

A is for

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An alphabet of a different kind. Hermione receives an unexpected bequest, and decides she needs help disposing of it - but there is only one person fit for the job. A 26x100-word drabble series.

One

Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione stared around, a jar held loosely in her hand, and wondered why Slughorn had left all this to her. She had disappeared from his radar years before, when she neglected to choose a career of influence.

She looked at the label: **Acromantula** venom. Perhaps even Aragog's it kept well. Uses: primarily, an important ingredient in potency draughts.

A whole pint. More than two years' salary.

She had no use for Slughorn's stores. She had to dispose of it all safely. But look at the chaos of the place! She would never be able to sell until it was catalogued.

*

Her foot collided with a heavy shoebox protruding from under the bottom shelf. Crouching, she opened it and found hundreds of **bezoars**. Hundreds, just gathering dust when they could have been in home first-aid kits. That selfish old pack-rat.

She picked up a handful and let them rattle through her fingers.

A sneering voice came back to her: "**Abenzoar** is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat..."

Not a word Snape had ever spoken had faded from her mind.

He was the one. Perhaps he would want this Aladdin's cave. If she could find him.

*

Hermione stirred sugar into her coffee, declining Minerva's offer of **cream**.

She'd gone right off **cream** since reading that it was used as an emulsifier in several particularly nasty disfiguring potions. So innocuous, but nothing else did the job.

"So you can't tell me, Headmistress?"

"He chose to disappear and Severus was ever thorough in what he did. Can't you ask someone else?"

"When I find I'm the proud owner of every illegal and dangerous substance in existence? He's the only one qualified to help whom I can trust not to steal the stock or shop me to the Ministry."

*

She took some of the leave owing to her and settled to her task. Well, as much of it as she could. Slughorn hadn't been one for labelling what might be incriminating. An afternoon of hallucinations after a whiff from one of these jars had taught Hermione not to open any of them.

She cut her hand on a broken vessel at the back of a shelf and went hunting **fodittany**. **Dittany** for wounds; **dittany** against poison; **dittany** that she'd taken precious seconds to pour onto Snape's ruined neck before abandoning him.

Slughorn had let his supply go rancid.

*

Whoever would have thought cataloguing could be so exciting? Hermione leaned on the wall, gasping for breath and gently cradling the jar of **Exploding Fluid** against her pounding heart. Why did the bloody owls have to rap so hard on the windows?

Why the bloody hell had Slughorn kept so much of the bloody stuff? Illegal, dangerous, expensive (naturally)... There was no end of **Erumpent** matter to be found in the store rooms.

She took the letter and paid the owl.

"Return to Sender."

The fifth letter she had sent on spec to "Severus Snape" somewhere in the British Isles.

*

Flobberworm mucus was unexpectedly fascinating stuff. Hermione was taking a break with a cup of tea and a chocolate biscuit. She had placed the jar in the sun on Slughorn's desk, glad to be away from the dim lamp light of the store rooms.

Viscous and clear, the fluid seemed as boring as the worms themselves, but in the light, Hermione observed a constant movement of rainbow hues like oil on a puddle.

She'd passed a surprisingly peaceful detention with Snape during her fourth year, sorting the worms while he expounded on their uses. But he'd never mentioned the rainbows.

*

A box full of long, slender bones was very puzzling to Hermione. It was unlabelled and shoved to the back of a deep drawer. They were scraped very clean and were hollow, but they yielded no clues.

She went home for her books on the anatomy of magical creatures.

Ah **Grindylow** finger bones. What the...? She'd never read of any uses for those. She rummaged further and found a set of bone pipes. Spells detected no residual poisons, so she put them to her lips and blew.

"MINERVA!" she yelled through the Floo. "Help me find Snape, please! Right now!"

*

Hermione returned to her work, though it was difficult to settle. She found herself staring at nothing while she ran a hank of black **horsehair** through her fingers, again and again. Fine **horsehair** nets were traditionally used for steeping grated **horseradish** to make antibacterial washes. Native species were preferred for their sympathetic qualities when used by British wizards.

Complete hokum, Snape had said. If anything, the oils in the horsehair acted against the weak magical properties of the root.

But why were Slughorn's pipes bound together with plaited **horsehair**? Ancient horse species, she recalled, were closely bound to elemental magics.

*

She was not talented at waiting.

So she fretted, staining her fingers with **ink** as she noted down her discoveries on index cards. Blue **ink**. From woad or genuine **indigo**, she wondered. The latter, inevitably, as it was more expensive, though it did not have the medicinal power of the native plant. Slughorn's collection was teaching her a lot about the man chaotic, selfish, self-indulgent and...

She examined her memories of Snape's stores rigidly organised, as many common as rare ingredients, and utterly utilitarian.

The dye on her fingers gave her pause. Letters failed. Would a less private approach?

*

"You know if he sees this, he's going to have a fit?"

Minerva slapped the *Prophet* down, dislodging a sack which tipped over and spilled pretty blue **Jobberknoll** feathers everywhere. Hermione scooped them up with a Containment Charm.

"There must be half a pound of those!"

"Yes imagine how much Veritaserum you could make," Hermione growled. "Ironic in light of how he must have lied to build this treasure trove."

She sighed and sat down.

"I don't know what to do with it all."

"Well, I hardly think an ad in the lonely hearts is going to win Severus' help."

*

The appearance and smell of dried **knotgrass** were very familiar from the Polyjuice incident in her second year. It surprised Hermione a little to find so much of it, given that it was common and inexpensive (*useful as an astringent and to stop bleeding*, recited the memory of Snape, *thus common in shaving preparations*). Less surprising, in

that sense, were the phials of **Kappa** water, the strength of demons bottled and glowing slightly in the dim room. Very rare and highly illegal. She had no doubt the value on the black market was enormous.

So why hadn't Slughorn sold it?

*

Leeches, lacewing flies ... Slughorn seemed to have been going in for Polyjuice manufacture on a large scale.

Hermione donned gloves to handle the **Lobalug** venom. She wondered how the Merpeople managed to use it without its dissipating in the water. Of course, now the question had come up, she had to know the answer. She catalogued nine pots and went through to Slughorn's library.

Shit. Did he have to leave everything in disorder?

"Merlin save me from untidy minds!" she cried.

"And to think you're the 'adventurous young witch in search of one with power to stir her cauldron'."

"Professor!"

*

"I had thirty-seven responses to that advertisement."

He was idly weaving together some**mallow** stalks from the pile she'd put aside. Mallow ash for preparations said to enhance divinatory powers.

"So what is it you can't cope with, Miss Granger?"

"I knew you were alive!"

He rolled his eyes.

"And here I am, since you and the old cat won't leave me alone. Hey presto. Now what?"

She gestured. "Potions, poisons, dark arts, controlled substances..."

"Do you really think I still have any interest in all this?"

But he wasn't quick enough to hide the gleam in his eyes.

*

He came through with a sheaf of papers.

"Have you been through Slughorn's notes at all?"

Hermione backed out of the low cupboard, dragging a crate full of deadly**nightshade** tincture, essence, dried, oils, even jelly.

"'Highly poisonous, useful in potions to aid night vision'," she quoted. "No, I couldn't make head nor tail of them."

Snape smirked.

"Not surprising. Old school, old methodology, old codes..."

"So you can work out what he was doing?"

"Certainly. Where are you storing those?"

"With the rest of the poisons, in alphabetical order, and then order of potency."

He turned away, already distracted.

*

By the time Snape finally tore himself away from Slughorn's research, his eyes blurry and his back cramped, Hermione was asleep, her head pillowed on her arms. She slumbered among a series of complex patterns she had made on the tabletop with what looked like a pharaoh's ransom in **opals**.

He picked up her index card.

Opal. *Readily absorbs and carries curses; crushed, enhances cursed potions. ???hypnotic properties???*

Reputed luck-bringer N.B. paradox.

Pretty, though. No wonder she'd decided to play with them. The card and the patterns; the taxonomist and the artist.

"Wake up, Granger. Time for a sandwich."

*

"Oh, ick. Pickled **Plimpies** I hate the way they stare through the glass."

"It's a useful effect, though," said Snape through the kebab that was all he'd been able to chase up in the small hours. "You remember my office?"

She looked at the jar again.

"I thought they looked familiar. They were next to the two-headed pig foetus, weren't they?"

"You have a good memory."

"But why would Slughorn want them?"

Snape shrugged carelessly.

"Their oils are useful for protecting skin during prolonged exposure to water. Other than that they're just ugly."

Hermione frowned. Something rang a bell.

*

Hermione let him have her sofa for their short night's sleep. She had to elongate it to accommodate his height, but he settled in with a blanket and a wry comment about 'roughing it'. In the morning, sipping tea and reading the papers, he seemed untroubled by life.

"What are you staring at, Granger?"

"Do you want some jam? It's **quince** I made it myself."

He spread some on his toast.

"Not bad. You know **quinces** are dedicated to Venus? They're used in love potions."

Why would he toss that into the conversation while apparently immersed in the Quidditch news?

*

"Have you found anything else water-related?"

He was riffling through a dog-eared folder of notes and diagrams. From the top of her ladder, Hermione noted a few silver hairs catching the lamp light, though the face he raised to her was less lined than she remembered.

"I was thinking along those lines myself. Look dried **Ramoras**. I wouldn't sniff them, if I were you," she warned. "Aren't they traditionally the guardians of seafarers?"

"He only has them dried?" Snape frowned. "Keep a look-out for **Ramora** eyes suspended in aspic, would you?"

He wandered back out. Hermione smiled.

*

Hermione was flummoxed by Slughorn's collection. She spent an hour puzzling her index cards into three boxes - "Water", "General", and "Healing". The latest in the final category was a wooden case containing twenty-four shimmering crystal phials of **Salamander** blood. A powerful restorative, it was particularly efficacious in treating the side-effects of severe hypothermia.

And she'd thought the Acromantula venom made her rich.

"I don't understand it," she said to Snape. "Why would he hoard enough potions to supply a hospital? He could have sold it!"

"He was afraid, Hermione. That may be why he bequeathed it to you."

*

"So tell me about what you've discovered," she prompted, taking the sprig of **thyme** from him and adding it to the stew. **Thyme** and sage were the two herbs she couldn't live without, both for their culinary and their medicinal properties. Severus raised his fingers to his nose to savour the fragrance.

He leaned his elbows on the table and watched her cook. He had brought some of Slughorn's notes with him; the rest he had left under unbreakable wards.

"He was supplying an army," he said.

Hermione's spoon dropped with a clatter.

"I thought it was over," she whispered.

*

"It's never over."

"But who...?"

"I don't know yet, but I shall soon. No victory ever destroys all the villains, Hermione."

"Then let's get back to work."

Slughorn's house presented a sinister facade to Hermione's eyes. She'd thought it a heavy responsibility being his heir before this weight of fear settled over her.

As luck would have it, her hand settled first on another box of phials, these glowing with the silver sheen of **unicorn blood**. Extended existence and poisoned resurrection.

First the hypnotic Grindylow pipes, and now this. And she had vowed never to go near Dark magic again.

*

Vervain, also known as Herb of Grace, is useful in tisanes brewed for the relief of headaches; in potions, it is an effective coagent against fever and snakebite.

Sitting with Severus as he brewed the tea they both needed, Hermione felt the urge to bombard him with questions. She waited, however, until he had located all the tins and packets he needed from Slughorn's kitchen.

Then he drew a folded parchment from his pocket.

"It's a page from Slughorn's diary," he explained. "It was hidden."

Hermione scanned it.

"So he was being used? And he chose me because..."

"You're incorruptible."

*

The tea made Hermione wrinkle her nose.

"**Wormwood**, Severus?"

"Recall page 792 of your herbal, Miss Granger." She knew he was teasing.

"**Wormwood**: bitter, but anti-melancholic."

"Five points."

She smiled.

"So," she said, "Slughorn was stockpiling for an army? But whose? And why?"

Severus grimaced.

"That is not clear, though I suspect that the Department of Mysteries may be involved and I would be reluctant to trust them even if I didn't know that some of Voldemort's cleverer minds had somehow been 'vanished' into there."

"And Slughorn chickened, then left everything to me, knowing my animosity towards the Ministry."

*

Hermione studied Slughorn's notes.

"This was a 'project for defence of an island realm'," she noted.

"Initially, yes," affirmed Severus. His fingers brushed hers as he sorted through the pages for a specific entry. "Ah here."

"The **Xerxes Potion**?"

"I believe he named it after he realised what it could do." Severus sighed regretfully. "Horace was a genius undisciplined, but brilliant. And with this potion he could have created a legion of unstoppable, amphibious warriors. He got caught up in the intellectual challenge then sat back and realised what he had made."

"Xerxes was a conqueror," said Hermione quietly.

"Yes."

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Hermione set herself to the task of completing her catalogue while Severus cleared out every scrap of Slughorn's research. Very few shelves remained to be sorted, thank goodness, though Hermione found herself regretting one aspect of the work's conclusion.

"Severus?" she said, looking round the empty office.

He emerged from a closet with a last few journals in his dusty hands.

"You've gone grey," she laughed, picking cobwebs from his hair. She turned away without quite meeting his eyes. "I have **yarrow** and **yew** for the bonfire thought we might as well give Slughorn's folly the Devil's own send-off."

*

They watched the flames in silence, standing close together.

"Such a waste," she sighed. "Thank you for helping me, Severus. It's been ... good to work with you."

"It has been my pleasure, Hermione." He did not look at her. "So you won't be needing assistance in disposing of your fortune, then?"

"Would you have time?" She did not dare look at him, either.

"Have you finished your catalogue?"

"There's just one thing left that puzzles me. I can't think of any potions applications for a **zebra** skin can you?"

He laughed and took her hand.

"Bestiary, page two thousand, Granger."

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