

The Apprentice and the Necromancer

by JunoMagic

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

Part 1, Episodes 1-10

Chapter 1 of 8

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1. Marriage Law

'A marriage law?' Harry crumpled the edge of the paper as he waved the *Daily Prophet* angrily around. 'Don't they have anything better to do just now?'

It was six months after the last battle. The dead were buried, but there were still Death Eaters on the loose.

Hermione looked up from her plate, grateful for the distraction. Kreacher behaved as if he had to win a cooking competition at each meal, but she had less appetite than ever.

'Well, at some point things have to go back to normal,' she said *Normal*. *How could anything ever be normal again?* she thought. 'What do they say?'

'Something about Squibs and jea-ns and precautions and bloodlines,' Ron mumbled around his toast.

Hermione turned to the third of the trio and frowned. 'How do you know about that? Since when do you read?'

Ron had the grace to blush. He swallowed convulsively, then cleared his throat. 'I don't actually. I overheard mum talking about it.'

'Give me that, Harry,' Hermione demanded. 'I bet it wasn't "jeans" you heard mentioned, but "genes".'

Harry rolled his eyes, but handed over the paper. Hermione pushed her chair back from the table and disappeared behind the paper until only the top of her head, a wisp of bushy brown curls remained visible. After a few minutes she put down the paper, shaking her head in a bemused manner.

'You know, this actually makes a lot of sense,' she said at last. 'The Ministry must be losing its touch.'

'What?' Harry stared at her. 'What's sensible about coming up with a marriage law when there are still Death Eaters running around?'

'So what are those jeans?' Ron asked.

'Well basically it's a law against inbreeding. Just think of that tapestry ' She waved her hand towards the door and the rest of the house. ' and how everyone among the pure-blooded families is related to everyone else. Magical ability is tied to our genes, Ronald. Oh, don't look at me like that. I've told you about them before. How a baby gets red hair? Remember? Information encoded in the cells of our body?'

Ron ducked, wincing.

Ashamed, Hermione bit down on her lip. She really shouldn't get that impatient with him. She knew how frayed her friend's nerves still were. But did he never really listen to her? Did he never remember a single thing she told him?

'Anyway, inbreeding is bad for the genes. If you have a tiny, stagnant gene pool, the risk of "bad" genes "meeting" and combining unfavourably is much higher than in an open society. Basically, if pure-bloods kept on marrying pure-bloods and got no new genes from outside, you might end up with a bunch of crazy Squibs when all is said and done. The Ministry has bespelled the genealogies of all wizards and witches so that only those persons may marry and procreate ' She did not even sigh at Ron's clueless look. ' have babies, that is who won't be mixing up bad genes. Basically, they want to prevent Draco from marrying his sister and producing another generation of lunatics.'

'But Draco doesn't have a sister,' Harry said, widening his eyes innocently.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him. At least he'd understood her. 'So you see, Harry,' she went on, 'this law actually has something to do with ... with clearing up the situation ... some ... some more.'

Ron rubbed his nose thoughtfully, finally wrapping his mind around Hermione's explanation. 'And how exactly are they going to do that? That law-thingy?'

'Well, if you want to marry, you have to apply to the wizarding genealogy offices. They will take samples of your blood and your prospective wife's and run tests, comparing them to the combined bloodlines of the wizarding world. If they come up clean, you may marry and have babies. If not, you won't get a licence. And ' Hermione snorted, 'if you try to have illegal unprotected intercourse, the men won't be able to function.'

Both Harry and Ron went pale. Their hands jerked. Hermione felt the corners of her mouth twitch with amusement. If she hadn't been there, they'd have probably touched their bits just to make sure they were still attached to them. Men! Really. Thinking always of one thing and one thing only.

'So what else is new?' she asked, picking up the paper again.

'Snape's trial is about to begin,' Ron muttered.

'What?' Harry and Hermione shouted together.

Ron flinched again, paling slightly. 'I ... I heard ... someone at the Ministry talk about it yesterday, when I went there for the Wizard Wheezes files.' Ron didn't read anymore than he used to, but he was getting better at listening to people. With one notable exception, Hermione contemplated.

'But.' Harry's voice sounded strained. 'He's not well enough for a trial. What the hell are they thinking?'

Snape was still in St Mungo's Isolation Ward. Hovering on the brink of death for weeks, the Healers still were not sure if he would ever be able to talk again or what other permanent damages the snake venom had inflicted on his body. Additionally, the memories he had given Harry hadn't been extracted with the normal spell, and could probably not be restored.

That Snape was alive at all was mainly due to Hermione's quick reaction. She shuddered, thinking back to those hectic minutes, when she'd somehow managed to get the blood flow staunching with magic, and then had kept him breathing and his heart beating, using Muggle First Aid. She'd ended up in St Mungo's for two weeks herself, just from coming into contact with his poisoned blood.

'He won't even be able to defend himself,' Hermione whispered, horrified.

Harry's green eyes flashed dangerously. Snape had always been a touchy subject with him. But since Snape's continued loyalty had been revealed, guilt and shame had been added to the already volatile mix of Harry's attitude towards the Potions Master.

'Then WE will have to defend him,' Harry announced.

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2. Evidence

The lights went on again. Hermione sat dazed, tears streaming down her face. Next to her, Ginny shuddered. The room around them remained strangely silent, apart from an occasional sigh or snuffle.

Harry Potter, chief witness of the defence, was white as a sheet as he stared at the silver screen, where moments ago the memories he had received from Snape had replayed like a Hollywood movie for all the world to see.

'That ... that will be all for today, Mr Potter,' the Head of the Wizengamot said at last. 'We will continue tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, with the witness Hermione Granger.'

Harry, his mouth set in tight lines, nodded in silence.

'All rise,' the court scribe intoned.

Hermione staggered to her feet as the members of the Wizengamot swirled out of the room in flying robes. Together with Ginny and Ron she squeezed herself through the crowd towards where Harry was waiting for them, ignoring interview requests and questions shouted at him from outside the room. At least they hadn't allowed the press to

watch the Memories. He looked shaky.

'Are you okay?' Ginny asked, her voice warm with worry.

He shook his head and glared at her. The Veritaserum would wear off only within the next two hours or so.

'Oops, sorry.' Ginny blushed in a deep red colour that clashed unfavourably with her hair. 'We're allowed to take the other exit again, so we can escape the reporters.'

Harry gave a sigh of relief, but remained silent. It was obvious that he didn't intend to say a word in public until he was sure of exactly what would come out.

'Let's go,' Ron said, leading the way to the back of the room.

Behind them, the court's watch-wizards stepped in the way of the reporters crowded outside the room. The dusty corridor they took ended in the backyard of a dingy little pub somewhere in the outskirts of London. Guarded and warded, it was a secure place for the chief witnesses of the 'Trial of the Century' to Apparate home to Grimmauld Place without being seen.

Once back, they headed for the library, where they collapsed wearily on the faded sofa and armchairs. But before any one of them had the chance to say something, a resounding CRACK made them jump. A wrinkled, worried smile was turned worshipfully up towards Harry. 'Master need anything?'

'Yes, I need...'

'Stop!' Ginny cried. 'Kreacher, something to drink and some crackers would be lovely, right?'

Harry nodded, mumbling something unintelligible behind his hand.

Luckily, Kreacher didn't understand his master and bowed happily, before he disappeared again. A minute later a pitcher of pumpkin juice along with some wheat crackers sat on the low table in front of them.

'I hate Veritaserum,' Harry said at last. 'I wish this was over already.'

'Not for a while yet, mate,' Ron said glumly. 'Though I think today should make a real difference, unless they've all been hit by one Bludger too many.'

Hermione swallowed hard, but the tight lump in her throat wouldn't budge. 'They don't look as if they're spending a lot of time on Quidditch fields.' Then she hid her face in her hands. 'He'll hate that. Oh, Harry, do you have any idea how much he'll hate what you did today?'

The fact that Harry didn't reply, but pressed his lips together even more tightly, was answer enough.

'But if that will keep him out of Azkaban,' Ginny said, 'surely that will be worth it.'

'If it will keep the git out of there.' Ron leaned back in his chair. Harry glared at him, but there hadn't been any real animosity in what his friend had said, so he let it go.

Hermione sighed and forced herself to look up again, watching Harry's pale-faced determination, Ginny's worried frown, Ron's tired slump.

Six months, she thought, and we still look as if we've just been chewed up by the Giant Squid and spewed out again.

'The evidence is very convincing,' Ginny said at last, trying to sound confident. 'They've questioned everyone. Twice. They even brought Dumbledore's portrait from Hogwarts. And today ... I just don't see how anyone could condemn him after what we've seen today.'

They fell silent again. Unfortunately all of them were aware of the volatile currents of public opinion at the moment.

'I really hope so, Ginny,' Harry replied at last, speaking very slowly. He'd be honest with them, Veritaserum or not, but he hated having no control over what he was going to say. 'But I'm scared. He DID do a lot of bad things. Because he HAD to, of course. But still.'

'Yeah,' added Ron, surprising Hermione with a sudden bout of perceptiveness. 'A dead hero's so much easier to deal with than a living traitor.'

'*Proditio plerumque amatur, proditor odio habetur*,' Hermione quoted. 'We love treason, but we hate the traitor.'

Irritated at Ron's confused expression, she added, 'Plutarch. An Ancient Greek historian and spell-wright. Seriously, Ron...'

'... don't you read?' chorused Harry and Ginny.

'You know I don't read, Hermione,' Ron spat suddenly. 'Why do you keep asking?' With a furious glare he stalked out of the room.

Hermione rubbed her forehead, blinking back tears. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'No, you shouldn't have,' Ginny agreed.

'I'm just so tired, you know, and he never listens, and I'm so scared of tomorrow. Why ever do they want to talk to me?' Hermione wailed.

'You're one of the Golden Trio,' Ginny said sensibly. 'He's been your teacher for six years. And ... well, you saved his life. So naturally they want to talk to you.'

Ginny was right, of course.

'I'd better go and apologise to Ron,' she said at last.

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'One of these days, they won't be able to patch things up between them,' Harry commented. With only Ginny around it was easier to just tell the truth.

'I know,' Ginny said. 'But I don't think there's anything we can do about it.'

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3. A Connection

And then?

'I was transported to St Mungo's where I received treatment.'

'For what?'

'The venom of the snake that I came in contact with, because of ... Professor Snape's blood.'

Her hands had been smeared with his blood. Her clothes had been drenched with his blood. And because she had done mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, she had actually swallowed some of the blood and the venom. The following two weeks at St Mungo's had not been pleasant. In retrospect she was almost grateful, though, because that way she had escaped most of the aftermath of Voldemort's defeat. Including the burials and the victory celebrations.

'How is he now?'

She stared at her interrogator. Why was he asking her that?

'Alive,' she said. 'Still at St Mungo's. You'd have to ask his Healer for details. Muriel Mugwort.'

Still not awake, she could have said and almost would have. She managed to bite her tongue at the last possible moment. Thankfully Harry had warned her about that urge to talk that was a side effect of Veritaserum. *Still deathly pale. Still no change. We don't know if he'll ever speak again. We don't know how to give him back his memories IF he wakes. We ...*

'Oh. Yes. Well. Thank you, Miss Granger, that will be all for now.'

She managed to nod and to refrain from saying anything else, although there was so much she wanted to say. About how he'd always tried to protect them, even against themselves. It was so strange how some events appeared so different to her now, looking back. But it wasn't her place to say all those things. This was a trial, and not a S.P.E.W. campaign. They'd hired the best lawyers money could buy, both from the wizarding and the Muggle world. And there was no point in hiring experts if you didn't let them do their work. So she kept silent.

Once they were outside, and ready to Apparate, she realised that she couldn't go back to Grimmauld Place right away.

'Look, guys how about you go ahead? I'll see you there later. I just ... I have to...'

She bit her lip, when the truth wanted to spill out of her: *need to go and see him. I need to go make sure he's really alive, that he's still there.*

'Of course,' Harry said. 'We understand.'

Ginny nodded. But Ron looked at her with his almost customary confusion.

Before she could say anything unfortunate, she concentrated on the Apparition platform of St Mungo's and vanished.

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Healer Mugwort, a squat woman with sharp eyes and a calm demeanour greeted her, as she entered the floor of the Isolation Ward.

'Miss Granger. It's been awhile.'

Hermione nodded. 'The lawyers advised us to stay away for the duration of the trial.'

'So today was the last day?'

'I sincerely hope so,' Hermione replied.

'You do look pretty wrung out.'

'Trust me, I feel even worse than I look,' Hermione said with a frankness that made the Healer raise her eyebrows in surprise. 'Veritaserum,' Hermione added. 'I came here directly from the Wizengamot.'

'Ah, of course.' The Healer gave her a comforting smile. 'Then I guess I'd better not offer you some Pepper-Up Potion.'

Hermione snorted at the joke. Pepper-Up Potion didn't mix well with Veritaserum unless you wanted to speak the truth and nothing but the truth for the rest of your life. 'I think I'm generally an honest person, but that would be taking things a bit far. How is he?'

'Better,' the Healer said at once. 'But still not awake. However, the latest readings show that his blood is completely clean now, his kidneys are working again. He'll have to watch his diet for the rest of his life, but he will have a rest of his life to do so.'

'That's good. Or it will be if they don't put him into Azkaban for that rest of his life.' Hermione trusted the Healer, and she was simply too tired to watch her tongue right now.

'It would be horrible to have saved him from certain death for a life-sentence in Azkaban,' Mugwort said.

'Horrible doesn't even begin to cover it,' Hermione said. 'I couldn't...how could I live with myself if I ended up saving him for a living death?' Despair choked her. 'I had no idea what I was doing when I saved him. And the Memories they replayed the Memories he gave Harry they made Harry put them into a Pensieve and then projected them on screen Snape wanted to die, you know? He wanted his life to be over. He never intended to survive the last battle. And then I come along, the Gryffindor Know-It-All, and I remember Muggle First Aid of all things and I save him. What am I going to do if all I saved him for was Azkaban?'

'I am sure it won't come to that. I've been following the trial in the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler*, and I think the prospects are quite good. Especially with the new line of the Ministry. They don't want to end up looking not much better than those Death Eaters and their pure-blood propaganda concerning what should be done to blood-traitors. Why don't you sit down a bit with me and drink a cup of soothing tea? I think our patient is aware of his surroundings again, at least up to some measure, and I don't think it would be a good idea if he were to pick up on how upset you are.'

Hermione swallowed her tears and sank down on the offered chair. 'Of course. But I just had to come, do you understand? I needed to make sure he's still there, that he's getting better, that...'

'Of course I understand. You saved his life. And he in turn saved all of your lives at one point or another. You can't get a much closer connection between two persons than that in the wizarding world.'

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4. Sentence

'They can't be serious,' Hermione said.

'I'm afraid they are,' Arthur Weasley said.

The whole Weasley family plus assorted Order members and friends had gathered at the Burrow. Somehow kitchen and kitchen table had been enlarged so that all of them

had found a place around the table. Everyone had a steaming mug of hot chocolate in front of them. And boy, how they needed that chocolate.

In the middle of the table lay the special edition of the *Daily Prophet* and the *Quibbler*. The headlines: 'Sentence in Trial of the Century' and 'Ex-Death Eater Must Marry'.

The Wizengamot those craven cowards had deferred the sentencing to an impartial magical judge, the Chalice of Neith.

Tonight the bloody Chalice had spewed forth its sentence.

As sentences in the wizarding world went, it was pretty straightforward. It pronounced Snape both guilty and not-guilty. Guilty of killing Albus Dumbledore, but not guilty of murdering him. Guilty of betraying the wizarding world, of committing various crimes during the first rising of He-Who-Finally-Was-Nothing-But-Dust, but awarded extenuating circumstances during the second rising.

In the end, he was set free on probation.

Which was all well and good, apart from the conditions of said probation.

To prove himself a good and harmless member of the wizarding community, Severus Snape, ex-Death Eater, ex-spy, ex-professor, ex-headmaster, had to marry within three years after this sentence was pronounced or spend the rest of his life in Azkaban.

'I ... I think none of us really expected that he would be freed of all charges,' Minerva McGonagall stated at last.

'But we hoped for it,' Poppy Pomfrey said sadly.

'What the FUCK of a condition is that anyway?' asked Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Could-Use-Cusswords-Without-Being-Scolded.

'One that's guaranteed to get him locked up in Azkaban until he's carried out of there,' observed George Weasley bitterly.

'And where's Shacklebolt?' Hestia Jones piped up.

Arthur Weasley sighed. 'The Minister sends his regrets, but...'

'BLOODY fucking hell, he's already betraying the Order?' Harry's eyes flashed bloody murder.

'Harry!' Molly Weasley couldn't bite her tongue any longer.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Weasley. But I just can't believe it. We have to thank Snape that all of us are alive and sitting here with our hot chocolate today, and not only the Minister let a FUCKING chalice sentence him to life-long imprisonment, but he doesn't even have the guts to TELL us how this came about! WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS THAT FUCKING WIZENGAMOT THERE FOR? WHY DID I HAVE TO DRINK ALL THAT SHITTY VERITASERUM AND PARADE SNAPE'S MEMORIES FOR THE WORLD TO SEE IF THAT IS THE RESULT?'

Hermione and Ron winced at Harry's outburst.

'You have to understand, Harry, the Wizengamot the Minister they wanted a completely impartial sentence,' explained Arthur Weasley. 'And the Chalice, it was fed with all the recent changes in law before they put the request for judgement in there, so it was up-to-date with the current values of wizarding society. And I think Hermione will know more about this than all of us thrown together there is this idea, which the Muggles regard as very humanitarian, and I think that is what this condition is based on. It's called 'rebalitation.''

Hermione moaned and sank down on the table. With a muted smack she knocked her forehead against the table. Once, twice, three times.

'Hermione?' Arthur Weasley's face showed uncertainty and worry.

'It's called 'rehabilitation'. And it has NOTHING to do with marriage. AT ALL.'

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'What can we do?' Ron asked.

Luna turned her huge eyes towards him and smiled beatifically. 'We need to find him a wife.'

'He's not even AWAKE,' Harry spit out. 'He's barely alive. The last thing he needs is a wife. What have they been thinking in that Ministry of Misfits? No, wait I mustn't suppose that they are thinking. Past evidence rather refutes that they CAN.'

The younger Order members had retired into the garden, as far away from the older Order members as possible. A Muffliato screen flickered with blue and silver lights around them, keeping their discussion private.

Hermione hadn't said anything yet, but Ron was aware that she was close to tears, and had been, ever since she had read about the sentence, up in the privacy of his room.

'Hermione? Are you okay?'

She raised her head and stared at him, her eyes red, dark smudges of exhaustion underneath them, tears shimmering in the candlelight.

For a while she simply stared at him wordlessly. Then she rasped out, 'WHAT THE FUCK do you think I am? NO, I'm not okay. How could I be? I saved his life, or whatever there's left of it. I spent two weeks in St Mungo's, puking blood. And for what? Just to hear that a stupid Chalice is going to send him back to Azkaban for the rest of his life? How do you think I could be OKAY with that?'

He winced and shrank back, but kept his arm around her. Moments later, Hermione sank down on the table, her shoulders shaking, her tears flowing. He pulled her into his arms and held her. Everything he could say would be wrong, had always been wrong. But at least he could hold her.

'So what do we do now?' he asked after a while.

The garden of the Burrow was silent apart from the muffled sobs of Hermione.

'Simple,' Luna repeated. 'We have to find him a wife. With those new marriage laws in place, we'll need to make sure she's a witch he can marry legally. Somehow we have to get the information about his possible matches from the Wizarding Genealogy Offices. Then we have to find the lucky witch and persuade her to marry him.'

'And what if he says no?' Hermione asked, sniffing noisily. 'And what if she says no?'

'We'll cross that bridge when we get there,' Neville said. 'And besides, we helped defeat Voldemort. Getting Snape married to keep him out of Azkaban should be child's play compared to that.'

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5. Strategems and Subterfuges

'So how are we going to go about that Genealogy stuff?' Ron asked.

Hermione chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip. Then she rubbed her aching forehead for good measure, but to little effect. 'I have really no idea. I doubt that the wizards at those offices are allowed to discuss possible candidates with just anyone. After all, this is a very private matter. Someone from the Ministry would probably be able to get them do a one-sided search ... but if Harry showed up there, all we'd get would be another headline in the *Quibbler*.'

Ginny laughed. 'And I can just imagine what kind of headline THAT would be. 'The-Boy-Who-Wants-To-Marry?!'

Harry scowled at Ginny, who suddenly blushed a deep fiery red.

Ron looked from his sister to his best friend and only shook his head. 'I can only say that you'd better show up at those offices in time, or I won't guarantee for Mum's actions.'

'Or my own,' he muttered. Since the war was over, the Weasleys had become even more protective of one another than they had been before.

'Hrmp,' Harry said. 'Doesn't anyone have any idea? Hermione? You're supposed to be the smart one among us.'

Luna looked up from her croissant. She had enchanted the crumbs so they'd drift in single file serpentine up to her mouth. So far the blond Ravenclaw had followed the discussions of their breakfast meeting in quiet rapture. Now her gaze drifted over Hermione and Ron, but she didn't say anything, just smiled to herself. If something was quite obvious to her, she usually attempted to let her friends figure things out for themselves.

Hermione caught her look at just the right moment.

And groaned.

She pushed the untouched plate away from her and buried her face in her arms. She seemed to be doing that rather often lately. How she longed to be back at Hogwarts. How she wanted things to go back to normal. But when had anything ever been normal in her life? An evil wizard on a crusade to kill her best friend and enslave her world had been the biggest factor of what had constituted normalcy for her during the last years. And that wasn't really very normal at all.

'I must go,' she mumbled.

'WHAT?' Ron's voice soared into disbelieving heights.

Wearily she raised her head, in time to catch Luna's approving smile. 'It's quite simple, really. I have to go and pretend that I want to marry him. Then they will have to do their tests and give me the results. And since it's been all over the place that I saved him, no one will doubt me. Life debt and all. They already think I'm completely barmy, it can't get any worse.'

Neville gulped audibly into his mug of cocoa. 'Can, too.'

He put the mug down. 'Once Snape finds out.'

Ron just gaped at her, rendered unable to even produce a screaming fit.

Hermione slumped down once more, hiding her bushy head all over again. Denial suddenly seemed such a tempting strategy.

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But she was a Gryffindor for a reason. And she felt fairly sure that Healer Mugwort would help her. If Snape was still unconscious.

For the first time in months she was hoping that there had been no improvement overnight when she entered St Mungo's.

'Good morning, Healer Mugwort.' She knew her hands were cold, and she'd had to Vanish a clamminess that would have indicated clearly just how nervous she was.

But Muriel Mugwort had read the latest news, too, of course, and smiled at her full of sympathy. 'Somehow I knew you would show up today. A cup of tea, Miss Granger?'

'Yes, please. I take it there are no changes?'

Muriel shook her head. 'I'm sorry, no. It will take a few days yet, I'm afraid.'

When they sat in the Healer's chamber with steaming cups of lemon balm and lime tea, their conversation quickly turned to the trial and the sentence.

'Now, that is a really strange sentence, isn't it? And I've never heard of the Chalice of Neith being used for sentencing anyone.'

'It's an ancient artefact. I suppose the opportunity to use it hasn't come up in the last thousand years.'

'Why so bleak, Miss Granger?' Mugwort asked. 'He's free. And once he's married and settled down, I'm sure he'll have a good life.'

'But ...' Hermione halted, when she realised that saying 'Who'd ever marry him?' wasn't exactly a polite comment.

'It will probably not be easy for him to find someone,' the Healer admitted. 'But I dare say not impossible. And he does have three years to ensnare a willing witch.'

Hermione drew a deep breath and hoped that her expression wouldn't give her away. 'As a matter of fact, there might BE a willing witch.'

Mugwort raised a pair of bristling eyebrows. With her round glasses the older woman now looked almost like a Little Owl.

'Well.' Hermione nervously rubbed her hands together. 'I do care about him, you know?'

The Healer's face softened. 'But of course you do. You saved his life.'

Hermione nodded. That much was undeniably true. 'I ... you...concerning this matter...I have a favour to ask.'

'Yes?' The frown was back.

'You see, I don't think he likes me. But, as you said, I really do care about him. A lot. So I was wondering, what with those new marriage laws, would it maybe be possible to find out now ... if ... if my caring about him has any future at all? Because, as I don't know if he could ever like me, and if there's no legal future for us no matter if he'd ever...' She trailed off and cast a pleading look at the Healer.

Mugwort sighed. 'That sentence and those new laws really take the romance out of courtship, don't they?' But then she gave Hermione an encouraging smile. 'I do

understand. I think you need a blood sample, is that right?’

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6. Wizarding Statistics

Hermione sat and waited in a private room at the Wizarding Genealogy Offices. She folded and unfolded her fingers for the thousandth time. She felt like pacing, but that would only make her more nervous. Being alone made it worse. But it had been good that they’d been so cautious, having her go alone, dressing her up in Hestia Jones’ old gown and casting a distracting glamour over her.

Reporters seemed to be lurking everywhere these days. Just yesterday, the Weasleys had discovered an American journalist skulking around the Burrow. He’d been exposed when one of the Weasley gnomes had landed on his head during Ron’s latest de-gnoming session and the disgruntled gnome had latched onto the unfortunate reporter’s nose. When Hermione had entered the Genealogy Offices, she was sure she’d counted at least five reporters lurking in the background.

What if the tests said that she’d be able to marry Snape?

She winced. Of course the tests would say that she could marry Snape. She was of Muggle origin, so the likelihood that there was any wizard out there who’d be barred from marrying her because of the new laws was virtually non-existent. And Snape himself was half-blood. As far as Hermione knew, the Prince family did not belong to the ancient pure-blood lineages.

So chances were that he had any number of likely witches to choose from. She didn’t know what she’d prefer ... having a few hundred candidates to check out in order to persuade one to marry the Potions Master or be stuck with only a handful.

The chosen few she snorted at the thought. No, she’d always been good at Arithmancy, and she’d kept up with Muggle maths during her holidays. There was no way, really, that Snape could end up with just a few of possible matches.

Suddenly the door opened. A stern, blond witch with narrow, black rimmed spectacles gazed down at her. ‘Miss Granger?’

‘Yes?’ Hermione jumped up, feeling just a little jittery.

‘I have the results for the tests you brought in. Would you come with me, please?’

Hermione swallowed dryly and nodded.

The office she was led to was small and busy. The wall at the back of the room was covered in convoluted, continually shifting family trees. Stacks of parchment, some more than a foot high, piled up on the desk.

‘Please have a seat. Coffee? Tea? Something stronger?’

Why would she need something stronger? ‘Nothing, thanks. I’m fine.’

‘Well, Miss Granger.’ Suddenly the Genealogy witch beamed at her. ‘Your case is really quite extraordinary. I wonder if you’d consider allowing us to run an in-depth arithmantic analysis. I’ve never seen anything like that before.’

‘Anything like what?’ Hermione felt sick. Did the witch mean to say that Snape didn’t have any no, she certainly wouldn’t smile in that case. Or would she? If she had to endure his Potions lessons at Hogwarts?

The smile of the witch didn’t fit her stern glasses at all. ‘For Severus Snape our tests come up with only one legal match. It’s a statistical anomaly. Very fascinating. We’ve never had an anomaly before. You see, considering that you are Muggle-born, and he is half-and-half, ordinary Arithmancy suggests that both of you would have any number of possible legal matches. And well, you do, of course. But your fiancé doesn’t. There is only one legal option for him to get married. It’s really quite astounding.’

‘One legal ... one? But there is ... and ...*wh* ... who is, who...’ Hermione gasped for breath, her nerves fraying. *Whoisthatwitch?* she finally managed.

The Genealogy witch beamed even brighter than before. ‘That’s what is the most amazing thing about this case! You are, my dear. You are the only witch that Severus Snape can legally marry according to the new marriage laws.’

Hermione felt her mouth drop open. Her heartbeat hesitated then started a wild gallop. Shivering, her hands curled around the armrests of her chair.

‘I am?’ she whispered.

‘Yes, you are! And isn’t that wonderful? That is certainly the most romantic love story I have ever heard.’ The bony face of the witch softened into a silly sentimentality. ‘You save his life during the war. You fall in love. And now your love saves his life all over again.’

She sighed happily, oblivious to the fact that Hermione was still gaping at her in shock.

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‘That’s impossible,’ Ron stated in a calm voice. ‘That can’t possibly be true.’

Hermione winced. She could cope with Ron when he was raging and screaming and being completely unreasonable. A quiet, reserved Ron was really bad news.

Harry was bent over the sealed parchment Hermione had tossed on the low table. When he looked up, he was very pale. The ragged scar on his forehead stood out eerily.

‘I’m afraid it is true,’ he said at last. ‘That document is valid. Sealed and all.’

Hermione sighed deeply. ‘And wizarding statistics don’t lie. Not when the ink has been mixed with Veritaserum.’

Harry slumped down on his chair, weary and defeated. ‘Oh, God. There’s really nothing left we can do, is there?’

Ron still stared at Hermione. His blue eyes went dark with pain.

She swallowed hard, not wanting to see herself reflected in those eyes, not wanting to see his pain, not wanting to see that now, NOW of all times Ronald Weasley suddenly understood her, really understood her, and knew what she would do, almost before she knew it herself. She knew what she had to say. She tried to think of S.P.E.W., of defeating Voldemort, of saving Snape, and all she could think of was Ron.

She swallowed again. Then she raised her head and met Ron’s gaze. He didn’t flinch, didn’t rage, just met her eyes, his expression full of grief and regret.

‘Of course there’s something left we can do.’ She heard her voice as if it was coming from far away. ‘It’s really quite simple, Harry. We have to convince Snape to marry me.’

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7. A Plan

'We need a plan,' Harry stated.

Hermione stared at him. A plan to keep Snape out of Azkaban. A plan to convince Snape of all people to marry her ... wait a moment, Harry had suggested that they need a what?

'A plan, Harry?'

Harry rolled his eyes at her. 'Yes, Hermione. Contrary to what you may believe I am capable of imagining this concept.' He hesitated, then attempted a grin. 'I figure that keeping someone alive might be a bit more difficult than trying to ... to kill someone.'

He swallowed hard.

'A plan sounds good,' Ginny commented, breaking the awkward silence.

'A brilliant plan would be better.' Neville sounded scared.

Luna, sitting cross-legged on the sofa, smiled to herself. As far as Hermione could tell, everything was proceeding according to the master plan her Ravenclaw friend had already devised in the strange and wonderful corners of her mind. Ron was standing at the window, staring into the rain. She tried not to look at him. Somehow, she forced her mind back to the matter at hand.

'Healer Mugwort said that he'll wake up any day now. She thinks that he'll need another three weeks or so at St Mungo's because he's been out of it for so long. But then they'll send him home.'

Ginny scrunched up her forehead. 'Do we have any idea where 'home' is for him?'

'That would be Hogwarts, wouldn't it?' Neville gave her a blank look.

Hermione shook her head. 'Not necessarily. The school's not open again. I talked to Prof...Headmistress McGonagall the other day, and they'll only open again in July summer school to make up for the missed year.'

Ginny shuddered. 'Mum's already talked about private classes.'

'If he doesn't return to Hogwarts that would make things rather difficult,' she added.

'And if he does return to Hogwarts, you think trying to manipulate him into marrying a student is going to be easier?' Ron turned back from the window. Hermione winced. She wasn't used to hearing his voice harsh with sarcasm. But he had a point. A very good point.

'He'd never allow himself to see anything in her but a student,' Luna put in. 'The castle's enchanted to keep everyone in it safe physically and mentally if at all possible. There has never been an incident of a student seducing a teacher at Hogwarts. Or the other way round. Whereas at Beauxbatons Academy, there are two ghosts that are the result of an unhappy love affair between a student and a teacher.' She beamed at them.

Ron paled. Harry frowned.

'Somehow I need to get close to him in a way that's not obvious,' Hermione said thoughtfully. 'Hogwarts would be easier than wherever he lives. And he will need a job.'

'Oh, I think he'll go back to Hogwarts,' Luna said cheerfully. 'He'll feel so guilty about what he had to do as a headmaster. And as the ~~Prophet~~ has already decided that no one would ever marry him, I doubt anyone else would employ him. After all, they'd have to assume he'll be taken to Azkaban after only three years. That's really not enough time to build up a good employer-employee relationship.'

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. 'I mustn't be a student, then. How about is there a problem with apprentices marrying their Masters? In the Muggle world it would be.'

Ron and Ginny shrugged they had obviously never thought about that. Neville's wide-eyed look said more than words. But Luna well-informed of all sordid tales of wizarding society exchanged her usual distant smile for a naughty little grin. 'In the Muggle world, that may be the case. In the wizarding world, such contracts are bespelled to protect apprentices. A Master's feelings cannot interfere with his evaluation of the apprentice. Perenelle Flamel was Nicolas Flamel's apprentice when they got married.'

'However do you know such stuff, Luna?' Harry said full of admiration.

Luna's smile turned beatific again. 'My father once ran a series about legendary wizarding love affairs. Morgaine and Merlin, Nicolas and Perenelle, Minerva and Albus.'

'Minerva McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore?' Hermione gasped. 'I don't believe that!'

Luna merely shrugged. But Ginny giggled. 'That makes more sense than the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.'

'The apprentice idea sounds good,' Harry said.

'It would give me three years of working with him every day. That would give me us time. And opportunity. I guess.' Hermione's stomach tightened. 'I hope.'

She'd never said a private word to Professor Snape while at school. The only personal thing she'd ever said to him had been 'Don't you fucking die on me' before they'd both been whisked off to St Mungo's. And the only personal thing he had ever said to her had been his observation that he couldn't see a difference between her normal and her hexed teeth. An incident that still hurt. Apart from that, they had only ever interacted as teacher and student. And he hadn't really liked her then. If he hadn't liked her when she was a student, how likely was he to accept her as his apprentice? And while she'd managed top grades even in Potions, especially in her O.W.L.s ... she was well aware that she was not up to his standards. She'd never given much thought to that, either, as she'd never considered a career in Potions.

'I will need to take my N.E.W.T.s as soon as possible,' she said at last. 'And I'll have to be better than I ever was.' After spending more than a year out of school.

'I'll need someone to coach me in Potions,' she added. 'And I'm afraid we'll still need someone to bully Snape into taking me on as an apprentice. He never had an apprentice before, so why should he get one now? And even if he considered that on his own, I think he'd never ever consider me.'

Luna nodded, pleased as a mother whose child has just solved a riddle. 'We will need to talk to Headmistress McGonagall.'

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8. A Visit

'It's good to see you, Miss Granger,' Minerva McGonagall said, and to Hermione's discomfort, proceeded to hug her.

'Thank you for your invitation.' Hermione smiled and tried not to stare at the changes in the room. There were new curtains, rich colours in tartan patterns. The many spindle-legged tables had been reduced to one that was placed between two battered over-stuffed armchairs (red leather and dark wood, possibly oak) in front of the fireplace. In a corner, next to a cosy cat basket, stood a handsome scratching post.

One of the shelves now sported a glass-cabinet with an astounding selection of whisky bottles.

'Why don't we sit down and have some tea?'

'Thank you,' Hermione said. 'That would be nice.'

Outside the pale sunshine that had accompanied her to the castle had given way to an April shower. Rain pounded against the windows.

They sat down on the armchairs, and when Headmistress McGonagall tapped the table between them with her wand, a complete five o'clock tea with savouries, scones and sweets appeared on the table, along with two pots of tea. Judging from the smell, one contained Earl Grey, the other Darjeeling, first flush.

Hermione had no appetite whatsoever, but she was grateful for a cup of tea to keep her hands from scratching down new hangnails. Her nerves were just a tad frazzled these days.

They needed outside help. And Headmistress McGonagall was really their best bet. But they also needed to keep the number of people aware of The Plan as low as possible. Luna had told them in disconcertingly clear words that it was inevitable that their plan would be discovered at some point.

'Such things will out,' she'd told them. *The Quibbler* once had a series of articles covering magical plots and conspiracies. They were all exposed. Though sometimes rather too late.'

Hermione had rolled her eyes, but Harry had agreed with Luna. 'Look at Voldemort. Snape himself is the best proof for what Luna says. We'll just have to try and make sure that we're only discovered when it's already too late.'

'You mean, after we're married.'

'Yeah,' Harry had agreed and looked at her with strangely sad eyes. 'That would be best.'

Hermione took a deep breath and dragged her attention back into the room. 'Pardon? I'm afraid my thoughts drifted a bit,' she said, heat suffusing her face.

But McGonagall smiled kindly. 'All of us have a lot on our minds at the moment. Why are you here today? I was hoping I would see you again at Hogwarts when we start summer school.'

Hermione took another deep breath then released it. Hyperventilating was not a good idea just now. She swallowed dryly. Now or never. Out with it. 'I...I have come to ask you for a favour, Headmistress. And ... if ... at all possible, I would ask you to ... to keep this the reason for my visit confidential.'

The Headmistress frowned. A look of alarm crossed her face. But after a moment she nodded. 'Very well. I shall do what I can. So what is it you have come for?'

Hermione lowered her cup with shaking hands. The spoon rattled a little when she placed it on the table. She bent down for her bag and extricated a roll of parchment. Just looking at the official seal of the Wizarding Genealogy Offices made her feel slightly sick.

'If you would take a look at this, please?'

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'I...I must say that ... it is very ... very commendable of you, Miss Granger, to ... to want to ... ah ... attempt ... this,' stuttered Headmistress McGonagall. Her nose had taken on a distinct pink hue. Then, 'Would you care for a bit of whisky? Because I need one now.'

Hermione blinked, slightly bewildered. Headmistress McGonagall was offering her whisky?

'Uh ... just a little bit.' It wouldn't be polite to refuse, and if Minerva McGonagall thought that a whisky would help, she'd gladly follow her teacher's lead.

'Ardbeg for me, and I think a wee bit Glenmorangie for you.' McGonagall handed her a glass with pale golden liquid, barely a finger high. Her own glass was considerably fuller, and the colour was darker, amber rather than gold.

The alcohol burned on Hermione's tongue and settled into a small, but surprisingly pleasant fire in the pit of her stomach. The next swallow actually tasted not too bad. Rather sweet and flowery, if liquid flames could taste that way.

'Your plan is good,' Headmistress McGonagall said suddenly. 'But I hope you don't expect it to work. Severus is not a man who...'

'Headmistress, I'm sorry for interrupting you. I ... I don't expect ... all I want is ... to get him ... to consider and I rather hope to take me up on it a ... a marriage ~~of~~mm ... convenience. I'd never expect him to ... I just ... I couldn't bear ... there's really been enough death and suffering caused by V...Voldemort.' She sounded like broken recording of Jane Austen's complete works. Hermione winced.

To heighten her embarrassment, McGonagall's eyes misted over. 'Indeed,' the Headmistress said. 'More than enough.'

'But I merely wanted to say that Severus Snape is neither easily manipulated nor do I think he ever intended to marry, not for love or any other reason. Not after ...' McGonagall cleared her throat and continued briskly, 'I suggest that you use the weekend to pack your things. On Monday we will start private lessons for your N.E.W.T.s. And tomorrow I will pay Horace a visit and remind him of the debt he owes the wizarding world.'

'Horace?' Then Hermione realised just whom McGonagall was talking about.

'Horace Slughorn,' the Headmistress confirmed. 'You, Miss Granger, will have to become a genius at Potions. Being your usual brilliant self will not suffice. For once you have a real academic challenge ahead of you.'

'I have no doubt that you will master this challenge. And I can only wish you and Severus the best of luck for the other.'

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9. Progress

She had visited Snape at least once a week ever since she had been released from St Mungo's herself.

At first she'd sat frozen. She'd come in, sat down on the visitor's chair, and spent two hours staring at his still form, dazed, without thought or feeling. After three or four

weeks, whenever she'd entered the room she'd started shaking and crying. Eventually that had passed, though.

She had grown quite calm. When she visited him, she found herself grow as still within herself as he appeared, lying in that silent room, the only sound his shallow breathing. Outside, the world was moving on, memorial services and victory celebrations over, heroes and victims beginning to pick up the pieces of shattered lives and moving on. Inside this quiet room, time stood still.

At some point she'd grown anxious again, had started worrying again. The Healers promised her over and over again that he would heal and that he would live, but still he did not move, still he did not wake.

Had she saved him for a life spent in a coma?

Her visiting hours were spent in nervous tension, watching, watching his face, his hands, for any change at all. But there was nothing. And when she left the hospital, she felt exhausted and drained.

Sitting next to him now, she was even more scared than before. But now she was scared that he would wake up, and not that he wouldn't. What if he woke? What would he say? Would he be able to speak? Would he even recognise her? Would she be able to act as if ...

She shook her head.

The good thing about this situation and about the only good thing about the situation was that there was nothing normal about it. It wouldn't matter if she was not able to behave as if nothing had happened, because so many things had happened, after all.

The Healers had no idea if he had lost his memories completely, or how many he had lost. The only thing they knew was that whatever Snape had done, it was not the normal method of retrieving memories for a Pensieve. At the moment, a Memory Charms specialist from the Permanent Spell Damage Ward was working with Harry to copy the memories and purge them as much as was possible from Harry's thoughts and emotions upon seeing them.

Hermione winced. She felt really sorry for whoever would end up having to explain that to Snape. Not enough that he was still alive, when he'd planned on dying, he would get his most private and painful memories back as seen from the perspective of the one person alive he detested most of all.

Was that a movement? She started, bent forwards, her eyes intent on his drawn, pale features. Her heart started racing and her stomach constricted.

Was he waking up now?

She stared at his face, at that thin body underneath the white and green covers. He looked so much smaller than she remembered him as a teacher. Human, pale and frail instead of powerful, black and looming over them all.

She frowned. His breathing appeared to be deeper than it had. And not as regular as before. Was that only her imagination or had that eyelid twitched slightly?

The door was opened. Slowly, carefully. And Healer Mugwort poked her head in. 'It's time, Miss Granger.'

Hermione nodded and rose to her feet. She wasn't quite sure if she was disappointed that yet another of her visits had passed without Snape waking up, or relieved.

When the door closed behind her at last, she sighed and turned to the Healer. 'Are you sure he'll wake up soon?'

Muriel Mugwort nodded. 'Didn't you notice the changes?'

Hermione flexed her lower lip thoughtfully. 'I am not sure, but he did appear to breathe more deeply. And not as regularly as he did before. And I think I saw one of his eyelids move.'

The Healer smiled. 'He can breathe without magical help again. And he is moving his eyes in his sleep. He is really only sleeping now. He will wake. Don't worry. He'll wake, and he'll live. And everything will be just fine.'

Hermione clenched her teeth. She knew that Mugwort only wanted to reassure her. But nothing would be 'just fine'. It just didn't work that way. Especially not with a life sentence in Azkaban hanging over Snape's head due to some misconceptions about Muggle justice on the part of over-eager Ministry officials.

She forced a smile. 'Thank you. I really hope so.'

oooOooo

'You look like shit, kid,' George quipped when she entered Grimmauld Place. He'd moved in after the memorial service.

He couldn't sleep at the Burrow, and he couldn't sleep at the flat he'd shared with his twin. She wasn't sure if he slept at Grimmauld Place either, for that matter. He was so pale that the freshly whitewashed walls looked colourful in comparison. His freckles stood out in dark flecks, making him look as if he had an attack of the measles.

'You, too.' She put her bag down and stretched wearily. 'Are the others back in?'

'Yes, you're the last one to come back. I just came down to get more Butterbeer to help oil that war planning session.'

Hermione flinched. Some words just didn't work anymore. A year or two ago, she'd have grinned at the term 'war council'. But then, Fred would have been alive to flap his hand over his mouth in a mock imitation of a war cry.

'I'll be upstairs in a minute,' she said.

'No changes then?'

She grimaced. 'Some changes, the Healer said, but he's still unconscious.'

'Don't look so glum,' George said. 'That gives us more time to come up with our plans. And taking on that big bad bat of the dungeons will require some bloody good plans.'

'He's not a bat. And he's not bad,' Hermione said automatically. 'I just hope our plans will be good enough.'

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10. More Planning and a Mystery

'... so he may really wake any day now,' Hermione concluded.

'And what will happen then?' Harry asked, pacing in front of the window, filled with nervous energy. 'He'll be told of his trial and of the conditions for his probation. What is he going to do then? What are they the Ministry going to do then?'

Hermione realised what he was getting at. 'You mean, is he going to visit the Wizarding Genealogy Offices right away are they going to tell him ...?'

She felt her face grow cold, as if the blood was literally draining from her head. But Ginny shook her head and interrupted, 'I did some more research. I looked up the procedures of the WGO and the details of the new marriage laws.'

Ginny frowned when she noticed how everyone was staring at her. 'What? Do you think Hermione is the only one in this room who knows how to find out about stuff?'

'No, no, we don't. Please, go on. What did you come up with?'

'Basically that either those Ministry-types are complete morons, or they are utterly, despicably devious.

'The first thing is, the WGO can't do one-sided searches. That would be matchmaking, and they don't have the licence for that. Matchmaking is an extremely lucrative business, and the laws guarding those licences go way back. Like, way before 'Anno Domini' had any meaning.

'Second, the results are protected by privacy laws, which means that Ministry officials have no way of getting them, unless they're dabbling in Dark Arts. Which I wouldn't put beyond them, of course.

'Third, and that's where things get really weird, Hermione shouldn't have been able to get the results, either.'

'What? But she had two blood samples!' Harry and Ron chorused.

'She had the blood samples, yes, but she only said she was engaged to Snape, she really isn't. Whatever spells they are using at the WGO, they ought to have recognised her lie and they shouldn't have worked.'

'Why?' Ron looked blank.

Hermione's thoughts whirled with panic. Was there any chance the results were duped? Oh, God, that would be beyond embarrassing!

'Think about it, Ron,' she forced herself to say. 'The WGO are working with highly sensitive information. You can't get much more private than your bloodline, especially with people so hung up on purity. You need to make sure that not just anyone can get their hands on that data. And it's not just to prevent blackmail. If they didn't have excellent safeguards they could just as well call it 'Blood Magic, Unlimited'.' She turned to Ginny. 'Do you think my results are ...?'

'Wrong? Forged?' Ginny emphatically shook her head. 'Luna and I deep-scanned the parchment. And Luna did some kind of involved truth-revealing spell. Something they sometimes use at *The Quibbler* for verifying their top-stories.'

Suddenly Hermione realised how deathly pale Luna was. Her skin looked as if it was painted on, her normally protruding eyes lay deep in their sockets.

'It's all right,' Luna reassured her. 'I'm just exhausted. That spell is really advanced magic. But, Hermione, I can promise you that the results are valid. And what's more, for some reason the magic thinks that you are already engaged.'

'What?' Hermione squeaked. 'I'm what?'

Ginny and Luna gave identical shrugs. 'We have no idea why the magic thinks what it thinks. But that's the only explanation.'

For a long moment the room was perfectly silent.

'Maybe it's part of that arithmantic anomaly,' Harry suggested at last.

Hermione exhaled a deep breath. That would almost make sense.

'And all I wanted was life getting normal again,' she muttered. Then her thoughts returned to the matter at hand. 'As for the Ministry, Ginny, I think we all know that being crazy and evil is not mutually exclusive.' She sighed. 'That probation's really a joke. It sounds as if they never really wanted him to be free. They dangle a normal, married life in front of him for publicity's sake when they KNOW that he has next to no chance of finding someone he can legally marry. Even without that anomaly, how could he ever have a fair chance?'

Ron shrugged. 'Don't ask us, ask the Ministry. I guess he could go to a Matchmaker. That would probably get the desired result under normal circumstances. He could brew Felix Felicis. But do you think he will? Can you honestly see Snape even trying to find a wife in order to satisfy this condition?'

He wasn't looking at her. He'd been friendly and polite to her ever since he'd accepted her decision. He hadn't even mocked her about starting a new version of S.P.E.W. But he never looked at her. Never met her eyes. And continued to amaze her with his new-found maturity.

'No,' she said at last. 'I don't think he'd go to the Genealogy Offices even if they did one-sided searches.'

*Even if the Ministry told him right away that I'm his only chance at staying out of Azkaban, I can't really see him asking me to marry him*she thought.

'So what happens next?' Neville asked.

Hermione sighed. 'I go back to Hogwarts. And on Monday I start brushing up on my Potions skills in private lessons with dear Professor Slughorn.'

Ron made gagging noises and Ginny snorted. Hermione found herself smiling at them. Some things, at least, hadn't changed.

'Uhh ...' Harry cleared his throat and shifted awkwardly. 'Right.' He went to one of the shelves and retrieved something that looked like a book. No, two books.

'I've got something for you, Hermione.'

He came over to her and held the books out to her. She recognised the first one at once. 'Advanced Potion-Making by the Half-Blood Prince'.

'I'd almost forgotten about it,' Harry mumbled apologetically. 'I went and got it from the Room of Requirement after Dumbledore was after Dumbledore died.'

A pause. 'You'll need all the help you can get. Uhh ... Ginny? How about we go down and start dinner?'

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

The banner is based on CC Attribution/NonCommerical licenced pictures by cambiodefractal and on CC Attribution pictures by "Drawings Of Light Paul" and i.m.indraneel. The face of my Hermione belongs to Minnie Driver.

Awards

'The Apprentice and the Necromancer' won the 'Locomotor' award for best action/adventure at 'The New Library Awards' 2008, second place for 'Best Original Character' and third place for 'Best Mega-Fic' in the 2009 OWL Awards.

FAQ

Why are there so many very short episodes collected in one chapter here on TPP?

Because they are episodes of a "virtual penny dreadful", written as "mega-drabbles". Each episode (with very few exceptions) is exactly 1,000 words long as counted by MS Word (minus the separators). The online wordcount may vary for technical reasons, however, since online counters often don't deal with contractions, dashes, or hyphenated terms quite the way MS Word does.

I have collected ten episodes in one chapter for posting on TPP because of bad experiences with the archive software TPP runs on. Apparently an inherent glitch makes a story collapse once a certain chapter count has been reached, and "The Apprentice and the Necromancer" is 250 episodes long! If you prefer to read the story in episodes, you should try reading it on my website or on FFNet.

What is a "virtual penny dreadful"?

In the 19th century "penny dreadfuls" were usually lurid and sensationalist serial stories published as booklets over a number of weeks, each part costing a penny, or very short episodes of the same literary importance published in newspapers aka glorified rags.

The aim of writing a "virtual penny dreadful" is to create a story as a series of many short episodes meant to entertain readers on a regular basis.

(Therefore complaining about the length of these episodes makes as much sense as complaining that a short story is not a novel, or that a drabble is a drabble.)

What's with the Garth Nix stuff in your disclaimer? Don't you know that TPP doesn't accept crossovers?

While "Apprentice" incorporates settings, items, and concepts from the "Old Kingdom" series by Garth Nix, there are no characters from those in my story. Therefore, the story still fits the crossover rules of TPP.

More questions, opinions, need for discussion?

Drop me a line at: juno AT magic DOT ms

Part 2, Episodes 11-20

Chapter 2 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

□

11. Books

Hermione nodded, staring at the battered book.

She remembered her misgivings about it. How the bloody brilliance of the annotations had made her jealous. How the lack of respect had infuriated her. How all the arguments it had caused had hurt her. Now she would have to be grateful that Harry had remembered to retrieve it. She put it on the table and turned her attention to the second book. This one was different, a scorched, dark-green journal.

A diary? She frowned, instantly suspicious. *But Harry wouldn't give me a dangerous book, would he? Not after ...*

'Of course he would,' she muttered. 'Some things never change.'

She pulled out her wand and held it at the ready, while turning the book into the light. Faded initials. An L and an E.

'LE?' She stared at the book, her heart pounding. *Was this...could this be...*

She flipped the book open.

'Potions', was written on the first page in a smooth, faintly girly handwriting.

'Thoughts, Notes and Ramblings Pertaining to My Second-Favourite Subject at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

Underneath it someone had scrawled in a boyish, crabbed script that was trying too hard to look spiky and cool, but didn't quite achieve the desired effect:

'An Effort to Scientifically & Systematically Improve on Depillatus Boring & Moronicus Dunderheadalus.'

September 2, 1970. First Potions lesson. I loved it. Like cooking, only better. Here's the recipe of what we did... Sev liked it, too. But he's sulking 'cause they won't let us experiment. He wants to know what would happen if he changed any ingredients or stirred differently. We've decided to set up a small lab in a hiding place so we can try out things.

September 5, 1970. Today we did... I think I used a bit too much of fluxweed. James Potter, that idiot, used a LOT too much fluxweed. His cauldron exploded, the lesson was cancelled and I never got to see if my potion turned out all right. Moron. And he grinned all the time as if he was a hero or something.

'At least now we know what adding too much fluxweed does to a potion'

was scrawled under that entry in narrow, boyish letters.

September 12, 1970. *Sev is right. Not being allowed to experiment is BORING. Charms is more fun. But I think I've discovered a hiding place where we can put up our secret lab. It's a room in the school. But it's not always there. And if it's there, I don't think it looks always the same. Will have to investigate it tonight. I wish Slytherin House was closer to mine. And that Gail didn't snore.*

At a rustling noise she looked up. Harry was standing in the door.

'Oh, Harry,' Hermione whispered. 'This... this is....'

He nodded. 'My mother's diary. I found it under a heap of Galleons in my Gringotts vault when I cleaned up in there. It covers all of her Potions lessons at Hogwarts. She was even more obsessive about note-taking than you are.'

He took a deep breath and pointed at the other book. 'Be careful, though, Hermione. He was livid 'cause I got my hands on ~~this~~ old book. I don't want to imagine what he'd do if he realised this one was still around.' He gulped. 'She... He... They brewed together until he... until they had that row... until my mother... until she couldn't... didn't forgive him.... He really *did* love her, Hermione.'

oooOooo

Slughorn, Hermione decided, was even slimier than a slug. Snape's hair at its greasiest couldn't be as oily as the Potions Master's condescending friendliness. But, she ~~did~~ have to grant him that, he'd given her an exceedingly thorough test to assess her skills *and* he'd whipped up a schedule for their lessons in half an hour that left her feeling hopeful, if slightly queasy.

Hermione made it back to the Great Hall just in time for lunch. After six months of repairing and rebuilding, Hogwarts looked as if nothing had happened apart from the epitaphs in the walls wherever someone had died in the last battle. She hesitated in the doorway. The hall was very empty without students. The enchanted sky above her was filled with drifting clouds.

'Miss Granger!'

She started. Headmistress McGonagall was waving to her. 'Why don't you sit with us? I assure you, we don't bite.'

'Are you sure, Minerva dear?' Horace Slughorn leaned back in his seat, laughing, his round belly wobbling slightly.

Hermione sighed. She'd rather have called a house-elf to her room. Instead she quickly made her way up to the teachers' table. Today only Headmistress McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Vector and Professor Slughorn were present.

'Thank you,' she said, when McGonagall drew out a chair next to her.

'Nonsense, dear, it would be ridiculous for you to sit down there.'

A soft pop heralded the arrival of a bowl of soup. Hermione sighed gratefully. Somehow the house-elves knew she had next to no appetite. She forced herself to pick up the spoon. She knew she had to eat. Adding an eating disorder to her problems wouldn't be a good idea.

Hermione had read up on her symptoms, of course.

PTSD, depression, and quite simply...*grief*. She'd even considered seeing a Muggle therapist, but quickly discarded the idea. She wouldn't be able to tell him the truth and that rather defeated the idea of therapy. Intellectually, she knew that as time passed, she would feel better. She would, eventually, come to terms with her losses. With never seeing her parents again along with their memories, they were irretrievably lost to her. With never seeing Fred again. Or Tonks. Or Lupin. Or...Ruthlessly she stopped the mantra of names that wanted to replay *ad infinitum* in her mind. Eventually, she would sleep better. She wouldn't feel sick at the mere thought of food.

But at the moment, such a simple act as eating her soup was almost more than she could handle.

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12. Awakening

'There will be a number of changes once school starts again,' Minerva was telling Slughorn. 'New teachers Henrietta Hitchens will take over Muggle Studies. Bill Weasley will take over Defence Against the Dark Arts. Alberic Switch has agreed to join us in a year to take over Transfiguration. Until then, I will continue to teach. Potions...'

'Well, Minerva, I wouldn't worry. Even if Severus can't shoulder a full work-load for a while yet, I am sure I can turn Miss Granger here into a more than acceptable apprentice by September. And she has the energy of youth to help her deal with the pranks of the lower forms.'

Hermione lifted her head from her soup, trying not to stare at Headmistress McGonagall. But of course the woman noticed and gave her the tiniest wink. Hermione lowered her gaze again. If the Headmistress wanted Snape to take an apprentice, she doubted that the Potions Master would be in a position to refuse. Thinking of the still, slight form that was all that remained of the once imposing man at the moment, she realised that he likely *would* need an apprentice.

'Hermione, we need to talk about your N.E.W.T.s after lunch. Would you come to my office at two o'clock?'

'Of course, Headmistress. And thank you for allowing me to sit with you. Professors.' She nodded politely to the other teachers at the table.

oooOooo

'I know you would really prefer to take all subjects again, Hermione,' McGonagall said, as she held out a cup of tea to Hermione. 'But that really wouldn't be feasible.' Hermione nodded. 'I know. And I...' She sighed a little. 'I have to admit that I really wouldn't have the energy, even with private lessons.'

McGonagall looked at her sharply, eyebrows raised. 'You hardly eat,' she observed. 'And you don't look as if you're sleeping much. You should see Poppy about that.'

Again, Hermione nodded. 'I will.'

The Headmistress sighed. 'It *has* been only six months. It takes time to recover. But you are young, you have your whole life ahead of you. I won't give you that rubbish about *'time heals all wounds'* time doesn't. *But* the passage of time *will* make it easier to live with them.

'Now, your subjects: Potions, naturally. Also, Charms the most difficult Potions are Charmed Potions. Herbology, of course. I suggest you take Arithmancy as your fourth subject stirring figures, measurements and brewing times are all dependant on Arithmancy and numerology.'

'I'll miss Transfiguration,' Hermione admitted. 'But I agree. That's all I will need, and that combination is regarded as one the most challenging besides the one you need for Auror training.' She smiled faintly.

'Good.' McGonagall sounded satisfied. 'Mr Potter and Mr Weasley won't be coming back to school, I gather?'

Hermione shook her head. 'Harry has already started Auror training. He'll be taking his N.E.W.T.s as he goes along. It will be easier on him than returning to Hogwarts and getting stared at like an animal in the zoo all the time. Ron is taking evening courses in accountancy, of all things. He and George and Lee Jordan will continue to run the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. But Ginny will be back. And Neville, and Luna.'

'That's good. I am looking forward to seeing them again.'

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A week later, Headmistress McGonagall summoned Hermione to her office, breaking up an extremely interesting Arithmancy lesson. 'He's awake,' McGonagall told her when Hermione stepped into her office, slightly out of breath. The headmistress was very pale. 'I was there when he woke this morning.'

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, she sucked in her breath and felt her knees go unaccountably weak.

'Sit down, girl. You need to go and see him, not faint in my office.'

Wordlessly, Hermione sank down on the visitor's chair in front of the desk.

'How... is he?'

'Awake. Alive.' Headmistress McGonagall had to swallow before she could continue. 'Confused. Unable to speak for the moment. The Healers are *somewhat* hopeful that he will recover some faculty of speech in time.'

'Oh, God,' Hermione whispered.

But as always, there was no answer.

oooOooo

'He is really much better,' Healer Mugwort assured Hermione. 'Of course, he still can't talk, but he knows where he is, and what happened.'

'You told him?' Hermione asked.

'Of course. He needed to know at least the bare-boned facts of what happened to be able to re-orient himself and to accept that he is still alive.'

'How... how did he react?' Hermione's voice was shaking.

'Not as badly as he might have,' the Healer said succinctly. 'Now, here we go. Don't allow him to move too much nodding or shaking his head. You may have half an hour.'

'Professor? You have a visitor.' Muriel Mugwort put her arm around Hermione and drew her closer to the bed.

Snape was indeed awake. His bed had been Transfigured so that he was propped up in a half-lying, half-sitting position. He had been staring straight ahead at the rain outside the window. At the Healer's voice he turned his head. Gradually, in tiny, slow, feeble movements. His eyes lay deep in their sockets. Against the deathly pallor of his face they were almost black, but dull. The burning intensity that Hermione remembered from his volatile dungeon temper was gone.

'Professor Snape?' she said hesitantly. 'May I...may I stay with you a bit? Sit down, perhaps?'

His gaze focussed on her. His mouth twitched. A minute shrug of his bony shoulders seemed to indicate that he couldn't care less if she did or not. Hermione sank down on the chair, knees once more weak with nerves and relief.

Healer Mugwort smiled at them and nodded encouragingly. 'I'll be back in half an hour. Call me if you need anything.'

Mugwort gently closed the door behind her, and Hermione was alone with her former teacher.

'I'm so glad that you're awake,' Hermione whispered.

A painful snort answered her. Severus Snape did not agree with her.

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13. Long Term Effects

She winced and her cold hands cramped into white-knuckled fists. But she did not turn away, meeting that black gaze as calmly as she could.

'I'm sorry, sir.'

His dark eyes narrowed derisively, but his throat only produced a barely audible rasp. However, he did not need to say anything. She understood him well enough without hearing aloud what he *would* have said.

How typically Gryffindor. Acting first and thinking later. Although I would have expected better of you, Miss Granger. Or was I mistaken in the impression that you always know everything? Better than Mr Potter and Mr Weasley, and now, apparently, better than I do?

She winced again, but still she did not look away. 'I just couldn't ...'

Unable to finish her sentence, she fell silent and just sat there, looking at him.

To her surprise, he did not turn his head away or close his eyes. Instead he simply returned her gaze, with eyes that were much too dark for his pale face. His features ... empty... exhausted. Tears burned in her eyes. But she was getting better at not crying.

When Healer Mugwort opened the door again, Hermione was still sitting at Snape's bed. She looked up and tried to smile. The expression felt strange and deliberate on her face, and when the healer raised an eyebrow at her, she gave up on her feeble attempt.

She turned back to face her professor, who still hadn't moved.

'I will come back, if I may, sir.'

He rolled his eyes in answer and gave another, almost imperceptible shrug of his too thin shoulders.

Does it look as if I were able to stop such advances? Suit yourself, Miss Granger, as you will do anyway, whether'd like it or not.

oooOooo

Once in the Healer's small office, Hermione leaned exhaustedly against the wall. She felt as drained as after an hours-long exam. 'Sit down*Sit down!* Mugwort took her by the arm and led her to her usual chair. With a flick of her wand, the Healer produced tea for two. With another, the grey-haired witch *Accid*'ed a small red bottle from one of her shelves. 'Just a spoonful of Pepper-Up Potion,' she declared. 'Open up, girl. Or I'll make it Invigoration Draught and that doesn't taste half as nice.'

Hermione obediently swallowed the Pepper-Up, gasping and sputtering only a little when the peppery potion burned its way down to her stomach. Her eyes watered.

'I think I could come to appreciate Headmistress McGonagall's whisky,' she wheezed. 'Similar effect, but more pleasant on the tongue.'

Mugwort snorted. 'So Minerva shared her whisky with you? She must like you.'

Hermione blinked in surprise. 'You know Headmistress McGonagall?'

The older witch afforded her a cunning grin. 'We went to school together. We always got along well, for all I was in Slytherin and she in Gryffindor.'

Another surprise. If Hermione'd had to guess, she'd probably have sorted Muriel Mugwort into Hufflepuff.

'House allegiance isn't everything, you know, girl? It shouldn't be at school, and most*certainly* should not matter once you're grown up and out in the world.' The Healer sniffed. 'Of course in *some* old habits die hard.'

Hermione flinched, as heat rose in her cheeks. She really should know better, after all that had happened. But as the Healer said: old habits sometimes had a longer life-span than they ought to.

'When will he be able to talk?' she asked, deliberately changing the topic.

Mugwort didn't answer. Instead she picked up her cup and took a deep swallow. Then she proceeded to slowly turn the mug green ivy wrapping around a black background in her hands. At last she sighed.

'I don't really know IF he will be able to speak again. He*should* be. We placed a stasis spell on his injuries while we drained the venom from his body. When his body would respond to magical healing again, we repaired all the damage his body had sustained. I don't think there's even a scar on the inside of that stiff neck of his. But see, vocal cords are a touchy part of human anatomy. There may be long term effects even though organically speaking he ought to be all right. Wizard-healers, for all our learning and our magical power, aren't much good with long-term effects on a body, anything that can't be put to rights at once.'

Hermione stared at her own cup. Steam drifted over the pale yellow of lime, balm and chamomile tea. She didn't much care for the taste, but it was soothing for her nerves without interfering with the Pepper-Up. *Long-term effects*. She definitely knew more about that than magical Healers. Her mother had been involved in dental surgery, repairing jaws and teeth smashed in traffic accidents and the like.

'Speech therapy,' she said at last. 'What he needs is speech therapy. If he's physically all right, he needs someone to guide his healing process and to make him exercise properly.'

Mugwort frowned at her. 'What kind of therapy is that? I've never heard of that before.'

'Oh, you wouldn't,' Hermione replied. 'It's a Muggle thing. Without magic, you have to deal with many long-term effects of illness and accidents.' She sighed. 'So there's no magical speech therapy? Too bad.'

Then an idea struck. 'Could we bring in a Muggle therapist? I happen to know a very good one. The hospital where my mother works...' She caught herself and gulped. 'Where my mother *worked*, she sometimes called a speech therapist in even before she started surgery. Of course I guess you'd have to *Obliviate* her afterwards ... so probably not ...'

'Hmmm ...' Mugwort put her mug on the table and steepled her fingers thoughtfully. 'Maybe and maybe not. It is worth a try and I know just whom to approach about this. Severus would certainly feel much better if he was able to lash out with that wicked tongue of his again.'

'What's the name?'

'Lois Petrel,' Hermione said.

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14. Special Needs

At roughly the same time, Lois Petrel stared at the calm face of an older woman with square glasses and a stern bun, who spoke with a distinct Scottish burr.

'So my daughter does not have ADHD? She's *not* a special needs child?'

Professor McGonagall frowned. 'I do not know what this A-D-H-D is, but of course your child has special needs. She shows all the signs of growing up to be an extremely talented witch. You can't just send her to some Muggle school and force her to forego her powers and her talents.'

'A witch,' Lois Petrel repeated.

A part of her mind was shouting at her to pick up the phone and call the police and the psychiatric hospital. But another part of her mind marvelled*Of course that's what it is! She has power inside her that she cannot get rid of. That would make anyone behave as if they've got a million ants inside.*

'Yes,' Mistress McGonagall confirmed. 'A witch. A human being just like you, but with very special talents like me.'

Suddenly the woman appeared to fold in on herself, growing smaller and smaller in front of Lois' eyes, until a dainty tabby cat sat on the chair before the young speech therapist. But before Lois could shout or have hysterics, the cat began to grow again, until the woman was back on the chair, not a hair out of place.

'Wow,' Lois said. 'That...that is very convincing.'

*Unless I wake in a nice, white cell tomorrow morning after having been locked up for a nervous breakdown*But of course she couldn't afford a nervous breakdown, she had Alina to think of, and that had always kept her going, ever since she'd found out at age sixteen that she was pregnant. Pregnant, with the father disappeared over night.

McGonagall smiled. 'Term starts on September 1. Alina will receive a letter via owl post an owl will fly to you with a letter from the school like a h... Muggle messenger pigeons. The Professor for Muggle Studies, Professor Hitchens, will make an appointment with you to help you get everything Alina will need at Hogwarts.

'We take Muggle-wizard relations very seriously, and we want Muggle parents involved in their children's education. So please, if you have any question at all, feel free to drop me a line via Floo network. We've hooked up your fireplace for message transport already. You just take a pinch of this powder, throw it into the fire, say my name and then you toss your letter into the fire. It won't burn, don't worry, but show up on my side of the network.

'Once your daughter is at school, you can use school owls for your mail, or you can buy one of your own.

'I know this is rather a shock and a surprise for you, but I promise you, Alina will be happy with us.'

oooOooo

Hermione wasn't really surprised when Harry showed up in the evening of the day after she had visited Snape. She was curled up with Crookshanks and *Most Potente Potions* on the sofa of the empty Gryffindor common room when Harry climbed through the portrait hole. 'Hullo, Hermione,' he said. 'I brought you some Butterbeer.'

Hermione was tempted to roll her eyes at him what a transparent excuse! In her mind, she imagined what Snape would say now *Surely even a Gryffindor can do better than that.*

Aloud she settled for, 'Thank you, Harry, that's really nice of you.'

She carefully placed the book on the reading table, far away from Harry's bottles.

Harry held out a bottle to her. Glass clinked against glass. Hermione drank deeply and suppressed a shudder. She didn't even like Butterbeer, really.

For a while, they sat silently in front of the fireplace. A year ago, Hermione would have prodded and nagged Harry about why he'd come. But now she simply didn't have the energy. He'd come over to talk, that was obvious. Therefore she was reasonably sure he would eventually start speaking.

'I've been to visit him,' Harry said suddenly, without looking at his friend. 'It was horrible.'

'Why?'

'He...he didn't say anything, anything at all. He just lay there, looking like a ghost and stared at me. He didn't even sneer or smirk. It was scary.' Harry shivered. 'And I...I apologised, but...but...how do you make up for six FUCKING years when I treated him like shit, and I bloody HATED him, and...

'And then he just closed his eyes.

'Gods, Hermione.' Harry slumped back. 'And he doesn't even know about the details of that trial and the sentence yet. And there's no way of telling how much he remembers, though I do suspect it's a fair bit from the way he looked at me. But he wouldn't say anything. Anything at all.'

'That's because he *can't*, Harry. I talked with Healer Mugwort yesterday. Physically, he is healed, but that doesn't mean there are no long-term effects, on his vocal cords for example. Not to mention the ... psychological effects of the stress he was under when he was ... attacked.'

The long words and the rather clinical explanation soothed her mind. And she could see that they had at least some effect on Harry.

'Are you still working on purifying those memories?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes, but that process should be finished soon. I hope. I don't want to look at them ever again. Though I doubt that they will ever be far from my mind, for as long as I live. Going over them again and again to filter out what my ... thoughts, feelings ... my perception has added to them ... Hermione ... I ... '

He shook his head, unable to find words to express himself.

'Oh, Harry.'

They remained on the sofa for another hour or so, drinking their Butterbeer in silence. Then Harry excused himself. Ginny and the others would already be waiting for him at Grimmauld Place.

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15. Experiments

Three days later, Hermione sat cross-legged on the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. On her lap rested a fat, leather-bound tome, the parchment brittle with age. Crookshanks, who was enjoying the emptiness of the tower, sprawled out magnificently in one of the squashy armchairs near the fireplace.

It was almost midnight, but Pliny's 'The Natural History' was not only part of the reading list provided for her by Professor Slughorn it was actually very interesting.

There is a wild purlain, she read, of which remarkable properties are mentioned. It neutralizes the effects, it is said, of poisoned arrows, and the venom of snakes.

She closed the book. Snakes. Venom. She really didn't want to read about that. She didn't want to think about that. A glance at the clock told her that it was already midnight, but in spite of the fact that she had an early lesson at the greenhouses in the morning herbs had to be harvested before the sun grew warm she didn't want to go to bed. She was not nearly tired enough to be able to sleep without nightmares. Briefly she contemplated Dreamless Sleep Potion. She shook her head. It was strong, it was habit-forming, and she knew she'd taken too much of it in the last months.

Better to do something constructive, she thought. Something to advance the plan of turning herself into an apprentice Snape would appreciate.

'Crooks, I'm off to the dungeons to do some brewing. Are you coming?'

The cat turned his back, curling up into a tight ball. Hermione raised an eyebrow. Well, that was a clear answer at least.

oooOooo

Her footfalls echoed in the empty corridors and staircases. With no students in residence, the teachers didn't patrol the castle at night. Only Filch did his usual round at ten o'clock, making sure that all windows were shut and all candles extinguished. As Hermione was about to enter the narrow staircase that led from the Entrance Hall down to the dungeons, one of the new epitaphs engraved in the castle's walls caught her eye. The stones for the epitaphs had been sandblasted. They stood out bright and cream-coloured against the age-darkened walls of the castle. She knew that the castle itself had chosen the verse for each marker. This one read:

Morgaine Montgomery (1984-1998)

Neither fire nor wind, birth nor death

can erase our good deeds.

She must have been one of the students who had slipped back into Hogwarts with Colin Creevey, Hermione realised. She'd heard that name before but where? Montgomery ... oh, of course. The Montgomery sisters. Morgaine and Madeleine. Their little brother had been killed by Fenrir Greyback. Now there was only Madeleine left. Hermione tried to call up a face to go with the name, but nothing would come to mind. Morgaine had been a Fourth Year when she was killed, likely in another house, so it was not really surprising that Hermione didn't know her.

But as she stood in the twilight of the Entrance Hall, staring at the marker, she couldn't help feeling that she ought to have known her.

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The door of the Potions Master's office was closed and Hermione hurried past it. The castle was cold in April, the dungeons positively icy. Once inside the Potions classroom, the first thing she did was light up a roaring fire and call up enough witch lights to illuminate the room brighter than she had ever seen it before. Without thinking, she went to her usual seat, a routine formed in six years of Potions lessons twice a week and a fair number of detentions served in that very same place. But when she was about to place her books on the desk, she hesitated. She wasn't a pupil any longer, for all that she was still studying for her NEWTs right now. She would never sit there again in a Potions Class, while her teacher stalked the room, glaring at her for her eagerness to get on with the discussion. Hermione inhaled deeply and deliberately moved to the next desk. That one had been Neville's. She was reasonably sure that the desk wasn't cursed, as her friend had once claimed. Only his fear of the professor had made him so nervous and clumsy in class.

'All right,' she muttered. 'Now let's try something completely new.'

Reading the Half-Blood Prince's notes along with Lily's Potions Diary had given her some ideas her fingers were itching to try out.

Maybe because she had such trouble sleeping, she had been thinking about sleeping potions and their dangers a lot lately. She had even drawn up a chart to compare the various elixirs and philtres and discovered a strange similarity: all of them relied rather heavily on magic for such natural effects as sleep and rest.

Her father had been very interested in homeopathy, and somehow the common factor among popular sleeping draughts had reminded Hermione of a discussion they had once had.

We have become so used to taking Aspirin and Tylenol that we never think about alternatives anymore. A bias. Of course there are situations when you need all those drugs, but very often a natural remedy would suffice, or even work better. It's like this when all you use is a hammer, eventually all your problems start looking like nails ...

She sighed. She missed her father's wry humour so much.

'Magic's definitely the hammer here,' she mused, setting out Valerian roots, skullcap, California poppy, hops, passion flower, chamomile and nutmeg on the desk. 'If I treat magic only as the very last and minor ingredient, used at just the right time, in just the right way to turn this into something more than a simple tea, the result should be quite different from the regular sleeping draughts. Much milder, but still efficacious. Of course, if I'm wrong, I might be cooking up a pot of poison ...'

Hermione grinned, when an irreverent thought struck her: *Snape would likely approve either way.*

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16. The Next Meeting

'A word with you, please.'

Hermione had been about to leave the Great Hall, headed for another Charms lesson. Professor Flitwick had her practicing advanced wand movements, using an exercise wand of the same length and weight as her real wand, but with no magical powers. At the moment, she rather doubted that she would ever reach sufficient dexterity to scrape more than an 'Exceeds Expectations' in her NEWTs.

And Snape was so exceedingly deft and adroit with his fingers...

She had started considering all her efforts in relation to her studies according to how she imagined ~~he~~ ^{she} would judge them. And for some reason she found that she never measured up.

'Yes, Professor McGonagall?'

'My office please, follow me. Don't worry, it won't take long. You'll be in time for your lesson. And Professor Flitwick tells me that he is very happy with your performance so far.'

'Oh.' Hermione's cheeks flushed with a pleasant warmth. But an insistent voice at the back of her mind niggled, *So you mean to tell me that dropping your exercise wand three times a session exceeds expectations? I don't even want to know what expectations those were to start with, in that case ...'*

A murmured '*Bonnie Prince Charlie*' opened the entrance to the office of the Headmistress. Moments later Hermione faced Headmistress McGonagall across her paper-strewn, claw-footed desk.

'I spent the morning at St. Mungo's,' McGonagall said. Her voice sounded strained, her lips pressed into thin lines.

Instantly, Hermione's mouth turned dry and her stomach quivered with nerves. 'How ... how is Professor Snape?'

Apparently the Headmistress noticed how anxious Hermione was and offered one of her rare, fleeting smiles. 'I found him much improved at least as far as his physical health is concerned. And it seems that luck is with us, for the moment: the name of that ... speech therapist you gave Muriel Lois Petrel she's the mother of one of our new first-years.'

'Really?' exclaimed Hermione. 'I never knew that Alina is a witch!'

'You know the child?'

'Not very well, Headmistress. In the holidays I used to meet my mother at the hospital for lunch now and again, and sometimes when Mrs. Petrel had no other babysitter for Alina, Mrs. Petrel took her along to the hospital they have childcare facilities for the employees there, though they were really designed for younger children. I remember that Alina was always very hyper.'

'Ah. Well, due to the fortunate circumstance of Alina being a witch, Muriel Mugwort was able to approach Mrs. Petrel concerning your suggestion of speech therapy.'

'Of course!' Hermione cried. 'If her daughter's a witch, she wouldn't need to be *Obliviated*!'

McGonagall nodded. 'Mrs. Petrel has agreed to take over Professor Snape's therapy. I believe they have met once a day for the past week.'

'Oh, that is wonderful news! Is he making any progress?'

'He is quite ... articulate by now,' McGonagall said in a dry tone that suggested whatever Snape had had to say to her, had not been pleasantries. 'However, not in the way he was before the attack. You will be able to see for yourself. You may Apparate to St. Mungo's after your session with Professor Flitwick this afternoon.'

The Headmistress cleared her throat and looked at Hermione full of sympathy. 'Mrs. Petrel will be there this afternoon as well. She has been apprised of your parents' situation. Therefore should you wish to, you may talk openly with her.'

Hermione expelled her breath as if she'd been punched into the stomach.

She tried not to think of her parents. It had not been her fault. She couldn't have known that the Ministry had cast an undetectable protection spell over her parents. She couldn't have known that this particular protection spell would interfere with the Memory Charms she had placed on them, much the way Pepper-Up Potion reacted with *Veritaserum*. She couldn't have known. Therefore it was not her fault.

And at least she knew that her parents were alive. And happy. Even if they'd never remember that they'd ever had a daughter.

'Thank you,' Hermione said at last. 'I'd better go to my lesson now.'

oooOooo

'Miss Granger,' Snape murmured as she entered the room and grimaced as if he'd bitten unexpectedly on a Bitterbark biscuit. Headmistress McGonagall had been right. His voice had changed completely. No longer silky and smooth, modulated and expressive, it was halting now, hoarse and harsh. But he *could* speak again.

'Professor Snape it's so good to hear your voice again!' She smiled at him, overcome with relief.

He snorted at her words, a weak, unimpressive noise, not at all like her former Potions teacher.

'May I sit down?' she asked politely.

He did not speak again, only quirked up a black eyebrow and gestured towards the chair with a feeble jerk of his left hand. As if he wanted to say, 'Since I can't remove you bodily from this room, you might as well sit down.'

Hermione sank down on the chair. On her way to his room, she had thought about things she could tell him maybe give him news about the other Order members? Or about how Hogwarts had been repaired? That she was going to take her NEWTs soon and that she was working on a Potions project?

But now that she sat at his side, all her plans seemed to have fled from her mind. What remained were confusion, apprehension, and muddled, painful questions that she couldn't possibly ask him.

'Miss Granger,' Snape rasped, his words barely audible. 'I hear ... that I am supposed to...' His voice cracked with pain when he strained to emphasize the word, '*thank* you ... yet again ... This ... time ... for devising a therapy to ... recover my faculty of speech.'

Her heart pounding, Hermione met his gaze. His eyes were bleak, his face devoid of expression.

'I'm just glad it works,' she said softly.

Snape closed his eyes. 'I am not.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

17. Damn and Damn Again

Looking into green eyes so much Lily's, then sinking into the liberating oblivion of death had *obviously* been too much to ask for.

He heard Hermione Granger gasp. For a long, agonizing moment of silence, the girl held her breath. When she finally had to exhale, the sound was caught between a sigh and sob.

Her distress, so clearly audible, made the life-debts he owed her tug uncomfortably at the core of his soul. He squeezed his eyes even tighter, and balled his hands into fists, glad that the blankets covered this helpless, overly emotional reaction.

Damn fate and all the Gods, or whoever got to decide that Granger's idea of subjecting him to Muggle speech therapy was worth yet another life-debt. And of course none of the times when *he* had saved *her* counted in his favour. Either because his objective had been to save Harry or due to his teacher's oath. Sworn to protect all of his students, saving her life had been part of his job description.

Of course he *had* to admit that if he absolutely must live, it would be infinitely harder without being able to speak. Or sing. On the other hand, maybe it would be better if he were *not* able to speak or sing when the door of his cell in Azkaban would shut behind him in three years. Insanity would certainly come faster. Though would insanity grant him oblivion?

He shuddered.

Damn Minerva, too, when he was already at it: for blithely pushing him into another three years of bondage. And *damn* *him*, for being shocked at her ruthlessness, at how she exploited his situation. Had she been a Slytherin, he would have expected her move. He would even have appreciated her stratagem. It was fairly cunning of her to save herself the trouble of having to replace her Potions master by first securing his services for another three years and then forcing him to take on an apprentice who would very conveniently be all trained up and ready to take over by the time he would be carted off to Azkaban.

Snape didn't seem able to shake off the sense of horror that gripped him since Minerva had informed him of everything that had transpired since that vile snake had sunk its fangs into his neck.

From Voldemort's downfall to his trial *in absentia* and that terrible, ridiculous condition of his probation. Though he should probably be grateful for small mercies: At least Minerva hadn't suggested that he ask one of the female Order members to sacrifice herself in order to save him from Azkaban.

A painful sneer contorted his lips.

As if he would ever consider that. He had surely ruined quite enough lives without having to add a woman's life and freedom to that balance, no matter if she acted out of a

misplaced sense of obligation, or worse, out of pity.

But the worry in Minerva's eyes had almost seemed genuine when she talked about him returning to Hogwarts to recover. He snorted. Almost as if she was still fearing for his life as if she were afraid that he would kill himself.

As if he could!

He was *cursed* to live, Bound by the second of three Unbreakable Vows he had made in his life.

And this second Vow would remain unlifted until he either died a natural death or was killed by another.

His memory was frayed he was aware of that, of holes and tears and cracks, of agony and anger no longer connected with time or place or event oh Potter, damn you, damn you, *damn you*, for being so much like her, so fucking damn *noble*. So fucking *clueless*.

But there was one memory he had retained.

The last time he'd seen Lily alive. She'd gone to visit a friend at St. Mungo's. He'd cornered her and dragged her into the linen cupboard. He'd fallen to his knees before her and begged her forgiveness all over again, had implored her to leave the country. He had seen in her eyes then that she knew what he'd done ... And then she had made him swear an Unbreakable Vow to her, using how *Slytherin* of her her idiotic, guileless friend as their Bonder.

She had made him swear to her that no matter *what* happened, he would not kill himself ...

He remembered everything. As if it was yesterday. And even after so many years the same questions tortured and haunted him. Had Lily really known what he had done? Had she forced that Vow on him because she had come to hate him? Or had she done it because she still, somehow, at least a little well, not loved him, of course, for how could she? But cared for him? In spite of it all?

The fact remained that no matter what the reasons for her request had been, *he had done what she wanted*

Since Lily was dead, he could never be released from the Vow. And now, whatever her motivations might have been, this Vow would turn into the cruellest torture he could imagine.

He was alive.

In three years' time he would be sent to Azkaban for the rest of his natural life.

And he could not kill himself unless he wanted to be forced to return as a ghost.

Of course, he mused, one thing possibly topped even that horror: Gryffindor Hermione Granger, of all people, would become his apprentice.

There was, however, one bright spot. As his apprentice she would be bound to obey any order he gave her. He smirked. Mentally he began to review the nastiest duties a Potions Master could give his apprentice. Oh, the orders he would give her ...

Abruptly he gasped as an idea struck him.

Orders. She would have to obey all of his orders. Maybe there was a way for him to be put out of his misery after all ...

Suddenly he had a lot to think about.

oooOooo

oooOooo

18. Accumulating Life Debts

Raised voices shattered his reverie. Two he recognised at once, Minerva McGonagall and Healer Mugwort. The other voice he couldn't place at once.

Then the door was thrown open with a bang, and Dolores Umbridge snarled, 'I know he's awake. And I insist on talking to him now. He'll be called up as a witness for several pending trials. And then there's his own ...'

'The decision of the Chalice of Neith is final,' protested Minerva McGonagall.

'That's what you think,' Umbridge hissed. 'And now I really need to talk to the ...*patient*.'

His eyes flared open, but in that instant two things happened nearly at the same time: Granger jumped up, putting herself between his bed and the door, and somehow she managed to find his left hand under the blankets.

Cold, thin fingers curled around his hand, holding on tightly as if *her life* depended on it.

'Headmistress McGonagall!' the girl cried. 'Professor Snape...he tried to speak...but he couldn't...and then...then he fainted!'

He took his cue from her and became perfectly still, even though that meant he had to leave his hand in her grasp.

'What happened, Miss Granger?' Professor McGonagall hurried to the bed and had the gall to actually place her hand on his forehead. It was all he could do not to jerk back.

'I... I... He wanted to speak... but he couldn't... and then, I think the exertion simply got too much for him... and he... he simply fainted.'

He almost snorted. You didn't need to be a Legilimens to realise that the girl was lying. But the level of her anguish was certainly authentic, and just obvious enough that it might *maybe* fool Umbridge.

Then Healer Mugwort raised her voice, 'Out!*Out!* Every one of you. And Umbridge, don't you *dare* set foot inside my ward again unless you come with Aurors and a warrant. Out! He's had a relapse. Yes, Miss Granger, even you.'

Reluctantly the fingers that were still holding onto his hand loosened their grip.

He heard movement, muttering, the door closed, then silence. He gave it another five minutes, then he exhaled deeply and slowly opened his eyes. Muriel Mugwort sat in the chair Granger had vacated, her keen gaze resting on his face.

Snape attempted a smirk, but that hurt the muscles in his throat and he winced. Muriel flicked her wand over him in the slow wave of a diagnostic reading. Green and red

runes lit up in the air above his body and faded again.

'Well,' the Healer said. 'That Umbridge is really a nasty piece of work, isn't she? You're lucky that the Granger girl reacted so quickly.'

A sharp metaphysical tug let him know just *how* lucky he had been. He seemed to be accumulating life-debts these days the way a stray dog acquired fleas. He closed his eyes again. *You've got no idea*, he wanted to say. But his voice failed him. So he just mutely shook his head.

'You need to sleep now,' Mugwort said. 'Your energy levels are very low.'

He wanted to shake his head again hadn't he slept long enough during the last six months? But even that small movement was too much. Fatigue dragged at his mind like lead weights, and everything grew dark.

oooOooo

Hermione recognised Mrs Petrel the moment she entered the Isolation Ward. Lois was a petite woman with very pale skin, and long, dark brown hair that she wore in a stern pony tail, much like Professor McGonagall's bun. But her chocolate-coloured eyes were warm and understanding, and her whole demeanour was always very calm, quiet and unthreatening. She was the kind of person who put you at ease. Someone you could have sitting at your bedside in silence all day if you were sick, and you wouldn't feel bad about it at all.

The amazing thing about her daughter was how *different* from her mother Alina was. The little girl looked almost exactly like her mother (only her hair was a little darker and she promised to grow tall). But temperamentally they were complete opposites. Alina was a little dervish, always on the move, sprightly, impulsive, hyper.

Well, Hermione thought, as Lois Petrel was walking towards her, *if Alina is a witch, maybe her temper is not so surprising after all. I wonder which house she'll be sorted into ...*

Lois ignored her hand and simply embraced Hermione, holding her tightly for a long moment. 'I am so sorry, Hermione. I had no idea.'

Hermione drew a shuddering breath. 'Of course not. And...' She forced a shaky smile. 'My parents ~~are~~ *are* well. So there's really no need ...'

Lois drew back and gazed intently at her. 'You've really grown up, Hermione.'

'Healer Mugwort is still with Professor Snape. There was ... a ... an altercation, but everything's under control now. I think it's best if we go to her office and wait there for her.'

'A cup of tea would not come amiss, I think,' Lois said. 'I assume you can do the ...' She waved her hand in the air as if she were holding a wand.

Hermione smiled. 'Yes, I can.'

'How convenient.'

Once ensconced in Muriel Mugwort's comfortable office, Lois carefully looked her over, and Hermione wondered just how much McGonagall and Mugwort had told the therapist about past events in the wizarding world. *A lot*, she suspected, and Lois' next words rather confirmed that.

'Hermione, you *do* realise that you don't always have to be strong? Even adults are allowed to be weak. And to need help. I know that we've been barely more than acquaintances in the past, but I *am* a link to your old life. And you *do* belong to my daughter's new world.

'If you ever need someone, a shoulder to cry on or a sympathetic ear ... I'll be there for you.'

Hermione drew a shivering breath. 'I ... Lois ... thank you. That is ... it ... means a lot.'

And it really did.

oooOooo

oooOooo

19. Pub Crawl

'Why a Muggle pub, Hermione?' Ron groused.

'Because we needed to talk without being overheard, Ronald,' Hermione replied, trying to cling to the fraying edges of her patience.

They were hanging out at a comfortably grubby pub/club affair in London. The kind of place students went for dinner and planning the rest of their evening. One of those places, Hermione imagined, that you would think back to fondly even many years later. The beer was good, though sloppily served. You could survive the fish'n'chips served there, but it was wiser to stick to the *chili con carne*. In compensation, the prices did not make your stomach lurch.

Not that her companions not even Harry, not anymore had any idea about the value of Muggle money.

Upon settling down in their booth, they'd erected first an invisible Muffliato screen around them. Then a whispered Attentionem Propulso had made sure that no one would want to pay any attention to them.

'Couldn't we have done that somewhere in Diagon Alley? Or Hogsmeade? Or...' Ron whined. They had had to schedule their meeting late because of him. The crash course in 'Business Magic' he was taking at the evening school in Skol Alley only ended at 10 pm. After just spending three hours tackling the wizarding version of accountancy, it was probably no wonder that he was grouchy.

'Ron, shut it,' Harry ordered. 'We're too well known in the wizarding world. This is much better.'

'I like it,' Luna put in. With a serene smile she surveyed her surroundings. Her large eyes shimmered in the dim light of the pub, filled with fascination at the goings-on around them

Ron and Neville looked distinctly uncomfortable.

I bet it's the clothes, Hermione mused. Ron almost never left the house without robes, and she didn't think she'd ever seen Neville in public without 'proper' clothes. *It must feel to them as if they're wearing pyjamas*. She grinned to herself. That would also explain why Luna was so comfortable ... although their eccentric friend had dressed herself, and now looked like very much like some kind of hippy in her skimpy, flowery dress, Luna fit in well. Even with her necklace of bottle-caps. One of the girls at the bar was actually decked out much weirder.

Ginny had looked down her nose at Harry for suggesting that he Transfigure their robes. Then she'd cast a quick Vestimenta Transformo on herself.

'So how long have you been reading *Vogue*?' Hermione asked her friend.

Ginny grinned. 'That outfit is actually from *Cosmopolitan*.'

The tight pair of white trousers showed off her slender legs, while the wide neckline of her charcoal top subtly emphasised her slight cleavage. Smooth amber-coloured leather boots hugged her calves. She even had a bag in the same style. Ginny had also applied some make-up, just enough to emphasise both hair and wide lips. And she wore her hair short now, styled into a rascally bob. Hermione sighed. No wonder that neither Neville nor Harry could keep their eyes off Ginny. *Another reason for Ron's bad temper, probably.*

Hrmpf.

'I suggest we get started,' Harry announced. 'How is the Plan progressing, Hermione?'

'I'll sit my NEWTs next week.' She fought a wave of panic that threatened to uncoil in her stomach.

'Don't worry, Hermione. You'll be brilliant, as usual,' Ginny encouraged her.

Hermione gave her a wry grin. 'I had better be, hadn't I? If he's ever going to take any notice of me, I have to be a bloody genius.'

Ron shook her head. 'You actually like that, don't you? A man that's a real intellectual challenge. Someone who would ordinarily never even look at you.'

'Ron!' Harry and Ginny exclaimed angrily. Neville looked as if he'd like to turn invisible. Luna nodded appreciatively.

Hermione winced, but she couldn't think of anything to say. She didn't know what to think in the first place!

'I thought you were over that, Ron,' Ginny said.

'I am,' her brother bit out. 'That was just a random observation among friends.'

For a moment silence descended around the table.

Then Harry continued, 'Right. So how is he?'

'Better,' Hermione said. 'He still has problems swallowing and almost no voice, and when he chokes he needs someone nearby who can cast Anapneo. But ~~his~~ improving. Lois tells me that what he has is a paralysis of one side of his vocal cords due to the injury. The nerves were damaged and that's something magic cannot repair. They have to heal in their own time. That takes a long many months. And he needs intensive therapy. But apart from that, he is really much better. Healer Mugwort told me that he'll be released from St. Mungo's in a week. That way he'll have a few weeks at home before summer academy starts at Hogwarts.'

'And what will he do? You said that McGonagall asked him to come back to Hogwarts,' Neville asked, 'but will he?' He took a deep swallow from his cider. 'You know, Hermione, this stuff doesn't taste not half bad.'

Luna was stacking up beer mats in front of her. She was inordinately fascinated with their different shapes and designs.

'He will,' Hermione confirmed. 'He told me so when I visited him the last time. Apparently McGonagall simply told him when he'd have to be back in time for the summer courses and informed him that I'd be ready to start my apprenticeship with him at that time.'

'And he simply agreed?' Ginny frowned.

'Apparently,' Hermione replied. 'You know, I have been wondering about that as well. Why would he so readily agree to come back? Not to mention having me, of all people, as his apprentice.'

Luna turned away from her reverie of the beer mats and gazed at her friends, her eyes wide and weird, as if she was seeing things no one else in the shabby pub could perceive.

'Hogwarts needs him,' she said simply. 'His students need him. What else would he do?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

20. Spinner's End and Dream's Beginning

Snape staggered into the small sitting-room and slumped down on the one piece of furniture that had escaped the wreckage. His old, threadbare sofa. Now soot-blackened, it looked even worse for wear.

He didn't look at his beloved books, torn and burned, leaves and spines scattered on the floor.

Of course his wards hadn't held. Raging Death Eaters had taken out their wrath over their defeat on his property. It was a fucking miracle that he wasn't able to stuff the remains of his house into a matchbox.

Not that he cared. It was not as if he had any good memories of this place.

Memories his stomach heaved as his mind rolled with the newly restored memories. Bile rose from his stomach. He mustn't give in to that impulse. He would choke.

It would be so easy to give in, to allow himself to suffocate and die. He gagged.

No. Not that way. If there was one thing he wanted less than for his miserable existence to continue beyond the fateful door of a prison-cell in Azkaban three years hence, it was for this existence to continue *ad aeternam*.

If only because he really preferred black robes to the pearly silver habit of ghosts. No, if he was to escape from this hell, he would have to keep his wits together.

*Control your breathing. Concentrate on your diaphragm. Measured, shallow breaths. Relax. Count the seconds.*The calm voice of Healer no, she wasn't a Healer of Mrs Petrel echoed in his mind.

Slowly the seconds ticked by. Gradually the urge to vomit faded, leaving him spent and weak. His head pounded.

The memories had been purified completely. He had to admit that he was grateful for that. Looking at his miserable memories with the eyes of ~~Harry~~*bloody* Potter might have killed him and brought him back as a ghost instantly. But because the memories had been cleansed that also meant they did not contain the signature of his thoughts anymore. So now they felt alien and painful in his mind. As if iron spikes had been rammed into his brain.

And oh God, oh God... Why hadn't he simply *refused* those memories? After all, there was nothing even remotely good or pleasant about them. Why had he insisted on getting back what was his, when he *knew* that it was impossible to truly return to him what he had given away in that moment of weakness, when he *knew* that whatever he'd get back wouldn't really be *his* memories anymore, when half the wizarding world *shared* those memories with him now?

What a fool he was, what a fucking fool. But fortune really did favour fools, apparently.

The purification process had worked and now everything was back in place. Back out of place. *Whatever*.

He balled his hands into fists, fighting down the cramps that gripped his stomach again.

Potter, *Bloody* Potter, why couldn't you have let them sentence me to death?

And Hermione *Clueless* Granger, why couldn't you stop to think *just once* in your life?

oooOooo

Hermione *Clueless* Granger was finishing up a tour of Hogwarts Castle in the dungeons. 'This is the Potions classroom. I'm currently conducting some experiments in here. I hope they may convince Professor Snape that it's not the most awful thing in the universe to take me on as his apprentice.'

'Why would he think that?' Lois asked. She was walking along the shelves and staring full of fascination at the many glasses, phials and bottles, with their colourful powders, glittering liquids and strange shapes.

'Well, he didn't much care for my attitude when I was his student.'

'Why? I can't imagine you being anything but studious and brilliant.' Lois stepped next to Hermione, looking intrigued at the cauldrons on the table in front of her.

Hermione sighed. 'I didn't understand that for a long time. But I guess I was just too ...*eager* ... I kept disrupting the pace he'd set for his lessons. And he...he is someone who would very much prefer to be in complete control of everything.'

'Being magic affords you a much greater control of things, I'd imagine,' Lois suggested.

Hermione grimaced. 'Not necessarily. It's ...more something personal, I think. Anyway, here's what I'm working on at the moment basically it's Muggle homeopathy with a little "*extra*". I'm trying to use magic very sparingly to make the potions easier on the system. Before hanging around at St. Mungo's so much I really had no idea of how bad magical side effects can be ...'

'That makes a lot of sense, Hermione. How are your experiments coming along?'

Hermione sighed and crease appeared between her eyebrows. *Uh* ... I'm not sure. I feel so fucking *clueless* all the time. I'm just not used to experimenting. Do you know that I always dreamed of that when I was younger? Experimenting. Doing something new and creative.

'But now ... it's hard for me to think beyond my textbooks. You know, during the last years, what with the war going on and my friends always getting into difficulties and neglecting their school work as if there'd be no life after...after...' She shook her head. 'I never had the chance to really immerse myself, to ... you know, *enjoy*, *play* with what I learned. And following the rules, being perfect at that, getting *exactly* the described results that made me feel ... safe. *Secure*. I was in control.'

'Now the war is over, and you can let go,' Lois said gently. 'At least a bit. Life is never completely safe. But your life and the lives of your friends are no longer in danger. It is okay to relax a bit. To relinquish control.'

'It's just not easy,' Hermione admitted. 'And trying *harder* all the time makes it even more difficult.'

Lois laughed, a friendly, lilting sound. 'Yes, that wouldn't work. Don't worry too much, Hermione. You've got time. Relax, and allow your dream to begin.'

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

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FAQ

See Part 1.

Chapter: Experiments

What Hermione reads is taken from 'The Natural History of Pliny', Vol. IV, chapter 81, 20, translation by John Bostock and H.T. Riley, London 1856.

The epitaph is a quote attributed to Buddha. The Montgomery sisters and brother are canon, though their names are not given.

Chapter: Damn and Damn Again

Unbreakable Vows mere death as a result for breaking the Vow has always seemed not quite persuasive to me, therefore I've added the twist that you have to return as a ghost if you break your side of the promise. You could also assume that this condition was part of the Vow, if you like that idea better.

Chapter: Pub Crawl

'Attentionem propulso' means 'I keep attention away'. 'Vestimenta transformo' means 'I transform clothes'.

Spinner's End and Dream's Beginning

'Fortune favours the fool.' is a quote by Desiderius Erasmus.

Part 3, Episodes 21-30

Chapter 3 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

□

21. An Unexpected Shopping Trip

Hermione's mind was still in the dungeons with her cauldrons when she made her way to the seventh floor for her last lesson with Professor Flitwick before she would sit her NEWTs.

The thought of the exams stabbed into the pit of her stomach and made it lurch. But only a little. She'd been so scared of the OWLs. Why wasn't she in a complete panic now?

But she wasn't. Instead, she wondered about what to do with her latest brewing project.

oooOooo

In a flight of fancy she'd added the creation of a soothing bathing lotion to her list of projects. Which was actually Ginny's fault.

Because Ginny had bought a simple, no, rather a *simply ridiculous* Muggle foaming bath that contained thousands of tiny metallic golden hearts which Ginny had charmed so that they created a whirlpool, tickling the skin of the bathers. Not that there weren't wizarding substances with the same effect, but the practical Ginny had discovered that buying Muggle was much cheaper. Being a deft hand at Charms, the young witch saw no reason to spend a Penny or a Knut more than she absolutely had to. Ginny had promised Hermione that what she did was perfectly legal and absolutely safe, since she enchanted the Muggle-made substances only her own personal use in the privacy of her own home. She'd only get in trouble if a Muggle with no clearance for the wizarding world came into contact with the results of her thriftiness.

'And I assure you, I have no intention of sharing my bathtub with an uninitiated Muggle,' Ginny had told her.

Even thinking about that tart reassurance made Hermione roll her eyes.

'I should hope not, Ginny,' Harry had commented, his cheeks colouring suspiciously.

Hermione groaned. Apparently Harry had been quite *enchanted* with Ginny's bathing solution.

No, she really did *not* need *those* images in her mind.

But the bathing incident had reminded her of what else you could brew potions. Creams, tonics, perfumes... and bathing lotions. Still unwilling to resort to stronger remedies, Hermione was on the lookout for something to keep nightmares away and fears at bay for purely selfish reasons. *A good way to stay motivated*, she mused.

The main ingredients for the Muggle recipe she'd picked as the basis for her new project were milk and a variety of essential oils (rose, jasmine, musk, ylang-ylang). Rose for calmness of mind and emotional stability, but without the sedative effects of a sleeping potion. Jasmine for invigorating effects that wouldn't make you hyper. Musk oil was best known as a powerful aphrodisiac, but it was also an amazing purifying agent. Ylang-Ylang, perhaps the most interesting substance among the lot, was just as ambiguous as musk. Not only an aphrodisiac, it would soothe an agitated heart and could even induce slightly euphoric moods.

Hermione wasn't too sure about musk and ylang-ylang in the mix she'd probably want to substitute safer substances for them in the long run, maybe lavender and a bit of frankincense instead? but as Muggle baths went, it was pleasant enough to start with. *But...* it just wasn't strong enough, *magical* enough, to combat her sleeplessness and her restlessness. Maybe mooncow milk instead of ordinary milk. But that stuff was *expensive*! She'd need a gallon to conduct enough experiments. Or if she used powdered unicorn horn instead of baking soda as a cleansing agent? Its purifying properties should be strong enough to replace the musk oil.

oooOooo

Suddenly Hermione found herself right in front of Professor Flitwick's office. When had the way from the dungeons to the seventh floor become so short? Normally it took ages to climb all those stairs. She knocked and entered the room. To her surprise, she found the diminutive professor dressed up for going out.

'Professor Flitwick?' she asked. Had she mixed up the time? Was she supposed to be elsewhere right now?

'No, no, Miss Granger I haven't forgotten your lesson,' Professor Flitwick piped up. 'But it won't take place here. We're going to Diagon Alley, to visit Ollivander's today.'

Hermione frowned, but the professor smiled at her enthusiastically.

'It's time you got a second wand.'

'What?' Dumbstruck, Hermione could only gape at her teacher. Only the most powerful and adept witches and wizards could work with two wands. She knew that Dumbledore had had two wands. Flitwick, of course, could use two as well. She suspected that Snape probably could, too. But she? She was still practicing some of the more complicated one-handed swirls Flitwick was teaching her every night!

'Yes, Miss Granger. You will definitely need a second wand if you're going to be Severus Snape's apprentice. Do not look so frightened! We've not been practicing all those moves for nothing.' Flitwick beamed at her. 'I am sure that at the end of the summer not even Snape will have much to complain about when it comes to your wand skills.'

Practising all those moves... Suddenly Hermione felt rather stupid. That was why Flitwick had insisted on training her to use her left hand. That was why some of the new patterns didn't make sense to her at all. They were only half a pattern! She'd need a second wand to complete the movements.

How devious of the little old man! That was positively *Slytherin*! To leave her in the dark like that, embarrassed by her lack of progress and her clumsiness ...

'Are you ready to Floo? I really don't fancy walking to the Apparition point in that kind of weather.'

Hermione glanced at the window. Heavy spring rains were pounding against the panes. She'd never noticed, spending her morning in the dungeons.

'Flooding is fine with me, Professor.'

Suddenly her stomach quivered giddily. *A second wand. Oh my GOD, Professor Flitwick thinks I'm good enough to handle a second wand!*

With a shaking hand, she picked up a pinch of Floo powder and threw it into the fire. 'Ollivander's, please,' she said with a firm voice. 'Diagon Alley.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

22. Wandcraft

Coughing, Hermione stumbled out of the fireplace and stared. The narrow little shop had changed. The window sparkled in the sunlight of the spring afternoon. The hardwood floor gleamed with polish, filling the room with the scent of beeswax and vervain. There were new shelves, no longer dark with age, but bright new pinewood, reminding Hermione of IKEA, of all things. But the shelves were stacked from floor to ceiling with the very same slender boxes she remembered from her exhilarating first visit to this shop in the company of her parents and Professor McGonagall.

The long, dark desk was still there, as well, although deep scratches and soot-marks gouged the wood. And behind the desk was Mr Ollivander. The old man looked frail and thin. His wispy white hair reminded her of a fluffy cumulus cloud and his moon-like eyes were as disconcerting as ever.

'Miss Granger,' he said in a husky voice. 'I see you have come to choose your second wand.'

Ollivander gazed at her thoughtfully for a moment. 'Vine suits you even better now. A shrub as sprightly as your hair, if I may say so. Good for binding spells. Enhancing the powers of the bearer, it carries the spark of inspiration. Did you know that grapevine is traditionally also connected with healing and fertility? Since the days of Dionysus vine has been greeted as the disperser of grief and sorrow. And not only its produce, but its wood, as well.'

Hermione cleared her throat, unsure of how to reply. But apparently the aged wizard did not expect a comment, because he turned to the fireplace, which flared green again, announcing the impending arrival of Professor Flitwick.

'And my dear Filius, of course. Ash and birch.'

The small wizard dusted off his robes and beamed at the other man. 'And still in perfect working condition, after seventy-nine years.'

'I expected no less.' Ollivander solemnly inclined his head.

'Now, Miss Granger. Please place your first wand on the desk,' he said softly and stepped to his desk. 'Would you like to try this? Cherry, and a hair from the coat of a Cerynaian hind. Use your left hand, please.'

But the wand remained quiescent. It didn't even prickle, when she gave it a cautious wave.

'Mistletoe with a griffin-feather, maybe?'

She managed to burn her own hand with it.

'Oh no, oh no. But don't worry it always takes much longer to find a suitable second wand. After all, it has not only to complement your personality, but that of your first wand, too.'

After three hours of waving her left wrist in miniature flicks, trying out wand after wand, Hermione was getting sorely tired. As her initial elation was wearing off, doubts began to creep into her mind. Maybe Professor Flitwick had made a mistake, and she wasn't ready for a second wand? Maybe she would never be?

The wand that lay in front of her at the moment was longer than her first and more rigid. The wood had a reddish shimmer and just a few marks where twigs or branches had been. It looked rather handsome.

When she picked it up, her stomach tingled. When she waved it, a shiver raced down her spine. She opened her eyes. A pearly glow shone around the wand and what was more, an answering sheen shimmered along her first wand where it lay on Ollivander's desk.

'Ah...' Ollivander sighed with satisfaction. 'Here we go. Yew, 16.535 433 071 inches, containing the feather of a sphinx. An interesting choice. A male second wand to match your female first. It signifies rebirth. A good wand for Transfiguration and Arithmancy. A wand that may guide and transform, the objects it is used upon just as much as its wielder. And a sphinx' power for wisdom and cunning.'

oooOooo

Severus Snape took a deep breath and entered the shop.

It was late at night, and Diagon Alley was almost deserted. He knew he had to be very grateful that Ollivander had decided to see him at all, and agreeing to open up the shop at this ungodly hour was certainly more than he had any right to expect. And he was not even sure if it was wise for him to come. What would he need wands attuned to his very soul for at Hogwarts? Brewing school potions and teaching could be done with any wand bought off the rack.

But ever since his first wand had been broken how that memory *hurt*, even today, even after so many years he had yearned to have a wand again that would respond perfectly to him, to the magic deep within his soul ... For many years he had resisted that desire. A wand imprinted on him would have been a liability in his position. And the events of the past year had proven just how well his caution had served him, when the D...when Voldemort's ignorance of wandcraft had eventually served to defeat him.

'Welcome, Master Snape,' Ollivander said. A single candle illuminated the old man's face, casting eerie shadows of his fluffy hair against the stacks of wand boxes behind him.

'Thank you for ... agreeing ... to see me ...' He was painfully aware that his voice amounted to no more than a hoarse whisper. Yet it was better than it had been.

'Ebony, it was. And unicorn hair. A wand of darkness and light.' Ollivander sniffed. 'A pity it was broken.'

'Try this one first.'

oooOooo

'The wand chooses the wizard,' Ollivander had told him before closing the door behind him, an enigmatic smile wrinkling his face. 'And always for a reason. Don't forget that.'

Now Snape sat on his threadbare sofa again, a wand in each shaking hand.

Yew with dragon heartstring in his right. Birch with the feather of a sphinx in his left.

Resurrection and a new beginning.

Strength of heart and inner wisdom.

If only he could make himself believe in the symbolism of wandcraft again.

oooOooo

oooOooo

23. A Good Night's Rest

The good thing about the last night before the NEWTs was that Hermione had an excellent reason for not being able to sleep. An easy to explain, very obvious reason. She took the Calming Draught provided for her by Madam Pomfrey and dozed, her head resting on her pillow, which in turn rested on a stack of the most important books for her four subjects. (No one was here yet to find out about how she had at last succumbed to ancient superstitions. And if the house-elves discovered her last-ditch efforts to prepare for her exams, they probably wouldn't tell on her.)

Arithmancy wouldn't be a problem. She felt safe there. Numbers were good. Figures were fine. Calculations were, well, calculable. And the Muggle maths she'd been doing seemed to help her figure out the more bizarre problems posed in the mock exams she'd been doing. Even though she wasn't quite sure why.

She turned on her back, the rounded spine of her Potions book pressing almost comfortable against her neck from underneath the pillow.

Charms ... ordinary, NEWT-level Charms wouldn't be hard either. Apprentice level Charms even if the apprenticeship wasn't Charms, but Potions, *was* much harder.

She rubbed her aching left wrist.

Now that she had two practice wands to deal with, the joy over Flitwick's trust in her potential had given way to strained sinews and several small bruises. But she did love the feel of the second wand in her left hand. It felt almost as if she were finally able to eat with both fork and knife. She giggled and drew her feet up against her body. What a silly comparison!

Theoretical Herbology would be a lark. Of that she was certain. But the practical. She chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip. She simply didn't have Neville's affinity for plants. Or Luna's ... whatever it was Luna was having. Empathy?

Then something strange occurred to her. She sat up, a frown creasing her brows.

In sixth year, when Harry's potions skills had suddenly increased due to his perusal of the Half-Blood Prince's book, she'd been well, worried about the book (and after the incident with Riddle's diary, who could blame her for that?) but mostly she'd been plain *jealous*. She'd hated her clumsiness on a broom, too, but that had been easier to ignore. Brain vs. brawn, she could live with that. Some people had talent for dancing or Quidditch; others didn't. But when it got to book-learning, or even something to do with your hands, like preparing potions ingredients, or taking care of plants that was different. You could *learn* those things by practicing.

But now ... She knew that she could reasonably expect to ace the theoretical part of Herbology. And she'd do well in enough in the practical. However, Neville would be much better at *both*, because he just really *got* plants. And Luna was a Ravenclaw. For all her weirdness, she was almost as good academically as Hermione. And not Hermione huffed a little as *uptight* about things. Not as tense. Luna just ... remained unfazed. Even if she was not quite as smart as Hermione, Luna made up for that by being more relaxed. Somehow Hermione felt that really ought to be a contradiction, but she knew it wasn't.

Weird.

And weirder still, she wasn't *bothered* by the fact. A thought occurred to her and she turned towards her cat, a ginger fluffball at the end of her bed.

'Crooks,' she asked. 'Do you think I'm growing up at last?'

The cat didn't react.

Hermione snorted. 'Okay, I get it. As long as I'm even asking that question ...*probably not.*'

She lay back on her bed and her books, staring up at the hangings of her four poster bed. Dark blue, with tiny silver stars it was almost like looking at the sky on a summer's night.

Potions.

The one subject that made her stomach quiver with nerves and made her feel nauseated instantly. She fidgeted, nervously twisting her fingers this way and that, resisting the sudden urge to jump up and pace the room. But that would undo all the nice drowsiness of the Calming Draught she had taken.

Deep breath down to your stomach. Hold to the count of three. Concentrate on breathing out, let your body take care of inhaling.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Slughorn, slimy slug that he was, had been an excellent tutor. Perusing Professor Snape's old book and Lily's Potions Diary had been a real eye-opener. And though her experiments were not getting anywhere at the moment, even just *attempting* them, forcing herself to move beyond textbook recipes, no matter how scary that was ... It had changed her outlook on the subject. It was intriguing, it was exciting. As if she was doing riddles as if the solution was lying hidden just outside her field of vision, with the properties of possible ingredients providing the cues.

Hermione released her breath in a deep sigh.

She was fairly certain that she could take anything *the Ministry* would throw at her.

Severus Snape was an entirely different matter, however. He was the best Potions Master the wizarding world had seen in *over a century*.

And he did not want an apprentice.

He hated students. He'd hate having an apprentice even more. And most of all, he'd hate having her as an apprentice. Not to mention...no. It was best not to think about that. She wouldn't think about *that* now. *Couldn't*. Or she'd have a nervous breakdown.

Her stomach lurched and she swallowed dryly.

She would simply (simply???) have to make sure that she was the best apprentice imaginable. No. She had to do more. She would have to make sure to be the best apprentice *Severus Snape* could imagine.

And that was a task that might *just* turn out to be impossible to master. It was also very definitely a far more frightening challenge than any NEWTs Potions exam could ever be.

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oooOooo

24. Tell-Tale Heart

She didn't even have the grace to knock. Instead, she simply cut through his shaky wards like a hot knife through butter. Standing in the middle of the wreckage that was all that remained of his sitting room, she looked at him with horrified pity in her eyes.

'Oh, Severus,' McGonagall whispered.

'What do you want?' he rasped, coughed *wheezed* forced himself to concentrate on his throat muscles, his stomach muscles, so he wouldn't choke, and continued in a slow, hoarse whisper. 'Your precious summer academy is due to start only in a week.'

Minerva ignored him, surveying the ruined room, flinching visibly when the title of a mangled book caught her eye. Snape shifted uncomfortably. He had managed to pile up the shreds in a corner, but his strength hadn't been enough to actually dispose of the remains of his library.

'Who was it?' he croaked. 'Who tattled on me? That imbecilic Muggle? That Petrel woman?'

'Mrs Petrel is an extremely sensible young lady. With a remarkable grasp of magic for a Muggle. Of course she *tattled*'. She told Miss Granger that she was worried about you being here on your own, and Miss Granger in turn had the good sense to come to me about the matter.'

'Good sense?' Severus scowled. Laughter forced its way up his throat, emerging as the sounds of a hacking cough. 'Miss Granger? Who had the bad taste and idiotic idea to save my life? And the worse fortune to actually succeed?'

'Severus!'

The outraged cry afforded him a perverse satisfaction. But instead of giving him one of her famous McGonagall rants that once had reduced him to a quivering mess at age thirteen, she only took a deep breath and shook her head. 'You don't have any idea what Miss Granger did, do you?'

He frowned, trying to ignore the uncomfortable pressure of renewed obligations and life-debts weighing him down.

'What?' he breathed irritably. 'She saved my bloody life. And? She seems to be making rather a habit of that, too, if you look at Potter and Weasley.'

'Severus.' McGonagall's voice turned very soft. 'How long had you been taking that snake venom before V before Riddle threw that monster at you?'

That made him jerk up his head and meet her eyes. Caught in the disconcerting, penetrating stare of Hogwarts' new headmistress, he found that he could only tell her the truth.

'Ever since Narcissa forced that Vow on me. Dumbledore made me,' he muttered. 'But what has that to do with the heroics of your precious Miss Granger or her invasion of my privacy?'

Still Minerva held his gaze. 'Do you know exactly *what* Miss Granger did to save you?'

He shook his head. He didn't want to know! Wasn't it enough that she had forced him to live, when all he had wanted was death?

'She used Muggle First-Aid, Severus. *Mouth-to-mouth*. She swallowed your blood. And with it, she swallowed Nagini's venom. And *she* hadn't tried to systematically build up at least some measure of immunity against that vile beast's poison. Her heart stopped beating twice in the first night at St Mungo's. Her hands were completely flayed because they were drenched in your blood.'

He crossed his arms over his chest. 'My heart stopped three times, Mugwort was pleased to let me know, so what?'

But even he realised that his tone notably lacked conviction.

'Miss Granger visited you almost every second day while you were unconscious,' McGonagall continued. 'She *cares* about you. Of course she would alert me to the fact that you are all alone in a ruin of a house, unable to take care of yourself. That is not an invasion of privacy.'

Sitting at his bedside while he was unconscious... sending McGonagall over to help him... caring about him? Suddenly he stared at McGonagall in shock. 'Do you mean to tell me that this irritating girl has developed a crush on me? And you want her to become my *apprentice*?'

McGonagall laughed out loud and briskly shook her head. 'Really, Severus. Whatever happened to your good judgement? Hermione Granger had only *one* crush in her whole life - on poor Gilderoy when she was thirteen. Are you still holding that against her?'

'Hrmpf.' He painfully cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice was low and halting, but the sounds were a little smoother. 'And what about Krum? And that Weasley boy?'

McGonagall sighed and sat down on the one chair still standing. 'She was in love with Krum, but thankfully she was intelligent enough not to love him. Weasley she certainly loves, but I think she couldn't be *in love* with him even if she wanted to.

'Is it so very hard to understand that someone may simply *care* for you?'

Snape stared at McGonagall in silence for a moment. Then he drew a ragged breath and replied honestly, 'Yes, it is.'

'Oh, Severus,' Minerva said softly, sympathy softening the lines of her face again.

He resisted the urge to complain about that highly annoying refrain. Instead he only rubbed his aching forehead.

Pouncing on that opening like the cat that she was, McGonagall roused herself and announced briskly, 'Be that as it may. You'd better get used to the fact that there are still people around who care about you. Including myself. And you're not staying here one more night. You are coming back to Hogwarts with me now. I'll send a couple of house-elves over to clean up this mess and get your things. Oh, and you can spare your throat the effort of even trying to refuse, because I will not listen to any more

arguments from you today.'

After a moment, 'By the way, whatever happened to the houses next door? I thought there were Muggles living there?'

He winced, his shoulders slumping wearily. 'There *were*,' he whispered. 'Immigrants. Poor, you know. Many children. Seems it wasn't healthy to have me as a neighbour.'

'Oh, God ...'

oooOooo

oooOooo

25. Conditions of Indenture

'Here's to Hermione!' 'Miss Granger!' 'Four Outstanding!' The toasts rang out, and the resident ghosts clapped their translucent hands.

At the other end of the High Table, Severus Snape, once more dressed in his customary teaching attire of black black trousers, black frock coat, black robes scowled bleakly. He was even paler than usual. His skin had lost the sallow tinge that might once have indicated that he'd actually be able acquire a nice tan if he'd only get out into the sunshine regularly. The bite marks of Nagini stood out against the pallor of his neck, thick, knotted scar tissue in angry reds and purples.

Minerva McGonagall shook Hermione's hands. A wave of giddy pleasure flowed over Hermione. She just couldn't stop smiling tonight. She'd even dared to smile at Professor Snape.

'We need to talk about your apprenticeship,' Headmistress McGonagall informed Hermione briskly. 'Are you free after dinner?'

At the mere mention of her apprenticeship Hermione's heartbeat quickened and her stomach quivered. *Uh...* I wanted to go to Hogsmeade with Bill with Professor Weasley. But I can easily change arrangements.'

McGonagall nodded. 'I don't begrudge you your celebration, my dear. Your results are truly outstanding. But someone has to explain all the ramifications of an apprenticeship in the wizarding world to you. And as Professor Snape has made it plain that he does not wish to have an apprentice...'

'...least of all me...'

McGonagall gave her a wry grin. 'There is that, too, yes. But, therefore, I do not think he would care to make sure you truly understand the conditions of the apprenticeship you will be entering. And if you enter a binding magical contract, you *need* to be aware of exactly what you are doing.'

Hermione's stomach felt as if a herd of hippogriffs had decided to stampede. She swallowed hard and was glad that the noise of conversations buzzing around the High Table covered what was most likely a very audible gulp.

She took another deep breath. 'Yes, of course, Headmistress. I appreciate that very much.'

McGonagall smiled. 'Good. In my office at shall we say 9.30?'

oooOooo

'Here,' Minerva McGonagall said. 'I have already drawn up the indenture.'

The headmistress placed a large roll of parchment covered in swirls of dark green ink on the desk between them. 'I'm afraid that such binding magical contracts still require you to sign them in blood.'

Hermione took a deep breath and pulled the parchment a little closer to her. She'd read up about magical apprenticeships, of course. She knew that the blood signature was an essential part of the contract, but it still made her uncomfortable.

'The roots of the ceremony go back to antiquity, but the procedures in place nowadays have been formed in the Middle Ages. The medieval oaths of fealty have much in common with parts of the ceremony,' McGonagall explained.

Hermione frowned. 'In what way?'

She couldn't remember reading anything about that.

The headmistress gave her a thin-lipped smile. 'Blood to sign you, kiss to bind you.'

Hermione gulped. 'Oh. I didn't know that.'

'That's why I've asked you to meet me here tonight,' McGonagall sighed. 'Your plan as far as it goes is a good one. Severus would never accept help out of pity, no matter how deserved it was. He-Hermione, what we are going to talk about here tonight, I do hope that it goes without saying that it stays in this room? Not even your co-conspirators may hear of this. The only chance your plan has of succeeding is that you follow this through with the trust and honour traditionally demanded in this indenture.'

Hermione nodded. 'Of course, Headmistress.'

'I think we can move beyond this form of address,' McGonagall said. 'Tomorrow you will be made Severus' apprentice and as such you will be a member of the staff. My name is Minerva, as you well know.'

Hermione needed a second until she was able to talk. Her heartbeat pounded so much that she could feel it in her ears. 'Thank you, Minerva.'

Suddenly Minerva McGonagall's smile warmed. 'It's normal to be nervous, Hermione. When Albus asked me to use his first name, I panicked and almost bit off the tip of my tongue.'

'Back to Severus. You know a bit of what he's been through. Even based on the little you know, you have to be aware of the fact that he is not inclined to believe that someone might respect him, or much less care about him. That apprenticeship may give you the opportunity to win his respect as much as make him aware that you truly respect him. I fervently hope that mutual respect may give us an opportunity to convince him that marriage to you is an acceptable way of keeping him out of Azkaban at the end of his probation.'

'However, I am not certain if he will agree. The question you must ask yourself today is: can you live with that risk?'

Hermione bit on her lower lip. Images that kept her awake at night crowded into her mind. Blood, so much blood. And that empty, despairing look. She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head to clear her mind.

'I don't know,' she admitted at last. 'But if it comes to that, I will have to.'

'Do you know if he is going to try to find a way to ... fulfil the terms of that condition on his own?'

Minerva sighed. 'He won't. That's what he told me, and I have no reason to doubt him. In fact, I'm almost surprised that he has not tried to kill himself.'

Hermione flinched, then she forced her attention back to the parchment in front of her. 'I think I may need a few minutes to work my way through this.'

The headmistress nodded. 'Take your time. If you have any questions, ask them now.'

Hermione bent over the coiled green script and read:

*This indenture witnesses that **Hermione Jean Granger**, graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, by and with the consent of the Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Minerva McGonagall, has put herself Apprentice to and with **Severus Snape** of Spinner's End, now Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, aforesaid Potions Master, and after the manner of an apprentice, with him to tarry and dwell from the day of date unto the full end and for the full term of three years from thence next and immediately following and ensuing fully to be complete, ended during all which term the said **Hermione Granger** apprentice to and with the said **Severus Snape** as her master well and faithfully shall serve; her craft and magick exercise solely on his behalf and his command, and obeye him in thought, word and deed; as pertaining to his craft and lore, his magick and mystery, for excellence continually shall strive and at all times shall fulfil whatever duties said master requests that she shall do or shall refrain from doing; his secrets she shall keep, his commandments lawful and honest everywhere shall do; hurt or damage to her said master she shall not do, nor consent to be done, but according to his power shall let and hinder or thereof her master inform.*

Taverns or Alehouses, she shall not haunt or frequent unless it be about her master's business here to be done.

All dice, cards or any other unlawful games she shall not play.

The goods of her said master inordinately she shall not waste, nor them to anybody lend without her master's license or consent.

*Matrimony or engagement with any man during or within the said terme she shall not contract without her master's consent nor from his service neither by day or by night shall absent herself as well in words as in deeds, so that said **Severus Snape** unto the said **Hermione Granger**, his apprentice in the craft, magick and mystery and occupation of a Potions Master the which he shall use after the best manner that he can or may shall show, teach, instruct and inform or cause to be showed, taught, instructed and informed as much as thereunto belongs or in any way appertains, and in due manner chastise her in the craft, lore, magick and mystery of his Mastery, and that said **Severus Snape** shall never abuse or exploit said apprentice and the powers of said apprentice in any way that is unlawful according to the craft, magick and mystery and occupation, and that said **Severus Snape** said apprentice under his care shall protect and guard and in all respects of his craft, lore, magick and mystery and occupation shall be responsible for, and finding unto his said apprentice all pay, meat, drink, washing and lodging to as such an apprentice of such a craft, magick and mystery or occupation is accustomed to.*

*And that finally said **Severus Snape** shall bestow upon said **Hermione Granger** the badge of apprenticeship to bind himself to her in all manner of aforesaid indenture and that said **Hermione Granger** shall accept this badge of apprenticeship from said **Severus Snape** to bind herself to him in all manner of aforesaid indenture until either of them dies or is killed or the agreed upon term is ended according to the dates set forth in this indenture.*

In witness thereof the said master and apprentice of these present, these indentures with their hands and seals and blood have set, the thirty-first day of May, Anno Domini 1999, so that said apprenticeship and indenture may end on the first day of June, Anno Domini 2002.

Sealed, delivered, and exchanged in blood and trust in the presence of ...

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26. The Apprenticeship Begins

Snape caught her after breakfast.

'Miss Granger? I need to show you your new quarters. The house-elves have already moved your belongings. You may use the rest of the day to settle in.'

His voice had improved, Hermione noted. He spoke haltingly, the sounds hoarse and thin. But for all that, she could understand him easily every syllable was clearly enunciated. She smiled at him. She was so glad that her idea of calling in a Muggle speech therapist had worked out so well.

'Thank you, sir.'

Snape frowned at her. 'Well, come a' he started irritably, but his voice broke when he put too much pressure on the vowel, and he coughed painfully. 'Come along,' he whispered, glaring at her.

Hermione tried to keep her face impassive, remembering what McGonagall had told her. *He doesn't want pity naturally, since he is a very proud man.*

Following the professor as he swooped out of the Great Hall, Hermione sighed. Apprenticeship with Snape would not be easy for a Gryffindor used to basically wearing her heart out on her sleeve.

oooOooo

Hermione had suspected that Snape's private rooms would be in the dungeons. She was not prepared for the fact that they were actually half a level above them, with wide windows and a beautiful view of the lake.

There were three entrances to the flight of rooms. At the southern end a stair descended to an age-darkened painting near Snape's office, while the door at the opposite end opened to the Slytherin common room. Roughly in the middle, an archway led to a spiral staircase that could be accessed from the office.

Hermione's room was at the southern end of the corridor, a spacious bedroom-and-study with an adjacent bathroom. Next was a sitting room and library, followed by Snape's study, a private potions laboratory, Snape's bedroom and bathroom.

'You will not enter my personal study or the private lab without my express permission. But you may feel free to peruse the library.' A raised eyebrow seemed to indicate that anything else would have been an impossible demand from the resident Gryffindor bookworm, so he wouldn't even attempt to make it. 'Should you require anything, the house-elf appointed to me is Nag. I assure you I shall be very displeased should I discover that clothes have been provided for him in order to end his service.'

'As long as you are my apprentice, you shall wear Slytherin colours in public. You may, however, dress in colours of your choice when in the privacy of these chambers. A robe for tonight's ceremony has been placed in your room.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.' Hermione's face burned. Her failed crusade to liberate house-elves would probably haunt her for the rest of her life. And Slytherin colours? She

winned mentally. She could just imagine what Ron would say.

'A suitable amount of money for your personal needs will be deposited monthly in your Gringotts vault. I expect you to keep accounts in an orderly fashion, to be presented to me every quarter.'

'Yes, sir.'

oooOooo

Hermione, resplendent in new black Apprentice robes with emerald-green border and lining, her wild curls sleeked back into a stern bun that rivalled McGonagall's, stood in front of the Potions Master. She was acutely aware of everyone watching her, as she stood at the centre of the dais.

The nick in her left palm that had provided the blood for her signature hurt. Contact with Nagini's venom had left her hands incredibly sensitive. McGonagall rolled up the parchment and nodded to her.

Time for her oath.

Hermione swallowed hard and began, her voice shrill and shaky in her ears.

'I, Hermione Jean Granger, swear to you, Severus Snape, my master, that I shall serve you well and faithfully in all matters of craft, lore, magic and mystery,' she gasped for breath, 'to obey your command in thought, word and deed, and to protect and to honour you and your secrets in thought, word and deed in accordance to this indenture.'

Her voice wobbled slightly, but she continued, 'I swear to be true in my search for knowledge and to strive for excellence in all matters of craft, lore, magic and mystery. May my words and deeds always reflect my honour and respect for you.'

Black eyes met hers, captured her gaze. She found she couldn't look away as Severus Snape began to whisper his part of the oath:

'I, Severus Snape, for my part swear to you, Hermione Jean Granger, my apprentice, to provide support, opportunity and guidance for all your endeavours in the matters of craft, lore, magic and mystery, to never abuse or exploit my position in accordance to this indenture, but to meet service, honour and respect you extend to me in equal terms, and that I shall defend you with all of my powers for as long as you are dependant unto me in accordance to this indenture. As a token of the bond of apprentice unto master and master unto apprentice, I give you my badge so all may know in whose service you are.'

Although he spoke very slowly, the sounds pressed and obviously painful, he never wavered. When he had ended, he pulled something from his sleeve and stepped closer to her. Hermione shivered as he reached for her, attaching a green and silver badge to the lapels of her robes with remarkably gentle fingers.

Hermione was glad that Minerva had prepared her for what would happen next, or she would have certainly flinched away. She was trembling and her hands were shaking, as she inched closer towards him and raised her head to meet his lips.

The darkness of his eyes seemed to swallow her, but she still couldn't break free from his gaze. Then, very softly, she felt a velvet brush of lips on her mouth.

The kiss concluded the ceremony.

She was now apprentice to Severus Snape, Master of Potions, Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

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27. Many Meetings

Hermione had fled from the commotion at the castle that was caused by the arrival of the students who would participate in the Hogwarts Summer Academy 1999. But apparently the edge of the lake had not been quite far enough.

'Malfoy.'

'Granger.' He looked her up and down, taking in the emerald-green trim of her robes, the apprentice badge, the green ribbon that tied back her hair and the pale green of her blouse. 'You're even braver than I thought you were. Those colours suit you.'

A year ago she'd have retorted with a scathing reply. But a year ago he wouldn't have tried so hard to sound polite, as if he actually meant what he said. Maybe he even did. Worse, she knew he was right. Slytherin green suited her much better than Gryffindor red.

'Thank you. And you know me ... everything for knowledge.'

He shook his head. 'Then why aren't you in Ravenclaw?'

She couldn't help a wry grin. 'You've got me there.'

'He-he's really not so bad. At least to us Slytherins,' Malfoy offered. 'He was always fair to us.'

'More than fair, I'd say.' She bit on her tongue. That wasn't *precisely* disrespectful, was it? She'd learnt the conditions of her indenture by heart.

Now it was Malfoy's turn to smile. But although his lips curled, his eyes didn't reflect the expression.

'Perhaps,' he admitted. 'Well, I need to go and get my things sorted. See you around, I suppose?'

She nodded, staring after him, more than a little confused. He had certainly changed since she'd seen him the last time.

oooOooo

'Merlin, Hermione! Whatever are you *wearing*?' Ginny exclaimed, grabbing Hermione's arm and turning her around. Neville, Luna, Lavender and Seamus were following Ginny, their expressions betraying varying degrees of fascination or repulsion.

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Unless you're colour-blind it should be fairly obvious that I'm dressed in Slytherin colours.'

'Blimey, Hermione,' Seamus Finnigan sputtered. 'How can you stand that?'

'Well, as I'm Professor Snape's apprentice, it would hardly be appropriate for me to be dressed like a Gryffindor, would it?' Hermione replied with a certain irritation.

Lavender Brown, who'd come closer to listen to what Hermione would say, smirked, but when she spoke she sounded almost envious. 'Those colours look really good on you, Hermione.'

Ginny narrowed her eyes at Hermione. Obviously she ended up agreeing with Lavender, for she promptly moved on to the next uncomfortable subject. 'And did you just have a nice *chat* with Malfoy?'

Hermione sighed, suddenly very grateful that neither Harry nor Ron would be returning to Hogwarts for their NEWTs. 'He's not all that bad, Ginny. He did help us in the battle.' She hesitated. 'And I think he's been going through a hard time. You do know the conditions of the Malfoys' probation?'

The youngest Weasley frowned and shook her head. The others moved closer, obviously also unaware of those details, though they'd been covered by both the *Prophet* and *The Quibbler* at the time of the trial.

'Well, his majority has been postponed until he turns twenty one to make sure that there is time for him to ... prove his willingness to mend his ways. And guardianship of Draco has been taken away from his parents. His legal guardian is Andromeda Black now, his closest surviving family member.'

Ginny stared at Hermione, blinked and sputtered. 'How ... why ... how come *missed* this? Why didn't my parents ... does that mean he actually *lives* with Teddy?'

Hermione raised her eyebrows at her friend, wondering if she'd made a mistake in telling her. But those facts had been all over the press. They were not exactly a secret least of all Snape's secret.

'Look don't you think it's time to leave the past behind us and move on?' Hermione's head was starting to hurt. 'I know that we Gryffindors can bear a grudge for all eternity, but ...'

'He *did* help us in the end,' Neville stated.

Ginny glared at Neville, but there was something in the young man's calm gaze that made her relent. 'If he behaves himself, I guess I can do the same. Hey, if you know about what happened to Draco, do you know the conditions for his parents' probation as well?'

'Indeed I do,' Hermione replied and couldn't help grinning. 'The Malfoys have to work at St Mungo's for three years, their money was seized and given to charities, all their house-elves were liberated, *and* they've been spelled so they can't do any magic *at all* for three years.'

'Now that's sweet,' Neville said dreamily. 'Just imagine Narcissa scouring chamber pots the Muggle way ...'

'So what's like to be Snape's apprentice?' Luna asked, blithely ignoring all talk of old enemies and clothes.

'It's Professor Snape, Luna. I can't really say yet,' Hermione replied. 'The ceremony only took place on Monday.'

Just two days ago. Her mind whirled when she thought of the ritual. She knew it had been only a required part of the ceremony, but for some reason she couldn't forget the way his lips had felt on her mouth. So ... *gentle* ...

Quickly she continued, so the others wouldn't notice the heat rising in her cheeks. 'I'll be teaching remedial Potions and Charms to the Second Years and I'll have study groups to supervise with Third Years and Fourth Years. Apart from that I have to study on my own, I've been recruited to brew basic potions for Madam Pomfrey *and* I've got to come up with a practical project for Professor Snape to supervise.'

'That sounds fair beastly,' Neville said with admiration in his voice.

Hermione shrugged, but couldn't help feeling a bit pleased. 'Oh, you know me, Neville. The greatest possible challenge and all ...'

Lavender snorted. 'You really *are* a masochist, Hermione. But as the saying goes it takes all sorts to make a world. So have you guys any ideas yet about which subjects you want to take for your NEWTs?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

28. Not A Student Anymore

Severus Snape stared out of the window. His throat hurt, his temples were throbbing. He had an apprentice. He was at Hogwarts. Oh, and he was alive when he really should be past all of those irritations.

In other words, Severus Snape was in a very bad mood.

At the edge of the lake, a lone figure was walking away from the castle. He narrowed his eyes. Granger? Could it be that the chaos inside the castle had become too much for her, as well? Definitely. He knew that purposeful stride. Hermione Granger. Resident Gryffindor ... what had he always called her? He frowned. It was more than a year since he'd encountered her in class for the last time. He would never forget her overeager hand waving, of course. Or her tendency to disrupt the pace he set for his lessons. But beyond that ...

... right: *know-it-all*. That's what he'd called her.

As he watched her making her way along the lake, he wondered if she still was. Observing her, he remembered how her lips had felt under his ... so soft, so smooth, but still firm. If he was to believe Minerva (and he had no reason not to), those lips would have been the last thing he could have felt on this earth. He sighed. If he'd been at all conscious, that wouldn't have been all that bad.

No.

No.

What was he thinking? She was his *apprentice*. He must *not* think of her lips. It was only a ritual. An ancient, time-honoured ritual.

He turned his attention back to the lake. She was no longer alone at the lakeside. He narrowed his eyes and scowled *Of course*. Her little Gryffindor friends had arrived today. Naturally she *had* to meet up with them *right* away. *Damn and damn again*.

And he hadn't had a chance to talk with her about appropriate behaviour as a member of the staff. Well, *that* should prove to be interesting. He would get a good idea of just how much she had matured in a very short time. He didn't expect much of her, to be honest.

No matter how sweet that kiss had tasted.

oooOooo

'Miss Granger. How *good* of you to return to your quarters before midnight.'

Hermione jerked away and almost fell backwards down the stairs. She would have, probably, if an arm slung across her back hadn't caught her in time. She gasped and pulled away, leaning against the cold wall of the corridor for support.

'I...I...am sorry, sir. I was not aware that I had to observe a curfew.'

Black eyes blazed at her in the flickering light of torches.

'No,' he whispered. 'I guess you were not.'

'There are things we need to discuss. We can do so in the morning. Or ... at your convenience ..*now*.'

Hermione stared at her master, unbalanced, scared. *I chose this*, she thought distantly. *This is what I wanted. This is what I have to do.*

'Any time,' she managed.

'Good,' he replied. But he didn't seem satisfied.

He led the way to the library. She already loved the room filled with books from floor to the ceiling, what was there ~~not~~ to love about it?

'Sit.'

She obeyed, perching on the edge of an armchair, while he loomed over her, black robes throwing even darker shadows at this time of the night.

'It has come to my notice that you have been ... in the company of students today. That is not permissible.' He sounded angry, almost disgusted.

'What?' she exclaimed, instantly outraged. She hadn't expected anything good, as tense as he'd been when he'd greeted her. But that?

Wait. She bit her tongue. She was tired and not at her best this late in the evening. But ... She stared at him. Did he have ~~reason~~ for being angry with her?

'Not even a week, Miss Granger? And already I need to remind you of the conditions of the contract you signed? And with your own life's blood, too?' Snape bent down to face her. 'Trust me, you do not want me to chastise you as is my right according to said contract,' he hissed.

She stared at him and couldn't help feeling scared. Those burning eyes. *I've seen worse. So much worse. And I want to be here. Want to be here. With him. Right. So what's the problem with me hanging around with students?* It was hard to concentrate with him looming over her so dark and threatening. *Students. And I... But I'm not a student anymore.*

Oh.

I'm not a student anymore.

'But they are my friends,' she murmured and raised her eyes towards him, confused and worried.

To her surprise, he didn't hiss at her again, but simply sat down on the other armchair, inhaling deeply as if she ~~were~~ just another student, trying his patience beyond the bearable limit. And she guessed she was. She hadn't thought. She should have asked him, right away, about how she ought to behave now that she wasn't a student anymore. How could she have been so stupid?

'You, Miss Granger,' Snape said wearily, 'are no longer a student. You are a member of the staff. You will teach your first class next week. No matter if they are your friends or not, you cannot ... *'hang around'* with them anymore.'

Hermione winced, closing her eyes. She'd been looking forward to seeing Neville, Luna and Ginny again. 'I'm sorry, sir. I just didn't realise.'

'That much is painfully obvious.'

'May I not ever see meet them again?'

'Oh, merciful Mephistopheles!' Snape groaned. 'For one, they won't stay students until the end of time. And I suppose you ~~may~~ invite them to meet you here, in your quarters or you can meet them in Hogsmeade when you're free of a weekend.'

'Thank you, sir,' Hermione whispered, ashamed.

He just shook his head at her. 'Now go,' he said. 'Just go. Go to bed.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

29. Slytherin Colours and Order Business

'As this is an official Order meeting,' Snape said softly, 'it behooves you to be dressed as my apprentice. We are not going to Grimmauld Place to enjoy ourselves.'

Hermione glared at him, but she had expected that. 'Of course, sir.'

Her master frowned, as if her reaction had taken him by surprise, and she had a hard time suppressing a small smirk. When he quirked a black eyebrow at her, she knew she hadn't succeeded and allowed herself a broad grin.

'Whenever you are ready?' Snape drawled.

Her grin smoothed into a smile his voice was getting better. If he was gentle on his voice, she could almost hear her old teacher again.

'Just a moment, sir, I'll need my cloak.' She hastened into her room and returned with her newly Transfigured cloak. Solid black before, it was now a deep Slytherin green with a silver clasp shaped like a snake-like dragon to fasten it.

Snape's frown deepened.

oooOooo

Soon they were hurrying away from the castle, keeping their heads down against the downpour of what passed for summer rain in the Highlands. When they reached the edge of the grounds, Hermione was soaked.

'Really, girl, why didn't you cast an Impervious Charm?' Snape grizzled.

Shivering, Hermione ducked her head in embarrassment. 'I...the Transfiguration has to settle in the fabric first sorry, sir.'

Snape shook his head, but didn't comment on her foolishness. Instead he whipped out his main wand and cast a quick drying charm over her. Warmth enveloped her.

'Ahh...' she sighed gratefully.

But when he put his arm around her for Side-Along Apparition, she shivered again, although Snape's body generated still more heat than the charm even through his thick teacher's robes. She had just a moment to inhale his scent. *Very male and very mysterious*, she thought, *vetyver, bergamot, possibly neroli*.

Then the familiar CRACK split the air (and very nearly Hermione's ears) and they were gone.

oooOooo

They arrived arm in arm, appearing in a grey square that could have won prizes in a stock photo competition for urban decay.

Cracked plaster in various shades of grey revealed brick structures erected in another century. Paint peeled from doors. Windows were broken or even boarded up, and piles of rubbish in the gutter indicated that a visit of the dustmen was long overdue. It wasn't raining yet in London, but the low clouds and dreary light indicated that it was only a question of time until it would start to drizzle.

For a moment neither of them moved then Snape stepped away from Hermione and briskly turned to the black door of number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Inside they were met by Molly Weasley, whose eyes widened in surprise as she took in the new colour scheme of Hermione's robes.

When Hermione glared at her, Ron's mother blushed.

'Those colours really suit you, dear,' she assured Hermione, more than a little flustered. 'A beautiful green, really.'

'Then why don't *you* wear that hue once in a while, too, *really*?' Snape suggested testily, indicating to Hermione that she should move along.

'Oh...*uh*...it might go well with my hair, I suppose,' Molly stammered. Then she pulled herself together and continued in a more business-like fashion, 'The meeting will be held in the library. Hermione, Harry and Ron are already there. Professor Healer Mugwort is waiting for you in the kitchen.'

'What?' Snape bit out. 'Am I to be hounded by healers even when I'm occupied with Order business?'

'Oh, no, of course not,' Molly hastened to assure apologetically. 'I...*uh*...assume Minerva thought this would be the most efficient way of...*uh*...providing you the opportunity of regular check-ups.'

'Believe it or not, we *have* been worried about you.'

oooOooo

When Hermione entered the library, she was met with identical expressions of shock and consternation in very different faces.

Green eyes blinked at her like an over-sized owl.

A generous spattering of freckles paled on round cheeks, while a rather big mouth dropped open.

'What?' Hermione snapped. 'What did you expect? I'm the apprentice of the head of Slytherin house. It would hardly be appropriate for me to wear anything but Slytherin colours.'

Harry stared at her as if she were a ghost. Then he swallowed and attempted to speak, but Hermione would have none of it. 'And don't *yodare* try to tell me that those colours really suit me. I've heard that from just about everybody already and I don't need to hear it again. I know that I look good in green!'

oooOooo

'We have had excellent leads on at least five Death Eaters who were trying to hole up in three different countries.'

'And now, from one day to the next, they are gone without a trace. Our sources have clammed up and claim that they have no new information about their whereabouts. It's as if they've vanished into thin air,' Sturgis Podmore concluded his report.

Minerva McGonagall frowned. 'That is indeed very worrying. Thank you, Sturgis.'

'Arthur? Would you, please?'

Arthur Weasley nodded and cleared his throat. 'The ministry's stance is that the SSS the International Confederacy's Secret Service for Sorcerers...is best equipped to deal with runaway Death Eaters.'

'Shacklebolt has been after me to support his plan to disband the Order at the end of this year. Mind, I can understand where he's coming from the pureblood faction of the Wizengamot has been giving him hell, and there are many Ministry Officials who do not sympathise with *uh*... the Order's mode of operation. But I have to admit, I don't much care for this plan.'

'Neither do I,' Snape agreed in a soft voice. He was speaking very slowly, carefully enunciating each syllable.

He doesn't want them to know how badly his voice was hurt, Hermione realised with a start.

'So many Death Eaters should not have been able to escape our pursuit at one and the same time,' Snape continued. 'Not without assistance.'

'But who would help them?' Hestia Jones asked fearfully.

oooOooo

oooOooo

30. Party Time in Slytherin House

He opened the door and allowed her to step through into the Slytherin common room. Once inside, Hermione couldn't help staring. She'd been in here a few times since she'd become Snape's apprentice, and had come to appreciate its strangely comfortable mixture of austere elegance and subterranean shabbiness.

Tonight, however, the room was unrecognizable: Slytherin house was having a party.

Witch lights illuminated the room, cast pillars of light through the skylights into the lake and flashed like spotlights in a disco. Silvery spider nets glittered above a bar that took up one entire side of the room in front of the fireplace. At the opposite end of the dungeon a raised platform had been transfigured into a lounge area, complete with green armchairs and settees. The space in between was empty, ready to serve as a dance floor.

Hermione gaped.

And she was not the only one. Several Slytherins, who were busy at the bar, arranging bottles and glasses, were staring at her. Others, who were working on Transfiguring some last minute decorations (enchanted spiders to dance and making a skull's eyes blink in emerald-green) plain gawked. And Pansy Parkinson looked as if she'd swallowed a streeler.

'Sir!' Pansy exclaimed reproachfully, turning to Snape.

The Potions master directed a withering glare at the young woman.

'Not one word,' he snarled hoarsely.

Hermione flinched. She didn't particularly care for spending an evening in the company of inimical Slytherins.

But Snape was already circling the room, subjecting the decorations to close scrutiny. Now and again he flicked out his main wand, and a pale glimmer indicated the use of a detection spell. Twice at the bar and once on the dance floor, he hissed at one or another of his Slytherins, who promptly removed whatever magical prank had caused the displeasure of their head of house.

Hermione remained near the portrait that covered the entrance to Snape's quarters, trying to ignore the dirty looks Pansy kept throwing at her, or how some Sixth Years at the bar whispered among themselves, even pointing fingers in a way that didn't match the Slytherin reputation for subtlety.

When Snape returned to Hermione's side, he looked satisfied.

'Sir,' she started, 'maybe it would be better if I didn't ...'

'What? Stay?' He frowned at her and was no doubt about to reprimand her, when quickly hushed smirks at the bar caught his attention, causing Snape to direct his scowl at his students instead of at Hermione.

'You are *my* apprentice,' he told her. 'You stay.'

'If those dunderheads have a problem with that, they are free to spend the evening in the solitude of their rooms. And you needn't worry that any of them will dare to hex you in the face. Not as long as I'm present.'

'However,' Snape added with a slight sneer, 'I would not advise you to eat or drink anything that I haven't inspected first.'

Hermione gulped. 'Very well, sir.'

oooOooo

The clock above the fireplace chimed eight. Issuing from four black boxes in the corners of the dungeon, music started with a beat that made the dungeons shake around Hermione.

At the first well-known riff, Hermione spun around to face Snape, her mouth open in shock. Black eyes glittered with thinly veiled amusement. He obviously enjoyed the effect the Slytherins' choice of music had on her.

'I guess I knew that you don't care for the Weird Sisters,' Hermione muttered.

Snape smirked. 'Just an advance warning should you feel the need to discuss the origins of this music with certain pureblood students, or with anyone from another house for that matter, you will find yourself remarkably tongue-tied.'

Hermione stared at her master for another moment, before she lost control and started giggling. To her surprise, Snape's sneer broadened into an almost wolfish smile. He moved closer to her so he could whisper into her ear, 'It's a not very well-kept secret, but Slytherin house throws the best parties at Hogwarts.'

She wasn't sure what distracted her more, inhaling his scent again (vetyver, definitely bergamot, cypress and something else that escaped her at the moment) or by a volley of bats circling above her head that had been charmed to blink with green and silver lights.

She could only nod.

Snape must have waited for her momentary inattention, for he gripped her hand and drew her against him, even as he stepped out onto the dance floor. His black hair flew as he moved to the rhythm, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Hermione flustered, surprised, clumsy stumbled, caught herself, was pulled close to him, then pushed away again ... clearly Snape knew what he was doing dancing *disco fox* of all things! When her mind finally caught up with her feet, she managed to growl at him when the dance brought their bodies close.

'But you *don't* dance!' she accused him furiously. 'You *never* dance!'

His answering smirk was positively devilish. 'I never dance *in public*,' he replied. 'Not everything is as it seems, Hermione. You, my dear disciple, need to develop some appreciation for subtlety.'

She twirled, stepped, skipped, swayed into his arms. Together they moved forward, then he spun her away from his body again.

oooOooo

'You might have warned me,' she complained later, when they were standing at the bar.

'Here cider for you, Guinness for me.' He raised his glass to her.

If this hadn't been Snape, Hermione would have said that a mischievous glint sparkled in his eyes.

'I might have,' he agreed easily. 'But it was much more fun not to warn you.'

Hermione felt her brows knit together. Snape *Severus* Snape was talking about *fun*? Surely the world was coming to an end. And there was no mistaking his expression now. Her dour master was decidedly *amused* by her reaction to his sneaky ambush.

'You may, of course,' Snape continued in his best lecturer's tone, 'keep in mind for future reference that the head of house always has the first and the last dance at

Slytherin parties.'

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

The banner is based on CC Attribution/NonCommerical licenced pictures by cambiodefractal and on CC Attribution pictures by "Drawings Of Light Paul" and i.m.indraneel. The face of my Hermione belongs to Minnie Driver.

FAQ

See Part 1.

Chapter: Wandcraft

The Cerynaian hind is the Golden Hind of Greek mythology.

Hermione's new wand is at 16.535 433 071 inches exactly 42 centimetres long.

Chapter: Conditions of Indenture

Potions Master vs. Potions master: The canon terminology of Potions master probably refers only to the fact that Snape is teacher at Hogwarts. However, since there are no universities for further academic studies, the most common way of magical training after school could very well be an apprenticeship to a Master of a special branch of magic. In that respect Snape would be not only a Potions master, but a Potions Master or Master of Potions. This is (American) fanon, but it ties in well with historical European traditions of craftsmanship.

The 'Indenture of Apprenticeship' is based on the wording of a historical contract of a carpenter's apprenticeship from the 17th century.

Chapter: The Apprenticeship Begins

The oath of apprenticeship is based on the contract included in the previous chapter and on an oath of apprenticeship used by the Society for Creative Anachronism. A medieval oath of fealty was traditionally sealed with a kiss on the mouth.

Chapter: Many Meetings

The title of the chapter alludes to a chapter in 'Lord of the Rings', 'The Fellowship of the Ring'.

Chapter: Slytherin Colours and Order Business

Snape's scent is based on my favourite scent for men by L'Occitane en Provence, 'Vetyver'.

Chapter: Party Time at Slytherin House

The first song at the party is 'Summer of 69' by Bryan Adams.

Discofox is a European disco-dance from the Seventies that is still quite popular in Germany.

Part 4, Episodes 31-40

Chapter 4 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

□

31. Morning After

At breakfast the next day Hermione was decidedly the worse for wear. Bleary-eyed and headachy, she clung to the edge of the table, hard put to prevent her lips from breaking into an ear-splitting yawn.

She knew that Snape had had even less sleep. He had stayed up until dawn patrolling the Slytherin quarters once an hour after the end of the party.

And quite effectively, too: he'd thrown a Seventh-Year boy out of the Sixth-Year's girls' bedroom (though Hermione had the distinct feeling that Snape was quite impressed with how Ciardha Vaisey had worked his way around the charms that were supposed to keep boys from ever setting foot inside the girls' dungeons), he'd broken up a magical spin-the-bottle game in the broom-cupboard, and escorted a Fifth Year girl who'd decided that she was plenty old enough to handle Ogden's Firewhisky to Madam Pomfrey in order to have her stomach lining restored.

In spite of all that, Snape looked just the way he always did: pale, bad-tempered, and disgustingly awake.

Minerva had at least a sympathetic smile for her. 'Slytherin house party?'

Hermione nodded carefully while she looked longingly at the mug in front of her, willing it to fill up with coffee instead of tea.

'Ahhh...' Madam Hooch let out a nostalgic sigh. 'Those were the days. Slytherin parties were already infamous when I started at Hogwarts. Did you have fun?'

Yellow eyes focused on Hermione who didn't feel at all up to this disconcerting scrutiny.

Did she have fun? Hermione frowned, mentally going over the previous night. She'd danced with her master. She'd danced with ~~Snape~~! Not once, but twice. She'd also danced with Malfoy. And she'd done the *Magicarena* with a whole gaggle of Slytherin goslings Second and Third-Years. She'd rolled into her bed at two a.m.

Actually ... She put her mug down and beamed at Madam Hooch.

'You know,' Hermione said slowly, 'I really had a lot of fun.'

oooOooo

'Here,' Snape rasped. 'A tablespoon ought to suffice. Merlin, don't *look* at me like that! I'm not about to poison my own apprentice. It is only a basic Invigoration Draught. How you survived the war if a single late night has you looking so peaky is really quite beyond me.'

He directed one of his most intimidating scowls at her.

'Trust me, Miss Granger, I did not enjoy last night any more than you did. But my ...*Slytherin house expects* its head of house to uphold certain customs and traditions. And it seemed expedient to exploit the opportunity to bolster your position with my Slytherins. You will need every help you can get if you're supposed to teach them one day.' He sniffed. 'Not that I necessarily think you will get very far no matter how much help I can provide for you.'

When Hermione just stared at him, he rolled his eyes towards the ceiling of the dungeon, muttering darkly under his breath.

'You didn't honestly expect that I consider *silly* children's dances and those pitiful attempts at partying by hormone-controlled teenagers as ... what would you call it? Oh, yes,' his voice softened into a supercilious sneer, '*fun*' would be the term that you and your Gryffindor cronies use for such exceedingly *mature* examples of entertainment as the one we had to suffer through last night, wouldn't it? But surely you as you are no longer a student anymore have at long last moved beyond such ridiculous notions, haven't you?'

Snape didn't wait for a reply, but spun on his heel and exited the room, leaving Hermione to stare after him in horror. The last she saw of him was a swirl of black robes as he strode down the corridor towards his office.

oooOooo

Much later Hermione shuffled wearily into Snape's private library and slumped down into an armchair. From beyond the door that connected the room with study, she heard the low, strangled sound of her master's voice.

'I am not going to do that that that is completely...'

'Preposterous?' Lois Petrel sounded amused. 'Was that the word you wanted?'

Hermione allowed herself a faint grin. She'd love to be a spider at the ceiling of that dungeon right now. She could just imagine Professor Snape's expression when faced with the Muggle-woman's peculiar mixture of patience and insistence, coupled with a notable lack of apprehension where a certain Potions master was concerned.

A harsh hacking sound indicated that Snape was trying to clear his throat. Snape at a loss for words?

'No, don't do that,' Lois interrupted and launched into an eloquent explanation of how Snape should have a sip of water instead of clearing his throat and overstraining his vocal cords.

'So what did you want to say earlier, professor?' Petrel asked at last.

Huh?

A pause.

'Silly,' he admitted grudgingly.

'Really? Surely you can do better than that, sir. What's so bad about *silly*?'

The silence stretched out for a long moment. Then, to Hermione's surprise, Snape answered:

'*Silly*' is dangerous. It leaves you weak and exposed. It provides an opening for your enemies to hurt you and those that you ...' He choked, and Hermione could hear the effort it took him to follow Petrel's instructions on how to clear his throat. 'That you care about. It is best to avoid situations which ...'

'Cause you to let down your guard?' Petrel sighed. 'Sir, I don't know anything about you, and next to nothing about your world, about my daughter's new world. And I'm only a speech therapist, not a psychologist. But ... the war is over. You've won. The enemy is dead and gone. Maybe it's time for you to learn how to be silly again? To have a bit of *fun* now and then?'

'What good would that do?' Snape asked, his voice strained and weary.

'Well,' Lois continued briskly, 'as far as this *'silly'* exercise is concerned that you find so repugnant, it might help you to get back the voice you once had.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

32. Teacher, Teacher, Toil and Trouble

She must have dozed off, because the next sound Hermione heard was Snape's smooth voice near her ear as he asked, 'Did the sweet children tire you out already? Why, but it's only your third day! I cannot imagine a heroine of the war to give up quite that quickly.'

Hermione blinked trying to go from sleepy exhaustion to witty repartee within a few seconds, and failing miserably. All she could see were his dark eyes, black and fathomless, and his gaze made her stomach flutter. For fleeting moment, the horrible suspicion overwhelmed her that he knew exactly what an effect he was having on her. Then her ears caught up with her eyes, and she realised that his voice sounded ever so much better. Almost like the silky-tongued Potions master of her school days. Had he attempted that *silly* exercise after all?

She couldn't help smiling, a befuddled, sleepy, honest, happy smile.

A smile that made him frown and draw back instantly, and suddenly she was wide awake with her heart racing and her mind in desperate circles ~~sa~~*mustn't think mustn't think mustn't let him see mustn't let him see how I how I that I...*

Somehow she managed to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth.

'I'm not,' she said. 'And yes, they did. How did you survive so long?'

Too tired for diplomacy and too Gryffindor for subtlety, she added, 'More precisely, how did you survive*me*?'

The mere thought of Ravenclaw smartarse Pearl Shynnyng was enough to make her feel nauseated. And the girl was ~~only~~*one* rather small Second Year, compared to a whole group of sullen teenagers interested in anything *but* study groups.

The corners of Snape's mouth quivered. Then he gave in to the impulse and snorted. In better days, the sound might have been a chuckle.

'There's one of your kind in every other class. Along with a Neville and hopefully only one specimen of Weasley twins. Oh, and we mustn't forget a pair like Potter and Draco, of course. Though I should probably warn you now you can count yourself lucky if you get them as boys. Boys are less studious and much more obvious than girls.'

Hermione blanched.

Snape smirked, but his reply was almost gentle: 'Don't worry, Miss Granger. If you're merely weary to your bones, if the classroom is not in ruins and fewer than ten pupils are in the hospital wing, you have done very well indeed for your third day.'

'But I don't think they learnt anything today at all,' she moaned.

She knew she didn't have the perfect personality for a career as a teacher she was too impatient, she hated having to repeat herself. But to fail at such an important aspect of her tasks as Professor Snape's apprentice ... If she didn't even manage teaching basic Potions to a horde of Second Years, how could she ever hope to ...

'Welcome to your life as a teacher at Hogwarts,' the Potions master said dryly.

oooOooo

She dropped her wands again, her face screwing up as if she was close to tears.

Snape was ready to snap at his apprentice, when something about the way she'd winced when the larger wand had struck her palm, how she couldn't keep her fingers from twitching now and again, registered with him belatedly.

Minerva's words came back to him, *'Her hands were completely flayed because they were drenched in your blood.'*

Shite.

He ought to have remembered that. The only reason he hadn't snarled her to hell and back or even chastised her as was his right was that he was so bloody tired himself today. She ought to have told him.

Why hadn't she told him?

Bloody Gryffindor stubbornness.

Why did she so desperately want to impress him?

... *she wanted to impress him?*

'He' He was about to clear his throat, when he remembered Petrel's admonitions. Instead he only swallowed painfully. 'Miss Granger? Could it be ...'

He shook himself. Her hands, wet with his blood, with his blood and Nagini's venom. Snape heaved a sigh. He had to do better than that.

'I was informed that your hands were injured when you saved my life. Is it possible that there are some after-effects that impair your performance with your wands?'

Her wands, one moment held loosely in her hand, cluttered to the ground once more. She was deathly pale as she stared at him.

After-effects, my arse, he thought, and bent down to retrieve her wands. It was not something he would normally do, touching the wands of another wizard, but Hermione looked as if she was about to faint.

Somehow in the process birch touched yew.

The energy and wisdom of two sphinx feathers mingled and flowed into him, soothing and golden, overwhelming him, blurring the world before his eyes.

He would have fallen, but for Hermione's hand catching him just in time. He heard her suck in her breath in agony, then the power found her recognised her and flowed through his body into hers, drawing them together and drenching them with warmth and light. When the flow of magic ebbed away, he felt as breathless as if he'd just played a round of really fast Quidditch, or crazily made love to a beautiful woman.

'I didn't know that the core of your wand is made of a sphinx feather,' he said slowly.

She was staring at him as if she had never seen him before. 'I...I...I'm sorry...'

He shook his head. 'I should have asked,' he said softly.

Carefully he laid their wands on the table and reached for her. Claspng her gently around the wrists, he pulled her hands towards him.

He stared at those hands. They were slender and very white, perfectly healed. Nothing reminded of what they must have looked like, stripped down to raw flesh by the touch of his blood.

'I can give you a salve for your hands,' he whispered.

oooOooo

oooOooo

Oi 'Mione,

You had to go to a Slytherin house party? And you really couldn't poison them? Let me know when you go again, I'll send you a supply of special Wheezes free of charge.

Also, how come that **git** Snape's being so hard on you???

Harry showed me your last letter to him (& how come you write different stuff to Harry than to me?) and I was ready to Apparate to Hogwarts so I could challenge the Great Git to a proper duel. Only Harry reminded me that you can't Apparate straight to Hogwarts and then he shouted at me how Snape is one of 'us' and how I just don't understand and well, I guess I would have lost that duel anyway.

I guess Harry's right. I don't really understand. I mean, I know what you've told me, but you [the next letters are smudged and struck through] havedamn I lov

I do miss you, you know?

Sometimes I almost wish it could be the way it was before, only of course who would want that. This is not what I imagined things would be like. Accountancy is even worse than Binns. But someone needs to do it, I guess.

George & Lee say hi.

Talk to you soon,

Ron

oooOooo

'You're brewing WHAT in my classroom?'

'A *uhm*... a bubbly bathing potion. *Uh*... based on Muggle herbal remedies. *Uh*... Soothing, you know. But ... I ...' She knew she wouldn't be able to conceal her motivation in attempting the kind of experiments she was currently engaged in.

'I have trouble sleeping,' she explained. 'And I hate proper sleeping potions. They ... they mess with my mind. And I know I have to learn how to experiment if I want to make it as a Potions apprentice, so I figured I might just as well try coming up with something that would help me.'

Snape's fingers strayed to the bridge of his nose. Hermione winced at the sure-fire sign for a seriously irritated Potions Master.

'The recipe,' he demanded wearily.

Hermione gulped, but handed it over without hesitation. She knew it by heart in any case: two cups of milk, powdered, one half cup of Epsom salt, coarse, one half cup baking soda, five drops of rose oil and jasmine oil, four of musk oil and three of ylang-ylang.

'Tell me what you've done so far.'

'I've been trying to substitute magical substances for the ordinary ones,' Hermione mumbled.

'You've been doing WHAT?'

Hermione flinched.

'It wouldn't work the way I wanted,' she mumbled.

'Merlin's bollocks, *of course not*, an herbal bath is ...' He shook his head. 'An herbal bath is an herbal bath. You can't just randomly substitute ingredients. Successful experiments require a stringent test methodology.'

'To start with *every single one* of the ingredients in your recipe already *has* its own unique magical powers.'

She blinked at him. Professor Snape looked ready to pull out his hair at the roots and strangle her with it. He sighed deeply.

'Tell me about the magical properties of unicorn horn.'

'*Uh*... ever since Ctesias wrote his ground-breaking treatise on the use of unicorn-horn around 479 before Christ, its medicinal use has remained unchallenged. It's a powerful purifying agent, highly effective against most common poisons. It offers protection against convulsions and epilepsy. Since the Middle Ages, it has also been used to combat plague, to cure fevers and the bites of snakes or dogs with rabies. In 1678 William Salmon wrote a lengthy essay that advertised using it undiluted at ten grains per dosage against plague, pestilence and poison, but also against measles and small pox, which didn't work out well, causing rather phenomenal side effects. At the end of the seventeenth century, Nicholas Culpeper investigated the use of unicorn horn to aid magical births. And in the 18th century Pierre Pomet revolutionised the distillation of unicorn horn, using the most highly diluted potency to the greatest possible effect.'

'Yes, yes, yes that is quite sufficient. Now ... what can you tell me about the magical properties of nutmeg?'

'NUTMEG?!'

oooOooo

At long last Hermione closed her books. Or rather, not her books. One was a cookbook her mother had ... well *left her*, she supposed. The other was a copy of Culpeper's famous herbal. And surprise, surprise, he'd had a lot to say about simple, down-to-earth nutmeg.

She felt so stupid. So utterly, *utterly* stupid.

How could she have spent six years in Snape's Potions class and learned ... next to nothing? How could she have walked away with outstanding NEWTs and have developed such a pro-magical bias that she'd become blind? And her knowledge of proper test methodology well, *deficient* didn't even begin to cover it.

And her *damn* hands.

One clumsy flick with her wand, one moment of flinching ... and her cauldron had not only exploded, but also caused her and Snape to spout ylang-ylang scented bubbles from their ears. She moaned into her pillow. How should the formidable Potions Master ever come to respect her, if his bed ended up soaked by bath bubbles due to her incompetence? And she'd been so sure that her idea was a good one. A *creative* one.

She inhaled deeply, another groan on her lips, when her nostrils flared.

Nutmeg.

Suddenly she realised it was another component of her master's personal scent. Vetyver, bergamot, cypress. And homely, not at all harmless nutmeg.

oooOooo

'Sorry I couldn't invite you so far,' Hermione said. 'But what with the Slytherin house party and Professor Snape discovering my experiments, it just didn't work out.'

'That's okay,' Luna reassured her, while examining the Slytherin snakes curled around the fireplace in Hermione's room. 'School's keeping us busy, too.'

'Yes,' agreed Neville glumly. 'They really meant what they said with that *accelerated* programme.'

'Oh, my gosh,' exclaimed Ginny. 'You've got an underwater window in your bathroom? How cool is that?'

'It gets better,' Hermione said sourly. 'There's one in the toilet, too. And when you forget to draw the curtains you can just bet that a merman swims along to look in on you.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

34. All Sorted!

He woke drenched in sweat, his right hand curled painfully around his left forearm. For a while he lay motionless in the darkness. Then he reached for his wand and cast a quick *Lumos*.

Snape inhaled deeply. Then he forced himself to look. *Nothing*. Just faded black lines. Voldemort was gone. He would not come back. It was just a tattoo now, not a Mark.

He stared at the ribbed vault of the ceiling. His subconscious had a plethora of nightmares to draw from. Why need it be this one? He knew that dream so well. For more than nine years it had tortured him in the past before it had become reality once more.

One thing was sure: he wouldn't endure this nightmare for three years. The dream had to go. And if other options failed, he would move up his plans *Damn*. He would have enjoyed three peaceful years. He would have liked to provide Hermione Granger with the apprenticeship the bright young witch deserved. He frowned. '*Like*' was the wrong word; he did not '*like*' having that Gryffindor as his apprentice. She was merely useful.

But for some reason, no better term would come to him.

oooOooo

'So they'll put an old hat on Alina and it will look into her mind and then it will talk and tell everyone what her House is?'

Hermione smiled. 'I know that sounds weird, but yes, that's it.'

'Hmm.' Lois looked frankly dubious. 'Tell me about the Houses again.'

'Well, there are four. Gryffindor that was my House Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each House has a noble history, and the members of each House are supposed to have certain traits of character and talents. Hufflepuffs are patient and loyal, Ravenclaws are smart and disciplined, Gryffindors are brave and honest, and Slytherins are powerful and cunning. Of course that's a bit of rubbish, really. There are brave Slytherins and patient Ravenclaws.

'Your House is like a home away from home, almost like a second family.'

'And a bit of competition increases that feeling,' Lois suggested. 'It knits the community closer together.'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, I guess it does.'

'Your Professor Snape, what was his House?'

'Slytherin.' Hermione sighed.

'Is that bad?'

Hermione contemplated the question for a moment. Then she shook her head, remembering what Healer Mugwort had told her.

'No,' she replied. 'Only some of my friends haven't quite grown beyond the stage of inter-house rivalry yet. They don't really understand why I should want to be his apprentice.'

'Or how you'd come to care about him?'

'What?!'

'Hermione, I am not blind!'

oooOooo

Hermione never dreamed the same nightmare twice. Her subconscious was much more creative than her waking mind. Endless variations of horror crept into her slumber almost every night.

She didn't dare to use Dreamless Sleep often. No more than once a month, when she had to be extra-alert in the morning for example when a double brewing session featured Gryffindors and Slytherins in the same dungeon.

The other nights Hermione kept a comforting witchlight in a glass on her nightstand and tried out various Muggle herbal remedies.

Awake once more, she mentally went over the ingredients of the calming tea she had brewed that evening: aniseed, balm, calendula, caraway, fennel, passion flowers, peppermint, peels of rose hips, rosemary, valerian roots.

Drawing on what she had memorized from Culpeper's herbal and a fat Muggle tome about homeopathy, Hermione tried to recall everything she knew about each ingredient. Professor Snape had stated clearly that she would only be allowed near a cauldron for experimental purposes again when she knew every little detail about every ingredient, be it Muggle or magical.

... Valerian. ... different active compounds, including essential oils ... Sedating properties that may bind to receptors in the brain that regulate central nervous system ...
Magical usage: sleeping potions, love potions, purifying philtres... protection charms ... Linked with Mercury... more potent when Mercury is in conjunction with the moon ...

Corresponding element: water ...

Hermione yawned, her eyelids growing heavy once more. She smirked wearily. So those herbs could have an effect on her, after all.

oooOooo

The Sorting Hat ended its song and its wrinkled countenance seemed to scrutinise the trembling First Years carefully. Then Professor Weasley began to call the names of the new students so they could be Sorted, and Professor Sprout placed the old hat on each little head.

Hermione was staring at the row of children in front of the High Table's dais.

They were so ... *small*. So very, very young.

She stared at their happy round cheeks and their perky snub noses and remembered how scared she'd been. She'd been utterly convinced that the Sorting Hat would send her home, that it would explain how everything was a horrible mistake, that she, Hermione Granger, daughter of dentists and Muggles, could not possibly be special enough, *magical* enough, to stay at Hogwarts.

And now here she was, not a student anymore, but an apprentice and assistant teacher.

oooOooo

'Alina Petrel.'

Hermione leant forwards so she could watch as Alina skipped onto the dais, chocolate-coloured hair flying, dark eyes glittering.

Alina looked very much like her friendly, calm mother. And she was a kind girl, Hermione knew that. But Alina was also a little imp. Mischief sparkled in her eyes and she appeared to positively *brim* with energy.

Alina sat down. Her small face disappeared under the flap.

Respectful silence filled the hall.

Lengthened.

Alina kicked her feet, completely unconcerned.

'Well, well,' the Sorting Hat laughed at last. 'Who would have thought? Slytherin House, beware! Here's one for you who will be *area*/challenge!'

Hermione clapped like mad. 'I wish Lois could have been here to see that!'

But Professor Snape groaned.

'There,' he muttered. 'Didn't I tell you about the law of every other class having an equivalent to the Weasley twins? Here's the next generation, no doubt about that. And in Slytherin house, too. Whatever did I do to deserve this?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

35. A Walk in the Forest

Ron couldn't stop shaking his head.

Hermione in Slytherin apprentice-robos. Hermione mirroring Snape's gesture of rubbing the bridge of her nose. As if Ron was trying her temper beyond reason, merely by breathing in and out.

'It's not a good time now, huh?'

She forced a smile. 'I love having you here,' she said. 'But ...'

Ron pouted. 'You actually prefer hanging out with the gr...'

He wanted to sulk until she made up with him, until she gave him a really sweet kiss and accompanied him to Honeydukes.

'Don't,' she snapped. 'Just don't.'

'Sorry,' he mumbled.

He looked at her again, the way she adjusted a phial here, added a cautious stir there ...

She had changed so much. He couldn't precisely say *when* she'd begun to change, as he hadn't noticed then. He recalled the last time they'd talked, when she'd gone on and on about how exciting everything was, Muggle *ho...homo...homeopathy*, magical and mundane properties of ingredients, their side effects ... She'd only stopped when his eyes were crossing. And all he'd been able to think of was that she actually *enjoyed* being Snape's apprentice. She wasn't just Doing The Thing Martyrs Must Do. She really *liked* being with Snape.

Ron suppressed a sigh. No more Honeydukes for the two of them. She was slipping away from him. Just as Harry was, what with his Auror training and his growing involvement in politics and law, of all the dastardly things.

'Look, I understand that you don't want to ...' Ron started.

'Oh, Merlin! No! Ron, look, I'm sorry, but I'm really busy this afternoon,' she explained hastily. 'This project is such a mess. I started out all wrong. I'm not sure I'll ever get it right. And I'm so horribly scared that I that I'm just not good enough. That, when all is said and done, I'm nothing but a copycat and a textbook-parrot. That I'll never succeed at being *his* apprentice.'

She hesitated then met his gaze without flinching. 'Or at anything else, for that matter.'

He knew exactly what she was talking about. What he didn't know was how he ought to respond.

'I'm sure it will work out,' he said lamely. 'But I guess I'd better get going. We can meet some other time.'

But Hermione shook her head. 'No, don't, please! It's just really bad timing this afternoon. Are you free tonight? Look, why don't you go for a walk with Lois until dinner? She'll be done with Professor Snape's therapy session in a few minutes. And Headmistress McGonagall has allowed her to stay for dinner, so she can see her daughter.'

'A Muggle?' Ron asked, and instantly regretted his question.

'Yes, Ronald,' Hermione ground out. 'A *Muggle*. An extremely competent speech therapist who can help where *magical* remedies have failed.'

'I... *uhh*...' Mione, I didn't mean it that way, and *you know* that!'

'Very well. Prove it. Take her for a walk. Stay for dinner. Be around when I'm free to spend some time with you. Which isn't *how*.'

oooOooo

The first thing Ron thought was, '*But she's real pretty!*'

The second was: '*But she's older than me. Her daughter just started at Hogwarts.*'

The third was: '*So what?*'

The fourth was: '*But Alina's in Slytherin.*'

Then he smiled at the woman. 'Hello! I'm Ronald Weasley. An old friend of Hermione's. She's asked me to keep you company until it's time for dinner. I hope you don't mind too much.'

oooOooo

'A walk would be great,' Lois admitted. The sessions with Professor Snape left her quite drained. He was certainly one of the most intense men she'd ever met, and in dire need of some therapy. And not speech therapy, either.

She smiled at the red-haired young man at her side. 'I'm not allowed to go anywhere on my own while I'm in your world. Everyone's worried something bad might happen to me, stupid Muggle that I am.'

He laughed. 'You don't have to be a Muggle for that. Stupid is quite sufficient to get you into trouble at Hogwarts. And look at Hermione being smart isn't exactly safe either.'

'Yes,' Lois agreed. 'But I'm still sad that I missed the incident with those bath-bubbles. So where are we going?'

'How about a walk along the edge of the Forbidden Forest? That should be safe enough and maybe I can show you some magical critters.'

'Forbidden Forest?'

'Yes, for the students. Magic is not a game, you know.' He sounded very serious now. 'There *are* dangerous creatures in those woods.'

'Oh.' Lois couldn't help casting an anxious look at the castle.

Ron grinned, suddenly looking like a boy again. 'Don't worry. Alina is quite safe. Snape keeps his Slytherins in line. It's the Gryffindors that always get into trouble.'

'And you were a Gryffindor?'

'Yes, indeed, just like Hermione.'

'Tell me about that. What was it like to go to school here?'

oooOooo

'Oh, look! How cute! They are playing football with that stone! And the others are cheering! They *can talk*!'

Nine small, ferret-like creatures were tumbling around a tree. Four or five appeared to be throwing a small, black rock back and forth between them, while the others applauded or booed, in a constant stream of garbled shouts and high-pitched jeers.

'They are just jarveys,' Ron said, frowning. 'Well, I suppose they are cute enough,' he admitted. And it was definitely a lot of fun to watch the Muggle woman's delight at those silly forest creatures. 'And they can't *really* talk, they are more like *uh*... Muggle parrots, I guess. They do insults really well. One of my cousins kept one as a pet a while ago, much to the dismay of his parents. Oh, and the critters are pretty valuable their musk is one of the main ingredients in magical perfumes.'

Lois beamed at him. 'I like them.'

'And I like you.' Ron blushed. '*Uh*... I guess we'd better return to the castle now. It's nearly time for dinner.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

36. Almost A Teacher

'Is Hermione really as bad an apprentice as she believes?' Lois asked.

Snape tapped his wand at the table. A moment later two pots of tea and the relevant paraphernalia, including a huge plate stacked with sinfully buttery shortbread and spicy cinnamon scones still warm from the oven, graced the round table in his study.

Somehow they had fallen into the routine of having a cup of tea and a spot of biscuits at the end of their meetings. Snape couldn't quite recall how that had happened. Maybe when Petrel had asked about life at Hogwarts, no doubt concerned for her daughter's welfare? And he had felt obliged to answer her questions for some bizarre reason?

Goodness, he must be losing his touch.

However, Snape had to admit that Lois Petrel was surprisingly easy to talk to. She never assumed, she never prodded. And no matter how much he hated all those excruciating little exercises she subjected him to, his voice was improving. Sometimes, when he was well-rested and went easy on his voice, he almost recognised it again.

Frowning, he turned his attention to the Muggle. As far as he was concerned, there were only two positive aspects to having Granger as his apprentice: one, no matter what happened, there would be no further life-debts between them the bond between master and apprentice would take care of that and two, well, that very same bond would ...

'Miss Granger? A failure?' That notion was so ludicrous that it pulled his mind back into the room instantly. Frowning, he poured Petrel her customary cup of Earl Grey, while taking refuge to his usual Lapsang Souchong.

When he looked up, Petrel was still waiting for an answer.

He scowled at her. Had they been talking about anyone else, he would have assumed that Petrel had been manipulated into asking that question. But Granger would be horrified at the mere thought of such a scheme.

'I *did* accept her as my apprentice,' he declared, hoping that this would end the discussion. He did not want to talk about Hermione Granger. He preferred not to ~~think~~ of her, if that was at all possible, which it really wasn't, since they practically lived, and definitely worked together.

Petrel regarded him with raised eyebrows over the rim of her teacup.

'What?' he bit out irritably. Lois didn't say anything. After another moment of silence, Snape wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose.

'Miss Granger shouldn't have attempted those experiments on her own. No one expects apprentices to experiment on their own. That's why the damn thing is called *'apprenticeship'* after all how is it possible that she is still so insecure?' he asked at last. 'There is really no reason for that. Her academic work has always been beyond reproach. I admit that I agreed to the apprenticeship only because I was not in a position to refuse the request of Headmistress McGonagall. But,' he sighed, 'if things were different ...'

(Very, very different. So different that he couldn't quite imagine that situation.)

'... I would have been delighted to ask her to accept the position.'

And why did that thought make him feel so unbearably sad all of a sudden?

oooOooo

Alina Petrel turned out to be less of a nuisance than Snape had expected her to be. She was smart, studious, mostly obedient, and adapted well to her magical abilities and life at Hogwarts. But still, he knew a born troublemaker when he saw one, and when his instinct told him to watch certain students, watch them he did.

Additionally, watching Alina was quite amusing. She got along well with the other Slytherin girls of her year Geilis Duncan, Mika Malkin, Dorothy West. But her best friends belonged to other houses: a little Ravenclaw girl, Prudentia Halleywell, and a boy from Gryffindor house with the unfortunate name of Myrddin Loewe.

At the moment Snape was standing in an alcove near Ravenclaw tower. Alina and Prue were seated just around the corner, in the shadow of an enormous bookcase.

'Well, I don't think you're at all silly,' Alina was saying earnestly. 'What's silly about missing home?'

Wet snuffling was the only answer. Miss Halleywell was obviously suffering from a violent bout of homesickness.

'If my home were magic, I bet I'd miss it just as much as you do. You know, you really should talk to Miss Granger.'

'But she's a teacher!'

'Well, yes, but not really. She's like ... *almost* a teacher. She's Professor Snape's apprentice. That means she's still a little bit like us. She's still *his* student, even if she's *our* teacher. You can talk to her. And she listens. Even if *you* think you're being silly.'

'How do you know?' Prue sniffled.

'Well, I went to her when I was worried ...' Alina squirmed. 'You know, about if it's okay to be friends with people from other Houses.'

'Oh. What did she say?'

'She said how everyone's House is real special, and so is Slytherin, and I ought to cherish my House. But how it's also okay to have other friends, because it would be silly not to. She's helping Geilis with her reading, and she's tutoring those Gryffindors that don't know the inside of a cauldron from the outside. She won't treat you special because of your House, 'cause she doesn't really belong to any House anymore.

'She's fair.'

Which surely was a grand and sweeping statement for an eleven-year old.

'Maybe I'll do that, then.' Prue Halleywell sounded faintly hopeful.

oooOooo

Silently, Snape slipped away. He was almost sure that those two would return to their respective Houses in time for curfew.

So Miss Granger was fair? And she was helping a neglected Slytherin child practice her reading? Telling another Slytherin to cherish her house, while supporting her slightly unusual choice of friends?

Why, Miss Granger, he mused, I believe Miss Petrel is right: you are almost a teacher. And I bet you're not even aware of it ...

oooOooo

oooOooo

37. A Dark and Stormy Night

At the beginning of November, a moonless night filled the Forbidden Forest with near impenetrable gloom. Gusts of a stormy North-Eastern were shaking the branches of the Whomping Willow and rushing through the treetops, driving icy showers across over the castle and grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys and Grounds, trusted his monsters' good sense to stay cooped up in their caves and lairs in a night like this and had cut his late night rounds short. Now he sprawled on his huge bed and was snoring with great gusto, making the shutters of his hut vibrate on their hinges.

But there were predators that not even the foulest weather kept from prowling. Around three o'clock in the morning the agonized death-screams of nine young jarveys carried over the howling of the storm and the creaking of the wind-swept trees.

In Hagrid's hut old Fang groaned softly in his sleep. For a moment his rheumy eyes opened. But when no other sound reached his wrinkled ears, he rolled closer to the fading warmth of the fireplace and slept on.

oooOooo

Inside the castle, another sound woke Hermione Granger from a restless slumber that had been haunted by familiar nightmares. She sat up in her bed, her heart racing, her nightshirt drenched in sweat. For a moment she wondered why she had woken. A strange sense of urgency filled her, of need, as if she'd been called.

But everything was silent now. Waiting for her frantic heartbeat to slow down, she listened to the darkness. For once she was alone in her chamber, her cat Crookshanks hadn't returned from his nightly prowls yet.

There. Again.

A groan. As if someone was trying not to scream with pain.

Snape!

She reached for her wand and jumped out of her bed. Only when she found herself standing in front of her master's bedroom, she hesitated. Snape hadn't needed to tell her that she was never to enter his bedroom that had gone without saying.

Another agonised moan.

He hadn't told her not to enter his bedroom without his permission. He'd never mentioned his bedroom at all.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione reached for the door.

oooOooo

Inside, the first thing she noticed was the smell of blood. Then her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and a scream caught in her throat.

Professor Snape was lying on the floor, his wand next to him. He was clutching his left arm and a pool of blood spreading below him.

'Sir! No! No! What have you been doing?'

She slid down on the floor beside him. He groaned again and tried to push her away.

'It's not what it looks like,' Snape rasped. Then another convulsion of pain seized him. Hermione's left arm went around him, pulling him into her embrace and the weight of his body off the injured limb. When the spasm had passed, she turned his arm into the light.

She swallowed dryly. The skin at the inside of his left arm looked very much like a skinning spell gone very wrong.

His *left* arm.

Hermione almost sighed with relief, as sudden understanding flowed through her. He had told her the truth. It really wasn't what it looked like at first glance. He hadn't tried to kill himself. He had merely attempted to remove the Dark Mark.

Following her gaze, Snape ground his teeth. 'Not. One. Word.'

'Of course not, sir. But *please* let me help you.'

After a moment he gave a curt nod then minutely relaxed in her arms.

Knowing better than to use magic on an injury resulting from an unknown spell, Hermione clapped her hands and summoned the house-elf. 'Nag, I need clean towels, bandages, a bowl with water. Sir, do you have some antiseptic potion here?'

Snape shuddered, but nodded again, his teeth clenched, sweat forming on his forehead.

'*Accio* Antiseptica,' Hermione flicked her wand and held out her hand. A moment later she winced at the impact of a big brown bottle. Then a soft CRACK! made her whip up her head in panic, but it was only the thin, wrinkly house-elf who had appeared at her side, the items she had requested in his arms.

'Thank you, Nag.'

The house-elf bowed to her, threw a scared look at his master and disappeared again.

Hermione used one of the towels to wipe off the blood while keeping a steady pressure above the wound to staunch the blood flow. The towel was drenched in seconds. Awkwardly, Hermione poured a little of the antiseptic potion on another towel. She didn't dare to release his arm. There was so much blood. As if she'd walked in on a scene from one of her worst nightmares.

Bunching up the soaked towel, she carefully cleaned the outline of the wound. He jerked weakly in her arms at the sting of the potion. Cleaned, his arm was a mess of raw flesh and raised black lines. He had managed to completely skin his forearm except for the parts of his skin that were covered by the black lines of the Mark.

Hermione's stomach clenched.

And he was still bleeding heavily. She couldn't keep the blood flow staunched. She had no idea how to treat a spell damage wound that obviously resulted from the use of Dark Magic.

'Sir? Sir?'

He was deathly white, his eyes shut tightly. Low moans escaped his lips, when another convulsion shivered over his body. It felt as if she were holding someone in the throes of the *Cruciatus* Curse.

'Sir, I cannot staunch the bleeding. I need to call for help. You might bleed to death if I don't get help.'

'Wouldn't be all that bad,' he mumbled. But he cracked open his eyes and regarded her for a long moment.

'Sir,' Hermione whispered urgently, as unheeding of her tears and his blood as she had been once before, many months ago. 'Please.'

'Very well,' he sighed wearily at last. 'Get Poppy.'

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38. Dear Harry

Dear Harry,

Hermione hesitated. A good start. Friendly. Normal. She resisted the urge to chew on her fountain pen. Taking a leaf out of Ginny's book, she'd enchanted the ink cartridge to magically refill itself. Writing had been much more comfortable since she'd thought of that. No more bits of feather getting stuck between her teeth.

Thank you for your letter.

That was good, too. Polite and nice. If a trifle obvious. She halted again and stared out of the window. She loved the view of her new rooms, even on such a dismal day in November.

I hope you are well. I am ...

She paused. The cold and wet weather of November was taking its toll. An adult human body numbered exactly 206 bones, and every single one of her bones was aching right now.

I am feeling absolutely rotten?

No. Not good. Harry didn't react well to honest answers. He'd only blame himself if he knew that she was still suffering from the after-effects of the *Cruciatus* Curse.

Hermione stretched, winced, yawned, and reached for her tea. She'd picked an invigorating mixture instead of one of her usual calming or soothing draughts today. Mixing the long-term effects of the *Cruciatus* Curse with her insomnia was doing nothing for her presence of mind and she still had the study group of the Hufflepuff Third Years to supervise this afternoon. Thank God it was the Hufflepuffs, and not the Slytherins, or worse, the Gryffindors.

I am ... I still feel ... utterly shaken?

She shuddered. Shaken. What an understatement. Whenever she closed her eyes she could still feel the weight of his body against hers, the wetness of his blood on her skin. The smell of his blood mixed with the scent of his body. She recalled the way he had looked at her, that dark, desperate gaze. She still wondered what he had seen in her eyes that had prompted him to agree to her request to summon help.

I am still feeling a little bit shaken, which is really not surprising given what happened.

Of course he didn't appreciate your visit. Honest, Harry, what were you thinking? He's still Professor Snape, after all. Although I suppose I do understand why you had to come, and I suspect that he does, too.

Severus Snape was now the only close connection to Harry's parents and Harry's family that was left. He was the only person alive who'd been really close to Harry's parents, in good ways and bad ways. He had perhaps suffered even more than Harry because of Voldemort. And because of Albus Dumbledore, a small nagging voice at the back of her mind insisted.

Hermione recalled an unsettling conversation she had had with Harry a few weeks after the final battle.

oooOooo

'Do you ... do you hate Dumbledore? For what he ... for what he did to you?' she had asked.

Harry shrugged. Shrugging was still his default gesture. But he met her gaze calmly. The fierce anger that used to blaze in his green eyes, that had kept him going, had almost vanished, drained away in war and death. She remembered how he rubbed his scar his second favourite gesture.

'Of course not,' he said. 'Dumbledore did what he had to do. Just like the rest of us.'

Then he fell silent, while his gaze grew distant and his lips thinned to a harsh, straight line.

'Sometimes, I guess,' he admitted finally. 'You?'

She had stared at her balled fists. Hermione remembered that she had visited Snape just the day before that conversation.

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'Yes,' she whispered, and the sound of her voice echoed loudly in the silence of her room. 'I do.'

'Sometimes,' she added. Propping her elbows on the table, she wearily rested her face in her palms. The skin of her hands tingled almost painfully at the touch.

For example, every time she'd visited Professor Snape in St Mungo's.

She picked up her pen again and placed it on the parchment.

Professor Snape is much better. Ron's idea to ask Lois for advice was really brilliant. For some reason we are still not sure why the Mark behaved just like a Muggle tattoo under the laser beams. They could 'scrub' it right off. He'll have some hideous scars left, because Healer Mugwort says the residue of Dark Magic that is still in the tissue would act up again if she were to try and heal it prettily with magic. But that doesn't bother him at all. I think he's just glad that he got rid of the damned thing finally.

'Act up.' She snorted at her own words. But Harry would handle that euphemism better than 'might make Professor Snape bleed to death within half an hour'. She had summoned help just in time. She tried not to think of that. It made her hands shake too hard to keep writing.

The apprenticeship is interesting, although I'm really scared that I'm an utter failure at it. Ignore whatever Ron's saying. He just can't understand that I might enjoy learning all about Potions regardless ...

'Regardless' was the most unobtrusive way she could think of to refer to The Plan.

And The Plan ... Hermione inhaled deeply and tried to suppress the quivering that always seemed to grip her stomach lately whenever she thought of her master.

The Plan was not going well.

The fact that she had saved Snape's life yet again, and the rather spectacular circumstances of the event (which included a blood-drenched nightshirt clinging to her body, Snape barely conscious in her arms, an absolutely livid Headmistress and a thoroughly disgruntled Master Healer) added even more strain to the already tense relationship between master and apprentice.

I'll let you know at once if anything happens.

Give my love to Ron & George. And no, I most certainly won't keep an eye on Ginny.

Love,

Hermione

There. She sighed. All done.

Just in time to leave for that study group with those Hufflepuffs.

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39. Cruciatus

Muriel Mugwort had assumed that Hermione Granger's request for an appointment was about her master. Either to talk about his health, or ... about other things. But when she saw how stiffly the girl moved, the Healer realised that Hermione's reason for the appointment was all her own.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger,' she greeted the young woman, holding out her hand.

'Thank you for making time to see me,' Hermione replied.

'That's my job, dear.'

Unobtrusively, the Healer catalogued several clues about her patient's condition. Very pale. Too thin. Dark circles under the eyes and the eyes themselves dull with lack of sleep. Stiff, careful movements, as if in considerable pain. No strength to the handshake. Skin cold, clammy. Hand trembling. The symptoms were quite clear. Nevertheless, Mugwort was thorough in her examination, both with the mundane and the magical procedures.

Finally Muriel asked Hermione into her office, where the healer plucked a small blue phial from a shelf and counted twenty drops into a tablespoon.

'Swallow quickly. It burns, but it will help.'

Hermione did as she was told, although her grimace showed just how awful the potion tasted.

'And now, a simple herbal tea.' Mugwort went to another shelf. The small pot was labelled for its ingredients, a mixture of meadowsweet, nettle, rosemary and willow bark.

For herself, she settled on a strong, plain Assam. She needed it. She'd seen too many cases like Miss Granger's in recent years.

Quiet minutes ticked by on the clock-faces of an elaborate time-piece on the mantelshelf. Ten dials sporting different sizes and hands were a testament to the many duties of a Master Healer in the Spell Damage Ward.

'You should have come sooner,' Muriel remarked.

Hermione shrugged. Much easier, the healer noted. The potion had worked its magic. For now, the pain was gone.

'Would that have changed anything?' A hint of bitterness in her voice. Mugwort narrowed her eyes at the girl. That was to be expected the long-term effects of the *Cruciatus* Curse were never only physical.

'No,' Mugwort admitted. 'But there are potions like the one I just gave you that alleviate the pain. Salves that help with the stiffness. Other potions to help you sleep. As I am certain you are aware of.'

'I am. But all of those potions are very strong and highly addictive. They also interfere with my magic. And they mess with my mind.'

'If you prefer the pain, why are you here now?' Muriel raised an eyebrow at the girl.

Hermione sighed. 'I hoped that it had passed. I was fine in summer, and it's been more than a year now. I hoped it would be over.'

'But it's not,' she concluded bleakly. 'Is there any kind of cure? Something I missed when I did my research?'

Now it was the healer's turn to sigh. 'I am very sorry,' she said gently. 'But no, there is no cure for the after-effects of the *Cruciatus*. The long-term consequences vary, of course. They depend on the strength of the wizard or witch who cast the curse, as well as on the magical powers of the victim, the length of time and the number of times the victim is subjected to the curse. Women usually withstand the curse better than men, but Muggle-borns have less resistance to magical attacks. Other factors involved are how quickly treatment is provided afterwards and how soon the victim uses magic again.'

Mugwort studied Hermione's face. It was never easy to talk about the details of torture, but she needed to know the facts to provide the best treatment she could.

'Who did this to you?' Muriel asked, keeping her voice quiet and even.

The young woman balled her hands into fists so hard that the knuckles stood out whitely and in sharp relief. Her veins shimmered blue through skin that was so pale it was almost translucent.

'Bellatrix Lestrange.'

Hermione's gaze strayed to one of the clock faces. The inscription below it said *Longbottom*. The hands were titled '*Alice*' and '*Frank*'. Frank's hand pointed to '*asleep*'. Alice was '*counting bubble gums*'.

'It wasn't all that long, I think,' Hermione went on. 'It seemed an eternity to me, but from what Harry tells me, it can't have been much more than an hour.' She put down the empty mug and rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. 'I'm weak. I started talking almost at once. And if ... someone else hadn't corroborated my lies, she'd have had me tell the truth within moments. If I'd still been able to speak that is, which I really wasn't.'

'They took me to Bill Weasley's house right afterwards. His wife took care of me. But there was no time to summon a healer, or to wait with ... what we had to do.'

'I ... recovered quickly, or so I thought at the time. I was back on my feet the next day, after all. But of course it was summer at the time.'

'Cold and damp weather are common triggers for the after-effects of the *Cruciatus*,' Mugwort observed.

Hermione grinned wryly. 'So I noticed.'

'Any other symptoms you haven't told me about yet?'

The young woman sighed and nodded. 'Not very often, luckily, but ... I do get ... cramps of a sort sometimes. Convulsions. As if ...'

'As if you were being tortured all over again?'

Hermione hid her face in her hands. 'Yes.' Even muffled the strain in her voice was clearly audible. 'I told you I'm weak.'

'No, you are not,' Mugwort said briskly. 'You are merely having a harder time with the after-effects of a horrible curse than other witches might have. There's nothing weak about that. Some of us get horrible migraines, others don't. Some women suffer monthly cramps, others don't.'

'You have to talk about this with your master. There are potions you will need that have to be brewed freshly and which require highly advanced skills along with steadier hands than you have right now.'

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40. Slytherin Pastimes

Caring didn't come easily to him, but it was part of his job as head of Slytherin House. He was responsible for sixty-seven students this year, thirty-five boys and thirty-two girls, and he took that responsibility very seriously. He always had. Therefore Snape made a point of talking to each of *'his'* children once a month.

He kept a notebook for that, with a list of the names so he wouldn't forget anyone, and to keep track of the small troubles the children expected him to remember. Mostly he managed to remember without consulting his notes, but he had found filing that information quite useful over the years, when the development of some bout of teenaged angst or other coincided with a notable drop in academic performance. He invariably hated resorting to that strategy, but sometimes it was easier to tackle the emotional end of things to produce the desired result in the classroom, no matter how awkward and uncomfortable the procedure made him feel. And of course, compared to other discomforts of his sorry existence, trying to take care of the emotional needs of his Slytherins was almost cosy, so he wouldn't complain.

Naturally, this special schedule of his was a well-kept secret, since such maudlin sentimentality wasn't very Slytherin, even if it was a necessary routine.

Much like administering a dose of Skele-Grow after a Quidditch match, Snape told himself, as he made his way down to the Slytherin common room on a Monday evening in late November. *Just another annoying task.*

Due to the Slytherin Quidditch practice taking place on Monday evenings this term, the common room was emptier than usual of an evening. Draco had occupied one of the alcoves and sat huddled over a stack of books. The NEWTs for the accelerated Seventh Year would take place shortly before Christmas. It wasn't easy for the three Slytherins who had returned to Hogwarts, least of all for Draco. But Snape allowed himself to feel just a little bit of pride the boy no, the young man was holding up well. Better than he would have assumed at the start of the summer academy. He smirked. Potter's absence was clearly doing Draco a world of good.

Little Geilis was curled up in an armchair, a fat book on her lap. Her right index finger was following the line she was reading at an agonised crawl. Her lips were moving soundlessly, and there was a look of intense concentration on her pale little face.

In one of the niches, four girls were gathered around a square table and playing a board game: Pansy Parkinson and the other three First Years. He frowned when he didn't recognise the game as one of the traditional wizarding games. It looked to him as if the board was made up of hexagons that had been enchanted to mirror landscapes, meadows, fields of barley, woods, mountains, muddy or sandy areas and even a small patch of desert. Along the edges of the pentagons villages, towns and roads were springing up, directed by the players. It seemed to be a very involved strategy-game, based on trading and building. There was certainly a lot of giggling and groaning and swearing involved. With a gleeful grin, Alina was prodding the figure of a black knight across the table. She seemed to be the most accomplished player.

Had they dared to enchant a Muggle game? It certainly looked like it. For a moment Snape considered interrupting the game and demanding an explanation. Enchanting Muggle objects was dangerous. On the other hand ... it was only a game. And Pansy Parkinson was quite adept at charms. And she had grown into a quite responsible young woman.

In the end, he turned away and went over to Geilis. The girl looked up and smiled shyly at her head of house. 'Hello, sir.'

Then her gaze slid worriedly to his left arm. At his scowl, she blushed ferociously. 'I ... I ... How ... how is your arm, sir?' she stuttered.

The official story was that he had had a potions accident. Which was utterly humiliating, but preferable to the truth, of course. He forced a smile. 'Thank you, child. Quite well. I hear that my apprentice has been tutoring you?'

The blush deepened into a crimson colour. 'I...uh...yes, she does, I mean Miss Granger. She noticed how I was having trouble...anduh...she's been...uh...'

'Helping you?' He wouldn't force her to admit out loud that she'd been sent off to Hogwarts barely able to read. Discreet inquiries had revealed that due to Hermione's help, lots of practice and her innate magical talents, Miss Duncan was quite a good reader by now. Not quite on the same level as her class-mates, but certainly up to the curriculum of her year.

The child nodded fiercely.

'That's good. What are you reading?'

Geilis swallowed hard. 'Just just a Muggle book, sir.'

When he frowned, she added quickly, 'I the magical ones they are harder to read, sir, with the story shifting and pulling you in and all. But it has magic and wizards, sir.'

'Magic and wizards?' He raised an eyebrow. *What kind of Muggle rubbish had He...Granger given to the child?*

'They are reading *'The Lord of the Rings'*,' Draco put in. 'Hermione comes over twice a week in the evening and reads a chapter to us, then we take turns. Everyone reads a page.'

□

Snape turned to Draco, aghast. He didn't know what shocked him more, the book that his imbecilic apprentice had chosen or the fact that *this Slytherins* were apparently quite happy to spend an evening reading Muggle mythology.

His apprehension and consternation must have shown on his face, because Draco laughed.

'You don't need to worry,' Draco reassured him. 'Their favourite character is Gandalf, not Saruman. Slytherins prefer to side with the winning team. And he's quite a wily wizard, that Gandalf character. Sneaky. Could have been a Slytherin, I think.'

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NOTES

Banner

The banner is based on CC Attribution/NonCommerical licenced pictures by cambiodefractal and on CC Attribution pictures by "Drawings Of Light Paul" and i.m.indraneel. The face of my Hermione belongs to Minnie Driver.

FAQ

See Part 1.

Chapter: The First Days

The uses of unicorn horn are based on the essay 'The use of unicorn horn in medicine' by William Jackson, The Pharmaceutical Journal, Vol 273, No 7330, p925-927, 18/25 December 2004.

The recipe for the bathing lotion is based on one I found online at <http://magickrecipes.com> Magick Recipes.

Chapter: A Walk in the Forest

Jarveys are from 'Fantastic Beasts & Where To Find Them'. The properties of their musk are AU.

Chapter: Almost a Teacher

The name 'Geilis Duncan' is based on the historical 'Geillis Duncane', a Scottish woman who was accused of witchcraft in the 16th century. Her story can be read at sacred-texts DOT com. 'Mika Malkin' refers to the canon Malkins, of course. 'Dorothy West' should be rather obvious. 'Prudentia Halleywell' alludes to the TV-series 'Charmed', of course. But 'prudentia' is also Latin for 'wisdom' and thus a very good Ravenclaw name. And 'Myrrdin Loewe' is wordplay referring to another wordplay. In Susan Cooper's 'The Dark Is Rising' series Merlin uses the name 'Merriman/Merry' 'Lyon/Lion'. Myrrdin is also an old name for Merlin, and 'Loewe' is only a weird way of writing 'Löwe', the German word for 'lion'.

Chapter: Cruciatus

Canon says nothing about any long-term effects of the Cruciatus apart from the case of the Longbottoms who were tortured into insanity, as far as I know. Fanon otosh includes that motif a lot, and as I think it makes sense, I've chosen to do so as well. I interpret the severity of long-term effects to be dependant on various factors (as outlined in this chapter), so every wizard/witch would react differently, from having next to no symptoms to having something like a 'relapse'.

Chapter: Slytherin Pastimes

The board game is 'Settlers of Catan'.

Part 5, Episodes 41-50

Chapter 5 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

41. A New Threat and An Old Agenda

MUGGLE-BORNS MURDERED FAMILY OF FIVE DEAD!

Edinburgh. A family of Muggle-born wizards, the parents along with their three children, were killed in their beds during the night of Saturday, November 27.

The deaths of herbalist Thomas Richardson (37) and his wife Sorcha (36), a stay-at-home-witch, along with their three children, Ian (9), Peter (6) and Jenny (4), were discovered by friends of the family who arrived at the Edinburgh family home for an afternoon of Quidditch playing on Sunday.

When the Richardsons did not react to doorbells and Floo-calls, Aurors were alerted and decided to Apparate directly into the house in order to determine if an accident had occurred. Inside the house nothing pointed towards any unusual occurrence or a fight, but when the Aurors entered the main bedroom, they found the parents lying dead in their bed. Upon entering the children's rooms, the Aurors were faced with exactly the same scene: the three children had been killed in their beds as well.

"They looked as if they were sleeping," said Harry Potter, Auror-in-training, who was first on the scene. The young man famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Voldemort in 1998 was visibly shaken when he told our correspondent that there are no clues at all as to what happened, but that it can be assumed that the infamous Unforgivable curse "Avada Kedavra" was used to kill the family.

"We can only assume that the tragedy was caused by followers of Voldemort, so-called Death Eaters, who are still on the loose and seeking revenge even more than a year after the Dark Lord's defeat," stated the head of the Office of Aurors, Gawain Robards, yesterday. "We urge all Muggle-born wizards and witches to be extremely alert for any suspicious activities and not to hesitate to Floo-call the Office of Aurors."

The story continues with interviews of colleagues of Thomas Richardson and background information on the killing curse on page 5.

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The *Daily Prophet* of Monday, November 29, 1999, dropped from Hermione's hands and fell to the floor.

Annoyed at the disturbance of his lunch routine (which consisted mainly in keeping a keen eye out for pranks among the student body), Snape turned towards Hermione with a scowl that faded to a look of concern as he took in her pallor and her shaking hands. He picked up the paper and quickly scanned the front page.

'Damn,' Snape muttered and glanced at the empty seat where Headmistress McGonagall was suspiciously absent today.

He considered the Order meeting last summer, when he had heard the first report about disappearing Death Eaters. He'd had a bad feeling about the situation even then: how likely was it for Aurors and Order members to lose track of five confirmed Death Eaters in three countries at the same time? Ever since then, the leads the Order and the Ministry had been following in order to apprehend members of Voldemort's organisation that still were at large had been thinning out. Since the beginning of October, there had been no useful information about any of those criminals at all. And now this.

The bad feeling in his stomach intensified to the point of nausea.

Regrouping, that's what they have been doing, the analytical part of his mind lectured coolly. *At some point last summer, someone has started to pick up the remains of Voldemort's organization. Someone who is powerful and cunning enough to make Death Eaters virtually disappear from under the noses of our Aurors, the Sorcerers' Secret Service and the Order. Now the new organization is firmly established and they have decided to send a message.*

'Damn,' he repeated, swearing in a soft voice.

The signal couldn't possibly be any clearer. Killing people in their beds, not even sparing the children. The ruthlessness of the execution was chilling, the agenda of whoever was behind this all too easy to perceive: eliminate Muggle-born wizards and intimidate the Purebloods.

He looked back at the article, trying to connect faces with the names. The parents had been a bit younger than he was, but they had probably been at Hogwarts together for a couple of years. He couldn't place the name of the man, but he thought he remembered the name of a Sorcha Friskin. A Hufflepuff, if he wasn't mistaken. Brown hair and green eyes. A round face.

No more. And their eldest had been almost old enough to come to Hogwarts.

'Damn,' he whispered once more, before he met the eyes of his apprentice and had to bite his tongue not to repeat himself for a fourth time.

Hermione after she'd saved his damn life yet *again*, there was really no use in persisting to call her 'Miss Granger' within the sheltered confines of his mind looked thoroughly shaken. No, worse: she was shaking.

'He...' He cleared his throat. 'Miss Granger, are you feeling quite all right?'

Of course she was not, that much was easy to see. He frowned irritably at her. 'Do you need an Invigoration Draught? Or some Pepper-Up-Potion?'

She blinked at him.

'Miss Granger?'

She shook herself. 'I...I'm sorry, Professor. I ... that article ... the poor children ...' She trailed off helplessly, giving a strange, stiff shrug. 'I...I think I need to be a-alone for a bit. If you will excuse me, sir?'

'Very well. Don't...'

He shook his head. There was really no reason to admonish Hermione about punctuality. She'd never been late for an appointment in her life.

'Sir?'

'Nothing. I-I will see you later, then.'

She only nodded, before she awkwardly turned around and slowly shuffled to the door that led out of the Great Hall from the dais of the High Table.

He felt his frown deepen. Something was wrong about the way Hermione held herself, so stiffly, and about the way she moved, so carefully. As if she was not only shook up by the news, but in considerable pain. Was she keeping something from him? He should probably consult Poppy ...

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42. To Hold You Through the Night

What with one thing and another, Hermione hadn't managed to gather her courage to ask her master for assistance concerning potions to help her deal with the long-term effects of the Cruciatus Curse. A neglect she was deeply regretting at the moment.

The first night of December 1999 was the coldest night of the autumn so far, heralding the advent of winter with first flurries of snowflakes. Dancing above the towers of the castle they turned into icy droplets of rain further down and the day before hoarfrost had glittered all over the gardens for the first time.

A big blaze was roaring in the fireplace of Hermione's room, she lay huddled under a heap of blankets with Crookshanks at her feet, a hot-water bottle clutched to her stomach, but to no avail. She didn't seem to be able to chase the chill out of her bones. Instead, the aching stiffness was slowly sliding into the realm of pain, with a hint of agony flashing through her whenever she breathed too deeply.

This is not happening, she thought. Instinctively she curled up into a ball, but the movement ripped through her body as if she were being struck by red hot pokers. Or freezing pokers?

But it was happening. She knew the signs by now and dreaded them.

First there were days of stiffness and aching joints. Of being cold and never getting warm. Then the sensations of cold and heat became mixed up, until they faded, faded into fiery pain. The next stage had her muscles seizing up. Agony.

I'm not weak. I'm not weak. I'm ... what did Healer Mugwort say about it? 'You are merely having a harder time with the after-effects of a horrible curse than other witches might have.' Right. Not weak.

A first cramp. She buried her face in the pillow and muffled her moan.

Not too bad yet. Just like ten times the feeling of the worst menstrual cramp imaginable.

She swallowed carefully.

I'm not throwing up. Not yet.

Her legs were on fire, they were twitching and she couldn't stop, and every movement felt like knives slashing through her flesh. Crookshanks leapt from the bed, to avoid her helpless kicks.

Not weak.

Just having a harder time.

The muscles along her spine seized up, bending her head backwards.

Not weak. And the real thing was much worse.

Much.

Worse.

Then she remembered Bellatrix' eyes again, filled with madness and hate, and she heard Bellatrix' harsh voice again, as the Death Eater shouted at her: '... Tell the truth, tell the truth!'

And then Hermione screamed.

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From somewhere far away she heard a voice, a voice that sounded a little hoarse, but surprisingly soft, 'You foolish, foolish girl, why didn't you tell me? I don't have any of the potions that might help you now in stock.'

Gentle fingers brushed her curls away from her face. Of course. He must have heard her.

Somehow she managed to open her eyes.

Snape was sitting next to her on her bed, still dressed in his teacher's robes. Although it must be close to midnight, he hadn't retired for the night yet. He had probably come back from his rounds just in time to hear her.

'Didn't get round to it,' she breathed, then clenched her teeth as another wave of pain made her shudder.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir,' Hermione pressed on. 'I think ... I think the worst is ...' She balled her hands, ignoring the agony shooting up her arms in a feeble attempt to keep control of her body. '... over,' she wheezed.

'Oh, really?' A black eyebrow rose in a sarcastic quirk. 'Do you mind if we ...test that admirably Gryffindor sentiment?'

She just stared at him, trying to get her breath back.

Impatiently he shook his head, but when he reached for her, his hands were careful, his movements as precise as ever. He gripped her under the arms to pull her body up against him, just as she had done with him not even two weeks ago. Not much of a movement, but it was enough to make her muscles cramp again.

She wanted to pull away from him, but her body wasn't cooperating. Her arms and legs were shaking, as she writhed. Hermione ended up with her face buried in her master's robes. Strong hands clasped her arms and held her tightly.

'It is best if you move as little as possible,' he murmured. 'Try to keep still. Try to relax. This will pass.'

She tried to obey his command, to relax in his embrace. A shallow breath brought his scent to her nose*Vetyver wood. Bergamot. Rosemary. Cypress. Nutmeg.*

Distantly she realised that under different circumstances she would have loved to be held in his embrace like that. For such a slender man he was surprisingly strong. And even through the haze of pain, his arms felt good around her.

When the next cramp seized her, she turned fully towards him, her fingers involuntarily clutching at him.

oooOooo

She had finally fallen asleep in the wee hours of morning, utterly spent from fighting down the echo of a Cruciatus Curse that would have killed or driven mad any lesser witch.

Her face was pressed against his chest, her cheeks flushed from the exertion. In spite of his constant admonishments to relax, she had chosen to fight each convulsion in typical, hare-brained Gryffindor fashion. Absentmindedly he smoothed a sweat-damp curl away from her painfully creased forehead. Her hands were still clinging to his robes, as if he were her only hope to last through the night. She felt fragile in his arms. Too thin. And *oh, Merlin*, too stubborn for her own good.

Snape allowed himself a minute sigh.

She must have heard him even in her sleep. She stirred slightly, snuggling closer to his body.

'... not weak,' she mumbled. 'Not weak ...'

'No,' he whispered, 'you're not weak. Not weak at all. You foolish, foolish girl.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

43. Waking in Your Arms

When Hermione woke, his arms were still wrapped around her.

She lay with her face pressed against his shoulder. Her bones and muscles still ached in the aftermath of the night, but for the first time in weeks she felt warm. For the first time in *months* she felt safe and secure. His right hand rested lightly on her left shoulder. When she took a deep breath, and no cramps seized her, intense relief washed over her. Snape reacted to her slight movement by curling the fingers of his left hand tighter around her waist and pulling her closer to him, but he did not wake.

She closed her eyes again and kept very still, just breathing, inhaling his familiar fragrance. The spicy scent caused a fluttering sensation in her stomach, and suddenly a strange ache formed in the middle of her chest. She felt light and heavy at the same time, as if her heart were a soap-bubble, shimmering, pretty, but fragile: a soft breeze would shatter her and rip her apart.

Breathe in. Her cheek, the way it rested on the rough woollen fabric of his robe. Breathe out. The weight of his right arm on her shoulders. Breathe in. The warmth of his body around her and beneath her. Breathe out. His left arm slung around her back. His hand holding her. Breathe in. Why did her eyes burn with tears all at once? Breathe out.

She opened her eyes and blinked.

His face so close to hers, unguarded and vulnerable in his sleep. She loved the proud arc of his nose. The sweep of his black lashes. And most of all, to see him at peace for once, the harsh lines in his face smoothed by quiet slumber.

... loved?

Oh.

She must have tensed, because his lids fluttered and then opened. Black eyes glinted in the pale morning light.

'How are you feeling?' he asked. His voice was low, but to Hermione's surprise she realised that it sounded the way she remembered it from earlier years.

Smooth.

She exhaled in a sigh. 'Better.'

A faint, relieved smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. 'Good.'

Tightening his hold on her, he sat up in a slow, awkward movement, grunting a little. Once seated, he carefully lowered her to a lying position, all the time watching her intently. After a moment, he seemed satisfied that she did not exhibit any negative reactions to being moved.

'Can you sit up?'

'I think so.' She attempted to raise herself the way she usually did, sitting up and swinging her legs around in one fluid movement and failed. She slumped back against him.

'Shit.' Her hand flew to her mouth. 'Oops. Sorry, sir.'

He merely raised his eyebrows a little. 'I would suggest taking things a little more slowly today, Miss Granger. *ACruciatius* relapse like the one you suffered last night is not a trifling matter.'

She bit down on her lip and tried again, more slowly. This time he helped her, gently pushing her back into an upright position. She felt stiffer than ever before, and her muscles protested every inch. But in the end she was sitting next to Snape, and although every bone and sinew in her body ached, there were no cramps, no agonised spasms.

His lips curled into a slight smile. 'For future reference, Miss Granger: *this* is what it looks like when the worst of a *Cruciatius* relapse is over.'

When she glared at him, she could have sworn that a spark of relieved amusement glittered in the depth of his eyes.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip, before she burst out with a question, 'Why didn't you call Madam Pomfrey?'

Snape shifted until he sat on the edge of the bed, his back straight and tense. He did not look at her, but stared at the opposite wall, the shoulder-length curtain of black hair hiding his expression.

'She couldn't have done anything else for you than what I did,' he said softly. 'And as long as you are my apprentice, I am bound to do all that is within my power to take care of you.'

oooOooo

'Are you sure that you're feeling better?' Lois asked. 'You look terrible.'

Hermione smiled. 'Yes, I am. With the cramps gone, Professor Snape could give me something for the pain. And he's going to brew potions for me that should prevent another relapse.'

'That's good.' But the concerned look didn't leave the eyes of the dark-haired Muggle woman. 'It was a ... spell ... that caused those problems?'

Hermione curled her fingers tighter around her mug of hot chocolate. She was ensconced in an armchair in the Potions master's library, snuggled into a soft blanket. Lois had come to visit her after the latest therapy session. Hermione sighed. She didn't particularly want to talk about the *Cruciatius* today. Or ever, really.

'Yes,' Hermione said at last. 'An especially nasty curse, one of the Unforgivables. It's called the '*Cruciatius*' Curse. It causes pain. Apparently it can have quite ... uncomfortable long-term effects.'

'I think I can see that,' Lois commented wryly.

Hermione shook her head. 'No. You can't. I had cramps, convulsions. No control over my body. The tiniest movement caused spasms of pain. And all that *was* something compared to the real thing.'

She swallowed hard. She didn't want to remember Bellatrix. Or the final battle. The memory of the article about the murdered family burned in her brain. Would it happen all over again? War, torture, death? And little Alina ... as a Muggle-born witch her life was at risk, too.

'I'm sorry, Lois. I'm afraid the wizarding world is not a very nice place.'

For a while Lois didn't reply. When she finally met Hermione's eyes, her expression was grim, but calm. 'I don't know how well you've kept up with the Muggle world, Hermione. But you should realise that it has never been a '*nice*' place. Why should the wizarding world be any different?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

44. A White and Woolly Christmas

Outside, the world was drowning in white. It had been snowing for three days straight now. The lake was completely frozen and some of the icicles hanging from the merlons of the parapet were as big as First Year students.

Inside, fires blazed in every room, and the flagstones in the hallways and dungeons of the castle had been enchanted to function as magical under-floor heating.

Now, just a week before Christmas, everyone was in high spirits. The students who had returned to Hogwarts for the accelerated Seventh Year had sat their NEWTs just a week ago. They would receive their results on Christmas day – a present most of them looked forward to with very mixed feelings.

Most of them, that was. Neville Longbottom was standing behind Professor Sprout right now and grinning like a fool.

'... if *he* gets to have an apprentice,' Professor Sprout was saying, 'then I don't see why/shouldn't have one, too. I'm as much a Master of my subject as Professor Snape is, and I have just as much work teaching and as head of house as he does.'

'I rather doubt that handling a handful of harmless Hufflepuffs amounts to quite the same challenge as supervising Slytherins,' Professor Snape sneered, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking down his long nose at the dumpy, wild-haired witch.

Instantly the glow on Neville's face diminished, like a Muggle light bulb being turned down a notch. Hermione snorted, then sheepishly ducked her head when her master directed a dark scowl at her. She knew very well that Professor Snape would have no say in the decision of whether or not Professor Sprout took Neville on as her apprentice. If Neville passed his NEWTs with satisfactory grades and Headmistress McGonagall agreed, there was no reason why he shouldn't get the position if Professor Sprout was willing to take him on.

Headmistress McGonagall cleared her throat and irritably narrowed her eyes at Snape over the rims of her glasses. 'I think the results of Mr Longbottom's NEWTs are due on Christmas day, Pomona. Maybe we should resume this conversation then?'

oooOooo

Peals of laughter caught her attention. Headmistress McGonagall looked down at the long tables of the Great Hall and frowned. Not far from the dais, a group of students occupied the end of one of the tables, playing an enchanted board game. Two Slytherins – Alina Petrel and Geillis Duncan – along with a Ravenclaw girl, Prudentia Halleywell, all of them First Years, and a Hufflepuff Second Year. Percely Parkinson was the younger brother of Pansy; originally an embarrassment to his family for having been Sorted into Hufflepuff, he now served as their favourite proverbial fig leaf.

'Tadaaa! I proudly present ...*the monopoly card!* And now I want to see sheep, ladies and gentleman, give me your sheep, come on, herd them over!' Alina's voice rang bright with glee.

Geillis sighed, Prue scowled, but both girls tapped the small wooden sheds set up on the table before them with their wands and proceeded to prod what looked like miniature sheep over towards Alina's shed. Percely didn't move, but glowered at Alina instead.

'Come on, Perce, I *know* you've got some sheep in there. Hand them over!'

Percely still didn't budge.

McGonagall felt her eyebrows rise. Sometimes Hufflepuff steadfastness went hand in hand with Hufflepuff pigheadedness in a rather unfortunate way.

'Peeerce. Perce! Oh, for GOD'S SAKE! I'll hex you into that desert down there if you don't give me your sheep right now.'

Percely, by now in full denial, had crossed his arms in front of his chest and was shaking his head. 'I need my sheep.'

Alina had had enough. She whipped out her wand, pointed it at Percely's shed and cried, *Accio* sheep!'

Unfortunately she flicked her wand rather too energetically, and a number of tiny woollen objects zoomed past her head towards the teachers' table.

Hot tea splattered over Minerva's hand. A marble-sized something was paddling frantically in her cup, bleating with fright.

'Merlin's ba...beard!' the Headmistress cried, plucking the tiny creature out of her cup and holding it away from her with stiff, elegant fingers, so the droplets of tea dripping from the animal's sodden coat wouldn't hit her frilly blouse.

'Miss Petrel!' She stalked down to the long table. 'Five points from Slytherin. We do not threaten to hex other students. And a detention to be served with Professor Flitwick. By now you really should have more control with that charm. If you do play games with enchanted figures, treat them respectfully.'

'Yes, Headmistress.' The small face paled, the dark eyes growing huge and frightened. Minerva ignored her, and turned to Percely Parkinson. 'And ten points from Hufflepuff. If you agree to join in a board game, Mr Parkinson, you will follow the rules of that game.'

oooOooo

Snape and Harry had arrived early for the Order meeting. While Harry expected Hermione to show up on time, he also knew that she was doing some last minute Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley.

Probably buying something for her master, he thought with some discomfiture. But of course she would. It was only proper, and given The Plan ...

He sighed and pretended to be intensely interested in the showers of sleet that were pounding the high windows of the library in number twelve, Grimmauld Place. But out of the corner of his eye he unobtrusively observed the Potions master, who was hiding behind the latest issue of the *Daily Prophet*.

Snape looked weary and sick.

Small wonder. There had been another attack. Another family of Muggle-born wizards killed in their beds. Father, mother, and two children, one of them just a baby. All dead, and no sign of whoever had murdered them.

Finally Snape lowered the paper. Their eyes met, and when Snape failed to utter one of his customary acerbic remarks, Harry sighed again. Snape not snarky? That was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

oooOooo

oooOooo

45. All I Want for Christmas

The Mark was gone. Only scars were left. If enough time passed, the Muggle Physician had told him, even they would fade.

But he still dreamed of the skull and the snake coiling around his arm. First the faint lines grew clearer, until they were black like coal on his white skin. Then a burning sensation crept over the tattoo. Increased. Warmth, heat. Fire! When he tried to flex his fingers, they remained frozen. Pain throbbed in his arm. Sweat formed on his

forehead, ran down his cheeks. His throat constricted, his breath hitched, reduced to gasps, as the pain increased. Until the black lines burst apart. Charred like coal, the skin peeled back around the Mark, revealing raw flesh. Still he burned. And he couldn't avert his gaze. His flesh crumbled away until only bones remained, strangely white and fragile. A gust of wind tore at him. And his bones turned to dust.

He lay clutching his arm while his tears grew cold. At last he turned onto his back and counted his heartbeats. Finally he rose, went to the window. Turned back. Passed the table with the newspapers. Five attacks. Eighteen dead. Ten adults. Eight children. And one cat. Turned around. Back to the window. And again.

Three years. He'd hoped for only three years! Of relative peace. Of well-known routines and small comforts. No nightmares. Control over his life. Better yet: Control over his death, thanks to a perfect plan that would grant him a painless end at the date of his choice.

Now ... He stared at the picture below the headline. A balding, middle-aged wizard, his arm around a dumpy witch, smiling at him *Now the Dark was rising again.*

He gazed across the lake towards the Forbidden Forest. Pearlescent mists drifted over the frozen surface. Beyond, the woods beckoned *The woods are lovely, dark and deep ...*

The darkest evening of the year. And then there was Christmas, the day of gifts and fake smiles.

It would be nicely symbolic, he surmised. And for the first and the last time in his life he'd receive the gift he really wanted.

oooOooo

It was incredibly difficult to find a suitable Christmas present for Professor Snape. Hermione wanted to give him something special, something he would cherish and value. Yet it also needed to be appropriate, something an apprentice could give to her master. In the end she had Charmed Muggle CDs to produce their music at a wand-tip, choosing songs Professor Snape seemed to have enjoyed at the Slytherin House party. Hermione was quite pleased with the result.

As she approached his library, she imagined his reaction. That special smirk. Maybe an appreciative glint in his black eyes?

But when she stood before him, she knew instantly that something was wrong. He was even paler than usual, his sallow skin tinged with yellow. 'Miss Granger? What are you doing here? The feast is in the Great Hall.'

'I've come to bring you your Christmas gift, sir. I hope you like it. I've created the Charms myself.'

He appeared startled, almost shocked at her words. For a second she caught a hint of unbearable sadness in his fathomless eyes. Suddenly she felt scared.

'Ah, yes,' Professor Snape sneered. 'Christmas ... a day of celebration and exchanging ... gifts.'

'Tell me, Miss Granger, have you ever wondered why I have taken you on as my Apprentice?' he asked silkily.

'...Yes, of course I have, sir. I assumed that...'

He held up his hand to silence her. 'Let that be my gift to you,' he announced, 'I shall tell you why I accepted you. And then I shall ask you for something in return. For the only ... gift ... shall we say ... that I will ever ask of you.'

She frowned. Her heart began to race. *But if he wants to ask me to marry him, why does he look so awful?*

'It's just a little thing,' he murmured. 'Something you are Bound to do anyway, by your oath and by your blood.'

Her breath caught in her throat, as a horrible premonition gripped her. *What if he did not want to marry her? What if he did not ever want to marry?*

'Sir,' she started.

But he would not let her speak. Anger flared in his eyes, as he swooped down on her. 'I shall ask no more of you than Dumbledore asked of me. Surely even a bloody Gryffindor such as you can one, just one time in my life give to me what I really want!'

His gift slipped from her grasp. 'No,' she cried, her voice shrill with anguish. 'Please! At least hear me out please!'

'Why should I...'

'Just three minutes, please! I promise I will do whatever you order me to do, even help you to to I did swear just hear me out, please!'

He took a step back and folded his arms across his chest. 'Very well.'

'Sir, please! I can I can understand that you don't want to go to Azkaban. I mean, who'd ever want to go to Azkaban. No one,' she babbled. 'And I also understand if you don't want a wife, I mean, I know that you loved Lily Potter.'

Though she didn't really understand. Lily had married someone else, for God's sake!

'Maybe we there could be another solution!' she stammered. 'There must be a loophole! Something. I'm smart, I can find a way.'

'Please,' she begged. 'Let me try! I promise, if there's no other way, I'll do it. Just not yet. Not when there is still time...' She fell silent, choking on her tears. She couldn't look away from him, from his eyes, so black, so bleak.

'Please,' she rasped. 'Don't ask this of me. Not yet.'

He slumped down on one of the armchairs near the fireplace. The silence grew, expanded, reached for her, strangled her.

'Very well,' he sighed at last. 'Not yet. Now go.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

46. Worrying and Worse

Harry Potter was worried. This was nothing new. Rather, it was his customary state of mind. In fact, he barely remembered how it felt not being worried, or worse.

Absentmindedly, he rubbed the scar on his forehead, before turning his attention back to Hermione's letter.

Harry was aware of the conditions of Hermione's apprenticeship. She had explained the magical contract very carefully to him, since its clauses meant she would probably not be able to tell him about some developments concerning The Plan. She was sworn to keep her master's secrets. Things might come up that she couldn't tell him, even if she wanted to. Harry would have to read between the lines.

He sighed and read the letter again.

... I am glad Christmas is over. All that noise and turmoil, you cannot concentrate at all. The apprenticeship is really demanding. Sometimes I wonder about failure. How do you live with yourself when the best you can do simply isn't good enough? Oh well, I am probably overreacting you know me ...

Hermione had looked awful at the last Order meeting. Her face had a pinched, painful look, the skin almost as pasty as Snape's, plum-coloured circles under her eyes. She'd been jumpy, too. Nervous. And when she'd picked up her glass of pumpkin juice, her hand had been shaking.

Come to think of, Snape hadn't looked a whit better. Harry frowned in concentration. A good part of his Auror training was devoted to noticing things, little details that other wizards would miss. While Hermione guarded Snape's secrets, Lois Petrel was not bound by any oaths or magical contracts. (Another frown and a mental note one of these days he had to look into whatever was going on between Lois and Ron.) Anyway, Lois had told Ron about the incident with the Dark Mark and its subsequent removal by Muggle means. Ron in turn had told Harry, who'd had enough by that time of all that talking around corners and had gone straight to McGonagall. At first pretending that she didn't know what he was talking about, the Headmistress' frustration had finally made her spill the whole story.

Apparently recurring nightmares had pushed Snape into using Dark Magic of all things to try to remove the Mark, almost killing him in the process. McGonagall had been utterly furious at Snape's unprecedented foolhardiness and lack of trust. But Harry suspected that Minerva's uncharacteristically emotional reaction to the incident was mainly due to her concern for the well-being of the Potions master.

Well-being, my arse, he thought, his mind jumping to the latest news from the Ministry of Magic. With Umbridge appointed the new Probations Officer, Snape's happiness was the least of their worries. Arthur had managed to get his hands on Umbridge's timetable, and it seemed her first check-up visit with the notorious ex-Death Eater was scheduled for the second week of January.

He put Hermione's letter on the table, but he couldn't get it out of his mind. Placing his palms on either side of the missive, he leant over the table, scanning the lines once more.

Something really bothered him about that letter. Something he couldn't quite pinpoint.

How do you live with yourself when the best you can do simply is not good enough?

He couldn't say why, but there was something about that question that chased shivers down his spine. Harry shook himself *It's probably my imagination, an overreaction on my part*, he thought. *Just an augurey flying over my grave...*

DAMN. Grave. That was it. *How do you live with yourself* a question that implied an alternative. Death.

Overreacting. *Reacting*. Something must have happened.

oooOooo

'*Arbroath*,' he muttered, and the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the office of the Headmistress slid aside. While Professor Dumbledore's passwords had reflected his sweet-tooth, Professor McGonagall attempted to educate anyone who had access to her office in the history of Scotland.

Arbroath for instance, Harry's reasearch had revealed, referred to a declaration of Scottish independence and confirmation of Scotland's status as a sovereign state in 1320.

As the revolving staircase elevated him to the office, he wondered how the hell he should go about discussing Snape and Hermione with the Headmistress of Hogwarts.

oooOooo

When Harry Potter announced his desire to discuss Severus Snape and Hermione Granger with her, Minerva McGonagall cast a longing glance at the shelf that held her impressive collection of single malt whiskies. Unfortunately and contrary to the beliefs of her beloved grandfather, who had held fast to the conviction that it was never too early for a wee dram the headmistress didn't regard eleven o' clock on a Sunday morning as the appropriate time to indulge in the water of life.

'Well,' she said, adjusting her spectacles. Harry appeared to be more than concerned. And he did not have the doubtful pleasure to observe the Potions Master and his apprentice on a daily basis. 'Well,' she repeated, took off her glasses and carefully rubbed them clean with an embroidered handkerchief.

'As far as her apprenticeship is concerned, Hermione is doing very well indeed. She is teaching the First and the Second Years and supervising the study groups of the Third and the Fourth Years. Additionally she is involved in Professor Snape's private research and has started a potions project of her own.'

'Yes, yes.' Impatiently Harry waved away those technical details. 'I want to know *how* they are. I know that Hermione is *doing* well, she's Hermione, for God's sake.'

'Not well, I'm afraid. Not well at all.'

Since the Wizengamot had pronounced the ridiculous conditions for Snape's probation, not a day had passed when she hadn't worried about the younger man. While Minerva admired Hermione's determination to save Severus' life, she had rather serious doubts concerning the young woman's plan and its prospects of success.

And to top things off she had to allow Umbridge inside Hogwarts again. The evening and the opportunity to enjoy a rather hefty nightcap really couldn't come too soon.

oooOooo

oooOooo

47. Black Rose

'Dolores.'

A wave of sweet musk drifted to her, almost making her gag with revulsion.

'Minerva.'

'What a lovely scent you are wearing.' Minerva's polite smile froze into a grimace on her face.

'Isn't it amazing, it's the most magical perfume I've ever had,' Umbridge gushed. 'Now, about this meeting ... I have to apprise myself of the situation of convicts who have been released under probation and to ascertain that the requirements of the relevant probations' conditions are met.

'There is really no need to look so worried, Minerva; I am sure you've been doing a wonderful job of keeping an eye on Snape,' simpered Umbridge.

'Thank you.' Minerva's tone was so sour it curdled the milk in her tea. *Next time Umbridge shows up, order Earl Grey,* she noted mentally, as she reached for a stack of papers on her desk. 'This is *Professor* Snape's schedule. And copies of my weekly reports.'

'*Hem hem.*' With grunts that reminded McGonagall of a pig looking for truffles, Umbridge rifled through the parchments in her pudgy hands.

'I see that you have allowed him to patrol the castle. And you've even granted him free evenings. Are you sure that is wise, Minerva?' Umbridge's eyelashes fluttered, reminding McGonagall of the twitching legs of flies in the throes of death.

Clamping firmly down on a vision of a giant fly swatter, Minerva forced herself to reply without outright hostility. She couldn't afford to antagonise Umbridge. 'I was not aware that the conditions of his probation contained any implication that I am supposed to curtail his freedom of movement, especially within the castle.'

'Of course, of course. I just meant to say ... in some situations it's wiser to err on the side of caution, isn't it? After all, he was one of the most dangerous followers of V V of the Dark Lord.'

oooOooo

'Well, well, Severus,' Umbridge simpered from behind the dragon-clawed desk. Snape could just imagine Minerva's face at having her study appropriated by the Probations Officer.

He was not surprised to see that there was no chair provided for him. Drawing himself up to his full height, he had a hard time to keep himself from imperiously crossing his arms in front of his chest. But even he knew that it was not exactly smart to start out with annoying Umbridge with the simple expedient of body language.

'Dolores,' Snape sneered. Somehow he managed to resist the temptation of mimicking her silly mannerism.

'It's Ms. Umbridge for you, Snape.'

He smirked as the sugary sweetness drained from Umbridge's voice. Her round eyes bulged a little as she leant forwards, pushing the expanse of her pink cleavage onto the desk. His nostrils flared as he caught the cloying candied scent of her perfume. Idly he wondered how many jarveys had died for that perfume, while listening with half an ear to her sermon delineating the preposterous conditions for his probation.

'... so what have you been doing in order to fulfil the requirements of your probation, Snape?'

'Are you interested, Ms. Umbridge?' He quirked an eyebrow. Red spots of rage appeared on Umbridge's cheekbones, and her bosom heaved under layers of garish tweed. He felt a satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his mouth and swiftly continued, as it was probably not the best of his ideas to drive his Probations Officer into apoplexy, 'Whatever I choose to do about the conditions of my probation, Ms. Umbridge, is solely between myself and the Wizingamot of the Ministry.'

'And the lucky witch,' he added as an afterthought, painfully aware of how bitter his voice suddenly sounded.

Umbridge's slack, wide mouth expanded into a malicious smile. 'Dear Severus, surely a hero of the war and a martyr for the cause will be able to find one witch willing to sacrifice herself in gratitude?'

She obviously didn't expect him to reply. Instead she went on, her high voice shrill and cutting, 'And if I were you, dear Severus, I wouldn't underestimate the influence of the Wizingamot on the other offices of the Ministry.'

oooOooo

Hermione's feet dragged as she walked towards the office of Headmistress McGonagall for her interview with Umbridge. The badly hidden stares of the students she passed in the corridors were burning holes into the back of her robes.

She wasn't ready for this. She was so damn tired. Even with Professor Snape's anti-Cruciatius potions to ward off another relapse, her bones and joints ached, and she could sleep all day. A turn of phrase from the book she was reading with the Slytherins meandered through her mind: '*thin, like butter spread over too much bread.* Yes, that was exactly how she felt. And worse, her mental state affected her magic.

If Umbridge tried anything, Hermione knew she wouldn't have the strength to defend herself. But of course that was stupid. Umbridge was a Ministry official. She wouldn't 'try' anything. And besides, during her time as High Inquisitor, Umbridge hadn't been able to do Legilimency, so why should she be able to do it now?

Still, for some reason Hermione's thoughts revolved around Occlumency as she approached the gargoyle that hid the entrance to Minerva's office.

How did it work? she wondered. Building a shield around your thoughts. She envisioned something like a tower to guard her mind. The sturdy donjon of a medieval castle. Huge, solid slabs of stone, surrounding her thoughts, sheltering her secrets.

Once inside, Umbridge fixed her protuberant eyes on Hermione and cut straight to the chase. 'What is your relationship to the Potions Master Severus Snape?'

Hermione stared at the bloated face of the witch and tried to concentrate on her tower. In vain. Walls crumbled, stones splintered. Instead of her safe tower, all Hermione could think of was a black rose under a glass globe, beautiful, thorny, yet strangely fragile.

'I am his apprentice.'

'Is that all?'

The glass shattered. For a moment the deep, seductive scent of rose blossoms enveloped her.

No, Hermione thought, *it isn't.*

oooOooo

oooOooo

48. The Most Noble and Venerable Knights of Dumbledore's Army

'Remember that you must tell the truth, Miss Granger. You must always tell the truth. If you lie to me, it shall cost you dearly.'

'If you are quite finished? My apprentice has other duties to attend to yet today.' A silky voice slithered into the room.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, but she didn't dare to move, fixing her gaze on the dragon feet of McGonagall's desk instead.

'Not until I am finished with her.' There was nothing girly to Umbridge's voice now.

'Leave my apprentice out of this,' Snape snarled.

Umbridge snorted. 'Or?' she asked with an evil smirk.

Snape never missed a beat, 'Or *you* shall suffer the consequences.'

Umbridge's squat figure recoiled as if struck, her broad, flabby face whipping up and around towards the door. Hidden in the shadows of the doorway, Snape loomed, his black eyes blazing.

'Is that a threat?'

'Wouldn't it be very ... *foolish* ... for a man in my position to utter ... threats?'

Umbridge's mouth dropped open.

'Yes,' she squeaked at last. 'It would be. Very foolish.'

Black eyes bored into her and underneath the pink rouge, her cheeks went pale.

'If that is the case,' Snape said softly, 'then by all means regard my words ... as a joke.'

oooOooo

'If we want to be proper knights, we need to have an ordeal,' Alina declared and looked imperiously at her friends. A motley group of First-Years and Second-Years had squeezed into a linen closet on the third floor. There were four Slytherins, two Hufflepuffs, three Ravenclaws and four Gryffindors. Yet somehow the linen closet managed to be just big enough for each of the would-be knights to find a stack of blankets to perch on.

'Yes,' Myrrdin agreed importantly. 'Some kind of vigil at least. I've read in the *Quibbler* that the ritual for entering the Order of the Phoenix demands that you stay a whole night all alone in the Chamber of Secrets.'

Geilis and Prue clung together, looking scared. Percely Parkinson frowned, but there was a look of determination on his face.

Ebenezer Sibly-Style, a First-Year Slytherin, steepled his fingers in his best imitation of his head of house. 'If we want to belong to Dumbledore's Army, I should think a vigil at the tomb of the most revered hero of our order would be an appropriate ritual to determine if someone is worthy to join our ranks.'

'A vigil at the tomb sounds good,' Alyah, a well-read Ravenclaw girl agreed.

'And afterwards,' Terrwyn Bevan suggested, 'just before sunrise we could have the initiation ritual, you know with handing over our seal and so on.'

'But that means we'll all have to be out of bed and out of our houses!' Prue sounded scared.

Percely threw her a disgusted look. 'If you want to be a hero, you need to take certain risks.'

'Are you sure you're in the right house, mate?' Barret Cruddace asked, grinning, while Percely scowled.

'Well, maybe we could have the initiation conducted only by our grandmaster and the two seneschals,' Alina suggested sensibly. 'That way only four of us would need to slip out at night. If we're careful, no one will notice. Professor Snape is still recovering from that Potions accident. His rounds are much shorter than they used to be.'

'Yes,' Cruddace put in, 'because the great git is afraid that Umbridge will catch him and ship him directly to Azkaban.'

'DON'T SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT, YOU JERK!' Alina jumped up, balling her hands into fists, ready to defend her head of house in battle or brawl.

Myrrdin quickly stepped in front of Barret, while Geilis hung on to Alina's arm.

'Calm *down* everyone,' Ebenezer said softly, but with astonishing authority. 'Crudass, remember rule number two. There will *be* no house-rivalry among the knights of our order. And that includes insulting any head of house, no matter how many points they may have taken from any house on any given day.'

'Crudass?' Myrrdin prodded his house-mate. 'I think there's something you want to say.'

Barret glared at Myrrdin, but the effect was spoiled by the embarrassed red flush on his face. 'I'm sorry, Alina. He's not a git. He's a hero. I wish I was as brave as he is.'

He gnawed on his lower lip, then he added, 'But I bet that cow would love nothing better than carting him off right away.'

Gloom settled among the prospective knights of the Most Noble and Venerable Order of Dumbledore's Army. They all knew about the conditions of Professor Snape's probation.

'I wish I was of age,' Terrwyn whispered. 'I'd propose to him in a jiffy.'

'Me, too,' sighed Alyah.

'Me, three,' added Alina and frowned, as an idea struck her. Her heartbeat quickened, and suddenly she was quite impatient for the Order meeting to end. Decisively she turned to Barret and offered him her hand. 'Forgiven and forgotten, Barret.'

'Now,' she turned to the appointed grandmaster. 'Who'll do the first vigil?'

Ebenezer looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then he smiled. 'You, of course. Since it was your idea to re-establish our order.'

Alina swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. She would be a worthy knight to Dumbledore. She would bring honour to her house.

'How do we go about it, then?' Percely asked.

Everyone turned to Cato. Although only a First-Year, the Ravenclaw boy was already known for his brilliant strategies at wizarding chess. Cato put a finger next to his nose, a sure-fire sign that he was thinking, and thinking hard.

'The first thing we have to do,' he announced, 'is to find out the patterns of the teachers' rounds. We need to know exactly who of the staff is where at any given moment. We'll have to watch them carefully, and note down everything we see. That way, we will know when it's safe to slip out.'

He sniffed contemplatively. 'Maybe we could even bewitch a map or something for that purpose.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

49. Ordeal of Knighthood

Alina was grateful that Hermione had shown her how to conjure up a flame and keep it safely in a jar. She used an old jam glass, hidden inside a woollen bonnet so it wouldn't give her away.

It had been easier to slip out than expected. The most difficult part had been to remain patient during the previous weeks, when they'd worked on analysing the schedules of the grown-ups. But it had been worth it. They were sooo predictable. Apart from Professor Snape, they all stuck to a certain routine with only very few variations. Even Mrs. Norris' rounds had a pattern to them.

Really, sometimes adults were too stupid. What if they were not a couple of students sneaking out after curfew, Alina mused. However had they managed to defeat Voldemort if they couldn't even make sure that everyone stayed put at night?

In spite of her jam-jar fire and being bundled up in onion-like layers of clothing, Alina shivered. March was still very cold in the Highlands. And dark. The castle and grounds were wrapped in the black shadows of a moonless night. Even the gleaming white marble of the tomb looming ahead of her did little to dispel the gloom.

A rustling sound made her start. The frantic beating of her heart pulsed right up to her ears. But the Forbidden Forest was a safe distance away. None of its creatures would venture to the hill above the lake where Dumbledore's tomb looked eastwards. And the tomb was warded. Not as strong as the castle, but it was protected. She was perfectly safe. And besides, Ebenezer, Adrastus and Alyah were only a few hundred yards away, down in the new boathouse at the lake. If she shouted, they'd come running at once. She listened hard, but now everything was still. After a while she relaxed and her thoughts returned to her vigil.

She'd attempted to prepare herself properly, she'd showered for cleansing, though she'd been too chicken for cold water. And she'd fasted, sort of. She hadn't had trifle for dessert, although that was her favourite pudding.

Okay. So what should a Knight of Dumbledore be like? Alina contemplated. Fearless and brave, of course. Defending the Light. Standing up for others, even if you didn't like them. Like Crudass, she supposed. Helping anyone in need ...

Her thoughts turned to the one person she knew who needed help most at the moment. Her head of house. At first glance that was a truly tricky problem. But she felt a grin spread on her face. At second glance, the solution was rather simple.

After all Alina *had* observed how Miss Granger looked at the Potions Master when she thought no one else was noticing.

Slowly the dark hours of the night crept by ...

oooOooo

A flash like lightning blinded Alina. Blue fire flared up to the sky, illuminating the lake and castle for a second, before the boom of an explosion shattered the stillness of the night. Instinctively she threw up her hands to shield her eyes, just in time to see the white marble walls of the tomb in front of her crack and expand outwards. The blast of the detonation knocked her backwards, throwing her down like a rag-doll. Then the nightly darkness was back, blacker and more impenetrable than before.

Alina never saw the hail of debris raining down on her.

oooOooo

After Umbridge's visit, sleep proved elusive for Snape. He couldn't get her face out of his mind, the revolting doll-like mask of pink lipstick and rouge, the coldness in her gaze, the malice in her voice as she had tried to intimidate Hermione. Cold fury coiled inside him, whenever he recalled the haunted expression on Hermione's face.

No one threatened his apprentice.

No one. Least of all that stinking toad. That upstart panjandrum. That vile ...

His pacing brought him back to the window. He could barely make out the white corner of Dumbledore's tomb in the gloom of the moonless night. He sighed, his fingers moving up to his throbbing temples, when a blue blaze burst into the sky at the edge of the lake. The instant when the thunder of an explosion rolled over the surface of the lake with ear-numbing crack, everything went dark again. For a moment he felt the foundations of Hogwarts tremble around him.

Then the newly installed emergency system of the castle kicked in. Bright lights flooded every room and hallway. The four houses were sealed with the strongest wards imaginable, and the recorded and magically amplified voice of the headmistress roared from the very stones of the keep: 'Students, gather in the common rooms of your houses. Prefects, conduct a headcount. Teachers, once all students are accounted for, meet in the Great Hall.'

Snape was out of the room before McGonagall had finished the first sentence. He never stopped to knock, simply throwing open the door to Hermione's room, barely noticing the short second when her naked breasts were exposed to his view, before she managed to draw down the jumper over her head. With one hand he picked up her apprentice's robes, with the other he grabbed her arm. 'Go to the common room and stay there until I return. If anything happens, use your badge to summon me.'

Then he was gone, disappearing through the portrait hole into the corridor of the dungeons.

oooOooo

Inside Slytherin house panicked students were running in crazy circles, when Hermione entered.

'Calm down!' she shouted. But no one was listening. Frowning in concentration, she put her wand against her throat. She knew the theory of the amplification spell, but she'd never used it before.

'CALM DOWN!' she roared.

Everyone froze on the spot. The silence was absolute.

'Prefects,' Hermione started, scanning the assembled students, 'is everyone here?'

Icy fear washed over her, as Hermione realised at a glance that at least one of her students was missing.

Alina Petrel was not in the common room.

Nor was Ebenezer Sibby-Styles.

oooOooo

oooOooo

50. Hell Freezes Over

The weekend after the explosion, the Order of the Phoenix convened at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The meeting was unusual for a number of reasons. For one, it

was the first time since Voldemort's defeat that the Order was on the wizarding equivalent of 'red alert'. For another, there was a Muggle present and the son of a well-known Death Eater was down in the sound-proofed kitchen, babysitting the orphaned grandson of Order members.

The sitting room had been enchanted into a spacious conference room, complete with a U-shaped arrangement of tables and a screen at the front. The younger Order members were seated on the right side of the room, with the older members including Hermione, who sat next to her master, with Lois Petrel at her other side facing them.

Minerva McGonagall was coming to the conclusion of her report as the picture of the gravesite flickered on the screen. Only the foundation of the tomb was still intact. The walls and roof had been reduced to a pile of rubbish strewn in a diameter of roughly twenty yards. Beyond that line white marble dust covered the grass for a further seventy or eighty yards.

'The tomb was completely destroyed,' McGonagall said. 'Neither the Hogwarts staff nor the Aurors have been able to determine if anything was removed from the tomb.'

'Do you have any idea about the identity of the perpetrators?' Andromeda asked.

Bill Weasley shook his head. As a former curse breaker for Gringotts, he'd been the Order's greatest hope of finding out more about the explosion. 'Nope. There's no trace at all of whoever caused the explosion. They used *kobalite* but they could have gotten that anywhere. We used that in Egypt, but the Americans use it, too. And the French.'

'What about the children?' Ron asked. 'Did they see anything? How is Alina doing?'

Hermione frowned at the easy familiarity with which Ron said the name of Lois' daughter. She knew that Ron had met Lois again. But somehow she'd never considered ... Lois was eight years older than Ron! Quite an age difference. Though not as much of a difference as between herself and ... She bit down on her lip and hoped that her cheeks merely felt hot, and were not colouring with a self-conscious flush.

Ron looked shocked when Snape raised his head to answer his question, though Hermione wasn't surprised. It had been hard on her master when it turned out that two of his own had been the ringleaders of a potentially lethal escape.

'Miss Petrel is still in the hospital wing,' Professor Snape said in a soft, tired voice. 'She is recovering from a severe concussion, which cannot be treated with magical means. She suffered numerous smaller injuries, lacerations and bruises, including a fracture of her right arm, which have been completely healed by now.' He nodded at Lois, his eyes dark with remorse. 'Miss Petrel was unconscious for two days. But she is expected to make a full recovery. Unfortunately, she remembers nothing about the incident except being knocked backwards by the explosion. Mr Sibly-Styles, Mr Alger and Miss Beiond were hiding in the boathouse, playing exploding snap. They didn't see or hear anything until the explosion took place.'

'What exactly were those foolish children doing out there at night in the first place?' Andromeda asked. 'And how is it possible that you didn't notice what they were up to, Severus?' The war had turned the orderly witch stern, and the accusation in her tone was impossible to miss.

'I am...'

'Andromeda, this is not...'

'There is no...'

Hermione, Minerva and Professor Snape started together, with Hermione the quickest to continue after a moment of awkward silence.

'As Professor Snape's apprentice, I am the teacher of the First Years and Second Years. I should have noticed they were up to something. I knew, of course, that there has been some kind of...'. She cast an uncomfortable glance at her master. 'Well, a kind of hero-worship going on, especially among the lower level classes, directed at Harry, Professor Snape, and mainly at Albus Dumbledore. Somehow the children came up with the idea of re-establishing Dumbledore's Army as an order of knights, and the ordeal of knighthood included spending a night in vigil at Dumbledore's tomb.'

Lois groaned, and Molly Weasley harrumphed pointedly. Ron chuckled.

'Plucky lass,' he murmured, and winked at Lois.

'What has been done about the children?' Percy asked, his voice rife with disapproval.

Before Hermione could answer, Professor Snape spoke again, 'Seventy-five house points have been taken from each of the students who left the castle at night for no good reason and without permission. Additionally, they have to serve three detentions. They were asked to supply the names of their fellow *'knights'*, but declined to do so. A decision for which they were rewarded with five points each.

'As for your earlier question, Andromeda, I assume full responsibility. I am the Head of Slytherin House, and I should have realised that something was afoot,' Snape added wearily. 'My only explanation please note, I do *not* and will *not* make any *excuses* for my failings is that something as ... thoroughly *Gryffindor* as this mad scheme has never occurred in the history of Slytherin House before.'

Ron snickered then grinned broadly at Lois, completely failing to notice her agonised embarrassment.

'Can we please get back to our topic now?' Harry asked with barely veiled impatience. 'We really have more important things to discuss right now than the pranks of some First Year dunderheads playing heroes.'

Snape's eyebrows quirked, faint surprise glinted in his eyes. At his most caustic, the Potions master went on, 'Indeed. Ladies and gentlemen, it has happened at last *hell* has frozen over. For once I find myself in complete agreement with Potter.

'Pleasant though it must be to discuss my shortcomings as a teacher and head of house, we do have more important things to discuss here tonight.'

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

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FAQ

See Part 1.

Chapter: To Hold You Through the Night

My theory is that any damage caused by Dark Magic is difficult to treat with ordinary magic. Dark Wizards would expect their victims to try magic first of all to repair the

damage the various hexes and curses cause, so they would attempt to create curses that are immune to magical treatment or that react badly to magical healing. Had Hermione asked Snape for help right away, he might have brewed some potions that could (possibly) have prevented that relapse. As it is, the shock over the news and her general bad health (insomnia, lack of appetite etc) added up and provoked an echo of the Cruciatus curse. They can't treat that relapse itself, the only thing you can do is wait until it has passed, and to keep the victim from moving as much as possible.

Chapter: All I Want For Christmas

The title of the chapter alludes to Mariah Carey's song 'All I Want For Christmas Is You'. And, as zeegrindylows reminded me, to the movie 'Love Actually'.

The nightmare in the first part of the chapter contains entirely intentional textual references to the first chapter of Frank Herbert's novel 'Dune'.

The line 'the dark is rising' is a quote based on the title of the fantasy series by Susan Cooper.

The second-to-last line of the first part of the chapter is a quote from the poem 'Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost.

Chapter: Black Rose

The rose in the glass globe alludes to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 'Le Petit Prince'.

Chapter: The Most Noble and Venerable Knights of Dumbledore's Army

Four Slytherins:

Alina Petrel

Geilis Duncan

Ebenezer Sibly-Style 2nd year, Ebenezer Sibly was a physician in England, and author of 'New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences', published in 1790. Elizabeth Style was a witch who was put on trial in the 17th century.

Haemon Rackharrow Haemon is a name from Greek mythology, referring to the son of Creon and Eurydice. It means 'bloody'. Rackharrow is a canon name he invented the entrail-expelling spell.

Two Hufflepuffs:

Percely Parkinson 2nd year, Pansy's little brother, we already met him ... Percely is an old name for "parsley" (which happens to be a masculine herb).

Johannes Flamel not canon, but referring to Nicolas Flamel, of course. In my version of the HP verse, there's a Dutch branch of the family who prefer sending their children to Hogwarts. Johannes has an older sister, Anne, who is also in Hufflepuff.

Three Ravenclaws:

Alyah Beiond an allusion to the Hebrew name of Aliyah, which means 'to ascend'. 'Beiond' is of course wordplay on 'beyond'.

Prudentia Halleywell see above: Almost a Teacher

Cato Cornell 'Cato' means 'wise'

Four Gryffindors:

Myrrdin Loewe see above: Almost a Teacher

Barret Cruddace 'barret' was original a word for a quarrelsome person, meaning 'haggler'; 'Cruddace' is a rather unfortunate alternative version of 'Carruthers'; nickname 'Crudass'

Adrastus Alger 2nd year, Adrastus is a name from Greek mythology and means 'he who stands his ground'. 'Alger' is an old English patronymic name and can be associated with 'alb = elf', 'adal = noble', or 'ald = old'.

Terrwyn Bevan 2nd year, Terrwyn means 'brave, fair one'. 'Bevan' is a Welsh patronymic name.

Chapter: Ordeal of Knighthood

Cats follow certain paths to check on their territory, so Mrs Norris would definitely be following patterns. And most people are creatures of habit, so eventually the kids would be able to come up with a schedule for everyone's rounds. Especially since poor Professor Snape has been so distracted lately.

Chapter: Hell Freezes Over

'Kobalite' is derived from Greek roots of the word for goblin, 'kobalos'.

Part 6, Episodes 51-60

Chapter 6 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

51. Muggle Mythology

Harry ignored Snape's comment along with Hermione's astonished look, when he didn't rise to the bait and went on, 'I assume the attacks on Muggle-born wizards and the destruction and desecration of Dumbledore's tomb are linked. Does anyone have any idea of what could be behind this? The Office and the SSS haven't come up with anything useful.'

Everyone looked at Harry. Then everyone looked away.

Silence spread. Lengthened. Grew heavy.

Finally Snape spoke again, 'Are you at all familiar with Muggle mythology, Potter? How about a random quote to test your proficiency? *At the worst our Enemy knows that we have it not, and that it still is lost. But what was lost may yet be found ...*' does that ring a bell? Does anything about that situation sound ... *vaguely ...* familiar?'

Harry stared at Snape. The words of the quote did indeed sound eerily familiar. Oh, right. *The Lord of the Rings*. Hermione had given that book to him for Christmas. To his surprise he'd actually liked it. But what had that do to with ...

... *how he'd barely managed to stand there ...*

... *how he'd just been able to stuff the Invisibility Cloak and his wand out of reach...*

... *how the Resurrection Stone had slipped from between his numb fingers...*

... *to lie on the ground of the Forbidden Forest for all eternity...*

... *or until ...*

'Oh SHIT!' he exclaimed.

Heads swivelled, eyes stared. If things had been different, the reaction of the other Order members would have been amusing. As it was, Harry merely felt tired; very, very tired. With everyone gaping at him, he realised he had to say something. He forced himself to meet Snape's gaze. But what was supposed to be a smile of acknowledgement slipped and turned into painful parody.

'Maybe we're going to get lucky, too,' Harry muttered, 'and a friendly Hobbit will find that damn stone?'

'Wit, Potter? When did *that* happen?'

oooOooo

'So you really believe that someone found the Resurrection Stone?' Hermione asked.

They had returned to Hogwarts right after the meeting. Hermione had barely managed to hurry down to the kitchen for a quick *hello and goodbye* chat with Draco. She hadn't even had a chance to exclaim about how Teddy had grown since she'd seen him last, or at how happy the toddler looked in Draco's arms. She suppressed a sigh; she would have to Owl Draco later on.

Snape turned away from the window. The darkness of the night mercifully hid the site of the explosion. Just as it concealed his expression. The hearthfire had all but died down in the library, filling the room with flickering shadows.

'I don't believe in coincidence,' he admitted.

He sounded so unbearably weary. Hermione winced, then she rose to her feet and went to stand next to him, peering up at his face in the twilight.

'So someone has been helping the Death Eaters that are still on the loose? Or has even ... taken over the remains of V...Voldemort's organisation? And now ... they whoever they are may have the Elder Wand in their possession?'

He sighed and nodded. 'Of that, at least, I am fairly certain.'

Hermione swallowed hard, forcing herself to follow his train of thoughts. 'And since Harry lost the Resurrection Stone somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, it might ... resurface; it could be found again?'

Snape inhaled deeply. 'Unfortunately, that is a possibility. However, as you are probably aware, *I do* tend to think the worst, so maybe Minerva and the others are right, and my fears are merely the excrescences of an overwrought subconscious.' He sneered slightly.

Hermione sucked thoughtfully on her lower lip.

'I'm not so sure,' she said, her voice sounding rather small and scared. 'Evil things seem to have an awkward tendency to end up in just the wrong hands at just the wrong time.'

'However, if I recall correctly what Harry told us about the stone, it was cracked. So maybe it wouldn't work anymore? And at the moment, Harry is still the rightful owner of the Elder Wand, so unless he lost to someone in a duel or something, the thief couldn't do much with it, right?'

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose with two stiffened fingers. 'As I said before, I always think the worst.'

Carefully, Hermione stepped closer to her master.

'For good reason,' she said softly. 'And there are too many conditional clauses in the questions I asked for me to sleep well at night.'

'Oh God,' she whispered, as a sudden chill made her shudder. 'Why can't it end?'

'I don't know, Hermione,' he murmured. 'I wish I did.'

Silence settled around them, only now and again the dying fire in the hearth snapped and popped. The waxing moon sent pale slivers of light into the room, just enough for Hermione to discern the bony contours of his face, his dark eyes, proud nose, thin, sensitive lips. Once more she grew aware of his personal scent. When she inhaled, she shivered again. The tiny hairs on her arms and neck rose up and her nipples prickled.

Black eyes bored into her. Then, barely discernible in the dim light, his stern expression seemed to soften. Somehow they stood even closer than before. His robes almost enfolded her, surrounding her with his fragrance and his warmth. She tilted her head back, mesmerized by his fathomless gaze. Her heart was pounding. Her pulse

vibrated in her throat. Her stomach quivered with longing.

Suddenly his lips met hers.

They were soft, dry and warm. Somehow one hand slipped around her waist and the other to the back of her neck. She flowed against him and somehow her hands clung to him, drew him closer still.

Tentatively, she returned his kiss. His embrace tightened around her. At first very lightly, then more and more languidly, his lips caressed hers, until she became dizzy with the tenderness of the moment.

oooOooo

oooOooo

52. Least of All My Life

Abruptly he drew away from her. In the darkness, the expression on his face was unreadable.

'Good night, Hermione,' he said softly. Then he spun on his heel and swept out of the room.

For a few minutes she stood there, rooted to the spot, her heart thundering, her head buzzing, her lips *..burning*, she thought, with the memory of his touch.

At long last she staggered to her room, where she sank down in the armchair near the window. Her fingers strayed to her lips, as if they could conjure up the sensation of his kiss anew. His lips had been like velvet, warm and soft. But insistent. Soothing and thrilling at the same time.

Why had he kissed her?

Hermione never went to bed that night, but remained in that armchair. Now and again she lifted a trembling hand to her mouth, where her fingertips lingered for a moment in a bemused gesture, before she dropped her hand again.

oooOooo

Hermione wasn't surprised when Professor Snape knocked on her door the next morning, asking her to meet him in the library. *What*id surprise her was the courteous tone in which he voiced his request.

With a pounding a heart and more than a little trepidation, she entered the room. To her amazement, she noted that Snape had elected to sit down in one of the comfortable armchairs in front of the fireplace instead of choosing to pace and loom over her. He nodded for her to take the other seat.

Gratefully, she slid down on the edge of the chair, her knees unaccountably weak this morning. She cast an apprehensive glance at him out of the corner of her eye. He looked as if he hadn't had slept anymore than she had.

'What happened last night,' he said slowly. 'Must not happen again.'

Hermione didn't dare to look at him. Instead she stared at her hands, cold fingers twisted nervously. She had not expected him to open his heart to her after just one kiss, of course. In fact, she had anticipated that he would react badly this morning.

Overseeing the Third and Fourth Year study groups Hermione had not been in a position to escape all discussions about 'Professor Snape, the Tragic Hero of the War', including various comparisons of her master with prominent tragic heroes of Muggle and wizarding literature ('Heathcliff all the way' ... 'I just wish I could be the Tenar to his Ged ...') along with diverse dissections of his personality (some of which had actually been quite enlightening). Therefore it seemed quite in character for him to push her away.

It hurt nevertheless.

'But sir!' Now she did look at him, and wished at once that she hadn't. Just a quick glance at him gave her a jolt.

He sighed. 'You are my apprentice,' he started.

'But what about Perenelle and Nicolas Flamel? They...'

'That was in the bloody Middle Ages,' he ground out, his eyes glittering. 'Things have changed since then.'

'But what about the safeguards in the contract? You couldn't exploit your position even if you wanted to!'

Snape shook his head, the flare of temper extinguished as suddenly as it has blazed up. 'Just because there have been ... relationships of the intimate kind between masters and apprentices in the past, and just because apprenticeship contracts are bespelled to keep the apprentices safe from abuse does *not* mean that a relationship like that is appropriate, Miss Granger.

'And besides,' again that hint of unbearable sadness crept into his voice, 'not even I am so cruel as to ask my apprentice to kill me one day, only to turn around and begin an affair with her the next day.'

Hermione recoiled as if he'd struck her in the face.

'But sir,' she repeated, and wished her voice sounded steadier. 'What about the conditions of your...'

He held up his hand, stopping her mid-sentence.

'Hermione.'

She didn't look up, but stared at her hands. She wondered if her face was as white as her hands. She certainly felt white. Drained of all colour.

'Hermione. Look at me. *Now*.'

She had no choice. She had to obey his order. Reluctantly she turned towards him. She stuck out her chin.

'A kiss is just a kiss,' Snape said softly. 'It is not a foundation for a marriage and a life together.'

'Not even to save your life?' she asked.

She felt as if she was falling into an abyss, when she met his black gaze.

'Least of all to save my life,' he replied, his voice hoarse. 'I am ...' He broke off.

Had he been about to say that he was sorry?

Instead he rose to his feet.

'We will not talk about this again. And now I suggest you get ready for those detentions. I believe the dunderheaded knights will invade the dungeons in approximately twenty minutes.'

Black robes swirling, he strode from the room.

oooOooo

Back in his room, Snape couldn't settle down in spite of his exhaustion. Although he was weary to his aching bones, he couldn't stop pacing.

Why had he kissed her?

What had come over him?

He wished he could forget how her lips felt. He wished he could forget how her heart fluttered against his chest.

He wished he'd had the guts to order her to kill him right away that damn day in December.

Snape sighed. Her despair at his as he saw it, absolutely reasonable request would no doubt haunt him until he gave that final order.

When that day arrived, he would make sure that she had means at her disposal that were less direct and ... devastating for the executor than *Avada Kedavra*. That was the least he could do. He was painfully aware that he owed her much more than that. Unfortunately, he felt that he was not in the position to pay his debts to her the way his honour and his heart demanded of him.

oooOooo

oooOooo

53. The Art of Looking for Trouble

Minerva McGonagall had stayed at number twelve, Grimmauld Place for the night. For better or worse, Sirius' old home was the headquarters of the Order, and Harry, in spite of his youth, her second-in-command. That role should have fallen to Severus, but not even the public display of his memories at his trial had sufficed to dispel the distrust of the wizarding society towards him. She suppressed a sigh. Even some Order members still held on to their grudges where Snape was concerned.

There was much she had to discuss with Harry at yet another breakfast meeting.

And when, Minerva wondered, had Harry turned into a morning person? More often than not he'd looked like something the cat just dragged in at the breakfast table during his student days.

But in the kitchen an astonishingly bright-eyed, if not exactly bushy-tailed Harry awaited her at a table laden with an even more lavish breakfast than she was accustomed to from Hogwarts. Noticing her frown, Harry shrugged helplessly.

'Kreacher thinks I need to eat more,' he explained and proceeded to heap bacon, eggs, tomatoes and toast on his plate. Minerva glanced at the young man's lean figure. A good thing Harry had inherited James' active metabolism.

'Well, Harry,' Minerva said finally, eyeing him over the rim of her tea cup.

How a nice cup of Darjeeling never failed to improve her outlook on the world of a morning! And thankfully, as opposed to whisky, tea was a truly universal panacea to be enjoyed at any hour of the day or night.

Harry lifted an eyebrow at her. 'Well, Minerva,' he mimicked her, almost as disrespectfully as Albus (God rest his soul) had done.

She sniffed slightly and put her cup down. 'You offered to give me an appraisal of the situation at the Ministry. Now would be a good opportunity to do so. I suggest you do not waste our time.'

That got his attention. 'Channelling our dear Potions Master this morning, are you?'

But he put down his cup, as well, his expression serious. 'The situation is getting out of control, Minerva. You have no idea. We've been able to keep some of the incidents from the press so far, but with the likes of Rita Skeeter breathing down our necks, you can imagine just how long that will last. When everything gets out, we'll have an all-out panic on our hands.'

'We don't have enough manpower to put watch-wizards with each family that has Muggle-born members. And the Aurors are always too late on the scene. Merlin's bollocks, sometimes we arrive when the air is still glowing green with that damn curse, Minerva! They know we're coming almost before we've left the Ministry.'

'You *know* what that means.'

'An informant,' Minerva said at once, the cold weight of dread settling into the pit of her stomach. 'Someone or several someones at the Ministry is collaborating with the Enemy.'

'Maybe even within the Office of Aurors,' Harry added. Brandishing a fork with a piece of bacon at her, Harry continued, 'Unfortunately there is also a very clear pattern to the killings. It all comes down to blood. They kill families. And only families with one or both parents of Muggle origins. Singles and unmarried couples or couples without children they are leaving alone so far. Apart from Voldemort's followers, that fits the agenda of quite a number of pureblood hate-groups.'

'Though what is really the most disconcerting about the whole thing is how methodical and cold-blooded they are. They only want to kill. They don't torture, they don't bother with destruction of property. They go in to kill, and only to kill.'

'The Ministry is at the end of their wits ... and so am I, for that matter.'

For a while the kitchen was completely silent save for the sound of Harry making short work of his breakfast.

There is really not much that could diminish a young wizard's appetite, Minerva mused. For her part, the older witch was reduced to nervously stirring her tea. The bowl of porridge in front of her remained untouched.

'I hear that a faction of the Wizengamot is already clamouring for a Muggle-borns protection act,' Minerva said.

Harry nodded. His first forays into the murky waters of magical politics had been incredibly frustrating. Politicians seemed to distrust heroes about as much as traitors, and contrary to Dumbledore, Minerva's voice carried little to no political clout in the Wizengamot. Additionally, in a society where one hundred fifty was regarded as really too young to die, the voice of anyone below the age of fifty simply wasn't taken quite seriously.

'They want to re-open the Muggle-born Registration Commission. This time to protect all Muggle-born witches and wizards. You can imagine the toad's glee.' Harry shuddered.

Umbridge's background of a well-respected pureblood family and along with her excellent connections at the Ministry and the Wizengamot had once again saved her neck, much to his chagrin. 'The mere thought that she can get at Hermione because of her apprenticeship makes my blood run cold! And I can assure you that the very idea of Snape at her mercy causes me nightmares.

'Though I would appreciate it if you do not share that particular detail with him,' he added at his driest. Then he sighed. 'No offence, Minerva, but Shacklebolt is too good a man for his office. As is Arthur.'

'I am sure that both of them would be the first to agree with you.'

'Ha!' Harry cried, amused. 'Unfortunately that doesn't help us right now.'

Energetically he pushed the empty plate away. 'At least I've already managed to make the Wizengamot deeply regret their decision to give me a seat in the aftermath of the victory. We must be grateful for small mercies, I suppose.

'Andromeda and Draco have been a lot of help. However, if you don't mind, I should like to accompany you to Hogwarts today. I urgently need to consult Dumbledore's portrait about the upcoming session.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

54. The Most Stupid Thing That People Do

At noon Snape found himself in front of McGonagall's office. He had just finished a round through the castle, which had yielded a satisfying total of one hundred forty four and one-fourth House Points. It irked him somewhat that the one-fourth point impaired the beauty of the Fibonacci number. It irked him more that he had been forced to take that one-fourth point from his own House.

The gargoyle slid aside, and Harry Potter appeared.

Snape jerked back. *What is that boy doing here?*

Potter glanced at him and nodded politely, 'Professor. Is Hermione in her room? I thought I might pop in for a moment, if she's not too busy.'

'What?' Snape stared at Potter in disbelief. 'Is that you, Potter? Or is it your evil twin ... or rather, your *good* twin? Which is rather more shocking.'

Harry Potter stopped dead and really looked at Snape. The careful scrutiny of those brilliant green eyes was quite discomfiting. A lesser wizard would have squirmed under the young Auror's probing stare. Snape merely scowled.

'I have reason to believe that you ... may find her in her room.' A pause. 'It's good of you to come and ... see her, Potter.'

Potter frowned, and opened his mouth, but at the last moment he seemed to reconsider. He ended up shaking his head instead. 'You look like shit, Snape.'

Snape's eyebrows shot up.

'Does that convince you that I am myself?' The young man grinned impudently. 'And I think Minerva wants to see you. Something about House points, I think.'

He nodded again, and strode off towards the staircase, leaving Snape to gape after him.

'You know,' Minerva remarked. 'He's right. You *do* look like shit.'

oooOooo

If there had been any doubt about how much worse for wear he looked, that was dispelled when Minerva poured him a generous dram of Ardbeg the moment they entered her office.

Snape slumped down in one of the armchairs before the fireplace and raised his glass to her. 'Cheers.'

Minerva took the seat on his right. 'What happened, Severus?'

'What happened? What didn't happen?' He contemplated downing the whisky in one gulp. As the Ardbeg was one of Minerva's favourites, he stood a good chance not to survive such a sacrilege. He sipped the whisky then he put the glass on the table between the armchairs.

'I can't do this, Minerva,' he muttered. 'The way she looked at me, as if I had broken her heart ...'

Now it was Minerva's turn to put her glass aside.

'Severus,' she asked carefully. 'What have you done to Hermione?'

Snape laughed bitterly. 'You gave her to me. You forced me to train up my own successor, and yet you ask that question?'

'Your successor? Severus...'

'But I can't, Minerva. I'm so tired. For a while I thought I might enjoy my last three years ... but now ... people are being killed left, right, centre.' He shook his head. 'I'm so tired,' he whispered. 'Even if she had to take over next week, I am sure that Hermione would ... would do a good job. Probably a better job than I ever did.'

He cupped his face with his hands. 'I promised not to ask this of her ...*yet* ... but I ... I don't think I can wait much longer, Minerva. Umbridge wants my head; she wants me in Azkaban even before my probation is over. And I will *not* go back there.'

'Ask what of her?'

He sighed wearily and raised his head to face Minerva. 'To kill me, of course.'

'Severus ... please tell me that I just misheard what you said. You asked Hermione to kill you?'

He shook his head irritably. 'No, I did not *I wanted* to, on Christmas day. But she stopped me, she...she seems to suffer from some ill-conceived Gryffindor notion that there may yet be a way to "save" me. Foolish girl.'

The headmistress stared at him, aghast. 'You promised Hermione *on Christmas day* that you would not order her to kill you*yet*?'

'Yes, that's what I said, didn't I?' He glared at her.

'What happened to change your mind?' Minerva's voice was shaking, but he barely noticed that.

He picked up his glass again. For a moment he stared at the amber liquid. Then he thought *What the hell?* And downed the Ardbeg in one gulp.

'I kissed her.'

oooOooo

'Ha...Ha...Harry!' Hermione took one look at him and flung herself into his arms, sobbing desperately.

Awkwardly he patted his friend's back. 'Hermione, what's wrong? What happened?'

'The plan, *The Plan*, it, it has fai failed. I...I...failed.'

He hugged her close then pulled her back into the dark corridor beyond the dungeons and into her room. Once inside, he led his friend to her bed and sat down next to her, his arms around her. Hermione cried in great heaving sobs, as if her heart was shattered, and her tears the broken shards.

'Hermione, calm down. *Please*. Or I will have to Floo Madam Pomfrey. What happened?'

'I...he...I...he kissed me.'

'Did he hurt you?' There was no question who *he* was.

'Harry,' she gasped, trying to suppress another sob and failing miserably. 'I am so stupid. I am so horribly, horribly stupid.'

'Hermione, if you don't tell me what happened right now, I will call Minerva!'

Hermione buried her face at his shoulder. *Iwuvim*.'

'You what?'

She lifted her face. Her eyes were red, her face blotchy, her lips trembled badly.

'I love him,' she repeated.

'You what?!'

Harry bit down on his tongue, hard. Then he counted to ten. Then to twenty. *Then* he took a deep breath.

'But ... Hermione, please don't take this wrong, but ... I admit this is quite a surprising ... development ... However ... as far as *The Plan* is concerned, what is so bad about ... *uh* ... being in ... *uh*... love with him? Especially if he *if he kissed* you?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

55. To Live Before You Die

(Sunday night at Hogwarts in the dungeons)

Hermione couldn't sleep. She hadn't slept for two days, and she still couldn't sleep. At last she gave up. Pulling on her apprentice robes, she blindly grabbed a book from the shelf and picked up her wand. With a whispered *Lumos* she slipped out of her room. She preferred to read in the library. Somehow the presence of many old books made the company of the thoughts that kept her awake at night easier to bear.

But when she opened the door, she found the room already occupied. A fire was burning, and floating candles provided a warm, comfortable reading light. Severus was seated in one of the armchairs, a book in his hands and a mug on the small table next to him.

He raised his head. Their eyes met. *So dark*. Her skin tingled and her stomach tightened with longing. At the same time a horrible feeling squeezed her insides together, almost like Devil's Snare. All of a sudden it was hard to breathe.

'I'm sorry, sir I didn't want to disturb you.' She made to draw back, but he held up his hand.

'There's no need for you to leave, He...' He shook his head a little. 'Miss Granger.'

She swallowed dryly and stepped into the room, noiselessly closing the door behind her. Fixing her gaze on the door handle, she gathered all her Gryffindor courage. 'I wouldn't mind if you were to call me Hermione, sir.'

For a moment he was silent. Then she heard his familiar sigh. It didn't sound exasperated or contemptuous anymore. Merely tired. 'I don't think that would be a very good idea, Miss Granger. Now, if you want to sit down and read, feel free to do so. Otherwise, you are equally free to leave.'

She gripped the book so hard that her knuckles stood out whitely. But she ignored the hot flush suffusing her cheeks, and moved to the other armchair. Somehow she managed to curl up in her chair. Somehow she was able to open her book.

She began to leaf through the pages.

oooOooo

And the magic that lives in words and rhymes took pity on her.

oooOooo

Snape watched her out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help himself. He wasn't surprised when she stayed. After more than twenty years of practice, he recognised

Gryffindor courage when he saw it.

Curled up in the chair, her feet tugged underneath her, she reminded him of a cat, so limber her movements were almost liquid. His potions had kept the after-effects of the *Cruciatus* at bay throughout the winter, and now the days were lengthening again. The way she leafed through her book also like a cat, like the restless movements of an agitated cat's tail. And not at all like her usual reading habits.

'What are you reading?' The question was out of his mouth before he could stop himself. 'If you don't mind my question, Miss Granger,' he added.

She looked up and smiled at him, but it wasn't a happy smile. Her brown eyes were huge in her pale face. In the firelight they glowed with the colour of sherry, rich and warm.

'Not at all,' Hermione said. 'It's a book that belonged to my mother. Muggle poetry. By an American woman-poet of the 20th century. Edna St. Vincent Millay.'

She inhaled deeply, frowning at the book resting on the soft curves of her thigh. 'I normally don't read poetry. But my mother loved these poems very much. I guess I was trying to learn what my mother found in them.'

'And have you discovered what you were looking for?'

'I am not sure. I have neither very much experience with reading poetry nor with most of the subjects the poems deal with.'

'What are they about?'

'Many are about love. Others about a variety of topics gardens, mythology, religion. A fair number are about death.' Her expression grew bleak. 'I know about that, at least.'

For a long moment he stared at the fire. Then, as if from far away, he heard his voice answer her, 'As do we all, who have survived ~~that~~*final* battle.' The practice of the press to call the battle at Hogwarts the '*final*' battle still irritated him. If only it had been. 'Is there one you like?' he asked.

'What?'

'A poem. Is there one you is there one that speaks to you?'

She thought about his question. At last she nodded. 'I am not sure if I understand it, but ... I thought I could ... maybe ... feel like it somehow.'

'Will you read it to me?'

oooOooo

Small Hands, Relinquish All

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

The mind, at length bereft

Of thinking, and its pain,

Will soon disperse again,

And nothing will remain:

No, not a thought be left.

Exhort the closing eye,

Urge the resisting ear,

To say, 'The thrush is here',

To say, 'His song is clear';

To live, before it die.

oooOooo

'What are you reading, sir?'

He blinked, slowly pulling himself out of his reverie about that long-dead Muggle-woman's words. Snape smirked at Hermione, as he held up the book he had put aside while he was listening to her.

'The Lord of the Rings?' Hermione laughed softly. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

He quirked an eyebrow at her. 'You may not believe it, but I've read it before. As a boy, long ago one of my Muggle relatives gave it to me for Christmas.'

'Why are you reading it again now?'

He gave her a wry smile. 'For two reasons. Maybe three. One, for some reason I did not desire to read about Dark Lords in my spare time during the last twenty years. Two, if my Slytherins are getting into trouble because of a book, I should at least be familiar with the story. Three ... it's not all that bad, for Muggle mythology.

'And I think Tolkien was right, at least partly. Thereare wounds that cannot be healed. And after some experiences you cannot ever be whole again.'

'But what about Sam?' she asked at once.

He looked at her in silence. Her bright young face, filled with fierce hope and something he couldn't quite pinpoint. And for a moment, for a very short moment, he wondered what it would feel like to be able to share that hope.

oooOooo

oooOooo

(Sunday evening at Hogwarts, office of the Headmistress)

'In other words, they're behaving like idiots,' Harry stated bluntly.

'That is a concise and accurate description,' Minerva commended him. 'Young man, I must say the Auror training seems to agree with you.'

Harry snorted.

'Hermione says she loves him. I believe she knows her mind. And you think that he is feeling bad about asking her to kill him and about kissing her because ~~he~~ she loves her, too,' Harry continued. 'Are you sure about that? I mean, he *ought* to feel bad about even *thinking* of ordering her to do that. But why feel bad about kissing her? Not that I ever wanted to kiss Hermione, but even I can see that she is kind of pretty, in a hairy sort of way.'

Minerva choked on her whisky. 'Yes, Harry,' she wheezed. 'I am *quite* sure about that. And *you* should be very grateful that Ginevra Weasley is such a tolerant, practical girl. Very grateful.'

To her surprise, Harry laughed.

'I am,' he said simply. 'Every day of my life. Those two ' He rolled his eyes. ' that's too complicated for me. There's more than one reason why I didn't end up a Slytherin.'

'Now, what are we going to do about those two idiots down in the dungeons?'

oooOooo

'... therefore I think it's best if you accompany her,' McGonagall concluded.

'You want me to do what?' His voice, all but healed, cracked under the pressure of disbelief.

Patience, as if she were talking to a three-year-old, Minerva repeated, 'Hermione, Harry and their friends are planning to attend a concert in London on Friday night. Muggle music. You might even know the artist. '*Sting*' or something like that.' The headmistress sniffed contemplatively. 'Muggles have really no better taste than wizards in their stage names. '*Weird Sisters*', '*Stings*' ... birds of a feather.'

'Given the current situation, I believe that Hermione should not go on her own.'

'But she won't be on her own! Neville, Weasley, Potter he's a damn Auror-in-training, Minerva! They're adults now, the lot of them. Surely they are capable of going to a rock concert without a babysitter!'

The headmistress fixed him with a piercing look. 'Neville isn't going. He's busy in the greenhouses. And while Harry may be an Auror-in-training, the others are not. Watch-wizards would attract too much attention. Can you imagine any of the other Order members at ... what did you call it? A stoned concert?'

'Not '*stoned*',' he muttered, 'though I might as well get some ...'*rock*', Minerva. That particular style of music is called '*rock*.' He frowned. 'Though I do believe his latest album is rather on the softer side.'

'Album?' Minerva shook her head bemusedly. 'Well, it seems you are well-acquainted with that aspect of Muggle culture, Severus. I'm sure it won't be too arduous. Who knows, you might even enjoy it.'

oooOooo

The Muggle clothing was a shock. The tight jeans and tighter t-shirt left almost nothing to his imagination.

She was beautiful.

And too thin. Fragile. Suddenly he recalled an almost banished glimpse of white skin, soft curves. The taste of her lips.

... the pain-filled darkness in her eyes hit him like a slap in the face.

'You're going to a concert, not to a funeral, Miss Granger,' he sneered. 'Or would you rather stay here tonight, after all?'

oooOooo

Of course he'd wear black. She hadn't expected anything else.

But the way the tight leather trousers hugged his legs and his long black dress-shirt swirled around him made her stomach tingle and tighten ...

'I'm sorry, sir. Ready when you are.'

oooOooo

It was hard to let her go.

What the hell was wrong with him?

oooOooo

She wanted to cling to him.

Instead Hermione turned and glanced around for the others. A crack sounded and out of thin air, a blonde young woman appeared, wrapped around a dark-haired wizard.

'Hey, Hermione!' Disentangling herself from the embrace, a poncho-clad Luna Lovegood meandered over to give her a quick hug. Luna's necklace of bottle caps had been exchanged for one with exotic shells. Apart from that, the witch appeared unchanged. The wizard at her side sported a poncho, too, green and black chevrons as opposed to Luna's blue and silver swirls. 'This is Rolf. We work together in Peru. Hello, Professor!'

Snape scowled, but nodded. 'Lovegood. Scamander.'

'Professor Snape! That...that...'

'Oh, Rolf did I forget to tell you? Hermione's his apprentice.'

'Of course you forgot, Luna. It's good to see you again, sir.'

'Here they are!' Harry's voice filtered through the bushes that surrounded the secluded public Apparition spot in Hyde Park. Ginny at his side, he shoved through the shrubs. He met Hermione's eyes with a concerned look. Her tremulous attempt at a smile prompted Harry to look at Snape. His expression hardened, but he merely gave

the Potions master a curt nod, before greeting the others.

'Hello Luna. Rolf, great you could get away. George, Lee and Draco are going to meet us there. Ron and Lois should be here any minute.'

'Draco?'

Harry turned back to Snape, his green eyes glittering. 'Yes, Draco. Draco Malfoy. I'm sure you remember him?'

'Harry,' Ginny put her hand on his arm. 'Stop it. And look, I think that's Ron and Lois getting lost in the bushes. Hey, Ron! We're over here.'

Moments later, Ron broke through the underbrush. 'Blimey, do they *want* people to get lost in this damn jungle?' He grinned happily at his friends. 'Oi, 'Mione! Hey, Looney. Rolf, old man.' His smile faltered. '*Uh...* Hello, sir.'

Lois, on the other hand, simply went straight to Professor Snape and offered her hand. 'Thank you for accompanying Hermione, Severus. I must say, you look great in Muggle clothes. Doesn't he, Hermione? Almost like a musician himself, all dark and dangerous.'

Lois winked at Hermione.

But Hermione was staring at Severus, frozen, unable to speak.

After a moment of awkward silence, Lois reached for Hermione's arm. 'Well, guys, let's get going before the concert is over!'

oooOooo

oooOooo

57. Gravitation

'*Who knows, you might even enjoy it.*' Just remembering Minerva's words made him scowl at the young witches and wizards walking ahead of him towards the Royal Albert Hall.

George Weasley had kept a place in the queue for their friends. Unfortunately this awkward Muggle procedure couldn't be eased with magic. They needed to get inside the ordinary way.

'Hey, ickle Ronnie,' George teased his brother. 'Who dressed you up? You look like *aMu* like a monster.'

Lois grinned smugly. 'At least your brother knows when to listen to a woman.'

'When did he learn that?' Hermione asked incredulously.

Draco greeted him politely, 'Good evening, sir.'

'Hello, Professor Snape.' George Weasley gave a respectful nod.

'Sir.' Lee Jordan attempted a polite smile.

Snape frowned. Were they trying to taunt him? But no their eyes showed only a kind of distant politeness mixed with slight apprehension.

When did they grow up?

oooOooo

Once inside, Snape narrowed his eyes at the scrap of paper in his hand. Cautiously he moved along the rows of seats, intent on finding the appropriate row. A noise like a dying lawn-mower, which was *probably* supposed to be a well-mannered cough stopped him.

He turned and glared at Potter. 'What's the matter?'

Potter gulped quite gratifyingly. '*Uh...* just that we're not going to sit down ... sir.'

Snape scowled. 'Why not, Potter? If I am not mistaken, these silly slips of paper indicate we paid good money for those seats.'

He did a few mental calculations, and his frown deepened. *Merlin*. He had paid *twenty four Galleons, ten Sickles and five Knuts* in order to accompany his apprentice to a Muggle rock concert?!

'Well,' Harry said. The young man's smirk definitely needed practice. 'That's what Don't Notice Me Charms are there for, aren't they? And besides, after the first three songs no one in the arena will stay seated anyway. Don't worry, Professor. No one will realise that we're there.'

Lois smiled at him reassuringly. 'It will be a lot of fun, trust me. Just don't try to shout. A bit of judicious singing or humming, however, might do your voice a world of good. Remember that silly exercise?'

Why were they treating him as if ...

He shook his head. He did not belong with them. He was only here because Minerva had forced him to. She really wasn't any better than Albus.

Except, he thought, I rather prefer her honest, piercing gaze.

oooOooo

Potter had been right. After the first two songs, people jumped from their seats, churned into the aisles, pressed towards the stage.

The music was good. Even better than the reviews had promised. The voice of the singer was mellow, slightly hoarse, unrefined and intense all at once. The Muggle version of an amplification spell enhanced the volume of the music to the point that it was almost too loud. But it caused the beat to pulse in his blood.

The next song started. The rhythm throbbed in the people around him. A wave of movement pushed him forwards, until he was suddenly drowning in a cloud of curls.

A flowery scent drifted up to him, ensnaring his sense. *Hibiscus and honey?*

Then he was pressed against Hermione. She swayed against him. The curves of her body bewitched his mind. His breath caught in his throat, and he grew uncomfortably aware of the thudding of his own heart, out of sync with the rhythm that had gripped the revellers around him.

He tried to keep his attention on the stage, on the blond man gyrating with his guitar and smiling as he sang.

As from afar, the words reached his ears and crept into his heart like a spell of longing. A deep ache built up inside his chest, an almost unbearable thirst that matched the desert mentioned in the current song. The feeling intensified whenever the young witch in front of him moved against him.

He couldn't get her smile out of his head. She had smiled at him when he'd woken in St Mungo's and when he'd accepted her as his apprentice. And the other night, when they had talked in the library; but that was a sad smile. She didn't smile very often anymore, he realised. He wished he could forget the agony in her eyes as she'd looked at him only a week ago.

Again she was pressed against him. Again he was pushed forwards. It wouldn't do to stumble, he tried to step back, raised his hands. But again the masses around him surged forwards, pulled at him, a sea of bodies, the melodies of Muggle music their tide.

He lost his footing. Clumsily his hands reached out, searching for something to hold on to.

Oh Gods, she felt good in his arms.

For a moment she stiffened. Then Hermione relaxed against him, leant against him even, as if she were pulled back to his body by an inexorable force. Instinctively, his hands slipped around her waist.

Lost to the gravitational forces of rhythm and melody, they moved together.

oooOooo

The music washed over her like waves on the shore. She didn't hear the words. She barely noticed the singer on the stage.

What she *did* notice was the man behind her.

Even in the crowd of concert-goers, she could still taste his scent. And when the masses surged towards the stage, she could sense him, as well. He was pushed against her: the warmth of his body, the tense muscles, the unexpected strength of his lean figure.

Another wave of bodies flowed against them. She felt him falter, his breath against her neck.

Suddenly, his hands on her body.

Curling around her sides, sliding around her waist, drawing her against him, closer, closer, until she could feel him pressed against her. Her heart pounding, her breath ragged, she closed her eyes and leant back against him.

The music and his embrace enfolded her, his personal fragrance (vetyver, cypress, bergamot, rosemary, nutmeg ...*ahhh*...) went straight to her head.

oooOooo

oooOooo

58. ... and a Little Assistance from Your Foes

'I'll be right with you,' she called, 'Just need to use the loo.'

'Sure, 'Mione.' Ron raised the hand that was not holding onto Lois. 'Don't get lost with all those Muggles everywhere. Or we'll come looking for you.'

Severus' scowl was impressive, but all it did was cause Hermione's stomach to flutter. She shivered, recalling the touch of his hands on her hips, and decisively turned around. They needed to get to the Apparition point before midnight when Hyde Park was closed.

The crowd swept her away.

His body behind her... his hands at her sides... the one time when the sides of his thumbs had brushed against her breasts... and the shocking realisation that he was quite unmistakably aroused by their proximity ... as he pressed against her back...

Hermione shuddered, gasped for breath and blinked. Distracted by desire, she'd completely lost her bearings. Around her, the crowd was thinning out quickly, as Muggles hurried to tube stations and parking lots. The night was very dark, and somehow the electrical lights were not as bright as she remembered them. Oppressive shadows of tall buildings loomed around her. Suddenly she felt distinctly uncomfortable. As if someone was watching her.

She needed to get back to the hall. The pressure of her bladder was quite uncomfortable now. Mentally shaking her head at herself, she turned around.

Head in the clouds ... daft idiot ... keeping the others waiting because you get lost in dreams... in the middle of the night in London of all places...

Rough voices slurred with drink got her attention. She frowned. Where had all the people disappeared to? She really didn't want to encounter a group of drunkards on her own. Nervously she felt for her wands, securely stashed away in holsters sewn to the sides of her jeans. But they wouldn't help her. Not against inebriated Muggles. Self-defence was one thing. Awkward situations of everyday life a completely different matter. Getting away from some sots wasn't a reason to hex Muggles. Nervously she bit down on her lower lip.

'Look what I found!'

Oh no. They'd seen her.

'A GAL.'

'Whaddas aluvvvely younglady alone here atnight?'

Urgh. There were five of them, and they were approaching quickly.

'Ah you lonely, dahlin?'

He was tall and heavy, beer gut drooping over sleazy jeans.

'Lookin' for company?'

She caught a hint of a cruel smile in the dim beam of the street-lamp.

Just a few drunks. Nothing to worry about. Just keep your head down and keep going. You're just a few hundred yards from the RAH. Just a few more from your friends.

'Looks like it, she's all flushed up.' Raucous laughter roared up.

'Hey, chicky, why won't you talk to us?'

She quickened her pace. She'd almost reached the hall. Surely there would be more people around in a second.

'Don't run away, we only want to talk.'

She ducked and hurried on, uncomfortably aware that they were coming closer. She could*smell* the drink on them. Her stomach constricted with fear.

'Will you look at that tart? No manners at all.'

'Needs to be taught.'

Suddenly one of them stepped in front of her, bringing her up short, while the other four closed in on her from the sides and from behind.

Oh God.

I'm in trouble. Really bad trouble.

Her heart was racing. Her whole body was shaking with terror. Now was the time to pull the wands. Her trembling hands slid down to her holsters.

But the men were faster.

oooOooo

Hermione struck out wildly. Panic constricted her throat. *Scream. You need to scream.* Hard hands pulled at her hair. Iron fists held her arms. Someone reached for her legs. Nails scratched her skin as they fumbled for her jeans.

Suddenly she could scream.

She screamed as she had only once before.

Startled, they dropped her. Her head struck the edge of the kerbstone. For a moment the world went fuzzy around the edges. Then a boot kicked her side, and the pain cleared the haze before her eyes. Another foot came down on her left wrist, pinning her to the ground. She could hear the bones break with a horrible crunch. A wave of sickness uncurled so quickly from her stomach that all she could do was open her mouth and vomit right at the man kneeling over her. He recoiled, and that was when Hermione saw the sixth man.

The man was standing behind her attackers, in the shadow beyond the street-lamp. He was dressed in robes. He had lifted one arm, a thin stick of wood grasped in his hand, pointed at her. His sleeve had slipped back, revealing his forearm.

On the pale skin the lines of a tattoo burned with black fire.

Hermione screamed and screamed and screamed, but her shrieks were fading from her ears as if she were moving away from her body. Darkness was gathering around her field of vision.

Then everything went black.

oooOooo

Snape's head shot up as the Bond called upon him. The blood drained from his head as the chill of shock washed through his veins.

Hermione was in danger.

'What's wrong?' Potter's voice cut through the fog of fear rolling towards him from his apprentice.

'Hermione She's being attacked.'

Pain and panic flooded him. He balled his fists, concentrating hard. *Helpless struggling.* He needed to find her. *Nails shredding skin, a choking grip.* He needed to trace her feelings back to their source. *Screams that cut through heart and mind.* He needed to Apparate to her at once. *Agony. Sudden nausea.* He needed to know where she was.

There! A sense of a location. A dark street corner behind the hall. How in hell had she ended up there?

Potter frowned. 'How do you know? How do we get to her?'

'She's my apprentice. I'm Bound to protect her. Get your wand out and hold on Side-along Apparition.'

TERROR! Mindless, all-consuming terror.

And then: nothing.

oooOooo

oooOooo

59. Legilimens!

Idiot girl. What had she been thinking? *Had* she been thinking at all?

Snape stood at the foot of her bed in the hospital wing and stared down at her still figure.

So fragile. Too thin. She didn't eat enough. Those dark smudges underneath her eyes they were not due to the attack. He couldn't remember when he'd seen her without them. Did she ever get a good night's sleep? And the lines on her face. There shouldn't be any. Hermione was only twenty years old. *There shouldn't be any lines.* But there were. Faint, at the bridge of her nose, on her forehead.

And, *oh God*, her injuries. Her broken jaw was healed, of course. But even with salves and magic, it would take days until the contusions and bruises receded. Right now her mouth was barely visible, swollen and discoloured. The healed wrist was still wrapped in thick bandages, to give bones, muscles and tendons a chance to recuperate.

He sat down.

'Miss Granger,' he said. 'You have been asleep for two days. It is time for you to wake up.'

Snape didn't expect her to listen to him. She hadn't reacted to Harry's voice or Ron's. Not to Minerva's nor Molly's or Lois'. He had failed her. He had failed her as her master. He had failed her on account of the life-debts he owed her. And DAMN IT ALL TO HELL, he had failed her as the one whose arms had embraced her last.

'Miss Granger,' he repeated. 'You are safe. Please, wake up. We need to know what happened. Please.*Hermione.*'

Snape didn't expect her to react. If he had believed in prayer, he would have prayed, begging not to turn Hermione into his bitterest failure. But as he was the man he was, he did nothing of the sort.

She woke all the same.

With a high, keening noise of pain and fear, she tried to clutch at him, but failed, weakened by her injuries.

'Miss Granger? Can you hear me? Do you understand what I am saying? You are safe. You don't need to be afraid. You are at Hogwarts. Nothing can happen to you here.'

But he knew, just as she knew, that not even Hogwarts was safe. It hadn't been before. There were no safe places left in the world, even with Voldemort dead and gone.

Brown eyes glittered huge and panicked in her pale face. But she nodded slightly.

Gryffindor all the way.

'We need to know what happened.'

It was cruel to ask this of her. But he had no choice. Either *he* got the information out of her, or an Auror, or worse, an Unspeakable would do the job.

'Your jaw was broken. That is the reason why you cannot speak. Don't try. It will take a few days until the swelling goes down.

'I am very sorry to ask this of you now, but it is necessary. The Aurors need to know what happened, even if you cannot speak. You have two options. Either I can extract your memories and put them into a Pensieve, or I can perform Legilimency'

For a moment she lay utterly still.

She should be allowed to sleep. To heal. It was not right to question her now. Whatever traces were left, were probably covered up already. But the Ministry was impatient.

Hermione widened her eyes at him. He frowned. What did she want to convey to him?

She lifted her right hand. Her hand trembled, but she managed to move it. She touched her fingertips just below her eyes.

Legilimency.

Foolish, foolish girl.

'Are you sure, Hermione?

'Legilimens!'

oooOooo

Fury surged through him at the attack. Five grown men turning on one young woman!

What kind of world is this?

Each blow struck him along with her, her pain and panic became a part of him.

I should have been there to protect her.

Then he was lying on the ground with her and looking up into the dim light of the street-lamp. And saw the sixth man, wand pointed, the Dark Mark burning black on white skin.

oooOooo

Snape had seen enough. As gently as he could, he began to draw back and found himself pulled deeper into Hermione's mind instead.

She was the brightest witch of her generation; mentally she was a power to be reckoned with. Hermione was too weak to reach for him physically. So she clung to him with the most desperate strength of her mind.

If he did not want to hurt her by forcibly withdrawing from her mind, he had no choice.

He allowed himself to be pulled into her mental embrace. Her mind-touch was delicate like her body but strong as steel underneath, quite unlike her physical form; with a hint of a scent (lemon verbena?). Snape concentrated on the idea of safety and security, hoping that she would eventually relax sufficiently to let him go.

oooOooo

Breathe in.

He tasted the fragrance of his shower soap and his after-shave lotion. Why did the scent of vetiver mixed with herbs make her heart beat faster?

Breathe out.

He remembered holding her, just as she recalled being held. She associated the first feelings of warmth, safety and contentment in months *with him*? Had this been a conversation, he would have laughed. But an untrained mind like hers could not lie to him.

Breathe in.

It was disconcerting to see himself with her eyes, and to observe himself as he slept. Snape was just like Hermione well aware of the imperfections of his appearance (hair lank from years of exposure to cauldron-fumes, skin sallow from bad eating and sleeping habits, face lined, teeth crooked). But for some reason his looks did not only not bother the young witch, she found them appealing. He gave a mental frown. How could anyone in their right mind be obsessed with the form of his hands, the darkness of his eyes? Love his beak of a nose?

Breathe out.

... love?

oooOooo

oooOooo

60. Of All The Hare-Brained And Idiotic Things

... *love?*

But there it was.

The strangest feeling of complete acceptance.

Of respect. Admiration. For his cunning mind, his magnificent skills. For his courage and integrity? Had she developed ~~amnesia~~? He'd been a Death Eater, for Merlin's sake. He was a murderer. He had killed a man she adored and liked!

Appreciation. For his wry wit and caustic humour. For the way he was bold enough to express his anger and frustration, when she always ended up biting her tongue. Was the woman *crazy*? Jumping in the face of people who only wanted to help you was *not* a good trait of character!

Concern. There was almost nothing about him that she wasn't concerned about. Did he eat enough? Sleep enough? Did his injury still cause him pain?

Happiness at a fleeting smile.

Exasperation. *He* was being stubborn? Wasn't that the pot calling the kettle black?

Tenderness. How in *hell* could she look at him as if he were some kind of precious miracle?

And underneath it all the calm conviction that he would never reciprocate any of these sentiments. That she wasn't deserving of his respect, either for her skills as his apprentice or as a person.

But

Her thoughts flashed back to the kiss, and he was sucked into a vortex of turmoil. Embroiled by raging desire, his mind was assaulted by two-fold echoes of sensations of such intensity that he gasped aloud.

Need. Desire. *Lust*.

Then his heart was breaking.

The cliché did not do the experience justice. An overwhelming feeling of despair, a mind-numbing experience of helplessness, of defeat, resulting from her inability to make his life better, worth living. Followed by quiet acceptance. If she couldn't save his life, she would at least provide him with a gentle death. He deserved so much more, but if that was all he would accept from her, if that was truly what he needed, then she would give it to him. Even though she would much rather give her heart to him, her love, her life.

oooOooo

Then she was in Potter's arms of course, that boy and all he stood *fo*~~had~~ to be present to torture him even here in Hermione's mind crying and shaking.

'I love him.'

'You what?'

'But Hermione, please don't take this wrong, but I admit this is quite a surprising development However, as far as The Plan is concerned, what is so bad about being in love with him? Especially if he if he kissed you?

The Plan?

Suddenly he was in the garden of the Burrow, looking at Luna Lovegood's serene smile.

'Simple,' the eccentric Ravenclaw was saying in her most infuriatingly patient tone . 'We have to find him a wife.'

oooOooo

A sense of apprehension, and again that feeling of quiet, unquestioning acceptance, as he heard and felt the memory of Hermione's voice *It's quite simple, really. I have to go and pretend that I want to marry him. Then they will have to do their tests and give me the results ... no one will doubt me ... They already think I'm completely barmy, it can't get any worse.'*

oooOooo

She hadn't even thought twice? She had simply, without hesitation, given up a comfortable future with the Weasley boy and her career of choice with the Ministry?

... just because she respected and admired him as a teacher, as an Order member and as a...as a fellow human being? Because he ~~had~~*deserved* a life?

oooOooo

OF ALL THE HARE-BRAINED AND IDIOTIC THINGS THIS PLAN MUST BE THE MOST ... absurd, fantastic, bizarre, ludicrous, preposterous, outrageous, quixotic, impracticable, misguided, ridiculous ... he was running out of adjectives... endeavour he had EVER encountered in his whole life.

... and MINERVA was in on the plan?

... how positively ...

... *Slytherin*.

oooOooo

Suddenly he was back at the evening of the concert, and Hermione was being swept along with the crowd after the show. She had intended only a quick trip to the loo. But with her mind in turmoil, her feelings in an uproar, her body burning for him (for *him??*) ... the young witch had been so distracted by the effects his embrace had on her (Oh Merlin, *his* embrace!) that she never noticed the insidious mind-touch that slipped past the natural barriers of her mind. A vile and subtle lure that had increased her confusion and steered her steps away from the crowd and down a dark alley, until no one would hear her screams in time ...

oooOooo

Only then did Hermione release him.

Snape slid out of her mind and came to sitting next to Hermione's bed, holding her hand and shaking all over.

She loved him.

He stared into her brown eyes. Hermione looked very weary, wrung-out, but also incredibly relieved.

Keeping such a ... Slytherin ... plan secret would have been hard on her, honest Gryffindor that she was. Foolish, foolish girl.

Woman.

She had given up on the future she had envisioned for herself because she was convinced that ~~he~~ she deserved a life. Foolish, *foolish* woman.

She loved him.

She had been prepared to do everything for him. *Literally* everything. Never mind the consequences. How typically, annoyingly Gryffindor of her.

She loved him.

She liked his *goddamn* nose.

She wanted him.

She wanted him so much that whenever he merely *looked* at her, her stomach tightened with need.

She needed him.

His (his!) embrace made her feel safe. Safe and secure. Warm and happy. At peace with herself and the world.

Foolish, foolish woman.

oooOooo

Snape exhaled deeply. Hermione lay in her bed, staring up at him. His black eyes blazed. She was glad that she was no Legilimens. His mind was bound to be a very scary place now. She should probably be frightened out of her wits, since he had discovered not only her ... inappropriate feelings for him, but also The Plan.

But all she could feel was boundless, grateful relief.

Her hand still in his, her lids fluttered shut and Hermione fell asleep.

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

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FAQ

See Part 1.

Chapter: Muggle Mythology

Textual allusions in this chapter:

the quote is what Gandalf said that Saruman said in 'The Fellowship of the Ring', 'The Council of Elrond'

the flashback in italics is almost directly from 'Deathly Hallows', 'The Forest Again'

Chapter: The Art of Looking for Trouble

The title of this chapter refers to the quote 'Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it, misdiagnosing it, and misapplying the wrong remedies.' from Groucho Marx.

Chapter: The Most Stupid Thing That People Do

The title of this chapter refers to the first part of the quote 'Falling in love is not at all the most stupid thing that people do but gravitation cannot be held responsible for it.' by Albert Einstein.

Chapter: With A Little Help From Your Friends ...

There really was a concert by Sting on April 1, 2000 in the Royal Albert Hall. If wizards or witches attended I'm not in a position to say, as they would have been wearing Muggle clothes and used 'Do-Not-Notice' Charms to hide their presence.

Chapter: Gravitation

The title of this chapter refers again to the quote 'Falling in love is not at all the most stupid thing that people do but gravitation cannot be held responsible for it.' from Albert Einstein. Gravitation may not be responsible for the not at all stupid action of falling in love. However, certain kinds of gravitational forces may speed things along.

The conversion of Muggle money into Galleons & co is care of the Currency Converter at the HP Lexicon.

Chapter: ... and a Little Assistance From Your Foes

The Bond is the bond between master and apprentice. The master is sworn to protect the apprentice, so he/she needs to know when the apprentice is in trouble. In a less powerful wizard, that would be an indistinct feeling of worry/alarm. Snape gets details because he's powerful, an excellent Legilimens and in love with Hermione.

Part 7, Episodes 61-70

Chapter 7 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

61. The Breaking of the Shell

Snape still felt quite unbalanced when he entered Minerva's office almost two hours later, a carefully prepared pensieve in his hands.

It had taken him longer than normally to create the memory of the attack. Partly this was due to the fact that second-hand memories were always more fuzzy than original ones, but the main problem had simply been an inability to concentrate on his part, an unusual difficulty concerning the separation of facts and emotions.

What he held in his hands now was as objective and purified a version of the events as he was able to produce. He hadn't been able to contain the malicious mind-touch without revealing other things, however. He would have to simply *tell* Minerva and, he supposed, Potter, about this. And hope that it would be enough.

'Headmistress. Mr. Weasley. Mr....Williamson.' He sighed. 'Potter.'

He put the pensieve on the table and sat down next to the young Auror.

'Professor Snape.' Potter nodded to him. 'How is Hermione?'

'She was asleep when I left her. Madam Pomfrey is with her, of course,' Snape replied tersely.

'Will she be all right? Molly is very worried. Hermione is like a daughter to us ' Arthur leant over, oblivious of the pensieve. Snape only prevented the red-haired wizard from knocking it over by grabbing the bowl and pushing it into Minerva's hands.

His hand snaked up to his throbbing forehead. 'She will be fine in a few days. We were in time to ... to prevent ...' To keep her from being raped and killed*Oh Gods.* 'He Miss Granger suffered a broken jaw, a fracture of her left wrist, plus numerous lacerations and contusions, and a mild concussion. She was healed, of course, but it takes time to recuperate from such injuries.

'But she *will* recover completely.'

Arthur sighed. 'That's a relief.'

Williamson picked that moment to join the conversation. In spite of purple robe and ponytail, the sharp gaze and self-assured demeanour of the young wizard made clear at a glance that he was not an Auror by chance. 'I've been over the incident with Mr. Potter. Is there anything you can add, now that you've retrieved the relevant memories from Miss Granger?'

She loves me. She wanted to save my life, and she loves me.

Snape cleared his throat, forgetting the procedure instilled in him by Petrel. When he spoke, his voice sounded hoarser than it had in weeks. 'As Mr. Potter no doubt told you, upon our arrival at the scene we happened upon five Muggles who were under the *Imperius* curse, and a wizard of unknown identity who cast an '*In Cinere Muto*' on himself, thus incinerating himself on the spot.

'But yes, there is more.

'The wizard who killed himself bore the Dark Mark. And Miss Granger got a good look at it. It was active when she saw it. Burning black on white skin.

'I have also reason to assume that the wizard was an accomplished Legilimens, who manipulated Miss Granger into straying away from the concert hall. To what end, I cannot say. But I do not believe that...' He swallowed. 'I do not believe that simply killing her was all that was on his agenda.'

oooOooo

Later, in the solitude of his bedroom, he could not settle down. Too much was on his mind.

Hermione Granger. The best friend of Harry Potter. Heroine of the War. His apprentice. His perfect, safe solution to end his miserable existence.

Was in love with him.

Loved him, even.

From her bizarre fascination with his nose to her ridiculous notion that in his arms of all places true safety and security might be found.

He paced the room.

When had his life become so strange? And what the hell was he supposed to do now?

Severus stopped and crossed his arms. He could not deny that he was attracted to Hermione.

The soft, delicate curves of her body. Those wild curls. That brave, infuriating smile ... That inquisitive, stubborn mind. Her calm, consequent caring.

Of love, he knew nothing. He had loved but once in his life, and that had ended with a man he hated marrying the woman he loved, and herself dead at his feet before her son was even two years old ...

Now the Dark Mark was burning again. Why? How? He had no idea. Voldemort was dead. He was certain of that. *This* Dark Lord was gone. But that didn't mean no other would rise. He sighed. All the signs pointed in that direction.

Severus slumped down on his bed, stared at the wall, his thoughts everywhere and nowhere at once.

What should he do now? Where should he go from here?

At last he shook his head and pulled out his main wand. Yew. For transformation and renewal. The core: dragon heartstring for strength of heart. And his new secondary wand shared the core with Hermione's. Feather of a sphinx for joint wisdom. He felt his lips curl into a wry smile. The irony of the symbolism was not lost on him.

For a moment, he sat in intense concentration. Then he murmured, *Expecto patronum.*

Silver haze drifted up from his wand, forming the translucent shape of a doe. Quietly, gracefully, she moved around the room, returning to him now and again to nuzzle him with gentle, worried touches of her shimmering nose.

Severus remained where he was, motionless, gazing at the blurred shape of his borrowed Patronus in silence. Thinking about love and life scared him. He was not used to such activities. But Severus knew he had no choice. He had to make a decision.

When the eastern horizon brightened with a new morning, Severus lowered his wand.

It was time.

'You cannot protect me any longer,' he whispered. 'Farewell and thank you.'

For a moment the silver doe stood in the first golden light of dawn that filtered through the window. Then she seemed to exhale in a sigh.

And was gone.

oooOooo

oooOooo

62. Cold Words

Two days later, Hermione stiffly sat down on her bed and reached out to pet Crookshanks. Curled up into a fluffy ginger ball, the half-kneazle was shedding in a spectacular contrast on the dark green cover.

'Hey, Crooks,' she murmured. 'I'm back.'

She stared down at her hands, the right lost in thick fur, the left resting in her lap. Covered under the black and green sleeve of her apprentice-robe, her wrist was still blue and green, with splotches of yellow. Her whole body sported a quite amazing array of bruises. Hermione glanced at the jar with bruise balm on her nightstand. It would take a while until her body was completely healed.

Strangely enough, that didn't worry her. Not even the burning Dark Mark she had glimpsed while lying on the ground worried her much. Her shrieking terror had drained away. She wasn't even able to formulate any theories about what was going on in her mind at the moment.

She could think about only one thing.

He knew.

Everything.

Her initial feeling of relief had faded, leaving behind a strange, shocked numbness. From that daze, apprehension had started creeping into her mind. By now her nerves were completely frazzled.

What would he do? End her apprenticeship? Give his final order? But he kissed me. He embraced me at the concert. It was rather obvious that he liked it, too.

But if Snape thought that a kiss was not the foundation for a marriage that would save his life, Hermione suspected that an erection would qualify even less.

A soft knock made her jump. The door opened. Snape stood framed by the torchlight of the corridor. As usual, he was dressed in black, trousers, frock coat, with the barest sliver of white indicating the presence of a shirt somewhere underneath the various layers of black fabric. His expression was unreadable.

'Miss Granger. I trust you are feeling better.'

Hermione swallowed around the lump in her throat and nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

'We need to talk.'

'Yes, sir.'

He spun on his heel and swept away towards the library. Hermione rose to her feet. Her heart was racing, her stomach was tied in knots of anxiety. Her mouth dry with nervousness, she stepped towards her desk and retrieved a piece of parchment, stuffing it into the deep pocket of her robes, before she followed her master.

Gryffindor courage, she thought desperately. *As if I've got any choice...*

oooOooo

Inside the library, Snape had taken up position with his back towards the windows. He stood stiffly, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

'Close the door, if you will.'

She complied. Her heartbeat was thrumming in her throat. Her hand was shaking as she reached for the door handle. Then Hermione turned around to face Snape.

'Well, Miss Granger,' he said in his silkiest voice. His black eyes bored into her. 'What have you got to say for yourself?'

Instinctively, she balled her hands, promptly winced at the aching stiffness of her left wrist and let her hands fall loosely at her sides instead. She inhaled deeply. Drawing her shoulders back and raising her chin, she tried to gather her thoughts.

'There are surely worse things than marrying me,' she plunged in. 'And I should think that a life-sentence in Azkaban is among them. I know you may disagree with me, but you do deserve to have a life. ' *She mustn't cry before she'd spoken three sentences. Damn. Hold yourself together, Hermione!* Surely a life in freedom even if it is here at Hogwarts and includes teaching all those dunderheads, even if it includes ...*uh...* my presence ... surely that is preferable to the alternative.'

Her heart was pounding so hard it was difficult to breathe. Her voice sounded thin and shrill in her own ears. 'I know that I'm not the apprentice you would have picked. That it will be awkward marrying your apprentice. And I'm very sorry for that. But it seemed the only solution at the time. And it *is* legal. We-we checked that. We I thought if as your apprentice you might maybe come to obviously not to *like* me. But maybe, maybe not ... resent me quite as much as when I was a student. Especially,' she gulped, 'if I could help you with teaching. Decrease your exposure to dunderheads. Do the boring stuff, so you might have more time for, for something you enjoyed.'

His posture had become even stiffer, if that was at all possible. His eyes had started to glitter blackly. A dead give-away for his rising fury.

She inhaled a shuddering breath and pulled the roll of parchment out of her robe.

'I am so very sorry that I betrayed your trust. I know I had no right to do what I did. But there was really no other way. And...'

Her voice faltered, her hand was shaking. 'At least that way we know that there *is* a way for you to fulfil those ridiculous conditions of your probation, sir. You don't have to go to Azkaban. Please, sir, if you would just consider it!'

Silently he accepted the parchment. He studied the seal carefully, then he unrolled and read the document.

At last he put the scroll away. He spun around and stalked towards Hermione until he stood a mere inch away from her. His scent enveloped her and made her stomach tingle even now. His black gaze was hypnotising.

'A positively *Slytherin* scheme, Miss Granger,' he hissed at her. 'Insinuating yourself into my presence, securing my trust, assisting me with the unpleasant task of subduing those imbecilic children ... and all *that* just to save me from a life-sentence in Azkaban?'

She shivered, but she couldn't move away, or breathe, or speak.

'Tell me, Miss Granger,' he enquired, his voice soft as velvet, 'with all your mad scheming and preposterous planning, did it not ~~ever~~ occur to you to simply ...*ask* me?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

63. ... and Warm Kisses

'Ask you?' Hermione gaped at Snape.

'Yes,' he repeated tersely. 'Ask me.'

'Who knows,' he smirked at her. 'I might even have said yes.'

'Yes? She stared at him incredulously.

A terrible feeling of hope mixed with fear and dread gripped her heart and squeezed it. Nausea washed over her as she gulped again, and tried to catch her breath.

'Sir,' she whispered, unable to quench the giddy feeling of longing that was rising in her heart. In spite of the stiffness and the pain, Hermione balled her hands into fists. If she didn't, she might reach for him, and she was certain that the only thing Snape would appreciate even less than a sobbing apprentice was an apprentice clinging to his robes in an effort of persuasion.

'Sir,' Hermione repeated earnestly. 'If you'd only consider it! Please! You've read the document, you've seen it's valid. If you marry me, you're safe. You won't have to go to Azkaban. You can live in peace.'

'It would only be a-a...marriage of convenience, a paper marriage, just for show. You would hardly notice that I'm there. I could continue keeping the dunderheads of the lower forms at bay for you. I know I am not the kind of apprentice you deserve, but at least I can do that. I think I cope reasonably well with the younger students by now.'

Hermione took a deep breath, and hurried on. She knew she was babbling almost hysterically, but she was too frightened of what he would say to stop now. 'I-I suppose I would have to stay with you, just to keep up appearances for the Ministry. But I promise I would, I would keep out of your way. And I would like to say that I do understand that if there will never be anything between us. Though of course if you'd consider ... if you ever thought that you might...*uh...*' She blushed fiercely.

'I well, I guess you know that I-I would actually be ... quite pleased...*Uh...* I do understand that an arithmantic anomaly is not any better a foundation for a marriage than a kiss. But surely it is better than the alternatives. Better than Azkaban. Or...' she swallowed hard, 'death.'

'And,' Hermione went on, 'while I'm certainly the first to admit that I don't know much about love or marriage *am* only twenty years old, after all I do think that in time we might be able to establish at least a mutually agreeable companionship, if not exactly friendship. After all, we do share some interests and we have ...*uh...* already spent quite some time well, we're not complete strangers to each other.'

'Please, sir,' she whispered. 'If you'd only consider it. It would be just to keep up appearances. Just for show. And ~~would~~ save your life.'

He didn't react, just looked at her intently. She was trembling under his black gaze. But somehow she managed to keep her chin up and was able to meet his eyes.

'Are you quite finished babbling?' Snape asked.

Hermione tried to swallow the pounding heartbeat that seemed to have lodged in her throat, and nodded. Snape stepped even closer.

'Good.' He stared down at her for a long moment with the strangest expression in his eyes.

'However,' he said softly, 'you are forgetting about something here, Hermione.'

With one word all hope, and all the nervous energy that had kept her talking during the last minutes drained out of her. Her shoulders slumped, and she lowered her head, despair dragging at her.

'Hermione. Look at me.' His right hand moved to her chin, gripping it gently between his index finger and his thumb and tilting her head back, so that she was looking into his eyes again. His hand slid down to her shoulder. At the same time he brought up his left, until he was holding her tightly. She couldn't have moved even if she had wanted to.

'You are forgetting,' Severus repeated in a low, careful voice. 'that I've been inside your mind.'

'I *know* how you feel about me.'

Something about the way he spoke made a shiver run down her back. She opened her mouth, but he silenced her with a slight shake of his head.

'I do not love you,' he said curtly.

Hermione sucked in her breath. Her nails bit into her palms, her left wrist throbbed with pain.

'Or ... in any case I don't think I do. At least ... not ... yet.'

Again she caught that hint of sadness in his dark eyes.

'Hermione, young as you are...among the two of us, I think you know far more about love than I do. I find myself most ill equipped when it comes to matters of the heart.'

'You must be aware of the fact that I do feel attracted to you.'

'And no matter what impression I may have given you, I do care about you.'

She could feel the warmth of his body against her breasts, right through the various layers of their clothing. She couldn't breathe.

'Very much,' Severus whispered. Hermione was drowning in his eyes.

'What ' She faltered and licked her lips. 'What are you are you trying to say?'

'What I am trying to say, in an awkward, roundabout way...is that while I still think that this *plan*" of yours is the most bizarre scheme I have ever heard of,' he said forcefully, before he softened his voice again, 'I agree. You *are* right. Marriage to you is infinitely preferable to the alternatives. Even I am not so insane as to insist that death or Azkaban would be better options.'

'Albeit probably more appropriate.' Severus sighed wearily. 'The answer to your question, Hermione, is "yes".'

A tender hand cupped her head, while his arm around her back pulled her against his body, until warm lips closed the last distance between them.

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64. Accursed Arithmancy

Hermione's world narrowed down to the touch of his lips on hers, warm, gentle, insistent, but infuriatingly chaste, to his hand holding her head, his fingers playing in her hair, his hand pressing against the small of her back ... When Severus released her at last, she swayed against him, gasping. Her whole body pulsed with desire from her little toes to her ears. He didn't let her go. Instead, both of his hands went around her back, pulling her against his body, while he lowered his head so that it rested against her right cheek. Tension and anxiety fell away. Within the circle of his arms, she could relax, and simply breathe. *Breathe*.

Finally Severus stepped back from her, but his right hand found hers, and pulled her along as he settled in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace. Seated on the wide, squashy armrest, she leant against him, inhaled his scent, and once again rehearsed the components in her mind. Severus still looked tired and thin, but she couldn't remember having seen him in a better shape. And he *did* look more relaxed. Less tense.

'Now what?' she asked.

A black eyebrow quirked up. 'We go and talk with the Headmistress and arrange for an appointment with the Ministry's Registry Office. I suppose the Magical Law Enforcement Office may have to be consulted as well. And of course those Wizarding Genealogy Offices.'

Her heartbeat quickened again. Somehow she'd never anticipated that *The Plan* would actually work. Only of course it *hadn't*, even if they *were* to be married now after all. Hermione's brain seemed to be trying to tie itself into knots. *How was it possible that her whole world had changed within five minutes? Or ten, maybe.*

'Surely you didn't expect me to play the blushing bridegroom, Hermione?' he sneered softly. But his tone lacked its usual sting, and his hand was soft on her leg, gently rubbing back and forth on her thigh. His other hand strayed to the bridge of his nose, as it so often did, when he was tired or exasperated. 'I am definitely not ... eager ... to ... *hell*, Hermione, there is no good way to say this!' His tone hardened with an edge of desperation. 'But even vows exchanged at a Ministry wedding hold more power of protection than the vows between apprentice and master.'

His eyes darkened to absolute black, as his fingers carefully caressed her left wrist.

'I am afraid it seems that you will need all the protection you can get,' he added in a low voice.

'I'm not exactly helpless,' she argued.

'Which is why you *allowed* yourself to be overpowered by five Muggles controlled by the *Imperius*?'

She sucked in her breath. 'They were?'

Severus nodded. 'Yes. You were *not* attacked by chance, Hermione.'

'But ... but why?'

He shrugged. 'Another message? Whoever is behind all this is just establishing himself as the new Dark Lord. They will need death and blood to build up a reputation.'

Severus' long fingers wrapped around her hand, his grip both strong and gentle.

'I almost wish there were other rites we could employ ...' He moved his shoulders uncomfortably.

Hermione frowned. 'Why? What do you mean?'

His eyes glittered with impatience and he drew away from her. Restless, he rose to his feet and paced the room, black robes swirling. 'Ancient rituals. Marriage rites.'

He gave her a pointed look. *Fertility* ceremonies.'

When she gulped, he smirked. 'However, they all have a distinct drawback. Just like the Unforgivables you have ~~to~~*mean* them, with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, when you cast them. As it is, that option is not open to us.'

Severus gazed at her, and for a fleeting moment Hermione had the impression that his eyes darkened with regret. But she couldn't be sure as they were almost black to begin with.

'Oh.'

'Yes. *Oh*', indeed. As a matter of fact ...' He pointed at the scroll with the seal from the Wizarding Genealogy Offices.

'... If you weren't so bloody Gryffindor, you would have noticed that this doesn't really look like an arithmantic anomaly, but rather like a botched curse.'

Hermione blinked at Snape. 'A *botched* curse?'

She stared at him. That bit of paper had ruled her life for almost a year. She had built her entire future on it. Now Severus was saying that it was only a curse gone wrong?

'Use your brains Hermione.'

She just stared at him.

'Think about it. You are a Muggle-born witch. I am part Muggle-born. The chances that there is no other fitting match for us ~~are~~*n**fin**itesimal*. I am not an arithmantist, but I would not be at all surprised if we were to find out that someone had fudged with the genealogies in an attempt to make sure that there was *no* legal match for me.'

'WHAT?' Her outrage made him smile.

'Hermione, you know who I am. What I was.'

She swallowed hard. 'But if they bewitched the genealogies ... then how ... how *is that* possible?' Hermione gestured at the scroll.

Severus caught her gaze. 'Remember the ceremony when you became my apprentice?' he asked. *Blood to sign you, kiss to bind you?*

She nodded.

'The same principle holds true for the most ancient and most powerful betrothal rites. I do not remember anything of what you did to save me, but I am told that ...' He inhaled sharply. '... that it was not unlike this ritual.'

'But ... wouldn't you have to ... I don't know ... agree?'

Severus looked at her with that strange sadness in his eyes and inclined his head. 'Yes,' he replied. 'That is true. As I said, I don't remember anything at all. But had I been aware of anyone calling me in that realm betwixt and between...At that time ... I would not have thought of you when I answered a woman's call.'

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65. Would You Pass Me the Sugar, Please?

What softer side Severus Snape might possess, he'd very definitely left it behind in the dungeons today. Like the proverbial bat out of hell he swept up the stairs and through the corridors, scattering students left and right, who winced in his wake and didn't even dare to respond to Hermione's reassuring smile.

'*My Lady Greensleeves*,' Snape hissed at the gargoyle that guarded the office of the headmistress.

With a black swirl of his robes, he imperiously entered the room that had briefly been his two years ago. 'Minerva.'

'S Severus. And Hermione. What a pleasant surprise. I did not expect you. How are you, my dear? I hope you are feeling better.'

'If you did not expect us, Minerva, then you still have a lot to learn,' Snape interrupted.

A stifled chuckle issued from the golden picture frame behind McGonagall's desk. Snape scowled at Dumbledore's portrait. 'Dumbledore. Don't you have ... business to attend to? Places to go? Canvas to adorn? Oil colour to sniff?'

The former headmaster's eyes twinkled almost as brightly as they had in real life. In the portrait he'd shrugged off his robes. He stood before them in shirt sleeves and bright pink braces that held up a pair of violet trousers. 'Actually, Severus, you are lucky today. My golf partners just informed me that they had to cancel our match for this afternoon. So today my time is completely at your disposal.'

'Albus, don't tease him so. Don't you see that he's not in a good mood?'

'Minerva, Severus has never appreciated being mollycoddled, neither by our own dear Molly, nor by you or even by myself.'

'Minerva, Severus can speak for himself, and if you really want to do something for him, send that old codger on his way,' Snape snarled.

The Headmistress frowned and fixed Snape with her patent penetrating stare. Snape merely raised a black eyebrow towards the portrait and crossed his arms in front of his chest in a gesture of exaggerated patience.

McGonagall's frown deepened. 'Albus, if you don't mind, I would prefer to speak with Severus and Hermione alone.'

Albus Dumbledore glared at his successor, but then he winked at Hermione, picked up his robe and quietly slipped from the frame.

Minerva moved around her desk and sat down, gesturing to Snape and Hermione to take a seat as well. 'I am sorry, but I have no new information for you about the attack. The Aurors, and I assume the Unspeakables are still working on the case.'

'This is not about the attack,' interrupted Snape. 'At least not ... only about it.'

He did not look at Hermione, but concentrated on the Headmistress.

Hermione's heart was thudding in her chest, and her hands felt unsteady. She would have liked to fidget and squirm or play with her hair or scratch at a hangnail. But that kind of thing was not quite the appropriate behaviour when your fiancé was going to talk to your boss about the planning of your wedding. She felt the almost irrepressible urge to cup her face in her hands and mutter an endless stream of '*Ohmygods*'. For almost a year she had lived with *The Plan*. For almost a year she had thought about little else. For almost a year she had not hoped to succeed.

Now she had succeeded and failed and all at the same time.

'In that case, what do you want to talk about?' A straight line appeared above the bridge of Minerva's nose.

Snape remained completely unfazed. 'You are keeping up with my schedule for the Probations Officer, I believe?'

At this change of tack, Minerva had enough. She removed her spectacles and glared at the Potions Master. 'Severus Snape. Either you tell me what you want, or you get the hell out of my office. Hermione, if you need to talk to me, you can stay, of course.'

Hermione dared to cast a glance at Severus out of the corner of her eye. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes glinted with the barest hint of mirth. He was enjoying himself!

'I will need no more than a minute of your precious time, Minerva. Then I will leave you to consort with your lion-cub in peace.' He looked at Hermione for the first time since they'd entered the room. She could have sworn that just for second, maybe not even that, the hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Then his expression grew stern again.

'Hermione and I are getting married,' Severus said simply. 'I wanted to ask you to ascertain the necessary requirements regarding the ceremony in order to fulfil the conditions of my probation.'

It said a lot about the resilience and presence of mind of the Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry that Minerva McGonagall did not faint on the spot upon hearing that quiet announcement.

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'Ron? Would you pass me the sugar, please? Oh, and before I forget ... I'll be in London on Friday next week. *Andh*... if you don't have anything else to do, maybe we could meet?'

Harry felt his brows knit together and resisted the urge to rub his scar.

Ron, however, remained completely unconcerned. 'Sure 'mione. No problem. I was going to meet Lois for lunch, but we can reschedule or meet all together. What are you doing here?'

Harry saw Hermione's lips quiver, then she bit down on her lower lip the way she always did when she was nervous. But something was different. A strange spark was gleaming in her eyes. *That was it!* Her eyes were shining today! Harry remembered that light in her eyes. From way back when a simple five House points earned in Transfiguration could make Hermione happy.

Could it possibly be...?

Hermione couldn't suppress a grin now. 'I'm getting married on Friday, Ronald. And I would be very happy if you and Lois and Harry and my other friends could be there.'

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66. Never Doubt that this is Real

TREACHEROUS TRAITOR OR TRUSTWORTHY TEACHER?

While Muggle-born wizards and witches fear for their lives and renegade Death Eaters vanish into thin air, Severus Snape is entering the second year of his probation at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Severus Snape (40), the most notorious of all Death Eaters escaped life-long imprisonment in Azkaban last year after Harry Potter and Muggle-born witch Hermione Granger testified in his favour. Since then Hermione Granger ...

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Hermione flung the paper away with such force that it sailed over the table and landed on the floor, the wizards inside the picture on the first page stumbling dizzily around inside their rectangle.

'That's disgusting,' Hermione hissed. 'Can't they leave you alone?'

Next to her, Severus sighed. 'Thank you for drawing the attention of all our students to the paper.' He pulled his wand and flicked it. Gently the discarded paper floated up onto the table again, spreading itself out next to his cup of tea.

He scanned the article, his expression unreadable. At last he looked back at Hermione, eyes black, mouth thin.

'What did you expect, Hermione? You would do well not to forget with whom you are dealing here,' he said in the soft, dangerous tone that could mask anger as well as bitterness. '*They* haven't.'

She wondered if he was referring only to himself. The thought of the disappeared Death Eaters was never far from her mind.

'Yes, sir,' she whispered.

The stony expression faltered for a second, before he fixed his scowl on her.

'You will need to be able to say my name, tomorrow,' he observed. 'If that is such a hardship, maybe we should arrange some time for you to practice pronouncing it?'

He raised an eyebrow, and drummed the tips of his steepled fingers against each other.

Promptly Hermione's hand began to shake and she had to put her cup down. Her heart syncopated its beats, making her feel rather woozy.

'Yes, s... Severus,' she breathed.

'Severus,' she repeated, firmer this time. '*SEH-ver-us*.'

He smirked at her. 'See, it's not all that difficult. Though I fully expect that on Saturday we will be reading an article in that rag here, which will argue the only thing that could have prompted you to marry me is the fact that I am at least able to pronounce your name accurately. If I recall correctly there are precedents regarding your first name, aren't there, *Herm-own-ninny?* Or should I simply say '*mione?*'

Hermione couldn't help smiling at that. But with the nasty article still in plain view, her mood darkened again quickly. Concentrating on her empty plate she simply wasn't hungry enough to eat breakfast she finally voiced what was troubling her the most regarding their upcoming marriage. 'I think I'm rather more worried about that this this scandal sheet will print that it's nothing but a paper marriage.' She glanced at Severus worriedly.

'I have no doubt that they will print exactly that. And worse,' he said frankly. 'However, Aceline Loxweild-Spalt was very thorough in her research. She's the best lawyer money can buy, Hermione. My probation only asks for '*marriage?*' It doesn't require a specific rite hell, it doesn't even require consummation! As far as I can see, there is no way for them to challenge the validity of our marriage. That would only be possible if we were marrying *only* to keep me out of prison.' His voice was so soft, when he continued, that Hermione knew that only she could hear what Severus was saying. 'I am not sure what it is that we are doing here, Hermione. But whatever it is it is not just '*for show?*' Never doubt that whatever this is, it is real.'

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On Friday, 28 April 2000 Ron Weasley met Lois Petrel for breakfast in Muggle coffee-place of American origin. As it was not the first time they went there, he felt fairly self-assured and quite cosmopolitan as he marched up to the bar and ordered a *half-caf-decaf-cappuccino-with-cream-but-hold-the-cocoa* and some of those American Muggle cauldron no, cupc... no, muffins.

While Ron waited for his order to be readied, he caught a glance at himself in the gleaming metal of the machinery. Dressed in black jeans and a charcoal grey jumper (both picked out by Lois), his shoulder-length hair pulled back into a neat ponytail, he looked almost like a Muggle. And like an adult, something which was infinitely more important to him. He had to *be* an adult. Lois enjoyed fooling around as much as he did, but she'd been bringing up her daughter on her own since she was sixteen years old. If their relationship was to have any future at all, he had to be a man, and not a boy to her.

Sometimes, like today, that was rather hard on Ron. As they settled down in the comfortable armchairs, mugs of coffee and plates of muffins on the small round table between them, he allowed himself to glower at the bag that contained his and Lois' shrunk dress robes as well as the wedding present for Hermione and Snape they had bought together the day before.

Then he turned his attention back to the graceful, dark-haired woman and forced a weak smile.

'I just can't believe that this is really happening,' he muttered.

Lois well aware of Ron's prejudices against the Potions Master and his fading infatuation with Hermione rolled her eyes.

'*Really, Ronald,*' she said in perfect mimicry of Hermione's way of speaking, before continuing in her ordinary mellow voice. 'A blind man can see how much Hermione loves Severus. And although he may have a hard time accepting that, if you know Severus, then it's quite obvious that he is very much attracted to her. *And..*' She raised a finger to prevent the rash words that were waiting to tumble from Ron's tongue. 'And that he cares for her deeply.'

Ron wasn't convinced, but he knew better than to argue with Lois. 'If you say so ...'

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67. The Foundations Relationships are Built on

Lois sighed into her white chocolate mocha. 'I*will* admit that their situation does seem a bit peculiar to me, what with his probation and her apprenticeship. But I assure you, I've seen relationships based on much more questionable foundations.'

Ron swallowed any disrespectful remarks about his former potions teacher that he might have been tempted to make, and observed Lois' face instead. He had noticed before, that sometimes, when they talked about relationships or about Alina, a shadow would cross her face, and her lips would press together into a hard line. He guessed that she was thinking about Alina's father in those moments. Normally that made Ron shut up quickly. He didn't feel any more comfortable today, but something prompted him to speak all the same.

'How was it between you and Alina's father?' he asked. 'Did you ever think about getting married?'

Lois put down her mug. Her face went very still. Instantly Ron regretted his question. Had he spoken too soon? Just a few weeks ago, he probably would have blundered on right away. But now *today of all times*, he thought with wry amusement he remembered the many times Hermione had snarled at him to THINK FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE before he opened his mouth. And he bit his tongue. Hard.

Lois toyed absently with the mug in front of her, turning it this way and that.

'He ... he told me that he was working on his PhD in sociology. At that time in my life this held an enormous appeal for me. A 'real' man, so much older than I was. And an 'intellectual'. In my eyes he had to be terribly brilliant in order to be working on a PhD. He was my first crush and my first real love, all rolled into one. A ... dangerous combination. And of course I was young and stupid and careless.' She counted the words off on her fingers.

'Looking back, I guess I could have noticed that something was wrong. His ... studies did not make him happy. He appeared to be under a lot of pressure all the time. I think he was very ambitious, but he worried too much to be truly brilliant. He lacked the ... well, I guess you'd call it "*Gryffindor*" daring.' Lois shrugged. 'I thought he was merely brooding in an attractive, darkly academic way.'

'We argued often. He wasn't comfortable with my friends, or with going out. All the usual things young people do, clubbing, cinema, even watching TV... he didn't like that. At first I took his attitude for intellectual disdain, and tried very hard to live up to what I thought were his expectations of me.'

'Then ... incidentally just a few days after a major row, I found out that I was pregnant.'

Lois' eyes grew dark, her thoughts obviously far away. She shook herself, as if she had to bodily force her mind back to the present. For a moment Lois gazed pensively at Ron, as if she was trying to see through him or into him, trying to read his mind.

'I think he must have been a wizard,' she said at last. 'When I went to his flat to tell him that I was pregnant, the flat was gone. The button of his doorbell at the main entrance, the sign with his name on it. Inside the building the whole bloody landing with the door to his flat had disappeared. I thought I was going mad. Then I went to his university. The faculty had never heard of a graduate student working on his PhD with the name he'd given me. The few acquaintances we'd gone out with together ... none of them really remembered him. They did recall going out with us, but they were vague about his name and about what he was studying. When I asked if they knew where he had gone, they kind of shrugged their shoulders and suggested that maybe he'd accepted a job somewhere or his family had moved. Or "*something*".'

'Whatever. He was gone. I was alone. I was sixteen and I was pregnant.'

Her eyes misted over. 'Damn,' she said softly. 'I didn't mean to cry.'

'But if this ...' She forced a smile and gestured at the air between them. 'If this thing between us is supposed to lead anywhere, you deserve to know the truth about Alina's father. Or as much of the truth as I am able to tell you.' She paused, and when she continued, her voice was harsh with bitterness. 'I can't even tell Alina the name of her father, Ron. Because he lied to me. He never even told me his *fucking* name.'

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The visitors' entrance to the Ministry of Magic was an old-fashioned telephone box. Ron stepped behind it and drew Lois closer to the wall of the building it nestled against. Smiling at her, he drew his wand.

'I'm only casting a quick *'Do-Not-Notice-Us'* Charm, so we can pull on the robes,' he explained the deft flick of his wand and a few muttered words.

Another wand-turn, and the handkerchief-sized robes he had pulled from his bag changed into heavy fabric spilling over his arms. 'Here you go.'

Feeling self-conscious, Lois slipped into the Bordeaux-coloured robes.

'How do I look?' she asked and twirled for him.

'Stunning,' Ron mouthed. Judging from his dumbstruck expression, he was completely sincere.

Lois laughed. Ron might be a couple of years younger than she was, but she appreciated his straightforward honesty, and even his sometimes painfully naïve bluntness very much.

'You don't think the others will mind that I'm not in Muggle clothes?'

'Well, you *are* only underneath.' Ron grinned at her. 'I think.'

'This is not the appropriate moment for any comparisons between Muggle and magic underwear, Ronald Weasley. But honest? Do you really think it's okay?'

'Of course it is okay. There's no law against Muggles wearing robes. And besides, I told you. You're beautiful!'

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68. Like a Bridge

It was a bit of a squeeze inside the phone box, but Ron didn't mind. Of course not, Lois mused, as they stepped into a busy corridor. After all he had managed to get not only a tight embrace out of this unusual elevator, but also a kiss. Lois grinned. Ron's technique might not be very sophisticated, but his lips tasted like ripe forest fruits, fresh and tart.

Harry and Ginny were already waiting for them.

'Oh, just look at you!' Ginny exclaimed. 'Almost like a witch!' She glanced at her brother. 'I hope Ron didn't suggest the colour just to annoy Alina?'

Lois chuckled. 'He might have. But no, in spite of this being an almost Gryffindor red, I picked the colour because it looks nice with my hair and eyes. And I think I still miss a rather important implement in order to pass as a witch.'

'I'd be happy to let you hold my wand,' Ron offered at once.

Ginny groaned. Lois faked a blow at his head. 'I just bet you are ...'

Ron grinned unrepentantly. 'But honest, Lois, I don't even think it's illegal for you to own a wand. It's just a crime to sell it to you. And anyway, you know what they say ...'

Lois arched an eyebrow at him. *'When in Rome, do as the Romans do?'*

Ginny frowned. 'I thought that was rather *"When in Rome, stay the hell away from the enchanted fountains and the Vatican!"*'

Ron shook his head and caught Lois' eyes. 'What I really wanted to say was ... well, blood is thicker than water and all that. You're Alina's mother. You're part of our world now.'

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The hall of the Registry Office in the Ministry of Magic was already packed when Harry, Ginny, Ron and Lois entered. Lois saw many witches and wizards she knew, both from Hogwarts and the Order. To start with, all the Weasleys were lined up in the front row. One of their own would be conducting the ceremony. Today marked Percy Weasley's finest hour and his first wedding as Registry Officer.

Ron had explained that office weddings weren't very popular in the wizarding world. Most people wanted special magical rites. Apparently such rituals could enhance the magical powers of a couple and increase their fertility. Lois found those ideas quite intriguing. Given the situation of Hermione and Severus, however, she rather understood why they had opted for a quick Registry Office affair.

From the look of things, this wedding would be spectacular nevertheless. In front of the room a dozen reporters and photographers were milling about. And while there seemed to be many friends and acquaintances present, a number of dark-robed, ominous figures were lingering in the shadows at the back of the hall.

'Hello, Hermione. You are really beautiful today!' Lois embraced her friend tightly.

Hermione did indeed look lovely if white as a sheet. The soft, moss-green velvet of a long dress shimmered underneath the hem and at the neckline of her customary black-and-green apprentice-robes, and a wide ribbon of the same colour and fabric kept her curly hair out of her face. Apart from that her jewellery was the only concession to the occasion.

Hermione was wearing emeralds.

'Normally, witches don't wear jewellery for their wedding ritual. But as this is really just a bureaucratic act today, I thought I might as well do the Muggle thing.' Hermione shrugged uneasily.

'Your grandmother would be very happy if she knew that you are wearing her jewels on your wedding day,' Lois said. 'And I love the symbolism.'

Hermione's fingers flew up to touch the emerald beads of her necklace.

'Yes,' she agreed with a faint smile. 'Emeralds for love and life.'

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Lois' former patient was dressed in his customary severe scowl and black robes. She suspected however that the scowl was linked with the presence of a plump witch introduced as Dolores Umbridge, Probations Officer, who stuck to the side of Percy Weasley like an obnoxious pink burr.

'Thank you for the invitation.' Lois smiled and offered her hand.

'Lois. How good of you to come,' Snape ground out, glowering at the hovering Umbridge.

'Be easy on your voice, Severus. You'll need it to say some very important words in a little while.'

For a second Snape glared at her as if he wanted to hex her. But then he surprised Lois. A hint of smile ghosted over his lips and he inclined his head, allowing his hair to fall forward so it would hide his softening expression.

'Yes, indeed. I do,' he replied and this time his voice flowed smoothly, like silk.

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The ceremony was short and to the point, and went without a hitch.

'... marriage, says an old proverb,' intoned Percy Weasley, 'is like a bridge you have to rebuild every day from both sides. I hope that the bridge you are building will last long years and that it will prove solid enough to carry your lives safely to the other side of whichever river you may want to cross.'

'Err... Professor Snape? You may kiss Her...err... the bride.'

To everyone's surprise, Severus Snape did just that.

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If looks could kill, neither Hermione nor Severus would have survived the ceremony. The toad-like Probations Officer in her frilly tweed costume was definitely not amused.

oooOooo

Twelve witnesses were asked to step up to the table and undersign the certificate of marriage. Lois was a little shocked, but also incredibly pleased, when her name was called.

Severus' bold scrawl was affixed next to Hermione's two neat signatures of her maiden and her new married name, written in a strange rust-coloured ink.

Lois bent over the creamy expanse of parchment. With plain black ink she carefully wrote her name. Her signature was the twelfth, thus rendering the certificate legally valid.

'Congratulations!' Lois beamed at the newly-weds. 'How does it feel to be husband and wife?'

Both of them merely stared at Lois in silence, looking rather shell-shocked.

oooOooo

oooOooo

69. Doves and Childhood Dreams

His wife looked ready to faint. The urge to vehemently clear his throat was quite overwhelming. Only months of Lois Petrel drilling him about good vocal hygiene prevented him. '*Don't whisper, that's not good for you. Don't cough, that's even worse. And never ever clear your throat.*' Was he allowed to sigh? Right now Severus Snape didn't remember and he didn't care. He didn't want a glass of water to ease his throat either.

What he wanted was an hour alone with Minerva's collection of whiskies.

'Hermione, I think they are waiting for us,' he said softly, putting a hand under her elbow to steady her.

'Oh. Yes.'

'There will be journalists waiting for us out there. And photographers,' he reminded her.

'Yes. Right.'

Severus could feel how she inhaled, how her back straightened, head high, chin thrust forward. He didn't need to read her mind to know what she was thinking. '*Gryffindor courage.*' He was sorely tempted to whisper into her ear, 'Care to share?'

But since whispering wasn't good for his voice, he remained silent. A scowl wouldn't be appropriate either. But he assumed that as a former Death Eater he was allowed to live up to his name even on his wedding day. His expression severe, he led Hermione towards the door, Potter and Ginevra Weasley hard on their heels. Out of the corner of his eye he saw how Potter's right hovered over his wand holster. Did he expect an attack right here in the Ministry?

Outside Snape felt as if he had walked into a thunderstorm lightning flashed from all sides, the noise of voices was deafening like thunder.

Suddenly Ginny prodded his arm. 'You have to give them what they've been waiting for, Professor. Kiss Hermione, and make a good show of it. Harry will field the questions while we make our escape. But you *have* to give them something!'

Hermione had stopped dead, her fingers gripping his arm so hard that the sensitive scar tissue on the inside of his forearm twinged. He glanced at her, and suddenly his incredulous heart skipped a beat.

She married me.

She had married him to ensure his freedom. She had married him because she loved him with all her heart. In spite of the fact that ~~he~~ *he* did not love her.

... *yet*, reminded him an echo of his own words and a strange feeling coiled and uncoiled inside him. Stronger than longing, different from desire.

And she wants me.

At that thought, desire *did* flare up in the pit of his stomach, sending fiery tendrils further down.

'Hermione,' he sighed.

She turned, her eyes huge. The moss-green ribbon in her hair and the glowing emeralds at her throat brought out sparks of green in her eyes that he had never seen before. She swallowed and quickly licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

For a second he wondered what her tongue might feel like twined around his own then he pressed his lips against hers.

She stiffened for a moment, surprised by his action, no doubt, before she softened in his arms. Her hips swayed against him, her small round breasts teased him even through all those layers of fabric that separated them.

And her lips ...

... her lips tasted of summer.

oooOooo

The wedding reception was held in the Room of Requirement.

The Room had outdone itself and transformed into a beautiful hall with a soaring wooden ceiling that looked like an overturned hulk of a ship. Tapestries that displayed mythical garden scenes covered the walls in gentle colours of green and cream, with muted splashes of colours were roses and iris bloomed. High Gothic windows looked out on beautiful golden summer sunshine somewhere or somewhen. A long table decked out in white linens, precious porcelain and gleaming sterling cutlery took up the middle of the room, surrounded by many high-backed chairs that matched the tapestries.

At the centre of the dining table, a sprawling arrangement of leaves and flowers shone in greens, yellows and whites, filling the room with the fresh fragrance of perfect spring.

'Wow,' Hermione whispered, awestruck.

Severus and their guests were affected likewise, because as one after the other of their friends filed into the room, only the occasional murmur broke the silence.

'What did you think of?' she asked, turning an astonished gaze up at her husband.

Severus blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it again. He was just as speechless as she was.

'Nothing,' he admitted, his voice hoarser than it had been in weeks. 'I-I probably should have, but ... I was ...'

He indicated the ring on her finger. The moment the enchanted dragon heartstring had touched their skin, it had transformed into matching golden wedding bands.

Hermione nodded. 'I couldn't come up with anything useful to concentrate on either.'

A smile bloomed on her face. 'It's absolutely magical.'

To her surprise, he smiled back. 'Most certainly.'

'Does it remind you of anything? Something you might have unconsciously connected with ... this occasion?'

Hermione creased her forehead. Yes, somehow she *did* seem to recall this room, or something *about* this room. But she knew she had never been here before. She tilted her head back, studying the honey-coloured beams above their heads. A flock of white doves was sitting on the beams below the high, vaulted ceiling.

Hopefully they are just as magical as the rest of the room, Hermione thought, *and don't defecate on our food,* as she looked at the open window at the far end of the room. As golden god-rays slanted into the room, she recognised the scene.

'Oh my,' she breathed and blinked rapidly.

'What is it?'

'I remember now where I know this room from.' She couldn't prevent a certain wistfulness from creeping into her voice. 'It's quite silly. It's from a book I had as a small child. You know, the kind of books people give to little girls so they can imagine their happy ending.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

70. Gifts and Flowers

'What about you?' Hermione asked and peered up at him, eyes wide with wonder.

Severus Snape stared at the table. Absently he lifted his hand to his forehead, as if he wanted to smooth away the lines there, or ward off an impending headache.

'The flowers,' he said at last. 'My mother loved flowers and their hidden meanings. She had an old Muggle book from the 19th century her mother was a Muggle, too about the secret language of flowers. When I was a small child, she used to make up stories for me while she was working in her scrap of a garden.'

'I suppose you could describe them as stories with the happy ending a mother imagines for her son.'

'Oh.' Hermione turned her attention to the flowers.

Severus knew she would recognise them, thanks to her NEWT in herbology.

There were three greens fern, young oak leaves and ivy, three whites blooming myrtle, apple blossoms and honeysuckle, and three yellows iris, zinnia and daffodils.

'So there is a message for us hidden in those flowers?'

He nodded. 'Yes.'

His eyes glinted like obsidian in the rays of sunlight that filtered through the high windows. 'Each plant and flower of this arrangement has its own meaning. Fern is for magic, shelter and sincerity. Oak leaves,' he couldn't help smiling, 'for bravery. Ivy, of course, symbolises wedded love. Myrtle is an ancient Hebrew symbol for marriage. In common flower lore, however, it simply stands for love. Apple blossoms for good fortune. Honeysuckle ...' He frowned a little. '*Bonds of love*. Yellow iris for passion. Zinnia ...for daily remembrance. And daffodils...'

'I thought daffodils were something bad?' asked Hermione, obviously recalling some half-forgotten Muggle folklore.

'Not when there are many of them.'

She laughed. 'There's rather a lot of them.'

'Indeed.'

'So what do they mean?'

Somehow his hand slipped around her back, delighting in the feel of smooth velvet over gentle curves. He leant his head a little against hers. Just enough to be able to smell her hair. *Could hair smell of sunshine?*

'Joy and happiness,' Severus replied.

oooOooo

Sometime between cheese and dessert, Alina got bored. She couldn't help fidgeting on the scratchy fabric of her fancy chair. And it was ~~was~~*really* difficult to keep from curling her braids up and down, just to keep her hands busy. But she didn't complain. She'd rather end up buried by debris again than to disturb her favourite teachers' party. Though she had to admit that she much preferred Slytherin house parties. Grown-ups had such a boring idea of fun.

Suddenly someone nudged her. When she turned to look, it was the young blond witch who was friends with Hermione. *A Ravenclaw like Prue*, Alina recalled.

'Hello Alina,' she said. 'I don't know if you remember my name from when we were introduced. I'm Luna.'

'I know it always sounds horrible when adults say that, but I *have* heard a lot about you. What do you think? Should we explore the room for a bit? I don't think I could eat another bite just now. And I'm afraid they'll try to squeeze in another speech or two between the cheese and the dessert.'

Alina turned to her mother. 'Mum? May I? Please?'

Lois frowned at her.

'We're not going anywhere, Lois,' Luna put in. 'This room is special. And it's quite safe. Really.'

'And you don't mind?'

Luna smiled. 'I wouldn't have offered in that case. It's been a while since I've seen this room in action. I'll enjoy myself as much as Alina. Don't worry. I think Hermione is very glad that you're here today.'

Her mother looked grateful and Alina felt promptly ashamed. Hermione had been her babysitter when she was a toddler. And Professor Snape was her Head of House. And she couldn't even manage to sit still through their wedding dinner.

'Really, don't worry.' Luna glanced at Alina. '*Both* of you. And now come along, Alina! Do you know what Room this is?'

oooOooo

The Room of Requirement was absolutely amazing, Alina decided.

Luna told her all kinds of stories about the room, some of them quite scary. And the room itself! In the wooden panels below the tapestries they discovered numerous hidden compartments and cupboards. One of them had revealed a large silver sword with rubies in its hilt, hidden behind a protective glass screen. Alina gaped at it, while Luna smiled and nodded.

Oh... Exultation flooded Alina, as she thought about how her friends would react to what she had seen here today. *The sword of Godric Gryffindor!*

But even better: the Room of Requirement had given her a present.

When Alina slid her hand over a small knothole in the panelling, it swung back like the mechanism of a gumball machine and popped a small bag made of dark blue velvet into her hands. Inside was a tiny silver bell with a mahogany handle, a silken kerchief wrapped around its clapper.

When she wanted to remove the fabric, Luna put her hand over the bell.

'Leave it. You can safely assume that it's magical, and you don't know what effect the sound of that bell may have. Put it away for now. You can examine it later with your friends.' Contemplatively Luna eyed the small bell. 'Maybe you should have a teacher look at it ... On the other hand, I shouldn't think that the Room is in the habit of making dangerous gifts.'

'Oh, and now I think it's time for the dessert. Ready to eat some more?'

Alina carefully put the bell back and secreted it away in her robes. 'Sure. Do you smell chocolate?'

As Alina rose to her feet, she noticed something lying on the mantelpiece between two golden candle sconces. 'Look! Another daffodil! I wonder what it's doing over here all by itself.'

Luna shrugged. 'Maybe a house-elf forgot it? Come on, I think your mother wants to talk to you before the banquet is over.'

oooOooo

NOTES

Banner

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FAQ

See Part 1.

The title refers to a quote by Kahlil Gibran:

"Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain."

Cold Words

... and Warm Kisses

These titles refer to a quote by Utada Hikaru: "I'll give you cold words and warm kisses. This is love."

Like a Bridge

The old proverb Percy uses to conclude the ceremony is actually a quote from the German writer Ulrich Beer. The original reads "Marriage is a bridge you have to rebuild every day best of all from both sides."

Gifts and Flowers

Floriography was quite en vogue in the 19th century. The book "The Flowers Personified" from 1847 is available online. Google it...it's really interesting. The arrangement of flowers used in this chapter is based on various online resources (too many to list them here). I'm not sure if a florist would approve of the arrangement, but at least the colours go well together and the meaning works.

A single daffodil symbolizes misfortune.

Part 8, Episodes 71-80

Chapter 8 of 8

Snape lives and marries Hermione. A 'Marriage Law Challenge' story with a twist turns into an AU-sequel of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' with new dangers, old secrets, and much more. Virtual penny dreadful. Many short episodes full of adventure and romance, with a dash of hurt/comfort, and a sprinkling of horror.

71. What Happens Now?

It was after midnight, when they left the Room of Requirement and descended down to the dungeons.

The sounds of their steps echoed in the silent corridors and empty staircases. Hermione's high heels clacked in an odd descant to the tense stride of her husband.

Husband.

Her heartbeat thudded uncomfortably in her chest and the sensitive skin of her hands prickled at the thought. She glanced sideways at Severus as they crossed the Entrance Hall to the stairs that led down to their quarters.

This was their wedding night.

Late or not, tired or not, her heart began to race, while her stomach tightened with nerves. She knew Severus had been honest when he had told her that he did not love her. Just as he had been truthful when he had admitted to the fact that he did feel attracted to her. That he did care about her. And yesterday morning, when he had reassured her that however this marriage would turn out to be, it would be real.

Then the portrait swung open, revealing the entrance to the staircase that led up to their private rooms.

What would happen now?

Once inside the corridor, Hermione frowned. The hallway was much longer than she remembered it. Severus must have noticed it, too, because he sighed.

'I should have anticipated this. I believe the castle saw it fit to rearrange our living quarters to our new ... situation.'

'Situation?' She turned towards him, torn between exasperation and amusement.

He looked down his nose at her, nostrils quivering. Hermione frowned. Was he annoyed? But his eyes glinted black in the torchlight. No not annoyed. Rather: exasperated. And amused as well.

She grinned at him. 'Shall we explore?'

As it turned out, Hogwarts hadn't changed all that much. The library had been enlarged to double as a sitting room and was now situated between two studies. Next to the laboratory they discovered a beautiful dining room with a balcony. Additionally there was a new bathroom with a small pool and shower big enough for two. The bedrooms the castle had left alone.

They ended up in the library again, and, Hermione thought, back to square one.

Wedding night.

She stared at Severus, unconsciously rubbing the slim golden ring around her finger. She just had no idea what to ... do ... or to expect.

"What ... what happens now?" she finally asked.

It was awkward to stand three feet away from ... her husband, and feeling just the same as she had any number of times while a student in his classroom: nervous and intimidated. She concentrated on the hem of her green dress, trying to assess his mood unobtrusively from underneath lowered lashes.

He wasn't any more comfortable than she was. His eyes glittered and his upper lip was curling into a snarl. 'If you are scared that I shall require you to fulfil your marital obligations now, I can ease your mind.'

Severus shook his head, his fine, slick hair flying. 'Hermione, *look* at me!'

With two swift strides he crossed the distance between them. Cool fingers touched her chin and forced her head up until she met his gaze. As always his beautiful black eyes made her stomach tingle and tighten.

'I will never demand anything from you,' he said in a soft voice. 'Nothing. Least of all ... anything ... like that. You have already given me more than I deserve. My life. My freedom.'

His hands slid to her shoulders, with careful, light touches.

'Please, Hermione,' he murmured. 'Don't look so scared.'

'But what...' Her voice didn't quite sound as if it belonged to her. 'But what if I... if I... if I wanted you to ...'

Severus raised an eyebrow at her and pulled her closer to him. When she gasped at the feeling of his arousal pressed against her stomach, he smirked. 'You only need to ask.'

Then he frowned, his eyes searching her face. 'Why are you so terribly nervous, Hermione?'

Her cheeks burned, but she couldn't break his gaze. 'Because ... I've never ... done this before.'

His reaction was instant. He took a step backwards. He stared at her, his face studiously devoid of any expression that might betray thoughts or feelings.

'I'm sorry,' Hermione mumbled, sinking down on one of the squashy armchairs, burying her face in her hands. That was certainly the strangest wedding night she could ever have imagined, with the bride apologising for the fact that she was still a virgin.

A rustle of his robes, and his scent flowed over her. Gentle fingers reached for her hands, drawing them away from her face. To her surprise Severus was kneeling before her.

'It is I who ought to apologise,' he said gravely. 'Please forgive me. I had never expected ...' He shook his head. 'Perhaps it is time for me to stop expecting anything, when my life seems to consist solely of surprises lately.'

Severus drew her hands to his lips and kissed them. He dropped kisses on her palms and whispered caresses over her fingers. The soft touch on the over-sensitive skin of her hands sent a jolt of pleasure through her body and provoked a shivery sigh. Her reaction seemed to please him. Slowly, cautiously, as if he wanted to make sure that he didn't frighten her, he reached for her face and trailed his fingertips along the lines of her face, forehead, temple, ear, jaw, until he reached her chin. He bent forwards she leant towards him their lips met. Like warm silk, his lips covered her mouth. When his tongue flicked against her lips, the sensation was exquisite. In a sigh of pleasure, her lips opened to his touch.

He explored her, teasing the corners of her mouth, slipping in, swirling along the inside of her lips, snaking around her tongue. Severus tasted of the wine and whisky they had drunk, of spices and a hint of the bittersweet chocolate from the dessert.

oooOooo

oooOooo

72. The Night after the Wedding

When she came back to the world, Hermione was on her knees. Only Severus' embrace kept her from collapsing.

'I think,' he said hoarsely. 'That is quite enough for tonight. We are both tired and not quite sober.'

When she uttered a soft noise of protest, he kissed the corner of her mouth, sending another spark of desire through her body. A reaction that did not escape his attention. His eyes shone with a satisfied gleam.

'There is time for everything, Hermione. Time enough. We can still count the times we have kissed on our fingers.'

'But...'

'Shhh,' he laid a long, slender finger over her mouth, before tenderly tracing her lips with his fingertip.

'I do want you, Hermione,' he stated. The unadulterated possessiveness in his voice caused a pleasant warmth to spread through her stomach.

His lips curled into an unexpected smile. 'I desire you very much. But I assure you that shared intimacy is more rewarding if the process to reach its completion is not rushed and if each stage is savoured for its own sake.'

She couldn't breathe. He had bewitched her mind, ensnared her senses. She gulped audibly, trying desperately to fashion her fraying thoughts into a coherent answer.

'That ... sounds much like the brewing of a potion,' she gasped at last. 'You need to add each ingredient at exactly the right time ... stir with a precise rhythm ...'

And hadn't his tongue stirred her desire just as adroitly has he mixed his brews?

'Indeed,' he smirked.

Although her aroused body regretted it, her mind was willing to agree to his reasoning. Her heart remained torn. Whatever was going to happen or not, she did not want to sleep alone tonight. Her face or body must have given her away. Severus rose to his feet and drew her up with him. Once they were standing, he embraced her once more, but did not allow her to touch his lower body.

'What do you want? I can see it in your eyes you want to ask a question, but you don't dare. While I might enjoy such rare an occurrence normally, tonight I would prefer you to simply *tell* me what you want.'

She took a deep breath. As an adult woman, *as his wife*, she should be able to answer a simple question in a complete sentence.

'Even if we don't sleep *with* each other tonight,' she said, ignoring the heat that suffused her cheeks, 'I... don't want to sleep alone tonight. If you don't mind.'

In the depth of his eyes an emotion flickered. Disbelief? His embrace tightened, allowing her to feel again that his body at least had ~~very~~ different ideas about the pace of progress for their relationship.

'Mind? Foolish woman. Why would I mind that?'

oooOooo

He was dressed in sensible black pyjamas, fine cotton, not satin or silk, almost as concealing as his daywear, when he re-emerged from her bathroom. When he noticed her curious look, a weary expression crossed his face.

'I learnt years ago that it wasn't a good idea to wear the nightshirts favoured by most wizards ... or any shall we say *enticing*' fabrics in case I was summoned.'

Hermione stared at him, at a loss for words. She had not expected his newfound openness to extend quite that far.

An instinct as old as mankind tugged at her heart. If only she could heal his heart, smooth away those pains and hurts. But when she saw his bleak, black eyes, she knew that no instinct would suffice. Maybe nothing ever would. Suddenly the years and experiences that separated them turned into a deep abyss.

He passed her and slipped under the green covers without sparing her another glance. Only when he had settled down in her magically enlarged four poster bed, he looked at Hermione again.

And then Hermione showed that she was indeed a Gryffindor.

She smiled at her husband, and began to undress.

At last she stood naked in front of her bed. She was acutely aware that her nipples were still taut with arousal and the slight chill of the room, and more than a little self-conscious at showing herself to Severus with all her little imperfections: the purple scar at her throat from Bellatrix' knife, the paler mark from the curse that had hit her in the Ministry of Magic, the slightly irregular shape of her breasts, the way her hipbones jutted out painfully because she was so thin.

With some trepidation, she sought his eyes, and was shocked at the intensity of his gaze. His eyes were blazing, his face she had never seen Severus Snape like that before ... his expression completely unguarded, laid bare, not for the world, but for her eyes only to see.

And he was looking at her, as if she was ... she couldn't find the right word, caught in that mesmerizing gaze ... something special and unexpected, at the very least.

She padded over to the bed and pulled out her nightshirt from below her pillow.

'It's green,' she said pointedly.

'So I see.'

As she slipped into the bed, her heartbeat quickened. She had never slept in the same bed with someone else before. Even after years of sharing a dorm, this would be a new experience.

'May ... I?'

He frowned, but nodded.

She scooted over with an awkward slither, before she curled up against him. He was too thin for a man of his size. But he felt good next to her. Strong, and warm, and solid. His tantalizing, addictive scent enveloped her. Severus exhaled deeply, then he slid an arm around her, drawing her even closer to his side. Hermione felt a small, contented sigh escape her lips as she snuggled closer to her husband and inhaled his special fragrance.

A few breaths later she was already falling asleep, sucked into the warm darkness of safe, sheltered slumber, for once without any dreams or nightmares at all.

oooOooo

oooOooo

73. Hold on Tight

'Crookshanks! Crooks! Croooooooks!' The panicked voice of Alina Petrel echoed noisily in the dungeons of Slytherin House.

Ebe Ebenezer Sibly-Style came up for air from his Potions essay. 'What's wrong, Ali?'

'Her... Mrs. Snape's cat! I was supposed to watch him for the weekend, while they are gone. And now HE is gone, too!' Her lower lip was trembling. 'I promised to take care of him. And now he's disappeared and they haven't even been gone two hours!'

'Shit,' her friend said succinctly. 'Where have you seen him last?'

'I'm not sure. He explored the common room for a while, then he curled up on my bed. I still have that essay to write for Professor McGonagall, and when I was halfway through, I thought I'd take a look to see if Crooks was all right or if he wanted food or something ... and he was gone!'

Ebe did his best thoughtful scowl, tracing his lips with the fingertip of his right forefinger. Alina rolled her eyes. He was taking things a bit far regarding his imitation of their Head of House. If Professor Snape ever caught that, Ebe would probably spend the rest of the term in detention, scrubbing cauldrons and pickling frog-brains.

'We need to search the house at once,' he said decisively. 'He's a half-kneazle, right? So Summoning Charms are out.'

Alina nodded. *Oh God, this couldn't be happening. Not to her. Hermione had trusted her!*

Ebe was already approaching the Seventh Year prefect, Ciardha Vaisey. 'Sir? We have a problem ...'

oooOooo

'Don't be afraid,' Severus said in a low voice. 'Just hold on tight.'

The CRACK of the Apparition was the loudest Hermione had heard so far, and the blackness that engulfed her seemed endless, although it probably didn't last more than a few seconds. But these seconds were terrifying enough existence without a body, being trapped neither here nor there, unable to breathe, to feel.

Then she was in his arms again, his lips kissably close, his eyes piercing as if he could look right into her heart.

Severus seemed reluctant to let her go. As far as Hermione was concerned, she would have been happy to keep standing in his embrace a while longer, wherever they

were.

... *wherever they were?*

'Where are we?' she asked. Drawing away from him, she turned around in an astonished circle, gasping at the façade of a huge church looming up above them. 'We're not in Britain anymore, are we? *That's* why you asked me to wear Muggle clothes!'

'Excellent deduction, Miss Granger, however did you notice?' Severus sneered. 'As a matter of fact, we are in France.'

'It's Mrs. Snape,' she retorted. 'And I knew that. People speaking French and street signs in French are rather a clue. Also, the Apparition noise was louder than usual ... I didn't know you could do cross-channel Apparition.' She tried not to frown. She *did* trust him implicitly.

'Relax, Mrs. Snape,' he murmured. 'While I wouldn't dare cross-continental Side-along Apparition if it wasn't absolutely necessary, you are quite safe with me within Europe.'

'You've done *cross-continental* Apparition?' Hermione gaped at her husband.

He nodded with a small smirk. 'Apparition is about power and concentration. I have both.'

'Hmm.' That much was obvious. 'Where exactly in France are we? And why have you brought me here?'

'This is the cathedral of Chartres. One of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in France. Famous for its stained glass windows and their exceptionally vivid blue colour. Come, let's have a look inside.'

She glanced at him sideways. 'I get to wear jeans and you remain dressed like a priest? Severus, if you so much as *look* at me while you're dressed like that, people will be shocked!'

He quirked an eyebrow, but pulled his wand from his sleeve. A quick, surreptitious gesture, and Severus stood next to her in blue jeans and a black shirt.

'Better?'

Hermione stared at him, flabbergasted. 'Who *are* you? And what have you done to Severus Snape?'

'Maybe I simply want to ensure that I have all the opportunity to *look* at you while we are here that I can get *without* arousing any undue suspicion?' he asked silkily, his voice sending a shiver down her spine.

oooOooo

The interior of the cathedral was very dark. The high, angular ceilings were lost in shadows, and twilight obscured the views of the long aisles. Incense filled the air.

Hermione thought that they must have entered the church not long after the end of a service. Several persons were still kneeling in the pews, mostly old women dressed in black, and there were only few tourists wandering around, peering into chapels and staring up at the windows.

Severus moved along without a noise beside her and Hermione felt the urge to walk on tiptoes, even though her sneakers barely made a sound on the flag stones.

She could barely remember the last time she had been in a church. As a child she had gone to church with her mother every Sunday. But then she had received her letter. And everything had changed. Uncomfortably, Hermione hugged herself, then hid her shaking hands inside her jeans-pockets. Why had she stopped going to church? Obviously at Hogwarts that was impossible, but she could have gone in the holidays.

'Keep those hands out of your pockets,' Severus hissed. 'Show some respect.'

Hermione jumped. Her hands icy, her face on fire, she ducked her head. 'Sorry, s... I'm sorry.'

He nodded, and gestured to move on to the eastern end of the cathedral.

'This part of the cathedral is normally called *'apses'* and if it is accessible, an *'ambulatory apses'*. In this case, the correct term, however, is *'chevet'* due to the radiating chapels built around the 'head' of the cathedral,' Severus explained in a low voice. 'Come, let us sit down in the nave for a while. I believe there's a choir practice scheduled in a few minutes. I think you may enjoy listening.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

74. Blossom of Magic

The bench was hard and uncomfortable, but the dim rays of blue and red light that filtered through the stained glass windows captivated her attention. Although the cathedral was a structure of stone, the secret of its architecture was the interplay of shadow and light: the sunlight as it lit the scenes in the colourful windows, the shadows obscuring the height of the arcs that carried the nave and the aisles, the flickering lights of the candles lit to carry a prayer to aloft, the darkness that lurked behind the vast columns.

Severus was right; shortly after they sat down, a boys' choir began a rehearsal. The song of bright young voices drifted through the high halls of the church and tugged at Hermione's heart. She didn't understand the words, nor did she need to. What else would they be singing but a prayer or a psalm? Again Hermione experienced a pang of regret, an odd, forlorn ache. She felt like a stranger here, out of place. Because she was a witch? Was that the true reason her mother had stopped going to church with her? Without her parents to anchor her to it, Hermione realised, the Muggle world was slipping from her grasp, faster and faster.

But why should that make her sad? She had her own world. And her own ... well, she supposed that you *could* call a husband *'family'*. Or at least the nucleus of a family.

Suddenly she wished that she could find it in her heart to pray. She had *so much* to pray for. Hermione glanced at her husband. The twilight softened the harsh lines of his face. Why had Severus brought her here? She wasn't surprised when he noticed her gaze. But the understanding she saw in his dark eyes took her unawares. Quickly, Hermione closed her eyes to keep silly tears from spilling.

A hand touched her fingers, slipped under her palm, dry and cool and strong. Fingers curled around her hand and held it in a careful grip, as always mindful of the hypersensitivity his blood had left her with.

oooOooo

'The cathedral of Chartres is also renowned for its labyrinth,' Severus murmured, as he led her back to the entrance of the cathedral. He pointed to the floor at their feet. 'It was integrated in the design of the cathedral from the beginning, and is one of the finest labyrinths to be found in the cathedrals of the western world. Some say it reflects

the symbol of the "*flower of life*" God at the centre, the world and the universe spiralling outwards. In the wizarding world the same symbol is known as the *blossom of magic*! For ages the labyrinth has meant a symbolic pilgrimage. You walk its paths in the hope of ascending toward salvation or enlightenment.'

Hermione stared at the white and black stone at her feet.

'The white stone comes from the quarries of Berchères, the black from Senlis. The diameter...'

'Do you believe in God?' she asked suddenly.

Severus paused, but didn't reprimand her for her interruption. Instead he considered her question.

'No,' he replied at last. 'At one time, I might have *wanted* to believe in a God. But that was long ago. Now ...' He shook his head. 'There is a Muggle who wrote a few lines about this cathedral. He is quoted in most travel guides. Orson Welles.

'A fact of life ... we're going to die. "Be of good heart," cry the dead artists out of the living past. Our songs will all be silenced but what of it? Go on singing. Maybe a man's name doesn't matter all that much,

Severus quoted. 'Don't forget that there is a world out here, Hermione. A whole world for you to see. And you *belong* to *this* world, too.'

'And how about you?'

Severus sighed and shook his head, refusing to answer her question.

'Come,' he said at last and held out his hand to her. 'Will you walk to the centre with me?'

oooOooo

They had just reached the centre of the labyrinth when a tiny old man in the black robes of a priest came hurrying towards them.

'Ah, it is you!' the priest smiled up at Snape. 'I thought I 'ad 'eard your voice. It 'as been a long time.'

Severus inclined his head. 'Yes. I was busy. And then I was ... sick, for a while ... Abbé Rigaud, may I present my wife, Mrs. Hermione Snape?'

The old man beamed at her and held out his wrinkled hand. *Enchanté, madame!* Absolon Rigaud is my name, and I am delighted to meet you.'

When she shook his hand, the priest covered her hand with his. Then he reached for Snape's hand, and although Severus looked extremely discomfited at the touch, he allowed the old man to take it. Abbé Rigaud's faint smile told Hermione that he was aware of how uncomfortable that gesture made her husband.

'May the love that brought you together grow and mature with each passing year. May it bring you both ever closer to the Lord through your love for each other. Let your love grow to perfection,' the priest intoned as he brought their hands together, joined them and covered them with his own. 'The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make 'is face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up 'is countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.'

'Thank you, Father,' Hermione whispered.

Severus wordlessly inclined his head.

'I am afraid, young man, that this will be the last time we meet,' Abbé Rigaud said in his wheezy old man's voice, his accent more pronounced than before. 'It is time for me to find my way to the 'eart of the labyrinth.' He turned to Hermione and smiled. 'Madam, I don't think you know 'ow much joy it brings to my 'eart to know that my friend 'as found you. 'e 'as been alone for far too long.'

oooOooo

oooOooo

75. Discoveries

'Why come here?' Hermione asked later. 'If you don't believe in God? I'm sorry...' Severus raised a disbelieving eyebrow, but didn't comment.

'I don't mean to *pry*,' she stated firmly. They were sitting in front of a small bistro with a splendid view of the square and the cathedral. 'But this,' she gestured, 'this is so very unlike you well, unlike the Severus Snape I'm used to, anyway, that well, I keep wondering who you are.'

When he drew his wand and flicked it underneath the table to create a *muffled* screen, Hermione knew that whatever Severus' reply would turn out to be, it wouldn't be a comfortable answer. She creased her forehead. What was this all about? Showing her that she had no idea who he was? Or she amended that she only knew small parts of who he was?

'Years ago my ... masters determined that I ought to be able to accomplish cross-channel and cross-continental Apparition. While I had the determination, the concentration and the power to obey their wishes even then, I lacked practice.

'Travel guides tend to include good pictures of famous cathedrals. And plain Muggle photographs are an excellent source for the visualization of your destination. Better than wizarding pictures, in fact, because movement distracts the focus of your mind.

'It was pure chance that I ended up here.'

He shrugged. 'I'm not in a position to say if it was chance or fate that I met Abbé Rigaud when I did. Or that he saw that he noticed...'

Severus' eyes grew so bleak that it was impossible for Hermione to distinguish between his pupils and his iris.

'He listened to me when no one else would,' Severus went on in a brittle voice. 'He offered me the forgiveness of his God at a time when...'

He shook his head and changed the subject. 'I thought you might enjoy the blue windows ... Blue is your favourite colour, isn't it? You never wear it, because it doesn't suit you. But you keep that blue vase on your window sill, and a blue bowl with potpourri on the other nightstand.'

Hermione nodded. She was surprised that he noticed such things. But of course Severus had been a spy for the better part of his adult life; it was probably second nature to him to be aware of such details.

'Yes,' she replied. She was acutely aware of the many things in his past she wasn't ready to know about. It shamed her that she didn't feel able to handle all of it, all of him. So Hermione did the next best thing: she let the topic go and followed his lead in this conversation. 'The vase is actually a souvenir. From a holiday I spent in France with my parents.'

'You sent a postcard to Minerva. The summer after the Chamber of Secrets was opened.'

'It feels so strange,' Hermione said in a small voice. 'I remember that holiday. I really do. But it feels so distant ... as if it never happened, or as if it happened to somebody else.'

oooOooo

Sunday morning Alina was in a state of hysterics.

The Slytherins had spent all of Saturday searching their House. They had discovered a many things among them a trapdoor to a secret tunnel, a junk room that no one had ever noticed before, filled with all kinds of curious clutter, and what looked like a torture chamber, complete with shackles hanging from the walls and a real rack, but no Crookshanks.

Ciardha Vaisey was a smart young man. He knew when he was beat.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he told the dejected and exhausted Slytherins loitering in the common room. 'There's no choice. We need help. And we don't need *just any* kind of help.

'We need the help of Gryffindor House.

'The cat of Madam Snape spent most his years here at Hogwarts in Gryffindor House. It stands to reason that he either went there to hide, or that they know where he might be found.'

He turned to Alina and fixed her with a steely gaze. Alina shivered. She knew that he would be polite to her outside Slytherin House. But there would be hell to pay later. And she rather suspected her punishment would involve the newly discovered torture chamber.

'Alina, you accompany me.'

'Yes, sir,' she whispered, her stomach queasy.

It would have been better if she had died in the debris of Dumbledore's tomb.

oooOooo

The students of Gryffindor House devoted their Sunday morning to turning their House upside down in vain.

Then Headgirl Ginny Weasley met with emissaries from Slytherin House on neutral ground (the Trophy Room).

'I don't think you need to worry about Professor Snape,' she told Ciardha Vaisey. 'I don't think he *even likes* Crooks. However, I'd really hate for Hermione to come home to bad news about her pet.'

Ciardha just shook his head at the Gryffindor's ignorance. 'That cat is as much a Slytherin now as Madam Snape. We'd better find him. Or I fear Slytherin House will be in detention until Alina graduates.

'We need to call all Houses. This is an unprecedented emergency.'

oooOooo

In the end it was a Hufflepuff who found Crookshanks.

Johannes Flamel (one of the would-be knights of Dumbledore's Army) had missed the fun of an emergency meeting consisting of all four Houses because he'd been in detention with Filch. He simply appeared at tea time in the Great Hall, the big ginger tomcat in his arms.

'OH MY GOD!' Alina screamed and raced towards him. 'CROOKS! Joe, wherever did you FIND him???' '

Johannes, astounded to find himself at the centre of a rapidly growing crowd of students from all four Houses, shrugged.

'I didn't find him, precisely. He showed up in Filch's office, and the old git threw a fit about a strange cat invading his quarters.' He rolled his eyes. 'He's Miss... Madam Snape's cat, isn't he? How did he get out of Slytherin House?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

76. Due Punishment

'A word with you, Mr. Vaisey?'

As Ginny approached the Seventh Year Prefect of Slytherin House, she wondered just how the custom of formal address among the Seventh Year students had developed. She suspected it had something to do with the accelerated Seventh Years who had taken their NEWTs just before Christmas. Only a handful of the original students of that year had returned to Hogwarts, all of them changed by the war. Formal address had eased things along between them, and somehow the regular Seventh Years had picked up that habit.

'Yes, *Headgirl* Weasley?'

Ginny rolled her eyes. What was it with Slytherins and their sneers?

'*Prefect Vaisey*, I request a moment of your precious time. In the Trophy Room, if you please.'

oooOooo

The moment they entered the Trophy Room, Ginny Weasley got down to business. 'Prefect Vaisey, I assume you are planning to punish Miss Petrel for her negligence concerning Madam Snape's cat. When you mete out that punishment, I shall be present.'

'What?' she stared at her, taken aback. Regaining his composure, Vaisey replied smoothly, 'Headgirl Weasley, I believe according to school regulations that is none of your business.'

Weasley wasn't impressed. 'School regulations, humbug. Vaisey, Alina is Hermione's friend. She's the daughter of my brother's girlfriend. I *anmaking* this my business. You have a choice. Either I'll be present when you punish Alina, *or* I'll take the whole matter to your Head of House. Imagine how *pleased* Professor Snape will be when we bother him with this.'

Vaisey sighed. This was certainly not a good weekend for Slytherin House. To be at the mercy of the other Houses not once, but three times in one day was degrading.

'Very well. Here's what we will do ...'

oooOooo

'... that's a ... quite educational punishment, Mr Vaisey.' Ginny narrowed her eyes at the brown-haired Slytherin. Vaisey smirked, a subtle sparkle in his pale green eyes.

'Miss Petrel promises to grow into a powerful witch. She needs to learn not to let things ... slip from her grasp, or to lose control,' he explained. 'It's actually a modified version of an exercise I've been conducting with my Third Year DADA study-group. As such it was approved by Professor Weasley.'

Vaisey smirked at the Headgirl's confusion. Confusion that turned into a frown.

'Vaisey? Am I imagining things, or do you actually *care* about her? Do you realise that Alina is a CHILD?'

Cold anger surged through Vaisey. Why did the other Houses always expect the very worst of Slytherin? He clenched his teeth. But of course he knew why. He forced himself to provide a polite answer.

'Yes, I most certainly *do* realise that, Headgirl Weasley. Contrary to popular assumptions, the customs of Slytherin House are not that depraved.' He didn't know what prompted him, but he added in a moment of rare boldness, 'I am very much aware that Miss Petrel is a child *now*. However, it should prove interesting to meet her again, say, eight or ten years from now.'

Weasley's frown deepened, but she didn't comment.

'Very well,' Vaisey said wearily. 'I shall expect you at the entrance of Slytherin House tonight at ten o'clock.'

oooOooo

Alina was almost petrified with fear as she stepped into the torture chamber. As she had suspected, the prefects of her House had decided that her punishment would serve as an inauguration ceremony for the newly discovered room.

All six prefects of Slytherin House were present. And a wave of such intense relief flooded Alina that her knees went quite weak. Headgirl Ginny Weasley. But Ginny's arms were crossed in front of her chest, and her face was cold. Alina realised that Ginny was not there to prevent her punishment.

'Alina Petrel,' Prefect Vaisey commanded. 'Tell us why you are here.'

'I-I have been negligent with m-my duties. A-and because of that ... I have brought shame to m-my House. I'm sorry, sir. I'm really, really sorry!'

She wanted to say that she still didn't understand how Crookshanks could have escaped from her room, but she knew that didn't matter. He had escaped, and the subsequent collaboration with the other Houses had cost Slytherin pride dearly. They would be the butt of school-jokes for months.

'I deserve to be punished,' she added in a small voice. 'I'm here to request my punishment.'

'Very well,' Vaisey said. 'Step in front of that wall.'

He pointed to the wall where the heavy chains with shackles and manacles were set into the stones. Trembling, Alina obeyed.

'Wand out!' Vaisey commanded.

That surprised Alina, but she pulled her wand out of her sleeve.

Then everything happened at once.

'*Expelliarmus!*' shouted Fifth Year prefect Angela Sutron, and Alina's wand flew from her hand.

'*Compedio!*' cried Sixth Year prefect Graham Pritchard. Shackles snapped around her ankles, chaining her to the wall.

'*Pulta!*' ordered Vaisey. Alina's wand rose into the air and raced towards her.

Then the beating started.

oooOooo

'Alina? Are you okay?' Geilis' worried voice penetrated the warm shelter of her blankets. 'Alina? Please, talk to me! Or-or...I'll call Mrs. Snape!'

'No!' Alina shot up and instantly winced with pain. 'Don't you dare!' She glared at Geilis with her left eye, as the right one was rather spectacularly blackened.

'OH MERLIN, Alina! You're bruised all over! Does it hurt very badly?'

Alina forced herself to face her friend and stiffly shook her head. 'It's really not as bad as it looks. What's worse is the disgrace of it all. Gilly, they had me wandless and shackled in a *second*! And then they made my OWN wand wallop me. I had to catch it, and break the power of the Charm with my willpower. Not with a spell. Just with the power of my mind.' Tears of humiliation burned in Alina's eyes. 'Obviously FLOBBERWORMS have more willpower than I do.'

'You can't leave the dorm looking like that,' Geilis told her. 'Look, how about I get a jar of bruise balm for you?'

oooOooo

oooOooo

77. Sleepbringer

The sweet, low sound of a bell alerted Snape to the fact that something was amiss in the Slytherin Common Room. That, and the incredible wave of fatigue that suddenly swept over him and almost flattened him snoring to the ground where he stood. He blinked convulsively as a huge, undignified yawn split his face.

Snape shook himself. Something was going on. The very air of the dungeons tasted suddenly of Dark Magic. Of ancient, very dark magic. Another yawn made tears leak out of the corners of his eyes. He scowled, fumbled with clumsy hands for a phial of Invigoration Draught and downed it quickly.

Then he gripped his wand and strode towards the common room of Slytherin House.

oooOooo

Once inside Snape was greeted by scene of rare peacefulness. Just before dinner, the common room was packed and normally quite a rowdy place. Tonight, however, silence reigned supreme. The lifeless bodies of students lay on the ground or slumped motionless over tables and in their chairs. Only Alina Petrel was standing in the middle of the room, her right arm raised, a tiny silver bell clasped in her hand, her dark eyes wild with fright.

Icy shock flashed through Snape. He fell to his knees next to Geillis Duncan and pressed his fingertips against her throat, held the inner side of his wrist in front of her half-opened mouth. After one of the longest moments of his life, a deep sigh of relief escaped him. He drew himself up and willed the frantic beating of his heart to slow down.

Miss Duncan was merely asleep.

A quick investigation assured him that indeed all of the students who had collapsed in the Slytherin common room had merely fallen asleep wherever they had been standing and whatever they had been doing.

With one notable exception.

'MISS PETREL,' Snape roared. 'WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?'

oooOooo

'What did you put in there?' Severus's voice was so hoarse that his words were barely audible when he eyed the steaming cup with obvious misgivings.

The line between his brows cut deeper than normally.

'A pinch of slippery elm bark, some wild cherry bark, cardamom, clove and a spoon of finely chopped liquorice root. Blended with Assam. With hot milk and honey,' Hermione explained patiently. 'And I'm not trying to poison you. It's one of Professor Sprout's recipes. Neville says it's going to help you.'

'I am supposed to find something that *Longbottom* said reassuring?'

Hermione's lips twitched. 'This is his area of expertise, Severus. It's a herbal tea. Not a potion.'

'Hmpf.' But Severus picked up his tea and took a careful sip. Then another. And another. For a long while they sat together in silence, simply drinking their tea. After a day spent in boisterous classrooms, the quiet of their quarters was very welcome indeed.

'So what did Alina do this time?'

Severus drew up his eyebrows and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

'It seems that the Room of Requirement has seen it fit to give Miss Petrel a present during our wedding reception,' he rasped.

Yelling at Alina had taken a lot out of his voice. Hermione frowned worriedly. Whatever the room had give Alina must be very dangerous for Severus to be in such a state. A moment later, her suspicions were confirmed.

'The damn Room dumped the tool of a Necromancer into the girl's lap,' Severus went on. 'And instead of bringing it to me for inspection, the little idiot simply tried it out right there in the common room.'

'Alina rang a Necromancer's bell?' Hermione gasped with shock.

Necromancy wasn't taught at Hogwarts, but it was part of the Ninth Year curriculum at Durmstrang and of Auror Training in Britain.

'Why am I not surprised that you know about necromancy?' Snape asked wearily.

'Err...probably because you know me too well?' She bit down on her lower lip. 'Harry did a course a while ago. It's part of his Auror Training, apparently. And you know that Harry's interested in everything to do with the Deathly Hallows, because...well, because of what happened during the battle. And now that the Elder Wand may have been stolen ...' Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot. 'I...uh...I may have persuaded Harry to share some of his course-materials with me.'

'Hermione, have you learned nothing at all from the last years?' Severus held up his hand to still her hurt protest before she even opened her mouth. 'Forgive me. I didn't mean it like that. But you do need to promise something to me now, Hermione.'

'*Promise* me that you will come to me with whatever you wish to learn. I will teach you enough to satisfy your curiosity. But please *promise* me that you will never touch any of the Dark Arts on your own. Promise me, Hermione. If you value the integrity of your soul, promise that to me.'

His eyes bored into her with frightening intensity. She swallowed drily.

'I promise,' she said at last. 'About today ... what kind of bell was it? And you could wake everyone, right?'

'It was the bell traditionally called "*Ranna*". The first and smallest of the seven bells that a Necromancer wields,' Severus explained. 'She is also called *'somniafer'* or *'sleepbringer'*, as that is her power to bring silence and sleep. Including *eternal* slumber.'

'Oh shit,' Hermione cursed softly.

'Indeed.'

'What did you do?'

'After I screamed at Miss Petrel in a way fit to wake the dead right there and then without the help of any bells and brought the Bloody Baron breathing down my neck?' Severus rotated tense shoulders. When he looked at Hermione again, his eyes were dark with regret.

'I woke them,' he said simply. 'And then I gave Miss Petrel detention until the end of the term.'

Her heart seemed to freeze inside her. Hermione shuddered convulsively.

'*I woke them.*'

Once again her whole world had changed from one second to the next.

Her husband was a necromancer.

oooOooo

oooOooo

78. How Can You Still Touch Me?

Severus put down his mug. His fingers strayed to his forehead again. Hermione hated to see him so weary and worried. She almost winced with embarrassment, when she realised that she had likely added to his load yet again with her selfish quest for dangerous knowledge.

Hermione rose to her feet and quietly moved behind him. She reached for his head and drew it gently against the back of the chair. She hesitated a moment. Then she gingerly smoothed back his hair and began to massage his head. Severus inhaled sharply and stiffened. But when she didn't react, and only kept rubbing his head and temples with careful, light movements, he exhaled deeply. After a while she could feel how he relaxed under the delicate circles her fingertips were drawing on his skull.

To her surprise, Severus' hair wasn't all that greasy. It was slick and lank, but most of all it was very, very fine, almost feathery, and so black that it shone with blue highlights as she parted it with her fingers. Hermione decided she rather liked feeling him like that, the curve of his skull, those fine strands. The slow rhythm of the massage also soothed the frantic circuits of thoughts and worries in her mind and calmed her racing heart.

Her fingers caressed his temples and smoothed his forehead. Would he mind if she bent down and kissed him? But suddenly Severus reached up and captured her hands. He drew her down towards him until she was sitting on the right-hand armrest. But to her surprise that position still didn't satisfy him. Only when her head was resting on his shoulder, he appeared content. Now his fingers found their way into her hair, tenderly tracing her temple, the curve of her ear, down her neck, stroking her, almost meditatively curling and uncurling her hair. Each touch made her skin tingle and her stomach tighten. But she kept still and didn't demand more than he would give her. The moment was too precious.

Abruptly he stilled the movement of his hand.

'Gryffindors,' he murmured. 'I'll never understand them. How can you still touch me, Hermione? Now that you know? How can you stand to let me touch you?'

She sighed. 'As I understand necromancy you cannot really learn all that much about it. It is rather a very special talent. Like being a Metamorphmagus. Either you're born that way or not.'

Hermione drew back so she could face Severus. The bleak look in his eyes wrenched her heart. She would rather see him smirk and sneer than witness such misery. She studied his face, so carefully devoid expression. Only the absolute blackness of his eyes betrayed the depth of his despair.

Her heart skipped a beat when realisation struck her. Severus *was allowing* her to see beyond his ever-present armour of sarcasm and scorn. He trusted her with his despair.

She sighed deeply and reached for his hands. She curled her fingers around his hands and held them as tightly as she could. The touch was almost painful. She met his eyes without flinching.

'Why should it change anything?'

She shifted her position and leant over, until her lips hovered over his. She allowed herself to sink into his fathomless gaze and kissed him.

At first she just brushed over his thin, cool lips. Her touch grew firmer. She teased and stroked until he parted his lips and allowed her inside. Her tongue slid into his mouth. The hard, smooth edge of his teeth. Warm wetness. Touch of tongue. Taste of tenderness. She twined her tongue around his, trailed along the sides, delved below ... and at last had to come up for air with a gasp.

She could feel him against the side of her thigh, hard, pulsing even through the fabric of his trousers. But when she made to reach for him, he stopped her.

'Much as I desire you,' Severus murmured. 'This is not the right time.'

He drew a shaky breath. 'I think I am ... aware now that you ...'

'That I'm still willing to touch you? To be touched by you?' Hermione provided, grateful to see that the despair had faded from his eyes. Instead his expression wavered between amazement and exasperation.

'That much is obvious even to an old fool such as I am,' he said and tightened his embrace.

'May I see the bell?'

Severus started and pushed her away a little, so he could look at her face. His hair surrounded his face in a dishevelled black halo. His pale cheeks were slightly flushed. Even his lips had gained some colour from the fierceness of her kisses.

'If you think you can ... what is it that your contemporaries deign to call this again?' He faked a thoughtful expression, trailing his mouth with the tip of his right index-finger, while keeping a firm hold of her back with his left hand. '... if you think you can, as they say, *'snog me senseless'* in order to lure me into inappropriate concessions, you are sorely mistaken, Hermione.'

'If that's what you think this was about, then... ' Hermione started indignantly.

'Hush,' he murmured. 'I know it was not, silly. It seems I still need to adapt to your straightforward style of conversation.' Severus sighed. 'To answer your question: I don't have the bell. I ensured that it will remain silent, that it doesn't pose a danger to anyone at the moment. Then I returned it to Alina.'

Hermione frowned. 'But why did you do that? If it's that dangerous ...'

'As you very correctly observed, necromancy is tied to blood. The Room of Requirement could give that bell to Alina only because it is tied to her blood. While *could* wield it if I must, it is not my place to do so.'

'But... ' Hermione's mind was reeling with the consequences that calm statement entailed. 'But,' she whispered, 'that would mean Alina's father was at Hogwarts once!'

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oooOooo

79. Mistakes and Consequences

'Ginny, what's wrong?' Hermione's week had been trying to put things mildly.

The incident with the bell on Wednesday had left Slytherin House in a turmoil. Her husband's temper had been horrible since then, although he had taken pains to be civil with her.

Alina in particular was completely rattled, not that anyone could blame her. But discovering just how terrifying it could be to have a jumpy and unfocused First Year in a Potions classroom had not been a good experience. Hermione simply didn't understand. Of course it had been a shocking discovery for Alina, but normally Hermione would have expected the girl to react differently to take the revelation of a special talent in stride, even if it was such a dangerous ability as Necromancy. Furthermore, Hermione knew that Severus had been quite lenient with Alina; he had not even detracted House points for that mishap and merely given her detentions so she could learn just how

dangerous the situation had been.

And now Ginny was moping over her tea with an expression better suited for a funeral than for a comfortable Saturday evening spent with a good friend. Ginny grimaced and continued to stir her tea in morose silence.

'Ginny. Please. Tell me what's wrong. I've been having a hard week. I can't take this silent sulking another second.'

'What's been going on?' Ginny asked, fidgeting in obvious discomfort. *Uhh...you would tell me if you wereuh...angry at me, wouldn't you?*

Hermione stared at her friend. A headache was beginning to throb at her temples. She inhaled deeply and forced herself to remain patient.

'Why,' she asked carefully, 'should I be angry at you?'

'Well...' Ginny stammered. 'I actually the whole school, I guess, couldn't help noticing well ... Professor Snape has been in a rare mood this week, and all of the Slytherins have been kind of tense and jumpy.'

'Yes, I guess that's true. But pardon my confusion,' Hermione frowned, 'what has that to do with you?'

'I'm afraid that I've made a horrible, horrible mistake. And I've promised not to tell anyone about it, but...'

'If you have promised not to tell anyone about it, Ginny, then why are you talking to me now?'

Ginny took a deep breath and fixed her gaze on her mug. 'Because I can't stand seeing Alina so scared and and confused and it's all my fault.'

'How is that *your* fault?' Hermione wanted to groan. They had tried to keep the incident from getting out. But apparently there was no way to keep ~~any~~*anything* at Hogwarts a secret.

'Well,' the words rushed out of Ginny's mouth, 'because I knew about the punishment and I was there and I did nothing to stop it and I should have gone to Professor Snape right away or to Professor McGonagall, but I wanted so badly to show the Slytherins that we *can* respect them and ... and ...' Ginny's voice faded to a despairing whisper. 'And all I did was let Alina down.'

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again.

'Ginevra Weasley,' she said, her tone threatening. 'What are you talking about? I suggest you start at the beginning and leave nothing out.'

oooOooo

'They did *what*?

Hermione was almost grateful to see how shocked her husband appeared. After listening to Ginny, Hermione hadn't been completely sure how Severus would react. From what Ginny had told her, the way Alina's punishment had been doled out with the miscreant being forced to actually *ask* for the punishment and the manner of the punishment both physical and painful was true to the most ancient Slytherin traditions.

'They charmed Alina's wand to beat her up,' Hermione repeated. 'Apparently the Prefects came to the conclusion that Crookshanks' escape and the disgrace of having to ask the other Houses for help was all Alina's fault and that she deserved to be punished for her negligence.'

'Ginny guessed that they would do something to Alina and blackmailed Vaisey into including her in the proceedings, so she could keep things from getting out of hand.'

'They used an exercise that Professor Weasley introduced for his Third Years this term. An exercise to get the students to react quicker to *Expelliarmus* and other wand-affecting curses. I'm not sure why they used the shackles,' Hermione shrugged uncomfortably, 'maybe simply because they were there.'

'Severus, I never told her not to let Crookshanks outside!' she pleaded. 'You were there, I only asked her to *watch* him!'

Severus stared at her wordlessly. A vein was beginning to throb at his temple, betraying just how angry he was.

'*Bloody fucking hell,*' he ground out between clenched teeth. 'The moment you turn your back on those little snakes, they bite where it hurts the most. Damn, and damn, and *damn* again.' He balled his right hand into a fist and beat it soundly on the table, fury and frustration flashing in his eyes. Then he slumped down in his chair, clenching and unclenching his fists. At last Severus took a deep breath. To watch him regain some measure of control was like seeing him slip on a mask, a harsh and expressionless mask that hid his real feelings completely.

'Hermione...' His voice was very serious as he implored her. 'You must believe me when I tell you that I *do not* approve of this.'

'In-House punishment punishment administered by Prefects and older students has a long tradition in Slytherin House.'

'*Everything for honour,*' he spat bitterly. 'And everything that occurs inside Slytherin House stays inside Slytherin House. You have *no idea* how some Slytherin families treat their children. *Their own children.*'

He rose to his feet. 'Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. Now I must go and discuss this incident with the Headmistress.' A pause. 'Hermione, I hope you are aware of the fact that there will be disciplinary consequences for Miss Weasley as well.'

Only when Hermione nodded, Severus spun on his heel and exited the room.

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80. Few and Far Between

'Alina is a *what*?' Lois stared at Hermione, her dark-brown eyes wide and shocked.

Snape was struck by how much like her daughter Lois looked. Alina seemed to get her looks wholly from her mother ... and her talents just as completely from her elusive father.

It had been decided to keep the incident with the bell quiet, but of course Alina's mother had to be informed.

Right now tea was growing cold in their cups and the warm sunshine of the afternoon was overshadowed by the topic of their conversation. Severus glanced at Hermione, who had unobtrusively taken Lois' hand in a gesture of physical reassurance. Uncomfortable as this conversation was going to be, he was grateful that his wife was present. Her friendship with Lois would ease the difficult discussion considerably.

'A Necromancer.

'A Necromancer is someone who has a special affinity for Death Magic. Necromancers are able to enter the Realm of Death. They have the power to raise beings and persons from the outer precincts of Death or to bind and banish them into Death, usually by wielding seven magical bells. It is an innate magical talent,' Severus explained. 'While all wizards can learn certain necromantic spells, only a Necromancer has power in the Realm Death. There are two kinds of Necromancers those with the power to raise the dead, and those with the power to bind them. At the moment we cannot be sure yet which of these powers Alina will develop. Time will tell.'

Severus noticed the bright gleam in his wife's eyes that betrayed how questions and connections formed lightning-quick in their brown warmth. The conversation with Lois Petrel would likely not remain the only uncomfortable discussion that day.

He took a deep breath and went on, 'Alina will need to be taught how to control her powers, and eventually she will need to be registered as a Necromancer with the Ministry of Magic. Lois I cannot make light of this. Necromancy is an extremely dark and dangerous talent. It might be very helpful if we knew who Alina's father was.'

'Oh God,' Lois whispered. 'But I can't tell you. I explained it to Headmistress McGonagall when she first came to visit me. He told me his name was Prosper Reagan. But that was not his real name ...' She went on to outline the circumstances of Alina's birth. When she had finished, the room was quiet for a long moment.

Snape had expected some sad and sordid story, of course. But this subtle and unconscionable exploitation of a young girl's infatuation left him unexpectedly sickened.

'Maybe he modified her memory?' Hermione suggested.

Severus shook his head. 'I doubt it. From what Lois describes, he cast spells only on himself, not on her or any other Muggles. Very clever.' Turning to Lois, he explained, 'If he had used magic on you directly, our authorities would have been alerted sooner or later. Or at the very least we could use magic on you now to reveal his identity. I would still ask you to let us try. If your memory has been tampered with, we should be able to detect the intrusion and possibly rectify it. But as I said, I doubt it.

'Now I have secured Alina's bell. She will not be able to ring it again, not by choice or by accident. For the time being, I don't think that the Necromancy will have any impact on her development or her education.'

Severus straightened and his mouth thinned.

'Unfortunately, there is another unpleasant matter we need to discuss today,' he announced wearily. 'I have to inform you that students from her own House decided to *"punish"* Alina for a trivial negligence in an inappropriate and unsanctioned way, and as I might add against my *explicit* instructions concerning such matters. I regret that something like that could happen in Slytherin House at this point in time and I can assure you that the offenders have been dealt with to the full extent of my disciplinary competences.'

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'... I see,' Lois said. 'What has been done?'

'The Prefects have been stripped of their privileges. For the rest of the term the Prefects of the Houses Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff will take over their duties. Any point the relevant students ever earned for their House has been subtracted, bringing the sum of House points for Slytherin House down to zero for the rest of the term. Ginevra Weasley lost 100 House points and *"won"* weekly detentions until graduation.'

'I see,' Lois repeated.

Hermione suppressed a sigh. Lois would never *truly* understand. How could she?

Slytherin House was in a state of hysteria, the rest of Hogwarts was little better. No one had ever known Professor Snape to subtract more than a grudging handful of points from his own students no matter *what* they did. The episode with the emerald that had been broken to take away a mere ¼ point from Slytherin House was the stuff of legends.

And now the *Head of Slytherin House* had eliminated any chance of his *own* House at winning the coveted House Cup?

The shock was so profound that there was almost no gloating directed at the Slytherin misfortune.

'Is it possible that I talk with Alina alone?' Lois asked.

Severus nodded curtly. 'Of course. I will go and get her.'

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'I'm so sorry, Lois.'

Her friend stared at her, the effort it cost her to keep calm visible on her face and in her tense posture.

'It's not your fault, Hermione. Or even Severus' fault. He didn't create those Slytherin traditions. And I am sure he did his best to curb them. 'There are bullies at every school. Do you think I don't know that? I've been treating the victims of bullies in my therapy sessions for years! And trust me, teachers like Severus, who *admit* that something went wrong, who don't just look the other way and pretend that everything is all right, are few and far between.'

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NOTES

Banner

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FAQ

See Part 1.

Blossom of Magic

Labyrinths mazes have always been regarded as places of power and introspection and they have always been important in mythology and religion. Information about mazes, including the labyrinth of Chartres may be found here: http://mymaze.de/home_e.htm

A visualisation is presented here: http://www.mymaze.de/gotisch_english.htm

The 'blossom of magic' is my own invention, but I think it matches the Pagan interpretation of the concept of mazes. The six petal rose at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth is an ancient alchemical symbol, by the way, which might add to its appeal for Snape.

The blessing The blessing is a mixture of a Catholic wedding blessing I found online at the The Catholic Doors Ministry and the Aaronitic blessing.

The quote... The Orson Welles quote is from his last movie 'F for Fake'.

Discoveries

Abbé Absolon Absolon means 'my Father is peace'.

Due Punishment

'compedio' means 'I put on shackles (on someone) '. 'Pulta! ' means 'wallop!/flog!'.

Even at 'harmless' Muggle boarding schools traditions of hazing and punishment among students can be incredibly cruel and harsh in real life. JKR chose to ignore that dark part of public school tradition; I decided against that. While I obviously don't subscribe to an interpretation of Slytherin House as Evil with a capital 'E', I also don't believe that it is a perfect place full of happiness and cuddliness and that all evil Slytherins are just poor, misunderstood witches and wizards. The effect of shock (and, hopefully, revulsion) of this chapter is quite intentional.

As for Ginny ... even the best of us sometimes make awful mistakes, sadly. In this case, I believe the old adage of 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' applies.

Sleepbringer

The bell 'Ranna' along with that particular concept of Necromancy is taken from the 'Abhorsen'-trilogy by Garth Nix. 'Somnifer' is Latin for 'Sleepbringer'.

How Can You Still Touch Me?

Necromancy in the HP universe: The basic idea is that while everyone can learn some kind of death magic (as we all know from canon), there are only a very few Necromancers who have magical powers even in the Realm of Death (and yes, that's a hint about what else is going to happen). Of Necromancers there are two kinds, those who raise the dead and demonic beings, and those who bind and banish them. Severus belongs to the latter kind (obviously or what do you think Voldemort would have had him do?). I think that this twist explains why Voldemort accepted Severus' return to his side so easily. Necromancy is regarded as evil magic. Period. And Voldemort would have wanted both to exploit Severus' talents and to keep an eye on him at the same time. Against Voldemort himself Severus' talents were useless because of the Horcruxes. I hope my line of thought makes sense.