

A Beach in Ireland

by Bambu

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Having said all that, this piece is written for Lifeasanamazon, and she knows why.

~o0o~

Hermione inhaled the invigorating ocean-tinted air and surveyed the small plot of earth she called her kitchen garden. In truth, it was more than a charming arrangement of herbs to flavor her meals. Verdant mint grew next to alihotsy in one quadrant, while a wholly magical variety of lily anchored the corner where heather tenaciously grew along the rock wall. Living on the outskirts of a Muggle town as she did, discretion and judiciously applied Disguising Charms were required to keep the magical plants from Muggle curiosity.

Generally speaking, the garden was separated into four zones, and Hermione weeded one per weekend, although sometimes she grew so lost in her thoughts she did nothing more than lightly bruise aromatic leaves. Shortly after moving to the cottage, there were days when recent memories had so consumed her that it would be nightfall before she realized how many hours had passed while she stared into the middle distance, the crisp fragrance of mint flaring her nostrils. On those occasions, she would lurch to her feet and stumble into the kitchen, her immediate thoughts filled with curse trails and hoarse shouts of anguish and rage, or the sight of blood and the stench of death. Once inside her home, Hermione would manage, with shaky hands, to heat a bowl of soup or make a cup of strong tea. She would seek refuge in the plush armchair in front of the fire in her snug little den, or, if it was really bad, she would crawl under the covers of her bed and stare blindly at the ceiling until the sun rose again.

Fortunately, she hadn't endured one of those nights for a couple of years, but her reliance on the garden remained perennial. It was grounding. She always smiled at that thought, and remembered Pomona Sprout's earthy practicality.

The shriek of a passing gull reminded Hermione she was wasting time. It was her birthday, and she had a carefully constructed agenda, including the few minutes it would take to weed zone three. Suiting task to thought, Hermione dropped a purpose-charmed cushion onto the narrow stone path, then knelt before spreading a square of canvas next to her. The Fanged Geraniums were a little tricky, and her fingers worked nimbly, finding opportunistic shoots nestled among the base of the snapping, snarling

magical flowers. The vicious flowers were essential in keeping pests from feasting on the tender leaves of lemon balm, red clover, and motherwort. The three herbs were her most essential crop; they formed the base of a Soothing Solution she brewed to combat the rare, but debilitating, Cruciatus aftereffects she still suffered as a result of Bellatrix Lestrange's tender mercies.

The sun ducked behind a cluster of clouds, casting striated shadows across the garden, and bringing with it an early autumn chill. Untying the cardigan wrapped around her waist, Hermione slid her arms into the sleeves, dispelling the gooseflesh pimpling her skin. She looked up; some of the clouds were as dark as an inky bottle of Dreamless Sleep.

A storm brewed in the near distance.

It had been a fine morning when Hermione ran along the ocean's edge, outpacing the waves playing tag with her shoes. Returning home, she had finalized her dinner menu to the last delectable morsel, save for dessert which was Harry's contribution.

"You can't make your own birthday cake, Hermione!" he'd exclaimed the night before, his head poking out of the fireplace, face tinted a lurid green from Floo fire.

"Why not?" She sat, tucked in a corner of her sofa, knitting one and purling two. "It's my dinner party. I invited you to share it with me. Why shouldn't I make my own cake?"

Spluttering with indignation, he had held firm, and seeing how determined he was she had acquiesced. Smiling at the memory now eased her intermittent, chronic loneliness.

The first crack of thunder sounded in the distance, rolling in over the sea. Rising to her feet, Hermione hurriedly brushed off her jeans and deposited the wilting greenery into the small compost box before gathering tools and cushioning pad. She raced through the back door into her warm kitchen, chased by fat drops of cold rain, laughing as she beat the promised downpour.

Slipping her feet from garden clogs and her arms from the sleeves of her cardigan, Hermione padded barefoot to the sink to wash her hands before she began cooking in earnest.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice called from the sitting room.

"Coming." His hair was messier than normal, and an all-too-familiar expression darkened his face. Hermione's heart sank. "You're cancelling, aren't you?"

"I have to leave for Cornwall..." he turned his head and shouted something indistinguishable over his shoulder, "...now. It's an ugly situation. I have to go."

Ignoring the stab of disappointment, Hermione found a smile for him. "Of course you do."

"I'm sorry. Can I take you to lunch next week? A delayed celebration? Or you could come to dinner at the house ... Ginny'd love to see you."

"My schedule isn't fixed." She stifled the mixed feelings of envy and irritation which accompanied any mention of Ginny Potter. When Hermione's relationship with Ron had died its intemperate death, Ginny had, not unexpectedly, sided with her brother. For months, she had rehashed, with a startling command of detail, why the relationship failed. That she had been newly wedded to the Savior of the Wizarding World added stress fractures to Hermione's friendship with Harry. Usually Hermione pretended otherwise, and generally the two women got on well. "It would be lovely to see you both, but I have that meeting with the Board of Governors, so it might not work. I'll send you an owl."

Harry shouted over his shoulder again. "Don't get your knickers in a twist! I'm coming!"

"Go, Harry. Be careful."

He smiled, ruefully. "Happy birthday."

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but he was already gone. And now, she thought sadly, there won't be any pudding.

And no company.

Not even her parents. They had sent a card and a check to mark the occasion. It was an impersonal gift, and it cut like *Sectumsepmra*. Regardless of the fact Mr. and Mrs. Granger had agreed to Obliviation that last year of the war, they had lived for eighteen months without the knowledge they had a child. When presented with the documents they, themselves, had prepared and left with their family solicitor, the Grangers were perfectly polite and welcomed Hermione into their lives.

That summer, she had lived in her childhood home while her parents converted their English assets and moved permanently to Australia's Gold Coast. During those weeks, the three had discovered they were never going to regain what they'd been as a family. Only Hermione remembered; it was a bittersweet longing for something that would never exist. Of course, her parents had said, she would always be welcome. The phrase *'as a guest'* never crossed their lips, but the words had hung in the air nevertheless.

Ron had never understood her grief. "It doesn't count, Hermione. Your parents are alive," he would say. "Fred's never coming back. He's dead." With the exception of his unique moment of sympathy for house-elves during the Battle for Hogwarts, Ron's inability to see *anything* from Hermione's point of view had been a key factor in the scuttling of their relationship.

At least that dark cloud had been equipped with a silver lining. The day before her parents departed Heathrow, Kingsley Shacklebolt had approached Hermione with a proposal; he offered her the position of Muggle-wizarding liaison for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At first, she had been doubtful. She was too young. She hadn't completed her seventh year, or taken her NEWTs yet. She hadn't formulated a new career path now that her future had deviated from her earlier plans. She had nowhere to live, except if she spent the small nest egg her parents had settled upon her, or accepted Harry's largesse (which meant sharing a house with his new wife).

Kingsley had been persistent, and, overwhelmed, Hermione succumbed to his persuasion. The Board of Governors' enthusiasm for her appointment had proved that her present celebrity was more than adequate qualification. Within a week her appointment had been ratified.

Fortunately, Kingsley had also been correct: Hermione loved her work. In the process of learning the position, she had regained her own love of the wizarding world. It was rewarding to introduce Muggle-born children to the magic of magic. It was gratifying to ease their parents' fears, escorting the hybrid families to Diagon Alley for their first taste of the wonders awaiting them. Her own, personal gift to those families was a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, newly revised, including a foreword written by Minerva McGonagall.

Cold leeching from the stone floor and into Hermione's bare feet reached *thenotice me* threshold, sharply pulling her from her reverie. She was often reflective on her birthdays; analyzing, evaluating, judging her achievements of the year, but she had things to do even if Harry wasn't coming to dinner. Before returning to the kitchen, however, she found a pair of slippers and slid her feet into their permanently charmed warmth.

When she opened the door of her icebox kept cold by daily refreshed dry ice -- Hermione stared at the roast on the top shelf. It was too large for one person, but she decided to cook it anyway; there would be leftovers for the coming week.

As she sliced, diced, wrapped and rolled, her thoughts floated along the stream of consciousness until, like a fishing bobber snagged by a hungry trout, it dipped into the memory of how she had acquired a cottage in Ireland at the tender age of nineteen (and then some, if one took the Time Turner into account). Her first assignment had brought her to Strandhill, with its golden beach and wide sand dunes. She had been sent to persuade the Cloverhills to allow their daughter, Kathleen, to attend Hogwarts that autumn.

It had taken two weeks to convince the family to trust their darling girl to a world they could not inhabit, and during that time, Hermione discovered the beauty of Ireland's coast. Staying at the local hotel, she had walked along the wide expanse of beachfront every day. The sounds of pounding surf, the mineral tang of salt spray, the delicate mist coating hair, face, and clothing had been irresistible. Instinctively, she had known her bruised soul and broken heart could heal in such a place, and there were times she couldn't tell whether it was mist or tears wetting her cheeks.

Hermione had discovered the cottage on one of her rambles. Nestled on the outskirts of the village, it was in sight of the sea, and its front garden was neglected and weedy. It had appealed to her as something of a kindred spirit, as she, too, felt neglected and weedy. The stipends from her Order of Merlin, First Class, and the rarely bestowed Medallion of Fidelity, for courage in the face of great adversity, allowed Hermione to acquire the cottage on a for-lease-option-to-buy. She hadn't needed to tap into the nest egg from her parents.

Within days of signing the lease, Hermione had *Scourgified* the interior of the cottage, porch to hearth and rafters to cellar. The weekend she moved her few belongings into her new home Harry had brought the traditional loaf of bread, jar of salt, and hazel & birch besom as housewarming gifts. Equally welcome, at the time, were Ginny's regrets claiming a prior commitment.

The Cloverhills invited Hermione to tea every few weeks, and their welcome had eased her introduction to the locals. Holiday-makers abounded during summer when her own work was busiest; none of the locals paid much attention to the comings and goings of the English lass who reportedly spent her time doing research for scientists, or walking along the beach, or taking an occasional dinner with one of the holidaying surfers.

In this fashion, Hermione had lived contentedly, if sometimes in aching loneliness, by the sea for the past eight years. Regrettably, however, in the present, it left her with too much beef, too much spinach, and still no company for her birthday. Maybe she should have invited Neville and Hannah to dinner as well, but it had been so long since she'd spent any time with Harry by himself, she had invited only him.

While she worked, rain splattered against the window above her farmhouse sink, but its intensity slackened. By the time the vegetables were cleaned and the potatoes and beef were in the oven baking, Hermione decided to take another walk. The wildness of the sea during a storm was endlessly mesmerizing, and sometimes, her heart ached at the ferocious beauty of the water she skirted.

Reflexively, Hermione glanced at the clock hanging above the back door. There would be enough time for a brisk walk to the dunes and back before the oven timer chimed. Grabbing her slicker, she stuffed her feet into her clogs, opened the back door, and debated whether to cast an *Imperturbable* to keep herself dry. Choosing to forego staid practicality, she sucked in a lungful of damp, salty air before darting through the garden, out the gate and into the rain.

Grit scrunched beneath her shoes as she half-jogged to the shoreline. Sand-strewn paths gave way to scrub-dotted drifts, and then she crested the small rise acting as a berm against high tides. Hermione paused, surveying the wide expanse of beach. Only two others had braved the storm. The first bade her a good afternoon when she drew near, and she asked, "Anything turn up in your net, Mr. Newell?"

"No, lass, 'nowt t'day." His gnarled hands tossed a net into the surf with long-practiced ease. Mr. Newell could be found on the beach every storm, looking for additions to his collection of glass fishnet floats. The pride of his collection, one Hermione had seen her first winter, was a Norwegian float dating from early 1810.

"Good luck then." Hermione passed the old man. Frothy sea water strained to reach her clogs, and she laughed, dashing its hopes. Her eyes strayed toward a wave plunging from great height only to crash into the receding tide. Spray flew, arcing, droplets disintegrating into fine mist.

Captivated, she watched the primal struggle as she walked on, peripheral vision sharp enough to warn her before she careened into the other occupant on the beach. "Sorry," she blurted the social nicety and side-stepped the man.

"All right," he replied noncommittally.

The sound of his voice froze Hermione in her tracks.

She knew that voice.

For a moment which stretched with time's elasticity, Hermione's childhood played out in an oddly centripetal fashion, revolving around the man with the voice. He had been adversary, teacher, healer, guardian, and martyr during her formative wizarding years. Her post-war years had been significantly devoid of his participation.

He had survived Nagini's snakebite, been pardoned for his crimes, and then disappeared from the wizarding world without a trace.

"Is there something you would like to say to me, Miss Granger?"

His voice was ripe with overtones, few of which Hermione recognized in conjunction with this man. If she were spiteful, which she rarely was, she would continue on her walk, but it was her birthday; she was alone and lonely, and Severus Snape had piqued her curiosity for years.

A gust of wind whipped her hair from its knot, her wand falling from its secure location, and Hermione caught it before spinning around to face her former teacher. To his great credit, he didn't seem to notice that she was armed, and to hers, her mouth didn't hang open when she looked at him. Had he not addressed her, she most likely wouldn't have recognized him. He wasn't as tall as she remembered; her younger impression fixed when, at the age of fourteen, he had embarrassed her in front of her peers. He wasn't as scrawny as he had been in the Shrieking Shack when Voldemort decided to forfeit his servant's life in his bid for immortality. Neither was Severus greasy or sallow-skinned as he had been when tenured at Hogwarts. In fact, he looked an awful lot like a man with a lot of leisure time and one who was at peace with himself.

Turning completely toward him, Hermione said, "Er ... hello. I didn't expect to see you here ... or anywhere for that matter."

"I'm rarely seen."

"If you'd like I'll promise not to mention it."

"That would be preferable, but I won't extract a Vow of Silence either." To Hermione's complete astonishment, he smiled when she had been prepared for a scowl. It was then her mouth dropped open. He would never be handsome, but his smile made him rakishly attractive. Severus took a step closer, and with one finger, he pressed her jaw shut before dropping his hand to his side. "Not what you imagined, Miss Granger?" he asked with one brow arched, and his amusement sparkling in his eyes.

Her thoughts were in a jumble. "Not at all. You've you're not Bugger!"

He laughed then, and the sound dispelled the chill of late afternoon and swiftly passing storm.

She flushed. "You've got me wrong-footed!"

In the background, waves crashed, and gulls shrilled as they took to the air in search of a meal.

"My pardon," Severus said, his tone cooled. "I didn't intend to offend you."

Hermione flushed hotter. "And I'm sorry I snapped at you." At that moment, the tip of her wand glowed red, and within an instant, Snape flexed his wrist, his wand dropped into his palm, and his expression was devoid of the good humor of moments past. She remembered that stoic expression, and hastened to reassure him. "There's nothing wrong, sir ... Mr ... Professor. Bollocks! I haven't the faintest idea what to call you, but my wand's only keyed to my oven. The beef is done."

His mouth twitched and he surreptitiously sheathed his wand. "I see. Don't let me keep you from your meal."

When he bent his head, his hair swung forward, revealing the lines of the cut professionally styled, she thought irrelevantly. Hermione watched it frame his angular face, strands brushing his cheekbone, and impulsively she blurted, "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Severus' posture stiffened instantly. "Thank you, but no. Good-bye, Miss Granger." Then he turned and walked away.

Hermione watched his perfect posture, his long gait, and liked the fact there were no billowing robes, just a man wearing a woolen jumper in faded blue and jeans showcasing a very fine arse. Inexplicably, her chest hurt, and she called after him. "It's my birthday."

The comment hung in the space between them, a fulcrum determining their future interactions. Hermione held her breath, heart hammering wildly.

He turned on the balls of his feet, his thick-soled shoes carving a fan in the wet sand, his eyes cataloguing her features. "If you will tell me where you live, I will bring the wine."

"I have wine. You could come back with me now." She wondered why it was so important to her.

"I have my own dinner to remove from the oven, Miss Granger, and a good guest never comes empty-handed."

"I'll set the table for two, and I'm sorry but there isn't any pudding."

"No birthday cake?" he asked.

"No." she replied, wondering how to introduce Harry's name into the conversation without driving Severus away completely. But her wand chirped, startling her. "I must run or the beef will be too dry to eat."

"Fifteen minutes?" he asked.

"Perfect." She told him her address and smiled once more before sprinting toward home and a significantly better evening than she had anticipated.

Hermione raced through her cottage, picking up clutter and pulling out the good set of dishes, pretending her nervous excitement was entirely normal. By the time she finished slicing the tomatoes for the salad, Severus knocked at the door.

He wore the same clothes he had on the beach, and he was two minutes early. In addition to a very good bottle of Claret -- uncorked to breathe properly, he said Severus had brought cake. Rather it was a very large cupcake, but enough for two people to share.

"Thank you. This is what my mum would call a 'gracious sufficiency'," Hermione said, accepting the chocolate-drizzled morsel and waving him toward the dining room-cum-study.

Viewing the interior of her home through her guest's eyes, Hermione saw a low-ceilinged, whitewashed cottage made cozy by her skill with a wand. Severus' lips twitched as he surveyed the room before openly perusing the contents of the nearby bookcase. "I see you have Magnus' *Theatrum Chemicum*."

"It was a Christmas gift from an old friend."

"I don't believe I have seen an available copy for some years." Severus set the Claret on the table, and angled his head in query. "Are you a potioneer?"

"Not at all. I'm simply interested in a great many things. I keep a wish list at Flourish and Blotts where my friends, in this case Harry, know they can always find something I'll like." When there was no visible reaction to Harry's name Hermione smiled more generously. "It's more personal than a book chit, and easier than receiving something I won't read."

"I see." Severus inspected the second set of bookcases, his dark eyes skimming the titles. He stepped back into the entry for a brief glance at the books there before returning to the dining room and squatting to scan the titles on the lowest shelf nearest the kitchen. Hermione knew he had figured out her system, and she didn't repress the smile which curved her lips.

"How many rooms upstairs?" he asked, and there was genuine amusement lacing his tone.

Her smile widened to a grin. "Three, one of them is the bath."

Severus nodded, rising from his crouch. "Then you've turned your bedroom into the Restricted Section?"

"Well spotted," she replied, and when he chuckled, the sound glided down her spine like a peacock feather in the hands of an accomplished lover. "You're the only one who's noticed."

"That your home library is arranged in the same fashion as Hogwarts'?"

"Yes. None of my friends have ever figured it out." She watched his lips purse and then twitch as if a caustic phrase fought its way to freedom, and liked him for quelling the rebellious impulse. A chime rang from the kitchen, and Hermione tore herself from contemplating the length of his eyelashes. "The bread's done. Will you pour while I get dinner?"

"Certainly," he replied and summoned the wineglasses. Her departure was stayed briefly, fascinated as she was by the grace of his hands as he poured the wine and set the glasses next to their place settings.

Hermione's return was preceded by a procession of serving platters, one laden with beef whose pastry crust was perfectly browned, one piled with roasted potatoes, a serving dish of creamed spinach, and a small basket of slightly overbrowned rolls. Steam rose from the platters, and the yeasty aroma of fresh bread melded with the richness of the beef. Her wand swished and china jockeyed for position on the table. "It's taken me years, but after the war, I promised myself to learn how to cook a decent meal."

"I'm an execrable cook." Severus held her chair while she sat. "I survive mostly on Pot Noodles, take-away and local pub fare."

Hermione watched him take his own place across from her, the absurdity of his being in her home at odds with how at ease she felt in his presence. "This isn't pub fare, but it's also not a proper Beef Wellington; I detest mushrooms. It's more of a Beef Hermione."

"I haven't eaten the original often enough to notice the difference," he said while taking three slices of the beef and a generous helping of the spinach.

Fleeting, Hermione thought his comment might be an oblique very oblique apology for the remark he'd made about not noticing a difference in her teeth years before. However, it was more likely that the original slur had been one of so many cruel comments he'd uttered when he was a professor she doubted he remembered, and she shrugged it off.

Plucking a hot roll from the basket, she broke it in two, added butter and watched it ooze into the air pockets created by properly kneaded dough. Before she took her first bite, Severus raised his glass to offer a toast. "Happy birthday ... Hermione."

His sincerity pulled another easy smile from her. "Thank you. I'm very glad you've come." She lifted her glass to his, and the rims kissed before she took her first drink. Then she asked, "Where did you get this Claret? It's excellent."

"Like your Magnus, the wine was a gift from an old friend."

His wry tone elicited an educated guess. "Lucius Malfoy?"

"Indeed." Severus swirled the wine, eyeing the residual drip of the wine's tears. "His Gringotts' vaults may have been depleted, but the wine cellars were untouched." When he turned his attention to her, he commented, "You say his name easily for one who suffered as a result of his loyalties."

"I notice you didn't say his convictions."

"Lucius has always been privileged, condescending, and convinced of his own superiority. Having said that, he is also intelligent enough to conceal his doubts and refrain from fomenting rebellion when the costs are too high."

Hermione frowned. "Are you saying he wasn't a loyal Death Eater? Forgive my disbelief."

"Not at all." He pursed his lips. "Azkaban changed him."

Unexpectedly amused, Hermione said, "That's like saying Fluffy was domesticated."

"Fluffy?"

"The Cerberus who bit your leg when I was a first year."

He frowned. "Hagrid named that monster, *Fluffy*?"

Hermione laughed at Severus' expression. "Hagrid has the most astonishing ability to see the good in the most maligned creatures."

Neither commented on the interview Rubeus Hagrid had given *The Daily Prophet* shortly after the Battle for Hogwarts, the one in which he had cried over having misjudged Headmaster Snape.

Severus cleared his throat. "To return to the point: Lucius had what is commonly referred to as a paradigm shift. Although in his case, it took two years to fully mature. Fortunately, he's more precocious than his wine."

Hermione speared her last potato. "Aside from Minerva McGonagall, he's my strongest supporter on Hogwarts' Board of Governors."

Severus' eyebrows rose. "Indeed?"

She shrugged. "I wasn't their first choice for the position, but Kingsley convinced them my friendship with Harry and my background more than made up for my lack of qualifications otherwise."

"Better you than most others." He crossed his silverware in the traditional, *I'm finished with my meal* placement and leaned back in the chair.

"Thank you. I didn't make a terribly good impression at my first Board of Director's meeting."

"Why is that?"

"That wretched Cornelius Fudge asked my opinion of the school's curriculum; you know, being Muggle-born and all."

Severus frowned. "How did that wastrel end up on the Board of Governors?"

"I thought at first it was Lucius Malfoy's influence. They were seated next to one another, but I've learned subsequently that Malfoy detests Fudge."

"Lucius detests anyone who can be bought."

"I'm not sure I disagree with that sentiment."

"Nor I."

"However we digress." She drank the last of her wine before speaking. "When Fudge pressed me for a more specific answer than the curriculum needed updating, I said the problem had been extant for years, and if they had been intelligent, you would have created the syllabus for Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"The position was cursed," Severus interjected with some asperity.

"I realize that, Severus." Exasperated, she pointed her finger at him without even noticing she'd overcome her indecision about what to call him. "If Dumbledore, who knew about the curse, had used your syllabus as a template, then his hiring mediocre teachers year after year would not have been an issue. The students would have benefitted from your expertise, regardless of who was teaching the information. You knew the subject better than anyone, except perhaps Remus Lupin." Severus didn't verbally react to her mention of the long-dead werewolf, but his lips pinched. Earnestly, she added, "In the long run, there would have been fewer lives lost."

He set down his empty glass. "You can't know that."

"No, I don't know that." Her fingertip grazed the lip of her wineglass, her eyes unfocused, as she remembered a great many things. An unspoken list of names hovered between her and Severus, and the only sound came from the fire crackling merrily on the hearth in the adjacent room. After a minute, Hermione said quietly, "If there had been ten years' worth of students better prepared for a war of attrition and terror, don't you think it would've helped?"

He nodded curtly. "How does this relate to Lucius Malfoy's supporting you?"

"When it appeared I was denigrating Dumbledore, Tiberius Ogden declared I was profaning a sainted martyr."

Severus snorted. "Dumbledore was no saint."

"I quite agree." Severus' smile was just this side of a smirk, and Hermione broke the remaining roll into breadcrumbs as she continued her tale. "I'm afraid I lost my temper ... only a little, you understand. I told the Board the purpose of Hogwarts' curriculum was to provide the best education for young witches and wizards, regardless of house affiliation or blood ties, and Dumbledore, saintly or otherwise, had been a manipulative old coot who leaked favoritism from every flamboyantly robed pore."

Snape gaped at her, and then he laughed.

It was remarkably infectious. For a couple of minutes they laughed together, and they created a surprisingly harmonious sound. After she regained her composure, Hermione commented dryly, "That was Malfoy's reaction as well."

Snape chuckled. "What did McGonagall say?"

Instead of replying, Hermione rose to her feet. "Let me clear the table first, and we can continue this by the fire. I'll bring the cake. Do you drink coffee or would you like brandy?" Waving her wand, the cutlery, china and soiled linens rose from their places and followed her. "I won't be a minute."

Yet he followed her into the kitchen. "I will help."

"You're a guest," Hermione protested.

"It's your birthday."

"All right--" Severus smirked cockily before she added, "--you may watch." He glowered at her caveat, and she could immediately see where the lines of his face used to fall naturally into such an expression, but she realized he was teasing. While still bemused by the differences between the man *then* from the man *now*, Hermione considered how often they had laughed during the evening. Laughter was enough of a rarity in her home to be noticeable, and it was more than welcome.

While he leaned against the doorframe between kitchen and dining area, she packaged the leftovers and placed them in the ice box. A soft susurrantion of sound pulled her attention, and when she turned she discovered the dessert plates and overlarge cupcake hovering at the command of Severus' ebony wand. In response, she snapped her wrist, her own wand twisting deosil; two snifters and a bottle of brandy floated from a sideboard. "Coming?" she asked before directing the *digestif* and accoutrement through the cottage and into the den with its warm fire and comfortably plush seating.

"After you," he replied.

Realizing how suggestive her question might sound, Hermione blushed, then hoped he would attribute it to the warmth of the room. He either didn't notice, or was more generous than she had realized.

"Pisco?" Severus asked when she poured the brandy. "It's colorless."

"It's from Peru. My parents were on holiday to Machu Picchu last year." She offered him one of the snifters, and their fingers brushed when he accepted the glass. Her heart sped up, enough to remind her she was a woman, he was a man, and she hadn't been with a lover for a very long time. "I think it smells a little like reeds, but it's an earthy aroma and I quite like it."

Severus sipped cautiously, his nostrils flaring at the first scent of the liquor. "It's an excellent choice with the chocolate."

"I thought it might be." They settled on her sofa, one at each end; Hermione tucking her feet underneath her, getting comfortable for what she hoped would be a long evening. She watched him lean against the sofa's back, his long legs straight, ankles crossed, and the arms of his jumper pushed up to reveal pale forearms, the left with a shadow of a faded tattoo. He forked a bite of the chocolate-drizzled dessert into his mouth, and Hermione thought he looked relaxed in a way she had never seen, and she marveled at his ease. "Do you mind if I ask why you live here?"

"In Ireland?"

"Yes."

"No snakes."

Suddenly discomfited, Hermione looked anywhere but at his neck, searching for an appropriate comment and finding none.

The silence elongated and then snapped.

"Let me ask you a similar question." Severus set his empty cake plate on the coffee table. "Why would a witch with ambition, intelligence, and status live in a small holiday village far removed from her friends and family? I don't see your name in the papers, nor is your face splashed across *The Daily Prophet* as you engage in wanton reconstructionist frivolity." He was kind enough not to mention Ron's frequent gracing of those very pages.

"Are you honestly interested, or was that a rhetorical statement?"

Severus turned his body toward her, folding one leg on the sofa. "Surprisingly enough, I am genuinely curious."

Hermione finished her brandy before replying. "I fully expected to marry Ron when the war ended, after, of course, a suitable engagement and my either attending a delayed seventh year at school or petitioning to take my NEWTs independently. The three of us had planned to enter the Aurory together." She shrugged. "Harry isn't suited for much else for which I don't thank Albus Dumbledore and Ron failed the entrance exams. I passed, but the results coincided with my discovery that Ron was incapable of fidelity given more than three pints of ale as an inducement."

"So you accepted Shacklebolt's offer in a fit of pique?" Severus asked carefully.

"No. My future had suddenly broadened, and it was the first possibility I was offered. I was reluctant at first, yes, but once I met with the Cloverhills I knew Kingsley had been right. This is an ideal job for me."

He snorted in disbelief.

"Really." She leaned toward him, one hand reaching out to touch ... to emphasize her honesty. "I know the system is flawed and corrupt, and I've always wanted to make things better." When he opened his mouth to speak, she rushed on. "I thought I would do it by being an Auror, but Severus, I can help the children entering this world. I can make a difference in how they perceive it and how it perceives them. As a result of my prodding and..."

"Stubborn refusal to acknowledge the status quo?" he asked archly, laying his right arm along the back of the sofa, fingering the seams in the upholstery.

"Since you put it so bluntly, yes." Her eyes sparkled with mischief and satisfaction. "One of my suggestions has finally been accepted. There is now an exchange program for first years."

"An exchange program?"

"The Sorting Hat matches Muggle-borns with suitable magical counterparts, and they spend a fortnight in each others' homes during the month of August."

"Good god, Hermione. You've sown the seeds of revolution."

A smile further curved her lips. "I don't think it's as dire as all that ... but I do think there will be better inter-house cooperation and more tolerance between 'blood' factions?"

"Does your program include only Muggle-borns and purebloods?"

"Not at all. With the Board of Directors and Wizengamot's approval, there will be a two-week summer programme for all Hogwarts' children between first and second year. The current plan is to take them to both the Quidditch World Cup and the football World Cup Final, to enjoy sport from each world."

"And to think I implied you had no ambition."

The remark was so dry Hermione laughed. Severus' grin was sardonic, and the heightened color on his cheeks enhanced his looks. She'd never found him particularly attractive when she was a girl, but she thought post-war Severus was striking.

"If you think that's impressive, wait until you know who will be hosting the summer programme." His question was framed in the expressive arch of an eyebrow, and she

ceded the throne of subtle interrogation to him. "All right. It's Harry and Ginny--"

"Surely that's no surprise," he interrupted. "You've had Potter under your thumb since you were children."

--accompanied by Draco and Astoria Malfoy." If Severus had been taking a drink at that moment he would have choked, as it was, Hermione was treated to an expression of open astonishment on his face, and she laughed aloud. "I'll save you having to ask. I didn't accomplish it. Lucius Malfoy has been a supporter of the idea from the beginning."

"*Carpe diem* has always been a motto Lucius appreciated."

"And it wasn't me who convinced Harry, either. It was Arthur Weasley." She shifted, wriggling her hips to get more comfortable. His eyes flicked to her hips and back to her eyes, but he had looked long enough for her to be flattered. "You should have seen that first meeting." Hermione gestured with her hands as she described the encounter. "Arthur and Lucius sat at opposite ends of the room with Harry and Draco positioned in the middle. I practically had to stun Harry to get him into the room, and I don't think I sat once during those three hours."

"I can imagine." Severus cupped the snifter in one hand, warming the brandy. "Lucius, of course, would seize almost any advantage to rub the tarnish off the family name, and Arthur--"

"Wants peace."

"I remember the Muggles trying something like this in America when I was a boy. They called it Integration, and the results weren't promising."

"I know, but they didn't have the same political climate we do. For the moment, the pureblood faction has had its wings clipped." She looked at him through her lashes. "I, too, can learn from past mistakes," she said, and thought he muttered *house-elves*, but she ignored it. "It's an invaluable opportunity."

He nodded in agreement. They were quiet for a time, contemplating the bigger world beyond the cottage, and then Hermione levitated another log onto the fire before she said, earnestly, "I don't ever want another Muggle-born to suffer from bigotry."

Severus didn't respond immediately, but the fingers of the hand lying along the back of the sofa captured a stray curl of her hair and toyed with it. He finally said, "You can't erase prejudice."

She, in turn, stared at his hand. "If enough children are introduced to that which their parents fear, then perhaps, there will be less of it."

"If so, you'll be Minister of Magic by the time you're fifty."

Hermione scoffed. "I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"It was meant to be." Severus sounded surprised, and when she raised her eyes to meet his, there was an intensity which incited flutters of excitement in every erogenous zone in her body.

They stared at one another, the moment attenuating, the mood shifting, and then, as if their movements had been practiced for years, they leaned toward one another. A crack of resin in the fireplace sounded like the report of a rifle or an exploding hex, and, in an instant, Severus was on his feet while she grabbed her wand.

"Christ!" he swore, and then they lapsed into the first truly awkward silence of the evening.

Hermione's pulse thundered in her ears, but she didn't take her eyes from Severus. She might never before have considered him as a potential bedmate, but it was currently the predominant thought in her head. When his eyes met hers, she blushed.

He straightened to his full height, clearing his throat before he spoke. "Thank you for dinner, Hermione. Rarely have I appreciated the impulsiveness of former students, but tonight has been an unexpected pleasure."

"I'm about to be impulsive again." When he said nothing, she screwed up her courage and said softly, "I don't want you to leave."

His expression was indecipherable. "Do you mean that?"

"Definitely."

"Are you certain you aren't scratching an itch?"

"Not with you. Never with you."

She had never before understood the expression 'a molten look', but she saw one then. Her pulse pounded in her ears and she licked her suddenly dry lips. His dark eyes instantly shifted their focus to her mouth, and then he held out his hand. Shuddering with anticipation, Hermione rose from the sofa. His hand was warm when she took it, and Severus pulled her close, his head bending toward hers. When their mouths were an inch apart, he murmured, "Last chance."

Her response was non-verbal. She closed the gap between them, her lips pressing against his, her tongue flicking to greet his. The taste of good brandy and chocolate comingled with the essential flavors of man and woman, and when Severus pulled her against him, Hermione moaned.

Her slender fingers threaded through his baby-fine hair, and she leaned into him, feeling his interest in more than his firm grip and the acrobatics of their tongues. After long moments, they broke the deeper kiss with a light brush of lip against lip, and then Hermione arched her neck, letting her head rest in the cradle of his hand.

"Without meaning to sound trite," she said, her voice as soft as a kitten's fur, "would you like to see the Restricted Section?"

Severus slid one hand along the length of her spine until it spread across the small of her back, his pinky resting on the crest of her bum, then he cinched her tight against his groin even as he lowered his other hand, the one still cradling her head. In effect, he had dipped her like a dancer. He angled his head, his mouth skimming across her exposed throat. "Know what you ask, Hermione. Dark and unlovely things were found in Hogwarts' Restricted Section."

Grasping his shoulders for leverage, Hermione raised her head so their eyes met. She knew full well that he was a Legilimens, and she invited him to confirm her sincerity, to see the germ of a potential future lurking in her mind. For a long moment he stared at her, but she knew he hadn't accepted her silent invitation to pry. His eyes glittered in the firelight, and his lips were moist and parted. She thought he was sexy as sin.

Then, Severus shifted his balance to support her. Releasing one hand from his shoulder, Hermione cupped his cheek, the stubble of his dark beard tickling her palm. She had never considered herself particularly articulate, but hoped to find the right words. "If I learned nothing else from my time poring over restricted material, it was that all knowledge is valuable. Knowledge itself is neither light nor dark, it is intent and use which determines those things." Moving her hand, she delicately grazed the site of Nagini's bite, but she did not pause there. Once her hand was at the back of his neck she pulled his head closer, and whispered, "None of us is exempt from the taint of Darkness."

His kiss was searing.

Her emotions were in a tumult of sensuality and discovery, and her breath was ragged by the time they broke the kiss. Severus straightened, pulling her upright with him. The pulse in his neck beat rapidly, and Hermione arched onto her toes to rest her lips there. He groaned. "I want to lay you out on your dining room table and feast on you

until you can no longer form a coherent sentence."

The mental image was so erotic Hermione's body reacted with a responsive spasm, felt from nipple to hooded bundle of nerves. "My god."

"Or I could bend you over the sofa, watching the firelight dance across your skin as I slide into you."

"Bed," she said, panting, her knickers damp with eagerness. "Now." Between one breath and the next, Hermione spun into the nothingness between here and there, taking Severus with her. Her destination and determination couldn't have been more focused because they reappeared a scant foot above her duvet, then landed on the bed in a tumble of limbs.

"Enthusiasm at its finest," he remarked with a chuckle. The chuckle hung on its bottom note, altering into a grunt of appreciation when Hermione's fingers found the button to his trousers, and then felt their way along the zipper's seam, briefly teasing the bulge beneath cotton twill and metal.

Severus pulled her hand away, brought it to his mouth and captured her fingers with his lips, scraping the pad of her index finger with his still crooked, but whiter teeth. She writhed in an excess of sensation, her pubis grinding against his erection.

Then, suddenly, in that expectant pause before incendiary action, they were still. Lips puffy from kissing, hair tousled and wild, pupils dilated with excitement. When they moved, it wasn't fast enough to suit their urgency, but they managed to undress, flinging clothing to wherever it might come to rest.

Severus grabbed Hermione and rolled until she was beneath him. As he slid toward the foot of the bed, mouth latching onto one tightly furled nipple and flicking his tongue, her fingers threaded into his hair. She tugged the black strands, and he released her breast with a wet pop.

"Severus," she murmured his name in a whine.

Leaning his weight on the tripod of elbow and knees, his free hand skimmed over her -- shoulder, breast, soft tummy brushing the curly thatch of hair above her pubis, and then his fingers grazed the seam of her nether lips. His grin was entirely salacious. "Now?"

Being the thoroughly modern woman she was, Hermione wrapped her fingers around his throbbing erection, and when Severus reflexively bucked his hips, it was her turn to grin. "Definitely."

His finger dipped into her gathered moisture, and he brought it to her mouth, tracing her lips. She flicked her tongue to taste herself, and then he kissed her as eagerly as a child licks a long-awaited lolly. Without breaking the kiss, they maneuvered on the bed, fitting together easily, his narrow hips between her legs, and then, in one smooth stroke, he sank deep into her body. It was impossible to tell who made what animalistic noise, but he nuzzled her neck, and coaxed. "Touch yourself."

Hermione's muscles tightened around him at the suggestion. "I'll touch us both," she replied, breathlessly. She angled her thighs higher around his waist before slipping her hand between their bodies. When he thrust, the pressure of his movement and her active fingers drew sparkles of light at the edge of her vision. Her other hand cupped his buttocks, feeling the flex and release of his muscles.

She whispered, "I want to see."

He moved then. Bending his knees, he sat up while his hands repositioned her so they were conjoined while her torso remained on the bed. He guided the speed and depth of his strokes, and Hermione got her wish. She could see everything. Greedily, she followed the arrow of dark hair sprinkled across his chest, narrowing to a thin line leading to his groin. From there, she stared at the meshing of their pubic hair, black and brown, glistening with the moistness of her desire, and reveled in the sight of his thick cock pistoning into her body.

She had never been so aroused.

Soon.

She would come soon.

She clenched her muscles, again and again, heightening the stimulation.

"Don't do that." He practically growled the words. "I won't last if you keep that up."

"I don't care."

"You will if I come first."

There was a wealth of history in his statement; its underlying distress cutting through her haze of eroticism. Tenderly, Hermione tucked his hanging hair behind an ear and replied, "Then we'll do it again."

Their eyes met, their rhythm thrown out of sync, and Hermione's heart raced from more than building sexual release. "Yes," he said, "yes we will." His words had the solemnity of a vow, and Hermione pressed her fingers against his lips, sealing that promise.

Severus sucked her fingers into his mouth, and the sensation of his teeth scraping over the pads of her fingers catapulted Hermione's arousal to a fever pitch. She arched her back for more friction. His next stroke struck her cervix, and she cried out. He did it again, and then once more.

Noticing the clenching of his jaw and the increasingly erratic rhythm of his thrusts, she said breathlessly, "Don't wait for me."

"Are you close?" he asked, his voice roughened by need and gritted teeth. But he didn't wait for an answer; he twisted and pulled until he was on his back and she straddled him.

Hermione grinned wickedly, tightening the muscles of her pelvic floor, delighted when Severus' eyes practically rolled back in his head, and a guttural, nerve-tingling groan was wrought from his throat. He plucked at her nipple with one hand while the other gripped her hip.

As she rode him, she lowered one hand behind her, searching for and finding, his scrotal sac. When she fondled it, he bucked in a tempestuous upheaval, his pubic bone striking against the throbbing bundle of nerves in her mons. Muscles spasmed in a sensual display of ecstasy, and Hermione cried out in the extremis of her pleasure.

Severus jerked up, grinding into her, and shouting his own release.

Hermione practically fell across his chest, into his encircling arms as his residual spasms resolved into a series of shallow thrusts. She kissed his sweaty throat, and neither noticed that it was scar tissue beneath her lips.

Their ragged breathing was the only sound in the quiet room, but as it returned to normal, Severus' erection softened and slipped from Hermione's body. She moved then; only enough to lie next to him, her hand resting on his chest, feeling his heart slow to a soothing rhythm. "We'll need to do that again," she said quietly.

Severus frowned. "Didn't you..."

"Oh, yes, but I'm curious about the dining table."

He chuckled. "I'll consider it breakfast, that is if I'm staying."

The slight hesitancy in his comment roused her, and she lifted her head to look him in the eye. "Stay as long as you like."

"Be careful what you wish for."

She leaned over and kissed him softly. "I was, and you're here, so I'd say my wish was granted. Stay, Severus. Please."

It was his turn for tender; he settled her next to him, her head propped on his shoulder, and he stroked her hair until lassitude spread throughout her body. The last words she heard before she fell asleep were, "Happy Birthday, Hermione."

~o0o~