

Hide and Seek

by Anastadne

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Dear Professor Snape

Chapter 1 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Disclaimer: We're just playing. Everything belongs to JK.

AN: **swishes cape** Anastadne is the twisted brainchild of Anastasia ("Of Debts and Debt Collection") and Ariadne ("A Walking Shadow"). Grins, cocked eyebrows, and sweeping black cloaks abound. Enjoy what we've called tag!fic in drabble format.

Ariadne started it...

Dear Professor Snape,

I've something of yours that I found in the Shrieking Shack when I went back to check for your body – something very important, I think – nothing I'm willing to trust to owl post, regardless.

I hope this owl finds you. I've tried Spinner's End and that pub in Knockturn Alley you think the students don't know about. I can respect your desire not to be seen or found, of course, but the item in question is rattling in its case and emitting a strange odour.

I've no idea how to neutralise it.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger...

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Disclaimer: The usual applies. Just playing.

AN: *grins* ~Anastasia

Miss Granger,

Of course, the clever use of a ghost owl would be your doing, and, while impressive, shall not make me reveal where (and if) I am. Since you have exerted such effort to reach me though, I've chosen to respond.

The item you are describing is important, yes, but not beyond your skill to master. I shall not reveal what it can do, but will disclose that it likely knows exactly how to open the case's latch – and is of the most powerful dark magic.

Enjoy.

Do not try to find me,

Professor Snape

PS: It likes tea.

Dear Professor Snape

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

A/N: Ari again. Tag, Ana. You're it. :)

Usual disclaimer: Having fun; not making any money.

Dear Professor Snape,

I assure you I am not trying to find you, merely to return what is clearly your possession. If you've no use for this whatever-it-is, then I shall dispose of it entirely. I've no interest in the Dark Arts, as you well know, you great, egotistical git...

No, that won't do...

... as you very well know.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione Granger

P.S. Your in *absentia* trial concluded last week. Had your "item" – it's started humming, by the way – been found in the Shack, it would have gone worse.

She smiled primly and cast forth the owl.

Miss Granger...

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Disclaimer: No money - only fun.

AN: **laughs* Ana here. Tag. :D*

Severus chuckled darkly.

Miss Granger,

It matters not if you are interested in the Dark Arts. Merely handling it has tainted you in a way far worse than your book-addled mind could ever hope to encompass. The humming is a precursor. To what, I shall not disclose, but, since you still draw breath, it must like you – for now. If you believe you may simply dispose of it, you are far less intelligent than I have given you credit for in the past.

Professor Snape

PS: I care not about any trial, nor its outcome, as you well know.

Dear Professor Snape

Chapter 5 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

A/N: Ari here. Tag, Ana.

As Hermione read Snape's missive, the latch sprung open. In a flash, she grabbed her copy of Casaubon's *Key to All Mythologies* - quite the heaviest book ever published – and plonked it onto the lid.

Dear Professor Snape,

If I imagined you were interested in the verdict, I'd've shared it with you. Obviously.

Sincerely yours,

Hermione Granger

Casaubon's book toppled to the desktop.

Hermione paled.

When nothing further happened, she bent to the parchment and wrote, "P.S."

The humming resumed.

Ah. A bit lonely, Professor Snape?

P.S. I wore Voldemort's soul for months. Tainted? Please. Been there; still breathing.

Miss Granger...

Chapter 6 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Disclaimer: Same as always. No money. Only fun.

AN: **laughs darkly* Tag. ~Ana*

Severus set his teacup down and grinned. Raising an eyebrow toward the impatient owl clicking back and forth across his table, he hissed, "Settle!"

And, with wide, startled eyes, it promptly did.

Miss Granger,

Perhaps I was not clear enough earlier to penetrate your exceedingly thick mind. The type of taint I am referring to is not something to be survived or proud of. It is a cold, broken, nearly unbearable existence. Something your overly analytical mind would easily miss.

Obviously.

Professor Snape

P.S. Casaubon? Please. Weight is not the answer, Miss Granger. You're only serving as amusement now.

Dear Professor Snape

Chapter 7 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari again. (Psst. Ana. *Tag.*)

Dear Professor Snape,

Really, there's no reason to go all shirty. Of course you've endured worse things than having Voldemort whisper your worst nightmares to you for weeks on end. Everyone knows that. It was the lead article in *The Daily Prophet* during your trial. But of course you don't want to know about that.

I have appeased the whatever-it-is with the scent of Earl Grey (thank you for the advice; the rattling was becoming tiresome), and I believe it has gone to sleep. (You might have warned me that the case needed to be burped, though.)

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger...

Chapter 8 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Disclaimer: Same as always. Fun, no profit.

AN: Ana again. Tag. :) I should also note that neither of us knows what the other is doing until it appears here.

Miss Granger,

Interesting language. Clearly, the war took its toll. I am, by no means, beingshirtly, as you so eloquently describe, merely offering a warning. If you could comprehend the object you hold there, your demeanor would surely correct itself.

What I endured during my time as spy is of no concern to you or anyone else. I will thank you to leave that subject to death, where it belongs.

It sleeps but does not rest. Since you have no hope of understanding the object's power or importance in the slightest, it is time we discuss its return.

Snape

Interlude: Hermione

Chapter 9 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Angry Severus, ignorant Hermione, scary whatever-it-is... here we leave you for tonight. ~ Ari

The ghost owl glided noiselessly through her window, but she was restlessly asleep on the narrow bed next to the desk. It folded its wings, standing silent sentry over the ominously smoking case.

Professor Snape... eyes... cold... trapped... hollow...

Hermione whimpered in her sleep, her head tossing on the pillow.

A small case on Dumbledore's spindly table... Dumbledore's voice: "Take it, Severus... I dare not touch what it is meant to contain..." Snape refusing... fear? Finally, bitterly, conceding ...

Her outflung arm brushed the case, which shrank.

She awoke with it closed tightly in her hand.

Her skin was burning.

Interlude: Severus

Chapter 10 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Disclaimer: The usual. Just for fun.

AN: And we're back. Tag. ~Ana

"Take it, Severus... I dare not touch what it is meant to contain."

His eyes fixed on ornate grooves flaring at his touch; his soul rending from the very thought.... "No...."

"Severus..." Dumbledore shifting in his chair. "... you must agree – given your task – and promise. You will most surely die without its protection."

His hand spreading over the burning case, thumb on the latch. "Death would be preferable...."

Dumbledore's eyes boring into his: "You will not forget."

—

Severus opened his eyes, his fingers gripping the chair's arm tight enough to tear.

"Liar."

Dear Professor Snape

Chapter 11 of 31

How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Tag. ~ Ari

Hermione's blistered palm stretched around her quill.

Dear Professor Snape,

She winced as one of the blisters broke, blotching her ink, but she kept writing.

The case has stopped rattling - it's much, much smaller than last night, and it's giving off so much heat that even the ghost owl won't go near it, even when I wrap it in Mertlap-soaked cloths. They dry instantly anyway; whatever is inside seems to absorb the anaesthesia's essence.

Another blister broke.

It can't be truly Dark, or the Mertlap would turn yellow.

The owl won't touch it. Please advise.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Severus Pays a Visit

Chapter 12 of 31

12: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Disclaimer: No money. Just playing.

AN: Double tag. ~Ana

Severus scowled at the blotchy parchment, ran his fingers through his hair, and then slowly let his hand fall. Shoving his chair back roughly, he stood, swept across the room, swung his cloak around his shoulders, and, lifting his head to fasten the clasp, eyed the owl.

The owl sat low on the window ledge, carefully watching the wizard's mood darken, then, in a flash, it found itself encased in a cage. Before the owl could protest, the cage was wrenched sideways, and bounced along under the wizard's arm.

"You and I are going to pay someone a visit."

Through desolate skies, Severus flew, leather gloves gripping the broom's handle, cage tucked under his arm. After many hours, he slowed, touched down silently, set the cage to the ground - and hesitated. Placing a hand on the cold metal, he waited – doubtful.

The gates opened.

Through dark hidden passages, he strode proudly, ignoring the ghosts' scandalized gasps and whispers.

And, astonishingly, his password worked as well....

Pushing open the door, the candlelight throwing tall shadows forever upwards, he approached the wall, searching.

A pleasant voice greeted him: "I've been expecting you. We have much to discuss. Tea?"

Interlude: Hermione

Chapter 13 of 31

13: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Tag. (Write faster, Ana. Yours is moving; mine's bloody *reading*.) ~ Ari

Hermione's hand rested in the bowl, which she had thus far refilled sixteen times. As the level of Mertlap essence sank yet again, she turned a page in the dusty volume before her.

"*And in ye nynthe moone,*" she read, "*it shall comme to pass: ye missing Purpose shall burne, and ye Wynde-Chariot shall swinge lowe, and He-Who-Was-Kylled.*."

"Bollocks," she muttered. "Bloody wizards have *never* named things properly."

"Their spelling's improved," her mirror murmured complacently. "Your bowl's empty..."

Hermione glanced toward the window.

No owl.

The case was smoldering. Eerily silent.

She swallowed tightly.

"Hum? Please?"

The latch snapped open.

Severus: Tea

Chapter 14 of 31

14: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Disclaimer: The usual. Just playing.

AN: *Taaaaaag*. ~Ana

Severus scowled and set the owl's cage on the desk before taking a seat. The owl opened its beak to complain, then, sensing the tension, promptly clicked it shut. Near an open window, Dumbledore's endless collection of metallic contraptions continued to spin and whirl, catching drops of pale moonlight.

"I am not here for pleasantries," Severus stated, sighing when a cup appeared at his elbow anyway.

Albus Dumbledore shifted in his frame and took a sip from his cup. "No. I rather expected your return would be for something of importance."

Severus closed his eyes. "Albus, she's – *speaking* to it...."

Dumbledore smiled. "There is quite a charm to these things. More tea?"

Severus' scowl deepened further.

Dumbledore set his cup down and leaned forward. "Severus, do you wish to release it now? To regain what was hidden?"

The whirling contraption slowed, then wound once again. Leather creaked as Severus opened his hand from the fist he hadn't realized he'd made and smoothed it on his lap.

"You can open it – now."

"Not in that chit of a girl's presence," Severus growled.

Dumbledore frowned. "Now, Severus, is that any way to speak of the person who defended you at your trial?"

Interlude: Hermione

Chapter 15 of 31

15: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Book temporarily forgotten, Hermione peered closely at the case. It carvings would not stay still; she couldn't tell what they were supposed to be.

She didn't like them at all.

Feeling a bit stupid, she spoke. "You heard me?"

Whatever was inside rattled.

Fighting her desire to lean closer, she breathed, "You're supposed to be Dark."

Another rattle, perhaps an affirmation. She really couldn't tell.

"And you've tainted me?"

The lid jumped. The air around the case grew heavy, and she could have sworn it was struggling.

Its brooding silence reeked somehow of "No" and "Yes."

One was a lie.

Severus: Whirling Edge

Chapter 16 of 31

16: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

Disclaimer: No money. Just fun.

*AN: Getting hairy now, folks. *waves and tags on the way out* ~Ana*

Severus's tea cup crashed to the floor.

"Oh, you've spilled your tea. Shall I call a house-"

But Severus had already stood and crossed the room. "What do you mean *defended* me?"

Dumbledore's eyebrows raised. "Yes. Vehemently, from my understanding."

Severus reached behind his back and slowly leaned against the desk's edge. "And?"

"And she now knows quite a bit about you as a result. One of the few."

Severus glared at the portrait, his gloved hand once again forming a fist.

"Why did you leave it behind, Severus?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't."

Dumbledore set his tea aside.

"Did you hope someone would find it? Destroy it?"

"No..."

"Relieve you of the responsibility for it?"

"No!" Severus shouted.

Dumbledore gripped his frame and leaned forward, tracking Severus's footsteps, raising his voice after him.

"Who? Who would try to find you? Who could decipher what it holds?"

Severus strode away, seizing of the whirling edge of the nearest contraption and swinging it across the office, sending it skidding across the desk, into the owl-cage, and to the floor, where it shattered into countless metal shards.

As the owl fled through the window, Dumbledore asked quietly, "Someone who might care?"

Hermione: Research and Discovery

Chapter 17 of 31

17: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: No SSHG fic is complete without a library scene. *eyes glint* Ta-ag. ~ Ari

The scent of No...

The scent of Yes...

Hermione sniffed the air curiously, and her eyes glinted. Charming the box to follow her, she slipped cautiously into the corridor.

No one would question the Head Girl's late-night visit to the library.

No one would even notice the small box drifting along behind her.

She knew, because no one ever had.

She'd kept it with her since she found it, not daring to part from it lest it fall into the wrong hands.

She couldn't say how she knew it was important, but it was his, and he was gone.

Maybe.

The box hovered next to her as she quickly selected a thin scroll from the Restricted Section. She'd skimmed it before, of course, when researching the Horcruxes. It hadn't helped then, but she was sure she remembered reading something in it, something about personality, something about character, something about scents.

She'd cast it aside out of frustration, then.

A small smile played on her lips as she unrolled it to the proper passage.

The box hovered over the table, turning slowly in a sphere of glittering light.

She'd figured out Voldemort's cage Charm easily enough.

Not really Dark... not really...

"When the will of one wizard is the stronger and the intentions of both generally Light, the carvings will eventually stabilize, forming a protective shield in which.."

No, further down.

"... but when either caster conceals a secret from the other, the case and its contents will remain at eternal odds, eventually becoming extremely volatile and even dangerous to outside parties. For this reason, witches and wizards as early as the 15th century protested its use in marriage ceremonies; the law requiring same was eventually repealed in 1743."

Hermione scowled. "Barbaric."

The ghost owl landed gently on a nearby shelf.

Hermione ran her finger further down the scroll, reading more carefully than she had before.

"When the witch or wizard who provides the contents conceals a secret from the creator of the box, the contents will slowly be consumed by the box itself, indicated by extreme heat and the presence of two distinct odours, often but not always indicative of some aspect of the original casters."

Hermione's eyes narrowed furiously. "Lemon... I hate him."

She read, horrified, *"Only the revelation of the secret can prevent the destruction of the box's contents:"*

Hastily scrawling, "It's dying," she launched the owl into darkness.

Severus: Cold

Chapter 18 of 31

18: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

AN: Slooow going, tonight. Tag. ~Ana

PS: They like reviews.

Severus stood at the window, breath coming hard in cold, rough smoke.

A sharp pain caught. Cursing softly, he rubbed his chest.

Dumbledore remained passive. "What did you hope, Severus?"

"I was different then – before."

"We all were," Dumbledore said plainly.

Severus sneered. "I sacrificed everything - and for what?"

Dumbledore's eyes darkened. "Not all was lost."

Before Severus could reply, the ghost owl swept through the open chamber door and landed swiftly.

Turning his back to the portrait wall, he read the message.

"Severus?"

He snarled, "This isn't over."

Tossing the parchment aside, he launched the owl and shouted, "Fly!"

Severus and Hermione: The Library

Chapter 19 of 31

19: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Tag! ~ Ari, not at all slow tonight ;)

Before Hermione had a moment to worry, the leaded window burst inward from the force of Severus' flight, covering her with a cascade of falling glass.

Dropping his broom, he strode through the glittering pool of moonlit shards to be brought up short by the sight of the glowing sphere in which the case hung, suspended.

With a roar, he clenched his fist.

The sphere exploded, streaks of light retreating back into the substance of shadow from which she'd called it forth.

The case fell into his hand.

Eyes hard with fury, he reached an imperious hand to her.

"Come."

Severus and Hermione: Occulto

Chapter 20 of 31

20: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari here again. Ana, you are now free to billow about the castle. Tag! :)

P.S. All hail the mighty online Latin translator, which provided the scroll's title.

"It was Dumbledore's idea, wasn't it?"

At his hardened expression, Hermione drew her robes closely around her and rushed on. "I've read the scroll concerning *Occulto Quod Requiro...*"

"Hide and seek, Miss Granger." His eyes glittered strangely.

"The only way to save it, sir, is..."

"I know the requirement."

"Sir, you must hurry – the cage Charm slows time within itself, but you bollocksed that."

"Insolent girl..."

Hermione gestured angrily with her wand, and the cage reappeared. "You may insult me all you wish now, Professor."

Only then did he realize she'd omitted Dumbledore's title.

And used his.

Severus and Hermione: Crimson

Chapter 21 of 31

21: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

AN: *waves* Back in gear here. Taaag.

In the shadows, the ghosts' whispers had reached gossip's fever pitch, ending sharply in a chorus of furious hushes when Severus glared, his hand still outstretched toward Hermione.

Hermione stepped over a twisted window frame, her footfalls pulverizing glass into wood.

Within the cage, heat blasted from the case, and, as their hands touched, it ignited, ramming itself furiously against the sides, spinning over and over – finally forcing its lid open....

Severus growled loudly and the case violently snapped shut, descending to a cold, desolate blue.

At the fine edges though, it had begun to bleed.

They both noticed.

A single drop of bright crimson struck the floor between them.

Severus clenched his jaw.

"I-" Hermione began, but he was already pulling her out the door and down the corridor at a swift pace, striding wide, hair flying as he sharply turned a corner.

Stumbling, Hermione angrily beat his billowing cloak aside, shouting, "Wait!"

Severus spun and stopped short.

"You know what this means, don't you?"

Beyond Severus, a wavering trail of blood marked their path, and was now creating a sickening pool. "A portrait visit is in order. Care to join?"

Hermione's eyes hardened to deadly flat. "Yes."

Severus and Hermione: The Head's Office

Chapter 22 of 31

22: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari again. (P.S. Tag!)

The silver instruments whirled softly in the stillness as Dumbledore's portrait silently marked the passage of time, awaiting Severus's return.

Voices at the gargoyles – too faint to hear.

Voices on the stair. Coming closer.

The door slammed open.

The collective portraits woke up and stared down their ancient noses as a cloud of hair swirled in the moonlight beyond the opening door.

"A student?" Phineas Nigellus Black sneered derisively. "A Gryffindor, no less." He leaned comfortably in his chair. "Tangled webs indeed, Albus."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Not now, Phineas."

"... that manipulative old bastard!"

"Language, Miss Granger," Severus agreed.

"It's bleeding," she spat. "And I know what you forced him to do."

"Severus made his choice..."

"Because you gave him no alternative, *Sir*, for the greater good. So how, exactly, is *that* – she gestured to the bleeding case – "for the 'greater good'?" She glared at the portrait.

Silence, broken only by a spatter of blood hitting flagstones.

"No answer?"

"It was intended to shield him from –"

"Oh, *spare me*. The Wizengamot rejected that argument in the 18th century – 'for his or her own protection' – usually her – isn't that just another form of bondage?"

At the word "bondage," one of the portraits tittered. Hermione couldn't tell which.

"By protecting the part of him that can..."

"That can love? Yes, I've ascertained that, thank you."

"... that can love, I had hoped to mitigate the damage murder must inevitably do his soul."

"By destroying it first." Hermione snorted. "A pre-emptive strike to avoid violence? Please."

"Not 'destroyed,' merely 'protected' within –"

"Within a bond breakable only by you as the more powerful."

Severus raised his eyebrow.

"I did not presume I was the –"

More blood spatters.

"Your magic is killing him even now."

"I did not presume I was the more powerful."

"Your mistake," Severus hissed softly.

"Your magic was stronger," Hermione shot back. "His is the stronger character, however."

Dumbledore sighed. "Had he kept no secrets from me, this unfortunate situation..."

"Blaming the victim, Dumbledore?" She walked a few paces away from Severus and wheeled on the portrait. "Are all men so stupid?"

Dumbledore blinked, and Severus' eyebrow shot up again.

"Of course he kept a secret from you. Who wouldn't, faced with such options – to kill, to die, just to get a message to Harry?"

"I died for no less."

"Yes, but at least you did die. And properly, too. He gambled, in vain, that his magic might be stronger than yours, that his power to love be stronger than your hold over him – but for naught."

"No," Severus whispered.

Hermione glanced at him and hesitated, but the bleeding case spurred her on. "You miscalculated, Dumbledore..."

"Insubordination!" mumbled one of the sleepier portraits.

"... because love requires an object. Harry's mum, you thought. Conveniently dead. Yet you never paused to consider..." her voice trailed away.

"Consider... what?"

"That the power to love isn't the same thing as loving someone."

Severus: Understanding

Chapter 23 of 31

23: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

*AN: I've dusted off the Savatage playlist. For those who don't know, that's a good thing. ;) Oh. Tag. *billows away**

Dumbledore frowned, eyebrows in a tangled mass.

"You old fool..." Severus snarled.

Rumbling from the portraits grew louder where crowds formed, elbows were thrown angrily, and muttering about seniority rights were countered with timeless insults.

"You don't understand..."

"No!" Severus shouted, drew his wand and, before anyone could react, shoved parchment, inkwells, quills and an ornate candy dish crashing to the floor, then planted a boot on the chair – and climbed.

Silence fell as Severus stood on the Headmaster's desk and touched his wand to Dumbledore's frame.

"You don't understand." Severus glanced at Hermione. "Unlike you, I am no monster."

Hermione: Clarity

Chapter 24 of 31

24: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

*A/N: *waves* Ari here. (Tag!)*

When the candy dish shattered on the floor, she jumped.

When he climbed to the chair, her breath caught.

And when he caught her eye – darkly, sharply – she knew.

Standing proudly on the desk, his anger billowing around him, and she knew.

With a clarity born of fury, a certainty born of endurance, she knew what she wanted.

Needed.

Her breath, her skin, her very soul were all – all for this moment, when he caught her eye.

Her mind stunned, she couldn't breathe, and she didn't care.

... and He-Who-Was-Killed shalle be dethron'd with a glance.

Severus: Fight or Flight

Chapter 25 of 31

25: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

*AN: *waves* Good evening. :) *ripples cloak* Ta-ag...*

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said quietly, hesitating as Severus' wand dragged over his canvas, "yet a problem remains."

Severus reached his free hand out, and the case flew to him, swiftly coating his glove with dark blood. "Clearly."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "You must -"

Twisting his wand viciously, Severus hissed, "No..."

Dumbledore rose from his chair suddenly and stepped aside. "You clearly had intentions in leaving it. For whom? For her?"

Severus snatched hold of the portrait, tore it off the wall, and sent it hurtling across the office.

And a flash of gray fled in the midst of a chorus of protests.

Searching for the retreating robes, Severus roared, "Release me!"

From somewhere up high, a somber statement: "I underestimated you, Severus. I admit that now."

Severus paused, the case clutched tightly in his fist, and illuminated the shadows with his wand.

Dumbledore stepped down, gesturing his apologies to a sleepy wizard still slumped in his chair. Placing a hand on the frame's edge, he said, "Your ability to love never died. You did leave it purposefully.... You had wished it to be found by someone who would care."

Dumbledore folded his hands. "And was it?"

However, it was Hermione who answered.

Hermione: Truth

Chapter 26 of 31

26: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari here. Good morning. Tag! :)

"How dare you?"

Although she spoke softly, her voice resonated in the air.

Severus shot her a guarded glance.

"You would invade his privacy, before an audience?"

The portraits hushed. Not a robe rustled.

She walked over to the frame Dumbledore has so recently vacated, examined it clinically then flicked her wand.

It shrank, and she picked it up.

"You have no right to his answer. None."

Dumbledore's eyes flicked nervously to his frame. There should have been nothing ominous in the way she held it on her palm.

There shouldn't have been.

But from the bleeding case, a hum.

"Was it found by someone who cared?" Her brittle, almost bitter laugh broke the night. "That's the best you can do? Humiliate him as he's dying when the answer to your question stands right here?"

Dumbledore quite wisely said nothing.

"Obviously it was found by someone who cared. For the truth. For his reputation. For..." Her voice tightened. "For his memory, if need be." She caught Severus's eye and lied. "Nothing more."

Hermione touched her wand tip to the canvas, which started smoking slightly.

Far above, Albus Dumbledore's painted face began to sweat. "Miss Granger, please."

"Come back down first."

A much smaller Dumbledore reappeared in his frame. "Release the fire, Miss Granger."

Leaning so close that only the portrait could hear, Hermione whispered, "No. Now you're even."

She turned to Severus and extended her hand. "Professor Snape?"

He took in the sight of the Head Girl holding the smoldering portrait of the former headmaster and glanced at his own bloody hand.

The carvings on the case were writhing, constricting inexorably around the contents.

"The heat – we can't risk it."

She held his eye for a long moment, then – "*Muffliato*."

"I lied."

"I - obviously."

"Do what you will."

Severus: Fire

Chapter 27 of 31

27: How what was lost might be found - if she's very, very lucky, and very, very good.

Sorry for the delay. Tag. ~Ana

Severus was suddenly thankful for the thick boar's leather separating his hand from the case's searing heat. The carvings had ceased writhing and were now tearing apart, bleeding fierce red light.

Pulsing in perfect time with his heart.

Slowly, he took her hand into his....

The room exploded into blinding light, sharp shadows, first dark, then red, flickering. Something crashed, and the Headmaster's chair was on fire, the flames spiraling upwards in a violently twisting vortex. Tearing from Severus' hand, the case flew into the flames, encased in cloud of absent light.

Spinning wildly, it became nothing but a blur.

Shielding his eyes, Severus searched the firestorm, cursing when the case disappeared. His arm was jerked sideways, and he found himself staring at a wild-eyed Hermione Granger.

Both of them recoiled as the case's hum rose to an impossibly high-pitched scream, shredding the very air. The Headmaster's chair violently split in half, and several inkwells exploded, staining stone, wall paneling and several low-hanging evacuated portraits.

Hermione thrust Dumbledore's portrait into Severus' hand, shouting, "Tell him!" but froze.

He stared back at her - unseeing - his free hand twisted desperately over his heart.

Before Hermione could draw breath to scream, Severus fell.

Hermione: Love

Chapter 28 of 31

How what was lost might be found... if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari here. We're back (finally - sorry; I had a witches' weekend to attend). Special thanks to Lady Karelia for beta-reading and to iTunes for saving the *Walking Shadow* playlist entitled "Dark Angry Death Eater Against The Wall." This chapter is dedicated to all the Witches of Hogsmeade.

Hermione watched horror-struck as Severus fell, his body twisting to the hard floor, Dumbledore's frame splintering beneath him.

The roaring firestorm of the box's charm collapsed inward on itself, falling with Severus, leaving behind it a silence that tasted of ashes.

Above Severus's head, the case stopped spinning, hung suspended, and fell, cold, hard, and solid, cracking the stone beside his outflung hand.

A year – a moment – more – less – and she was at his side, choking on her own breath as with trembling hands she sought the answer she dreaded she'd find.

Time. She needed time.

She cast the cage.

The glowing cage lifted Severus and the case off the floor to hover silently at her shoulder. His eyes were closed, but his gloved hand still covered his heart. Alive, then.

Her mind raced through memory – the *Occulto Quod Requiro* box would disintegrate upon the death of both casters. Her throat tightened, and she forced her eyes upward toward the case.

Intact. For now.

Dumbledore's voice roared from the canvas flopping madly on the floor.

"*Accio* BASTARD!" Hermione yelled, and the canvas flew to her outstretched hand.

She slammed it to the desktop. "What more must he do?"

Dumbledore's portrait glared at her. "This is not your affair."

Hermione forced her unruly mind to order. "Agreed. It's yours. I know his secret. You heard me say it – that he kept hope alive that someday he might again know love. We all know it. What are you holding over him that he prefers death to honesty? What more have you done to him?"

Dumbledore was damnably serene. "Have you considered, Miss Granger, his reticence may stem from your presence, not mine?"

"Our touch ignites the very air."

"So I noticed," Dumbledore intoned blandly. "And yet you still call him 'Professor.'"

"Oh." Something very small pierced Hermione's heart from within. "Oh," she said again.

Although her logic insisted that of *course* she did and, further, that he called her "Miss Granger," she stuffed logic into a corner and, clutching Dumbledore's canvas in her hand, turned to the motionless wizard hovering darkly beside her in his golden cage.

"I –"

Dumbledore interrupted, "Before you proceed –"

"Now what?" Hermione snapped, her eyes wild.

"I must remind you that you are Head Girl of this school and that we portraits are duty bound to inform the Headmistress of any improper attachments on your part."

"I'm acting in the service of truth against an arcane and probably forbidden spell gone seriously wrong, the origins of which lie years before I was even born. Other than Professor Sn- ... Severus's destroying his former office, what makes our actions any different from the battle of Hogwarts?"

"Love."

Hermione shot the portrait a withering glance. "As opposed to... what? Wasn't love how Harry defeated Voldemort? Didn't you spend years beating that idea into his head?"

"Not this kind of love."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're jealous."

Severus's voice rasped faintly from the cage. "Leave the girl be, Albus."

Severus: Release

Chapter 29 of 31

How what was lost might be found, if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

AN: *waves to the readers* Ana here. I give you a whopping 300 words tonight. Seems they require the same energy as 3000 used to once upon a time. *laughs* Many thanks, always, to Ari for beta magic.

Severus' fingers tented into a twisted claw over his heart, tearing his coat's buttons askew. "Release me." He moved to sit up.

At her hesitation, he looked at her darkly. "Remove the cage."

Lowered to the floor, the cage faded, and the case settled serenely to Severus' waiting palm.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. Trying in vain, he repeatedly smoothed his hands over the canvas, eyebrows furrowing at the smoldering tears. He had succeeded in mostly taming a portion of his upper corner when a gloved fist slammed down into the center of his world, pinning the canvas to the desktop.

"Severus!" Dumbledore admonished, his gnarled fingers clutching his chair's spires tightly.

But Severus paid no heed to the protests from the endless wall of portraits nor from the tortured canvas turning into peaks and valleys under his gloved hand. Teeth bared, his lips twisted into a grin as he watched Dumbledore's incessantly calm demeanor degrade by the second.

He sensed Hermione's presence behind him, poised, ready.

Roughly setting the case on the desk, Severus leaned over, his hair falling in a wild tangle.

Fingers tracing the ornate carvings, Severus turned to look directly into Hermione's eyes.

And opened the lid.

The case sat harmlessly open, its edges coated in blackened blood. Deep within, a fusion of wired light spun furiously, pulsing in a heartbeat's time. When Hermione stepped closer, its speed soared, causing the case to thrum rhythmically against worn wood.

Talking to Dumbledore, yet with his dark eyes fixed on Hermione, Severus spoke.

"I lost everything then – everything but hope. You inadvertently granted me that with this – this *protection*. I was certain, though, that if anyone could unravel its mystery, it would be Miss-"

Hundreds held their breath in his pause, and living or dead, it mattered not....

"Hermione.

Hermione: Innocence

Chapter 30 of 31

How what was lost might be found, if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

A/N: Ari here. Tag :)

Her name in his voice a low bell whispering promise along her skin. At the edges of her vision, the light from the case smoothed into the roundness of water, its pulsing glow growing to surround them with the flow of sunlight through waves.

"Severus," Dumbledore crackled from his wrinkled canvas, "she was *achild*."

"And?" Hermione's eyes flew from Severus' to the portrait. "He can't have been hoping for *me* - just for someone to unravel the mystery. I can think of several who could have done it."

Severus' whisper was hoarse, almost inaudible. "No one else would have."

Severus: Poised

Chapter 31 of 31

How what was lost might be found... if she's very, very lucky and very, very good.

AN: My apologies for the delay. House guests enter and Severus departs. Onward. ~Ana

Pained silence broke as Dumbledore cleared his throat irritably. "Regardless, Severus, she -"

Without taking his eyes from hers, Severus took hold of a large dish of sweets, lifted it high, and slammed it hard onto Dumbledore's canvas, then, shoving his cloak aside, swept a gloved hand out, sending a dark shroud to fall, coating the high wall of portraits and muffling their shocked protests.

As his robes rustled still, Severus wordlessly took Hermione's hand in his.

From the open case sitting askew on the desk, a low hum became a somber song of loss, love, and hope poised to soar.