should take you to the Hospital Wing immediately."

But he made no move to do so, and she saw speculation in his eyes.

She pressed what little advantage she had. "You yourself observed just now that I am no Fourth Year. Could even a Seventh Year have held a Shield Charm against you?"

His eyes flickered to her hands, which she kept deliberately away from her wand, and back to her eyes.

"You've said there is something 'off' about me."

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

She smiled ruefully. "There *is* something off about me, sir, but I promise you, it's entirely benign." She sat straighter and invoked the formalities of Veritaserum she had learned during the post-war Wizengamot hearings. "I attest that I am legally of age " her mind ruthlessly observed that she had no idea what the legalities of her situation were, exactly; she told her mind to sod off. " and with full awareness and by my own will, I give you my permission to question me under Veritaserum." She finished the formal offer by touching her wand briefly.

He stared at her mildly as she completed the official ritual.

*Disbelief? Disdain? No matter.* "Your move, sir," she said, letting her arms fall to her sides. "The potion's effects only ever last for half an hour, probably less, in my case."

"You've been questioned before," he said flatly.

"Yes, sir. Several times."

With a sharp, downward slash of his arm, he summoned her wand, and she flinched. "Are you harboring the Dark Lord in your mind?"

Hermione bristled. "You already know I'm not, sir."

Placing her wand behind him on his desk, he countered, "I know nothing of the sort."

"Would Voldemort drink Veritaserum in front of you in front of *anyone*?"

"Are you His agent then?"

"No, sir."

"His messenger?"

"No, sir."

A long, assessing stare. Then he gestured curtly. "Sit."

She obeyed.

"What are you?"

"My name is Hermione Granger, sir."

"*I know that,*" he spat.

"Then ask the question differently!" she flashed. "We don't have much time!"

"Recollect yourself, Miss Granger."

"I'm *trying*," she said. She collected her wits as well as she was able with the potion coursing through her mind.

"What is your purpose here?"

"I wish I knew, sir."

"Then what are you?!"

"I'm not a 'what'; I'm a 'who.' At the moment, I seem to be a Hogwarts student, but "

"I've no interest in 'seems.'" Power emanated from him in waves, and she was suddenly aware of her heart beating.

"I wasn't finished yet. I am not a 'what,' I am myself, sort of; I am Hermione Granger and I both am and am not your student, which is truly disconcerting because I think I'm here because apparently, and without even my conscious knowledge, I've fancied you for years." *Merlin, Mab, and Mordred, I did not just say that!* Her heart pounded furiously as she tried desperately to stop talking.

"Veritaserum or no, you will address me properly."

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "I've fancied you for years, *sir*."

Not as much as a blink betrayed whether or not he'd heard her.

*Stupid... bloody stupid...*

But his next question gave no indication she'd said anything beyond her name. "What year are you?"

She struggled to breathe normally. "Physically, I am currently a fourth-year student at Hogwarts School of "

"Physically?"

"Yes, sir."

A mocking, skeptical eyebrow. "And the rest of you?"

"The rest of me is twenty-six years old."

He frowned. "Answer me."

"I did, sir. You didn't hear me."

His frown darkened. "There is nothing wrong with my hearing."

He seemed on the verge of movement whether to summon the Headmaster or another teacher, or to send her to the Hospital Wing, or to shake her, she didn't know "Of course there isn't, but I'm here under the auspices of Athena's owl."

He stiffened, movement averted. "What?"

"Have you ever heard of Athena's owl, sir?"

"It's a legend."

She blinked. "You heard me?"

"Of course I did," he said. "You expect to distract me with a fairy tale?"

"It's not a fairy tale, sir. Athena's owl is real."

"*Accio Veritaserum.*" Professor Snape examined the bottle, his brows meeting over the bridge of his nose as he read the label, frowning. "Impossible."

"What is, sir?"

"I ask the questions here."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you in any way tampered with the contents of this potion?"

"No, sir."

"Athena's owl, you say."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you know of it?"

"It's a coin, similar in all aspects save one to an obol, the Athenian coin for the dead. The coin known as 'Athena's owl' is different in that it bears the image of an owl on both sides, not one."

"And its supposed purpose?"

"Its *actual* function is to bear the spirit of whoever tosses it to a time and place in my experience, it always involves a temporal translocation; I suppose it could work only for place as well; I'm not entirely certain, having no first-hand experience with that sort of outcome. Theoretically, it almost has to be possible, but "

"You're babbling."

"Veritaserum has that effect, sir." She swallowed. "As I was saying, it bears the spirit of whoever tosses it to a moment wherein they may find the wisdom they seek."

"It's a legend," he said again.

"It may have become legend, sir, but I assure you, the coin known as 'Athena's owl' is real."

He regarded her skeptically, his thumb rubbing the potion bottle. "Time travel, you say. Very well, since you seem to believe that, how old are you?"

"Fourteen. And twenty-six."

"Fourteen and... what?"

"You didn't hear me, did you, sir?"

"You spoke further?"

"I did, sir."

He shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry, sir. I imagine it's the owl that's keeping you from hearing me properly. The coin, I mean. The premise on which it seems to work is this: When one is under its auspices, one may not in any way alter anything crucial to the development of larger historical events. I presume you cannot hear some of my answers because, were you to do so, your actions in the past your future, I mean might change, to who knows what effect." She paused for breath.

"You are rather articulate for a Fourth year."

"That's because I'm not one."

"What are you?"

"As I've told you, I'm Hermione Granger, sir. Doctor Hermione Granger, Assistant Archivist, British Library, Wizarding Branch, to be precise."

He shook his head. "You spoke further. After your name."

"I did, sir. I can only assume you were not permitted to hear it."

"Not permitted."

"By the owl, sir. The coin, I mean."

His lip curled. "You expect me to believe that you are here from..."

"The future, sir. Well, my present, really. From your perspective it would be your future."

"My future," he repeated tonelessly.

"Erm... well, sort of, yes, sir. To the extent that you have one, anyway; the metaphysics are rather complicated, and the question of your future is rather up in the air still. At least I hope it is." She gritted her teeth. "And I hope you didn't hear that."

"Hear what?"

"Oh, good. You didn't."

"This is most irregular."

She snorted. "You're telling me?"

"How dare you..."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Ask Demetrios if you don't believe me, sir."

He glanced at her sharply. "Demetrios."

"Demetrios of Alexandria, Bay-Laurel of Athena (2nd Class), currently Head Archivist, British Library, Wizarding Branch." She paused for breath. "Sir."

"I did not ask you for his vita, Miss Granger."

"In his case, Professor, I believe it would technically be a 'morta.'"

He glared at her.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's the Veritas serum. I can't help it."

"Silence."

A long pause in which he cast an efficient set of Contamination Inquiry Charms on the bottle.

When the bottle glowed blue, his brow furrowed, and he stood silently for a moment.

Hermione held her breath. *Please, please, please just ask Demetrios.*

Suddenly he nodded and, with a curt gesture indicating that she wasn't to follow, he wrenched open the door behind him, heading, she assumed, for the Floo.

She heard his short request: "Demetrios of Alexandria."

The pleasant voice of the operator spell replied, "At once, Professor Snape."

A pause.

"Good afternoon... Professor Snape, is it?"

Demetrios's voice carried to Hermione, and she closed her eyes, whispering to the empty classroom, "I want to go home."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Professor," Demetrios was saying. "How may I be of assistance to Hogwarts?"

"I've an inquiry concerning a legendary artifact whose existence requires substantiation."

"Oh, my, how fascinating legendary, you say? I am at your disposal, of course..."

Hermione could almost see her superior fold his hands over his middle, see him smile his kind, patient smile, and she whispered, "I really, really want to go home. To see Demetrios. The Archive. And this man is a stranger to me, and I'm *bloody fourteen*, and Merlin help me, I just want to get my hands on his arse..."

"A student has recently displayed behavior that is more than slightly aberrant."

Hermione sat on her hands and kept listening.

"Yes?" Demetrios inquired mildly.

"The student claims she is under the auspices of Athena's owl..."

Hermione could well imagine Demetrios's surprise. *It will take him a day and a half to find his eyebrows...* She stifled a giggle.

"... and insists on its actual existence." Professor Snape concluded.

"How very curious..." Demetrios's voice went silent for a moment. "Yes, most curious. Might one inquire as to the nature of the student's, hrm, behavior?"

"She evinces more familiarity with subjects beyond her year some rather esoteric than can be explained by extra reading."

"I see... this student of yours, I imagine she possesses a rather precocious intellect?"

Hermione heard Professor Snape snort softly. "She would have her professors believe so, at least."

Demetrios laughed. "An intellect rather more bookish than practical, then... yes, yes... I begin to perceive..." His voice trailed away, then he must have shaken himself a gesture Hermione knew well for he continued, "Yes. Quite... do go on."

"Additionally, there is some irregularity in her speech and also in conversations pertaining to her."

"What manner of irregularity?" Demetrios's excitement was palpable even in the next room.

"When she speaks one cannot hear all of her words although one is perfectly aware that she is speaking. Likewise, when one speaks about her..." Professor Snape coughed. "References to her sometimes appear to be inaudible to other staff members."

A burst of delighted laughter from the Floo. "*Remarkable!*"

A pause that Hermione knew indicated a scowl. "She is hardly remarkable."

"Oh, no, Professor, she is; I assure you. She must be, and you, I think, will have occasion to agree with me, although perhaps not for quite some time. Tell me, Professor are the other staff at all, hrm, troubled by this student's behavior?"

"The Divination professor is beside herself, but that is nothing extraordinary."

Hermione heard Demetrios laugh. "They always are a bit mad. Luckily it's not hereditary."

"I do not follow..."

"Ah, no, of course not. My mother was the Oracle, you see."

"The Oracle?"

"At Delphi. Quite the scandal that was; they're supposed to be virgins, you know."

Hermione could not begin to imagine Professor Snape's expression.

"So, you are somehow implicated in the wisdom she seeks," Demetrios continued. Allow me to congratulate you, then."

Professor Snape made a strangling noise. "Me?"

"Yes, if you were able to hear her mention my little owl, you are the central object of her float... quite important to it, at least, although neither of us will know how or why for quite some time, I think... if ever, really... well, I shall eventually, probably, but you... hmm... I wonder..."

"Are you certain that particular madness was not hereditary?"

"Quite, Professor; quite. As an archivist, only the possibilities of the past concern me. The future is only ever imaginary; it rightly belongs to the mad." Demetrios's tone grew serious. "You're in for a rather discomfiting time of it, I'm afraid but I've no doubt that retrospectively you'll find the right path everywhere. A lucky find for you, Professor. A very lucky find indeed. I do hope you won't give her too much trouble."

"What are you saying?"

"Athena's owl exists, Professor Snape, and its abilities are quite real."

"I find that impossible to believe." Professor Snape's voice was strangled.

"Oh, my word, I should say so; nonetheless, yes. It's been in my possession for aeons. I confess, I am quite looking forward to learning which of your students I shall find so very worthy... thank you, Professor; thank you. I'm absolutely bursting with curiosity, of course."

"Worthy?"

"Of course!" Demetrios's voice sparkled with patient anticipation. "My little owl and I have never been parted I confess I can't begin to imagine what circumstances will prompt me to lend her... and speculation is pointless, of course."

"Her?" Professor Snape asked weakly.

"My owl, of course, which I shall evidently lend to your student in the future. Might I inquire as to the student's name?"

"Hermione Granger."

"Ah," Demetrios said, a little sadly. "All I hear is a buzzing noise, I'm afraid. I am not to know her name yet, then. Well, so be it; Athena's wisdom prevails."

"Athena."

"Of course who did you think created the 'artifact' we speak of? Oooh, that word does make one feel one's years..."

"Might I see it?"

"My apologies, Professor, but as I am long since dead, no part of me will manifest on your end, and I should hate to risk losing my little owl."

"I see." Hermione heard Professor Snape's robes rustle slightly. "There is no chance that the student is lying?"

"It is possible, of course, although were that the case, one would hope for something more plausible. But what you say about the student's speech, and your inability to discuss her situation with other staff... it's consistent with my own experience. Aristotle finds it annoying, when it happens. It gets easier, with practice." He chuckled again. "Most things do."

A skeptical noise from Professor Snape.

Demetrios chuckled. "Why, Professor I presume that, as Potions Master, you do have other methods of inquiry at your disposal?"

"The Headmaster frowns on the use of any absolute methods when students are concerned."

"Does he really? How very modern of him... well, Albus always was his own Thestral."

"His... what?"

"Just an expression..."

A long silence. Hermione craned her neck but could glimpse only the edge of Professor Snape's robes through the door.

"Professor, is the student by any chance there with you?"

"She is serving detention in the adjoining classroom, and is no doubt listening to every word."

"My dear, can you hear me?" Demetrios called.

"Yes, I can, Demetrios um, I mean sir," Hermione replied, an odd lump rising in her throat.

"No harm, my dear; no harm. I've no doubt that from your perspective we know each other very well indeed, and may I just say that I am simply bursting with curiosity, anticipating the day I eventually make your acquaintance?"

A laugh released the tightness in her throat, and Hermione called, "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much, indeed."

"You will tell me the whole story, won't you? When Athena returns you?"

"Of course! But..."

"Yes?"

Her words stumbled over themselves. "But I didn't toss the coin at all it was a kitten who did, and I've no idea how to get home or even what wisdom I'm supposed to be seeking..."

"Ah, my dear, I'm afraid I didn't catch that."

"No, I suppose not."

"No worries, my dear; no worries. This conversation doesn't really happen, you know. Not unless it needs to have done."

"I don't understand," she said, faltering.

"Why, of course you don't; how could you? Some curiosities defy ready legibility, my dear, as you doubtless will learn." He chuckled. "Professor Snape, if that was all? I've a rogue windmill that's just appeared in the Archive, and it's wreaking havoc with the John Calvin papers..."

"A windmill has ... yes. Quite. Your assistance is appreciated."

"Oh, the pleasure is mine, really it's not every day I learn I shall break a silence I've kept since... well, for a very, very long time. My dear," Demetrios called to Hermione.

"Yes?"

"I shall look forward to meeting you, someday." His kindness filled the chill classroom, and her fondness for him somehow outgrew her heart.

"Thank you. And... Demetrios?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"I miss you."

A small chuckle, and a rushing noise signaled that the connection was closed.

---

*Trivial Note:*

1. Greek for "lucky find": hermaion. Isn't that nifty? :)

~ A.

## The Gift

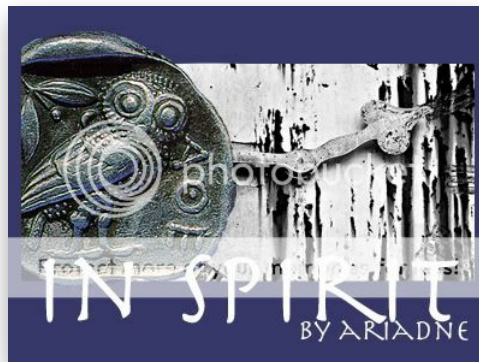
*Chapter 30 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *In which Demetrios gives Severus something he didn't know he wanted. Of course, he's oblivious. Mostly.*

A/N: In honor of Ana's birthday, words. (Sorry it's been so long - in addition to teaching full time, I'm now in school as well. I miss you!)

~ Ari



*Severus, in the present:*

Severus heard a plaintive "Meee" from the kitchen and, leaving the wardrobe fully expanded, joined the kitten by the table.

The cereal had moved.

"PRFSSR?" *it read.*

"I'm here."



"SRY 4 BUBBLZ."

*So, she'd realized. Well, of course; in her temporal location in the previous decade, he wasn't yet dead, so there was no real impediment to...*

*He coughed.*

*... excepting, of course, that he was her professor, and she was his fourteen-year-old student.*

-----

"Meee?"

"Forty-seven... forty-eight..." Without pausing in his brewing, Severus glanced at the table, where the kitten had been amusing herself for the last hour alternately washing her ears and batting the damnably uncommunicative cereal about with her paw.

She was sitting, her paw arrested in mid-air, staring at him.

"What now?" he muttered, completing the fiftieth spiral stir this phase of the potion required. He removed the stirring rod, careful to disturb the liquid as little as possible, and wiped it on a clean tea towel.

"Meee!" she announced, hopping lightly off the table to twine once around his ankles before trotting into the living room.

Making a mental note to check the potion just before sunrise, he followed, wiping his fingertips lightly on the towel.

Mimi had leapt up to Hermione's chest and was peering at her face curiously. "Meee? Meee?!"

Severus dropped to one knee by the lounge. "What did you see, little one?"

Mimi stared at him imploringly, then went back to her inspection of Hermione's eyebrows.

As Severus watched, a shallow, almost imperceptible furrow appeared between them. He had barely time to wonder if he were seeing things when the memory of her Summoning the Veritaserum off his shelves, of damn near knocking him over with the strength of her Shield Charm, hit him full force.

Automatically cautioning his younger self to hold steady, not to show that the strength of her Charm had him off-balance, he reached for the armchair as more memories exploded into his mind. He'd thought her possessed by the Dark Lord. Watched, dumbfounded as she drank the Veritaserum. Wondered what she might be, this creature who could hold a Shield against him, bandying words as well as... no, *better than* Dumbledore.

In her flat in London, seeing in his mind the raw force of her personality blaze in her eyes behind the rippling, luminous Shield, his chest tightened as his desire rekindled.

"*What are you?*" he remembered asking, and he closed his eyes.

"Your student, you fool," he muttered.

Mimi turned and regarded him with questioning eyes.

He raked through the onrushing memories of the subsequent interrogation, hearing her past answers in full, uncensored by history, able to judge what his past self heard only from the content of his subsequent questions.

Frowning, he puzzled through their conversation, his chest constricting when she dared utter things no student should say and no teacher dare hear, relaxing only slightly when he remembered contacting Demetrios through the Floo.

As if on cue, Hermione's fireplace flashed green.

"Potions Master?"

"What's left of him," Severus confirmed, not moving from the armchair.

"Quite, quite..." Demetrios said airily. "Tell me..."

"Anything," Severus muttered darkly.

"Oh, my boy, I can't begin to imagine "

"You most certainly cannot."

The flames flickered, startled, and Severus was just quick enough to intercept Mimi as she skittered toward the fire.

"Meee!" she protested, clawing his arm.

"Cat, for reasons I cannot fathom, I would prefer that you not disappear into that ark of antiquities."

The flames flickered patiently.

"Well?" he shot toward the Floo.

Demetrios responded amiably, "My memories of our conversation interrupted a most pleasant concern just now I assume your memories arrived as well?"

"They did," Severus said shortly.

"I confess to curiosity."

Severus snorted, and Mimi twisted in his arms to sniff his nose.

"Ridiculous cat. Try, Librarian, to contain yourself lest my familiar injure herself in the flames."

Laughter from the Floo, but the flames stayed still.

"Meee," Mimi lamented, butting Severus's cheek.

Severus ignored her. "I believe you were curious..."

"Quite, quite, my boy. More than that; astonished, really, that your even younger self heard her mention... well, surely she must have inquired as to your knowledge of my

little owl?"

Wincing at "even younger," Severus nodded.

"And you heard her."

"Obviously."

"Intriguing... oh, my, yes, how intriguing, how memories multiply... I've never been on this end before... hmmm..." Demetrios's voice trailed away.

Severus tapped his boot audibly, only to cause a burst of laughter from the still-quiet flames.

Mimi butted his cheek again, and he rubbed his fingers into her fur to quiet her.

A loud purr filled his ear, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

Demetrios continued, "I rather imagine she's been asking you about my owl for days now, from her perspective."

"So why should I hear her then, at that moment?"

"Isn't it obvious? You were finally willing to hear her... hm, well... perhaps not her, precisely..."

Severus swallowed at the word "willing," but, hearing a frown in the librarian's voice, remained silent.

"No... not 'her'... not quite yet, I think... but you were perhaps more, hm, open."

"Open," Severus repeated.

"Yes. As it is unlikely that you were ready to hear her, you must have been open to more to say, in need of the truth."

"The truth," Severus said, a low snarl growing in his throat.

At the sound, Mimi twisted out of his grasp and leaped to the floor.

"Potions Master?" the flames inquired softly.

"Truth," Severus said again. "What truth could I have ever 'needed' from a student?"

"She's not a student, Severus," Demetrios said quietly.

"I know that," Severus spat. "But my former self doesn't."

"Not quite yet, perhaps... but you will. It's probably inevitable; oh, my word, yes, unless..."

Severus exploded. "Merlin help me if Dumbledore discovers"

Demetrios's tone was uncharacteristically harsh. "Yes, well, he's proven himself adequately blind by now, hasn't he? Had proven, that is, by then. Oh, my, how limiting language can be.... Regardless, she cannot change history, and your losing place at Hogwarts..."

Severus made a strangling noise. "How are you in a position to judge Dumbledore's blindness?"

"I *can* read, my boy, even if contemporary accounts are somewhat more... well... more *epic* than can possibly be accurate. I *have* seen history sift itself out from written record once or twice in my time. I have a first-row seat; season tickets, as it were. And... well, I have of course had my little owl at my disposal until very, very recently," Demetrios finished gently.

"You've been there Hogwarts before now?"

"Many times, my dear boy. Many times. It was for many years the... how does the current expression go? Ah, yes. 'The biggest game in town.'"

Severus said nothing.

"Albus Dumbledore was an Olympic-class liar the best only ever omit, as you well know. And as for his nemesis..." Demetrios swore softly in Ancient Greek, and Severus's eyebrow lifted. "Well, you out-classed them both, didn't you? Albus by only a hair, perhaps, if that much... but thus you, Potions Master, lived for many years more profoundly, more *devoutly* in need of Truth her truth, I now perceive than anyone in history. And believe me, my boy. When it comes to history," the flames breathed, "I would know."

In the silence that followed Demetrios's outburst, Severus stood, unmoving, before the fire, invisible nostrils flaring.

"So you see," Demetrios continued after several moments had passed, "you have nothing to fear."

Severus coughed.

"Really, Potions Master. Whatever you begin to perceive through your acquaintance with our good Doctor, however you begin to perceive her my boy, you were human, swathed as you were in impenetrable black - you cannot lose your place at Hogwarts because you *didn't*. History required that much of you. But your heart?"

"My heart was beside the point."

"So you say. It is assuredly none of my business."

"It seems to be the only thing that bloody well isn't your business."

Demetrios sniffed. "I *am* capable of discretion."

Severus didn't bother to hide his disbelieving laugh.

The flames sparkled at him.

"Spare me your sparkling, dead man."

"As one to another," Demetrios agreed placidly. "Regardless, rest assured however champion an omittor Albus Dumbledore may have been, he was never a match for Athena."

"Merlin help me."

"Nor him."

"Meee?" Mimi yowled from the kitchen, and Severus heard the tell-tale scratching noise that indicated that his long-ago detention must be over.

## Keeping

Chapter 31 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *In which everyone has ample time to poke at things. Some things break, some things steam, and Mimi gets a new toy.*

A/N: There is always a chapter that buggers one beyond belief. My thanks to Anastasia, AnnieTalbot, Indigofeathers, and Lady Karelia for their patience as I wrestled with this one.

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### 31: Keeping

"Meee?" Mimi yowled from the kitchen, and Severus heard the tell-tale scratching noise that indicated that his long-ago detention must be over.

---

"WHUT IZ BASTRD?"

Severus stopped in the kitchen archway, his eyes raking the tabletop, where Mimi was licking the question mark experimentally.

"Dare I inquire who is the bastard du jour?"

Mimi turned and looked at him.

"Of the day," he muttered. "To which bastard does the good Doctor refer?"

Mimi skittered out of the way as the cereal rearranged itself sharply. "YOO AND BUMBLFORK." She stared at the cereal, eyes wide. Letters went flying off the table as the last word rectified itself to read, "DUMBLDOR."

Mimi peered over the table at the scattered letters, and Severus picked them up, crushing them with his thumb. "Tell Hermione that the Librarian insists Dumbledore is not a problem."

"IZ. HE SCARF... SCRFIC... KILLT U. " The letters scattered and started over. "VOLDMORT BASTRD KILLT U, OFF COURS, BUT DUMBLDOR 2. HATE THEM."

Severus watched as the cereal continued to rant.

"U KICKT MI OWT OF DUNJIN. SED GIT OWT NAOW."

He nodded, remembering.

"WHUT NXT?"

He closed his eyes, trying to anticipate his past self's next actions...

But he didn't need to anticipate. Memories flooded recklessly into his mind with no regard for his usually rigid mental order....

*Keeping his face harshly blank as he ordered her out of the dungeon lest she see...*

*Gripping the desk he'd never thought of as his own, exhaling slowly, a small, sharp twinge from his forearm...*

*A brutal kick for his instructor's chair, sending it crashing; sharp pain; the impact reverberating through his bones straight into the base of his skull...*

*And not a sound escaped him.*

*Slamming into his quarters, wheeling, clutching the mantel, the hearth empty, as always...*

*Always...*

*Concentrating against the pain in his foot, replaying his conversation with the Archivist the description of the coin, its function, its purpose... his thoughts running with increasing speed and volume toward the inevitable conclusion:*

*It can't be real can't be real it can't IT IS REAL.*

Severus paced Hermione's floor. He had accepted Demetrios's expertise without hesitation of course he had, given his prestigious position; the fact that he was dead meant he was politically neutral but when it came to trusting Hermione...

*That Granger girl will bear watching...*

In Hermione's flat, Severus snorted, but the memories continued.

*Wondering what her purpose was; how it involved him; against his will, as always; nothing new there...*

*Assistance. She must be after his assistance. Bollocks that as if his time was limitless, could expand to indulge her petty concerns. Let her turn to Potter...*

*Turning abruptly from his empty hearth and moving toward his desk where a small pile of essays lay as if meekly awaiting the lash of his quill, which Blast it he'd left it in the classroom...*

Severus eased himself into a chair at Hermione's kitchen table, still remembering...

*Stopping abruptly in the door to the classroom, his eye falling on charred remnants that had been quill before she had sparked it into ashes...*

*Because a Fourth-Year-Who-Wasn't had had enough force in her Shield Charm to rebound his spell, wreaking mayhem with his belongings...*

*Realizing that she'd not turn to Potter, no, not if she were as old as... as... as old she had no right to be.*

A Gryffindor. Minerva's problem, then. *Then, No.*

*Realizing that... that what? That other than Trelawney...*

A snort, both in past and present.

*... that other than that lunatic Trelawney, he was the only one who could hear her. How had the mad Archivist put it? The "object" of her "float."*

*Distilling what he knew of human character generally and of that student in particular, concluding with whip-blinding accuracy that she was here, she must be here to plague him on the matter of...*

*... of what?*

*Scowling...*

*He couldn't begin to imagine the focus of her research.*

*The area, then. Arithmancy... that or Charms... if she had any talent beyond reducing the library to precarious piles of maddeningly unrelated books, it lay in those subjects in finicky calculations and ill-calculated, attention-seeking displays. What assistance did she imagine he could possibly offer?*

*None. Obviously. He was no potions ingredient to be measured and used in her calculations.*

In Hermione's flat, a short, mirthless laugh. "Of course you are, you *idiot*."

---

Hermione sat at her usual table in the library still muttering to Crookshanks, who had been waiting for her outside the classroom door and who was now blinking at her from the nearby window ledge.

Leaning her head on her elbow, she stared at her History of Magic notes, asking them, "So what now?"

A brief pause whilst Crookshanks relayed her query through Mimi, then her neat handwriting exploded into, "NAOW U WAIT 4 ME."

She blinked at the size of the letters. "Wait for you? Wait for you to do what?"

"WAIT 4 PAST ME 2 STAWP KICKNG FURNICHUR. IDJIT JUST BROK HIZ TOE."

She rolled her eyes. "Lovely. Do you anticipate coming to your senses any time soon?"

Her History of Magic notes waited whilst Crookshanks washed an urgent bit of his tail. Then, "DEPENDZ."

"On what?"

"NO CLOO. IZZINT EVRY DAY U LRRRN U R OBJCT OF DIVYNE INTURV... INTRUST..."

Hermione's watched the cats struggle with spelling.

"... BUGGRING GREK GODDISS IN FORM OF STOODINT. CURISTY WIL OWT IN TYME."

She laughed shortly. "We can debate the question of my divinity some other time. What are you doing now? In your memories, I mean?"

"REZENTNG U."

"How spectacularly self-indulgent of you, Professor."

"RIGARDLSS, TROO."

Hermione leaned back in her chair and pushed her hair away from her face. "Well, I hope you don't make too long a business of it. Fourth Year wasn't exactly a basket of Pygmy Puffs the first time around, and I'd really like to get out of this uniform"

---

"Great Merlin, Hermione." Severus swallowed.

---

"It's getting rather too small and back into my own life before this castle gets any colder."

Her notes said nothing for several long moments.

Her lips twitched as she folded the cuffs of her blouse over the scratchy wool and pushed her sleeves up to her elbows.

Crookshanks leapt from the windowsill to her lap and shoved his head into her hand. Her notes rearranged to read, "MIMI SEZ HIZ THINKIN FUZZD UP."

She nodded. "Tell Mimi to give him a few minutes."

"MrrrOW."

Hermione rubbed Crookshanks's ears and waited.

Finally, her notes seemed to regain their composure. "I WILL PRBBLY AVOYD U FOR WEEK OR 2."

"Weeks?" She paled and sat straighter, her sudden movement sending Crookshanks to the floor. "Weeks? But... but you have a choice to make, yes? And a potion?"

"BREETH. IZ STIL SAYM NYTE U LEFT."

Hermione couldn't begin to understand how time was passing differently in the present and the past. "Shite."

"LANGUIJ, MIS GRAYNGRR."

"Oh, bugger your buttoned-up self and the Thestral you rode in on." She frowned, still trying to encompass the impossibilities of two independent yet conjoined times.

"PLEEZ STAWP THINKIN ABOUT MI BUTTONZ. TOO HARD."

Her eyebrows flew up. Although she knew, somehow, that he meant that she shouldn't make this any harder on either of them than it already was, a small gleam grew in her eye, matched by a quirk of a dimple in her cheek. "And how, exactly, am I not supposed to think about them... about *you*... when here I can see them and all I want to do is slowly undo each..."

Crookshanks' whiskers twitched as the ink blotted murkily on the page. "PRFSSR CHOK."

"U R CHYLD."

"Did you know you have nine buttons on each cuff? Really, Severus, how long did it take you to dress in the morning?"

"REPLY HAZY AKS AGIN LATUR."

Hermione's lips twitched. "Are you going to take points from Gryffindor because I fancy you, Professor Snape?"

A very long pause, then her notes re-formed to read, "PRBBLY."

"Bastard."

"BYND UR WYLDST DREEMZ."

"Oh, really? Tell me what do you dream of?"

Her parchment emitted a faint layer of steam.

Crookshanks arched his back, tail bushing, and he skittered backwards off the table, disappearing into the endless rows of bookshelves that screened her seat from the rest of the library.

She chuckled, running her fingers through her hair and braiding it loosely. Although her mood was improved for the moment and how could it not be? she knew there was nothing to be done. For whatever reason, she remained stuck in her own past, her only viable human ally a living, breathing... mmm... physically commanding Potions professor, whom she wanted very badly to... well, yes 'though she'd prefer to be at least a bit taller when that happened...

She leaned back again and closed her eyes.

She'd never borne the onslaught of the full strength of his magic before it had been all she could do to hold her Shield Charm against his Summoning spell. A simple spell, really; if he'd pulled anything more out of his arsenal, she wasn't sure hers would've held.

In its way, a duel was as naked as a kiss.

Eventually, she shook her head and forcibly derailed that particular train of thought. Sending a mental burst of exasperation in the general direction of Athena, Demetrios, and the Potions classroom, she took to the shelves where the advanced Arithmancy texts were kept.

Arithmancy had always calmed her nerves in school. She didn't think it would have the quite same effect under current circumstances, but there were a few problems she had left hanging in the Archive, and...

---

Severus had barely recovered his command of himself after the button conversation when Hermione's Floo roared in the living room and he heard the voice of the operator spell.

"Mrs. Potter for Dr. Granger..."

He stood very still.

---

However Hermione might have wished for her current Potions professor to sort out the finer points of divine intervention, history had its own opinions regarding the niceties

of timing and, for that matter, time.

One moment, she'd been snug in the library, focused completely on one of the Archive's more challenging organizational problems (Atlantis was always threatening to slip its mooring and drift down the Thames). In the next, and with absolutely no warning, she was blurring through several days as though clinging to a racing broom gone berserk, watching her fourth-year self speed through long stretches so banal she couldn't imagine what history was thinking.

---

When the operator spell received no answer, it continued, "Dr. Granger is unavailable, Mrs. Potter. Would you care to leave a Floonote?"

"Yes, thank you... oh, Harry, will you *please* take the baby or... no, just get me a quill... no, not the one James has been scribbling with one of the new white ones." A pause. "Oh, I don't *know* where you put them. Here, just hold him..."

A few minutes later, he heard the connection close.

Mimi hopped off the table and scampered to the archway only to freeze in response to something he couldn't see.

He looked into the living room as the last of the flames died away around a small, perfectly shaped apple on Hermione's hearth.

Mimi stalked it, crouched low and twitched her tail, preparing to pounce.

"That's Hermione's, not yours," he chided her, reaching for it.

At his touch, its peel unfurled, resolving itself into a gently rounded, perfectly smooth parchment.

Mimi wove hopeful figure-eights around his boots, looking up at the parchment as he read,

*"H, Crooks is beside himself and the baby's throwing an awful fuss... when you get in, will you pleaseplease come through and see if you can calm at least one of them? Thx ~ Gin.*

*P.S. Yes, Harry finally got us an iFloo. Frightfully trendy, I know - but I'm helpless to resist good design!"*

He placed the parchment on a side-table, where it immediately turned back into an apple.

Leaving Mimi to sniff the apple and casting a hooded glance at Hermione's softly breathing self, he checked the potion glimmering softly, just as it ought and reached for the Poe volume he still carried tucked inside his robes.

A wordy bastard, but he required distraction.

Within a few moments, Mimi was dozing curled on his lap, and soon he was muttering scathing commentary on what sort of fool buries a heart in the bedroom?

---

In the few moments when time slowed down and behaved properly, Hermione flung her thoughts through the cereal to check what time it was in present-day London.

The answer never varied: "FYVE MINNITZ AFTUR LAST TYME U INTERRPTID MI. WHEN IZ THER?"

But history never granted her enough time to answer.

After a particularly harrowing transition from her evening bubble bath to streaming out of the Great Hall after lunch an unremarkable few days later, she blurted, "Bugger Athena, anyway!" only to find herself on the receiving end of Lavender's impassioned and rather high-pitched censure.

"Hermione! Even though *you're* too mundane to appreciate the influence of Astral Entities..."

"Astral Entites' my empirical arse," she muttered, wheeling away and heading toward the Entrance Hall with Crookshanks on her heels. "As if you'd believe the *half* of it if I told you, you ridiculous cow..."

She felt rather than heard an eyebrow lift in her immediate vicinity and drew herself up short.

*Shite! Where did he come from?"* Professor Snape?"

"A word, Miss Granger."

Nerves taut from hurtling in short, fast-forward bursts through days at a time, she snapped, "What is it? I've Arithmancy in five minutes..." *I think.*

"Five points from Gryffindor." As the Hall emptied around them, he loomed over her. "For insolence."

His voice seemed curl under her hair, and she blushed. *Sweet Merlin...*

With her younger self quiescent and apparently blissfully unaware in the back of her mind, Hermione looked down, trying to school her features into something resembling a neutral expression. *Pixies preserve me, there are buttons on his trouser cuffs, too...*

"If you're quite finished examining the floor..."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The last student footsteps echoed away, and he spoke. "I've no use for legendary coins."

"I've little patience for the actual one," she muttered through clenched teeth.

He crossed his arms, and she risked raising her gaze to his hands.

*Strong. Capable. Um... bad idea, Granger.*

"What is your object in coming to this year?"

"I don't know."

"Impossible."

Hermione abandoned all efforts of not meeting his gaze. "What possible reason do I have to lie to you?" She crossed her arms back at him, and they glared at each other.

"Fifty points from"

"Take as many as you like! It makes no difference to me; if it does to history, then history will glue those rubies to the top of the hourglass with a Sticking Charm the likes of which not even the Founders ever imagined."

"You will address me as befits your..." Here he faltered.

"My what?" She laughed sharply. "Age? That hardly applies. My height, perhaps?"

He said nothing.

"Well, get used to it, sir; I don't get much taller."

A flicker of interest crossed his features.

Unnerved, she queried, "What?"

"So you survive to adulthood."

*Oh.* Chiding her ridiculously hopeful heart, Hermione shook her head. Of course he'd want to know how much time... "It happens this year I'm going to have to send my dress robes to London for alteration before too long if I haven't already. What month is it, anyway?"

His eyes glinted sharply. "You don't know?"

"I keep fast-forwarding."

"It is presently the 19th of September."

*Happy Birthday,* she thought sourly.

They stood there uncomfortably for a few moments. Finally, she broke the silence. "It was a nice bit of logic to try, though. That bit about my height, I mean."

Their silence outgrew awkward and hurtled toward unbearable.

Finally, he spat, "This is most unnatural."

"You're telling me, sir?"

He said nothing, his eyes seeming to measure her against some standard she could not begin to perceive.

When he reached no apparent conclusion, she said, "You don't trust me, do you, Professor?"

His eyes hardened, and she continued, "Well, of course you don't; how could you be expected to? You at least trust Demetrios, though, don't you? About the coin?"

He regarded her coolly. "The Archivist's credentials are impeccable."

"Well, you're going to have to trust someone. And he's utterly beyond politics, given that he's dead."

Something in his eyes glimmered briefly, and even as she saw it, she understood it immediately. Professor Snape - *this* Professor Snape *wanted* to die.

"I won't let you, you bastard," she said flatly, turning on her heel and heading toward the stairs.

"Detention! And fifteen points from Gryffindor," he snapped.

"Fine," she spat, not looking back. "I'm late."

*As always.*

---

*"I won't let you."*

Book and kitten forgotten, Severus moved to Hermione's side.

She lay still, breathing softly.

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

Held rapt by the curve of Hermione's immobile brow, he didn't notice when Mimi extended a small, curious paw toward the apple.

---

*Floatnotes:*

1. To the best of my knowledge, no individual or corporate entity holds copyright or trademark on a lowercase "i." However, if this assumption proves incorrect, the internet police will find me eventually and edit this chapter accordingly.

2. "The Tell-Tale Heart": The Poe story that endures Severus's critical scrutiny. The self-explanatory title has zero metaphorical pertinence whatsoever, because wouldn't that be too obvious? ... \*looks at you. ... Yes?

*\*twirls quill.*

~ A.

# Silent Without Effort

Chapter 32 of 33

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** Mimi chases her toy; everyone else chases their tails.

A/N: Many thanks to Bambu and Shefa for helping me see through a brick wall, to Subversa for alpha-reading, and to Dicky for being a benevolent postcolonial overlord regarding the butchery of the Queen's English. As always, thanks to Ana. This chapter and all that follow, however many there may be, whenever they may come, are dedicated to Mischievous T.

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## 32: Silent Without Effort

*Held rapt by the curve of Hermione's immobile brow, he didn't notice when Mimi extended a small, curious paw toward the apple.*

---

"Mimi, no."

But the kitten's paw had touched the apple. Faster than Severus could move, the apple activated the Floo and the flames shot up, catching Mimi's eye. He hadn't gone half a step when the flames, the apple, and a wild-eyed Mimi all disappeared, leaving a cold hearth and the imagined echo of a plaintive and somewhat affronted "Meee?!"

"Mimi!"

---

Hermione wasn't certain what time, day, or even month it might be when the tides of history paused, leaving her once again standing outside the Potions classroom. Slightly nauseous from the outrageous way she'd been yanked about through endless blurs of classes, meals, and corridor moments, all of which seemed to involve Professor Trelawney's too-large, searching eyes, she was beyond fed up with Severus, Athena, and even Demetrios, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd acquired a stalker.

She shuddered.

But if history had finally allowed her to catch her breath, she shouldn't waste it. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and took hold of her fraying temper.

From the absence of other students in the corridor, she deduced that another detention must be in the offing. With a half-thought for her crumbling student record - *it doesn't matter to history* - she adjusted the twisted strap of her satchel and rapped on the door.

"Enter, Miss Granger."

"Here we go," she muttered, beginning to wonder if Athena would ever get to the point or if this night like so many in the mosaic of her recent memory would see her hurtling forward through time as soon as she crossed the threshold.

"Good evening, Professor."

A wary eye greeted her. "It is the night before Halloween."

Grateful for that point of reference, she nodded. "Thank you. It could be March for all I can tell. Am I still in Fourth year?"

Ignoring her question, he rose and crossed the classroom to where she stood. "At last."

Whatever she might have expected had she retained any wits after skidding pell-mell through time, it wasn't that. She'd opened her mouth to ask his meaning, but before she'd summoned breath to speak, he was looming over her, his hands gripping her shoulders as his eyes and words commanded her, "Stay."

Unprepared for physical contact, she took a step backwards, but his grip tightened. "Erm... Professor...."

"Every night for the last six weeks I have told you the date, and every night you have simply nodded, taken a seat, and worked silently. Until tonight."

"You've assigned me detention every night? On what pretense?"

The professor's eyes flickered with annoyance, but he did not release her shoulders. "You are working on a special Potions project under my guidance."

"That's absurd - no one would ever believe that; I've little talent in the subject."

He barked a short laugh, and her brow furrowed as she looked more closely at him. The signs of strain and sleeplessness were visible, more marked than in her last clear memory of him.

"I'm sorry." The feel of his hands on her shoulders was fuzzing her thinking. "Um... right. Sir."

"No one has appeared to understand me, or to mark your absence in the evenings."

"Do you believe me, then? About the coin?"

"I intended to seize whatever opportunity to speak further on the inconvenient matter of your awkward presence. Now, if for once you will stay put." His hold tightened.

His closeness sent her thoughts more awry than even Athena's capricious launches through time. *Fifteen, Granger. You are fifteen, and that sort of thing is not. on. Not that you realized that then, stupid girl...* "Erm... I don't think a physical, um, seizing will be terribly effective, um, sir...." She felt her cheeks grow hot.

---

Even as he reached for the Floo powder in a reflexive attempt to follow after Mimi, Severus was brought up short by a new memory.



"What - now?! I don't care how confusing you find her pretty blushes, you daft bugger; no seizing Hermione until I Find. My. Cat."

---

Before Professor Snape could reply to Hermione, there was a sharp rap at the classroom door, and they both flinched backwards to a more appropriate distance.

"Enter," he snapped.

The door opened ever so slightly, and Professor Trelawney stepped through, her expression changing from anxiety to one of relief as soon as she spotted Hermione. Gasping, she grabbed Hermione's arm. "It is as I have Foreseen - you are here."

*Oh, sweet Merlin, she is stalking me. And, randomly, Rather too much touching...*

Fixing her gaze intently on Hermione's eyes, Professor Trelawney continued, "You must tell me, Spirit, for not even a True Seer can pierce the Veil to See her own future..." She gripped Hermione's arm harder, and although Hermione wanted instinctively to yank herself free, she realized the woman's eyes were sober, even serious, and that her hands were trembling.

Compassion welled in her. "What is it, Professor?" she asked quietly.

At the edges of her vision, she caught Professor Snape's eyes on her. *No, I'm not actually fifteen; just caught that, did you?*

Professor Trelawney's overlarge eyes seemed even rounder than usual; wide, vulnerable, and beseeching. "Tell me, Spirit... you must tell me... Is it as I fear? Does He Who Must Not Be Named return?"

Determined to let her down gently, Hermione shook her head. "I am sorry, but you won't be able to hear -"

"I will See the truth in your voice."

Confused as always by Professor Trelawney's tendency to imbue words with meanings they should never logically contain, but nonetheless oddly comforted that at least one soul in the castle had come to accept her without question for what she was, Hermione nodded. "Yes. He already has, in some sense."

"And does he bring Death to this castle?"

Hermione's throat closed, and she could only nod.

"And... and..." Professor Trelawney's grip on her arm was unbearably tight, her face inches from Hermione's. "And do I..." Her voice dropped to a strained whisper. "And do I live?"

Hermione swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded once more. "Yes, *you* do."

The potentially history-altering implications of her words echoed in the otherwise silent classroom, and Hermione, desperately curious to know if either professor had heard her, looked to them both in turn. Professor Trelawney's eyes were filling with tears, her shawls slipping from her shoulders as she released Hermione's arm, sagging with relief. She sank into a nearby chair, a quiet sob escaping her.

For a long moment, Professor Snape's eyes bored into Hermione's, his expression unreadable. When he finally spoke, his tone betrayed nothing, carrying only its usual sneering disregard. "Whilst my esteemed colleague collects what remains of her self-interested wits, might I inquire whether you know the outcome of this allegedly impending conflict?"

Hermione, mildly astonished to find herself bristling protectively, spoke rather more sharply than she'd intended. "You can't expect me to believe that you honestly think to subvert the protective limitations of an ancient magical artifact by inserting the odd 'allegedly'. Rather lame, really."

"I've no expectation regarding - nor the remotest interest in - what you believe or think. Neither is my problem."

"Well, that's short-sighted of you; tell me, has your toe healed?"

He glowered. "And how did you come to possess that bit of information?"

"You couldn't hear me even were I inclined to tell you, communication in which I've neither the inclination nor the slightest interest."

"Try me."

Exasperated, Hermione looked him straight in the eye. "You told me yourself, using two cats, my History of Magic notes, and a bowl of cereal."

His expression was quizzical.

"Don't tell me you heard that?"

"Your current condition does not, unfortunately, preclude my hearing the nonsensical with perfect clarity."

*So I'm Cassandra now? He can hear the truth as long as it makes no sense to him?* Hermione considered the potential of using that approach to communication, but discarded it almost instantly - had her speaking truth been the object of Mimi's misbegotten coin toss, she'd have been back in her usual time after the Veritaserum. No, Mimi was his familiar; there must be something he needed, although whether to discover it, learn it, or do it, she couldn't begin to say.

Trelawney was still sniffing softly.

"So do you?" he asked, with a hint of irritation.

"Pardon?"

"Do you know the outcome of the alleged confrontation?"

"You won't be able to hear the answer."

"Humor me."

Hermione smothered her own irritation, and recited, "At his request, you will kill Dumbledore and successfully get his final message to Harry, plus a great deal more information besides, ensuring that Harry wins. And far, far too many people die."

"More information, and too many people die. The rest was so much noise."

Hermione opened her hands.

Professor Trelawney startled them both with a choked laugh.

"What," they snapped in unison, turning toward the Seer, who was looking at them both with a bemused expression, the most normal expression Hermione had ever seen on her face.

"Not even I could have predicted this," she said, her still-teary eyes dancing with amusement.

"Predicted what?" Hermione asked irritably.

"My dear creatures," Trelawney began, her tone reminding Hermione unsettlingly of Demetrios, "you each hold the solution that neither of you can see. So quaintly Mundane, the pair of you - so endearing."

"That solution being?" Professor Snape demanded.

"The fact that you can see."

"You speak in riddles, Seer."

"Not this time, Severus."

Hermione was startled to hear a hint of steel in Professor Trelawney's tone.

"Use your eyes. Her words are but a different sort of Veil, one you cannot hope to pierce with language."

"Blast it, Sybill, speak plainly."

To Hermione's astonishment, Professor Trelawney laughed again. "You can't hear her, you refuse to see what's plainly before you, and I'm the one who is too subtle? You have spent too long in the shadows. Use your eyes, Severus. Question, and keep your questions simple."

Professor Snape said nothing.

"The more honestly you look, the more you may see."

Hermione blushed, and Professor Trelawney patted her arm.

*Affectionately? Surely not...*

"Good luck, my dear Spirit. He will miss the obvious, if you let him. And... thank you." Professor Trelawney squeezed her arm again and wafted out the door.

"That woman is beyond creepy," Hermione murmured.

"Perhaps." Professor Snape took several steps away from her and turned, scrutinizing her intently.

She found herself at loss as to what to do with her hands. "Well?"

Slowly, as if by choosing his words slowly he might effect greater understanding, although hers or his own, Hermione didn't know, he said, "I shall ask you a question, and you will not answer. You will nod or shake your head in response, no more. No words. If by some miracle you can keep silent..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Taking Professor Trelawney literally seems rather a desperate move. This isn't going to work."

He ignored her. "Will there be an open confrontation between..."

"Between the Death Eaters and the Order? Of course there will."

He scowled at her. "Nod or shake your head, Miss Granger. Or are the instructions too complex?"

"Oh, honestly. You of all people already know that there must be an all-out war, when it comes to it. Ask me something else."

"Do you know which side wins?"

She nodded, and he drew in a sharp breath. "You could see -"

"*Shut up. Which side, Granger - which side?*"

"I can't answer that with a gesture!"

"Does the Dark Lord win?"

She shook her head, and he slammed his clenched fist on a nearby table. Recovering himself, he stalked away, pacing. "I couldn't see it," he muttered angrily. "Damn that Seer..."

But Hermione's mind was racing. "You're not allowed to know the outcome, of course you're not; every other question you've asked you'd already half-deduced for yourself anyway. There must be something... something I can answer without playing Twenty Questions." she frowned, thinking, and then it hit her. *Of course!* She had it now; she'd already seen it. *Stupid, stupid, stupid...* "Ask me if you're going to live."

His face flushed with anger. "You dare -"

"Quickly - before history gets any other ideas."

"Impertinent child!"

"Damn you, Snape, I'm not a child - *Just ask me if you bloody well live!*"

He held her gaze for a long moment then looked away, swallowing, his hand clenching and unclenching as he mastered some internal battle.

Hermione waited.

Finally, he said, "It doesn't signify."

"I think it does, but that's hardly my point."

He glanced at her sharply, but she thought she saw a hint of something else in his gaze.

*Fear? But of which outcome?" Just ask me the question."*

He stood very still for a moment, then something in him seemed to sigh, as if deciding finally to admit some insignificant, long-ago transgression, one so tired and toothless as to hardly merit the bother of naming it.

*What a way to think of one's life...*

"Very well, Miss Granger," he said wearily. "As however old you really are, you still prefer parroting answers to actual comprehension, do I live?"

She suddenly wanted to smack him, or at least shake him soundly, but she managed to reply quite calmly, "I don't know."

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*Floatnotes:*

*Cassandra - Classical Seer whose curse was to speak the truth and not be believed. Hermione muddles the reference a bit, but I couldn't resist a nod to Wee Ghostie.*

~ A.

## As There Is

*Chapter 33 of 33*

Seven years after the final battle: Severus is neither here nor there - and is apparently unwanted, dead or alive, until a small black kitten pins his cloak to a cobblestone. Hermione learns that now and then life rests on the flip of a friendly coin. Does love have the power to cancel time? Only the cats know for sure, and they can't talk.

**Summary:** *Everyone's looking for something: a way home, a way out, and a lost kitten.*

A/N: Thanks to Ana, Melenka, and Goalie for alpha-reading, to Shefa for a long-ago conversation that plays out herein, and to Lady Rhian for pinch-hit beta-reading.

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33: As There Is

*"I don't know."*

---

Try as he might, Severus found himself too insubstantial to travel by Floo. As he initiated the Reflamation Spell to identify the other end of the most recent connection, he petitioned whatever forces looked after lost kittens, hoping that Mimi was not at the Potters', as retrieving her from that household might involve more explaining than he felt up to under current circumstances.

*"Reflamation initiated. Working..."*

While he waited, he tried to ignore the new memories emerging from the past.

Could Hermione not realize the effect she was having? His past self was, for now, too preoccupied to realize that the scent of her hair invited a dangerous game indeed, but it was only a matter of time. Surely the mature Hermione was logical enough to realize that the poor sod had enough dangerous games to be getting on with, and that she would be kinder to leave him in peace...

Then he snorted. *Who are you kidding?*

As the Floo worked its maddeningly slow re-connective magic, he gritted his teeth, determined to endure his once and future past with whatever dignity he could muster.

It would be easier if Mimi were here. He might not even mind if she used his leg as a scratching post.

---

"You don't know?"

"Spare me whatever diatribe you're queuing up; of course I don't. As I can't share what I do know, it stands to reason that I can at least share what I ..."

"Why are you wasting my time?"

"Me? I'd say rather that you're wasting mine. It's no lark to go dizzying through time whilst Athena or the coin or whatever is governing this situation waits for you to pull yourself together well enough to risk actually communicating."

"Pull myself together? I have been awaiting this opportunity for weeks."

"History evidently required that I not fall too far behind in my studies; there are things I needed to learn for... for that."

"As if your memorizing textbooks will affect anything."

"It did. I mean, it will. Not as much as your efforts, of course, but it will."

"Why can I hear you?"

"Probably because I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, or at least suspect. Or maybe... fear." She frowned, thinking. "Is fear is a kind of knowledge, I wonder? Perhaps, under certain circumstances... bad ones."

"These."

Out of nowhere, she heard herself saying, "I want to go home."

A searching glance. "Is home better than now?"

Hermione sighed inwardly, knowing he was seeking for clues to the big picture rather than expressing anything resembling concern. "Yes." But then she looked at him, daring to register his physical presence. She'd almost forgotten what it was like not to be able to see him. "In some ways."

His eyes went hard, and she studied them for a moment, finally chuckling.

"You find something amusing?"

She leaned against one of the student desks. "I just realized what you're doing when you look that way. You're calculating something, aren't you?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Obviously."

She laughed quietly. "It's not obvious to your students, Professor. They find it rather scary."

He shrugged. "That has its uses."

"So what do your calculations tell you?"

"At the moment, nothing, as you interrupted me."

"Hm. Then calculate aloud? Perhaps between the two of us we can..."

One of the cauldrons on the teacher's bench rattled sharply on its grate, emitting a rolling cascade of orange smoke. Professor Snape muttered something she couldn't quite catch, and the smoke coiled upwards, twisting into a tightly contained whirlwind, which he forced back beneath the potion's surface. The potion emitted a single bubble and turned a sullen shade of blue.

"Private research?"

"The results of your supposed project. I've calculated a random series of non-fatal, plausibly intermediate errors to maintain the fiction that it's your work."

"Thank you."

"For?"

"Intermediate."

He said nothing, adding a soft grey powder to the potion and setting it to simmer. Turning, he crossed his arms and looked at her. "Regarding your earlier suggestion, the answer is no. I work alone."

She walked to the front of the classroom and set her bag down on her usual desk. "Athena's Owl might beg to differ."

"Coins cannot beg."

"Must you be so literal? No; strictly speaking, coins do not beg, but cats..."

"That is the second time you've mentioned cats; what have they to do with anything?"

"I don't know, at least not for certain."

"Is there anything you do know?"

"Anything you can hear, you mean?"

He looked at her steadily.

She shook her hair out of her face and met his eye. "I know that you're given to expecting others to execute arcane, Byzantine schemes without bothering to tell them about it and then scorching them for their failure to complete tasks they didn't realize existed."

He snorted. "Hardly. As I believe I've just mentioned, I work alone."

"Generally," she conceded.

"Spare me generalities; stick to specifics."

"*Fine.* For a start, I know that you've recently broken your toe. Also, that you've never had a familiar. And why you hate Harry. And, lastly, why it took you as long as it did to admit that we needed to talk." As she spoke, she watched him very carefully, trying to discern from his expression what, if anything, he could hear.

"There is no we. I do not hate Potter. Despise, yes; hate, no. As for my limp ... "

"Despise, hate... you're splitting hairs."

"Which is my right."

"And now you're deflecting."

"Also my right. There are matters I do not discuss with anyone, least of all a meddling student ... or whatever you may be."

*No mention of familiars...* She shrugged. "Fair enough, but I don't see what it can cost you in this instance, as I already know."

His eyes narrowed, and she knew she was being measured. "There is more to knowledge than fact ... something you have yet to learn." Then his lips settled into a firm line, as though he'd decided something.

"The more honestly you look, the more you may see."

The blue potion emitted another bubble, and he glanced at it. "You, of all people, quoting Sybill Trelawney? Things must be dire, indeed."

"You've ample evidence for that without reminding me of how beastly I used to be to the poor thing ... trapped in this castle for something she can't even remember doing." Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed; the parallel was too close. Then she shook her hair out of her eyes. "Regardless, one or both of us, probably you, is supposed to learn, see, or do something, and the sooner we figure out what that something is, the sooner you can be rid of me and I can get home. As much as I hate this, it must be terribly disconcerting from where you stand."

"Which brings me to the point." He came around the desk and stood facing her.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The point I've wished to confirm with you for some weeks now. Your presence is not unfamiliar. You've been here once before."

She nodded. "Three times, actually, although there's really no way you could have known about the first two."

"I refer to a certain Quidditch match."

"Professor Quirrell."

He nodded.

"Yes, that was me, in the Forest. I've also been here on the night we were all Sorted, and in our first Potions class."

"Have you been present all this time?"

"No. I was the one who initiated the coin toss then, and when I'd..." *Dangerous ground, Hermione...* "When the logic of the coin was satisfied, I returned to my own time."

His lip curled. "The Archivist said the coin is a transport to wisdom."

"It can work that way."

When he spoke, his voice was low and quiet. "And tell me, Miss Granger, did you find the wisdom you sought?"

*Careful...* "I achieved better understanding, yes."

"How satisfying for you."

"Why are you getting angry with me?"

"You are stalking me through time."

"I'm trying to help you."

"I don't need your help."

"Perhaps not now, although my presence calls that into question ... I can see that, even if you're determined not to ... but in that other time, my time? You have no idea."

"I cannot imagine any circumstances under which your assistance would prove either needed or welcome."

*Pressing a phial into Harry's hands to catch his dying memories...*

"So you'd rather die?"

He put his hands on the teacher's bench and dropped his gaze. "Go away, Miss Granger, and leave me in peace."

"I did that once. I won't make that mistake again."

He glanced up, his hair falling across his face. "So you admit you need rescuing. Ask Potter. It's supposed to be his specialty."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Must I spell it out for you? You don't know whether I live or die, and you seek me out across time ... Why?" Straightening, his face resumed its familiar, imperious mask. "I can only conclude that in your own time, your overconfidence gets you killed."

"Me?"

"You know the outcome of the coming war, and yet you do not know my fate. Your characteristic over-confidence probably takes you out of the safety of the castle, doubtless against express instruction, most likely mine, and into some sort of last-stand crossfire."

Hermione blinked rapidly as she tried to follow his logic. "You... you think I defy you ... that I escape your protection?"

"Why else would you emerge here, this year, when..." He glanced almost reflexively at his forearm. "... unless it is to ask me to save you in the future."

Hermione snorted. "You *idiot*."

"Watch your tone, Granger. You are technically still my student."

---

"Oh, do go on grasping at that straw, for as long as you can..." Severus muttered, glaring at the hourglass that was spinning end-over-end over the cold grate.

---

Hermione stiffened. "Wrong on both counts. You refuse to see ..."

"Then enlighten me."

"I survive, which I'm sure you can't hear. Thanks in no small part to you, which I'm sure you can't hear either, but also thanks to Harry, and Ron, and countless others, and a great deal of luck, besides." She knew from his expression that her words were empty noise. "Why do I bother?"

"Your little life is not the one that ultimately matters, Miss Granger."

"I know that."

"Then I suggest you accept your unimportance and go haunt your own time."

*He could be describing himself.* "I am trying to go back. I'm trying right now."

"Try harder."

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you hiding from? What possible threat am I to you?"

If he could hear her, it didn't register on his face. "And when you do, see to it that you return the Archivist's coin. I've little patience for your self-aggrandizing conceit as my student; I've even less for you as thieving, time-traveling ghost."

It was all too much. "'Thieving ghost?' Me?!"

"Get out," he roared, pointing his wand at her.

Hermione exploded. "Do you think I want to be stuck here, unheard, largely unseen, attempting to work around the edges of history, groping in the dark toward some connection with someone who's clearly determined to sulk in isolation, when every time history lets me pause, I see the faces of so many of my friends, friends whom I know will die?"

His wand-hand remained steady, but his eyes flickered again.

*Doubt?* She didn't pause. "When I know your guilt, your despair, your self-imposed hair-shirt of heroic self-sacrifice? Fighting through the broken glass of your words, trying to find one elusive moment when you can actually hear me? When your insults and sarcasm make my teeth ache even as my heart breaks for you?"

He crossed his arms. "Your heart is of no concern to me."

"Patently not, but it matters to me! Tell me, do you think you can find a more self-negating role to play in this save-the-world business if you try? Or are you intent on suicide-by-battle-of-good-and-evil? Bit opportunistic of you, but ... Well! If that's how you see the world!"

"You have no idea why I ..."

"Yes, I do."

"You don't know what I have lost ..."

"I do."

"What I shall have to endure, what I am prepared to endure ..."

"More 'eager' than 'prepared,' I dare say."

"... what a bloody Crucio your presence is ..."

"No more than yours, believe me."

"... especially now, at a time when ..."

"When everything you fear is coming to pass?"

For a fleeting moment, his eyes were haunted, but he shuttered his expression.

She pressed on. "When you look at the faces of those around you and imagine the horrors that await them ... knowing better than anyone what Voldemort is capable of? What ends might await them all simply because they were born in the wrong time?"

"Stop."

"When your heart chokes on your own helplessness, on the utter certainty that what's coming ... however it ends ... will forever destroy everything around you, so really, perhaps it's best not to get too close, to stay detached, not to care too much ... or at all, if you can help it?"

"You think I don't care?"

"When you just want to stand and yell at everyone to prepare now, to start running now, to wake the hell up, and to scream with frustration because you know that even if you do, they won't hear you, because they can't? You're telling me I don't know what that feels like? That I don't understand? You think I don't know?!"

---

"Work faster, you infernal, decrepit excuse for..." Suddenly, Severus pushed away from the hearth and pressed his hand to his forehead. "Damn it, girl, are you trying to break the man?"

---

Professor Snape stared at her as if cursed into immobility.

"I know *everything*, Snape, everything *except* why I'm here and whether or not you live."

His voice, when he found it, was dry. "I can't save you, child." In his eyes, a helpless apology.

But in her relief at finally, finally being heard, she missed it. "I'm not a child. And I don't need saving, although I have, many times, and when I did, I accepted it with better grace than you seem capable of showing."

---

Severus tried in vain to slow his breathing. "Easy, man ... she's still a student. Your student." He groaned. *I hope he doesn't kill her.*

---

Professor Snape's jaw tightened, but his voice stayed even. "All questions of the future aside, I remind you that your current predicament seems to require my assistance. "

It was Hermione's turn to be caught flat-footed. "Oh, bloody hell; you're right. I'm sorry." *Granger, you are an idiot...* "And... thank you."

He blinked.

She slumped against the desk. "You could have thrown my words back in my teeth just then; Merlin knows I absolutely deserve it. But you didn't." She exhaled. "Thank you."

She glanced up at him; he was staring at her as though she were some astonishing new species of creature and he couldn't decide whether to squash it or flee.

---

*Flee. Definitely flee.* Severus smacked his palm flat on the mantel. "Find my familiar, you misbegotten, malfunctioning, Longbottom-level ..."

The Floosspell replied with a bland, "*Working.*"

---

Hermione's lips twitched wryly. "I'd make an absolutely horrible teacher. And I never really appreciated what a very, very good one you were. Are. Have been." She gestured apologetically; she'd never get the tenses properly sorted. "We didn't deserve you."

He said nothing, still staring.

"I honestly don't mean to make light of what you're enduring ... what you may yet have to endure. I know how it ends, so I forget that to you it's all still an amorphous and terrifying future." She sighed. "Bugger me; I *really* don't know how to do this." Pushing away from the desk, she stood before him, hands open. "Forgive me, if you can ... I hope you will, anyway."

---

Severus stifled a groan. *Poor bastard doesn't even see it coming. He'll be smitten in three...*

---

His wariness changed to confusion. "You're asking for my forgiveness?"

She nodded.

"Mine," he repeated.

"I am, yes, although I don't expect it."

He seemed to turn that idea around in his mind, staring at his hands as if he'd never seen them before.

---

... *two...*

---

He didn't look up. "I'm not certain how one goes about forgiveness, exactly."

She waited, but he didn't speak further. *Well. Can't have that.* "May I offer a possible approach? It's likely to be extremely awkward, but it might work."

He opened his hands slightly.

She went to him and offered her hand. "Can we start over? My name is Hermione Granger, sir, and although I was your student for years, I don't think we've ever actually met."

---

In London, Severus braced his hands on the mantel, holding himself very still.

---

After a long hesitation during which his eyes went hard again, perhaps seeking another way out, Professor Snape switched his wand to his left hand and extended his right toward Hermione's. She had to close the distance to clasp it ... *Of course; poor man...* but finally, their hands met.

She closed her fingers gently around his. "I wish I could tell you it will be okay, but I can't ... because I don't know." She saw that he was listening, that he heard her. "I will do what I can." She pressed her other hand over his. "I promise."

---

Severus closed his eyes, exhaling softly. *Oh, Hermione...*

---

After a pause, he nodded.

"You could hear me?"

"Yes."

A wild inspiration struck her. "Mimi misses you."

"Who is Mimi?" He tried to pull his hand away, but she resisted, pressing more firmly.

"She's your familiar."

"I've never had a ..."

His gaze dropped to their connected hands, then his eyes sought hers.

They stared at each other, their eyes widening.

In the next moment, Hermione was hurtling through time.

---

"*Working...*" the Floospell repeated.

"Work faster," he growled.

*"Connection retrieved. You are now connected to the office of Demetrios of Alexandria, Bay Laurel of Athena (Second Class), Head Archivist at the British Library (Wizarding Branch)."*

"Finally." Leaning toward the flames, Severus called, "Librarian?"

Demetrios didn't reply.

Severus strained to hear anything through the connection. Very distantly, he heard a regular, insistent thumping and a wildly off-key yowling that took a moment to register as singing.

"Librarian!" he called more loudly.

From much closer, he heard a soft, padding skittering, a mad cascading crackle, and finally several soft swishing noises ... exactly as if a stack of papers had been dislodged and fallen from a great height to settle individually on the floor.

The twitch of his lips was answered by an utterly delighted "Meee!"