

A Summer in York

by cabepfir

The war left deep traces on Hermione, as well as on Severus. How will they adjust to their new conditions, ten years after that traumatic experience? Post DH, EWE.

The Emily Brontë Library

Chapter 1 of 20

The war left deep traces on Hermione, as well as on Severus. How will they adjust to their new conditions, ten years after that traumatic experience? Post DH, EWE.

Disclaimer: The Potterverse belongs to JK Rowling.

I joined the brotherhood my books were all to me

I scribed the words of God and much of history

Many a year was I perched out upon the sea

The waves would wash my tears; the wind, my memory

Loreena McKennitt, Skellig

"So, these are the keys for the front door, these for the archive door, and these for the personnel toilet. Everything clear?"

"Yes, Madam," answered Hermione.

"I'll repeat it, anyway," Mrs. Peewit went on. "Jack will arrive here at nine and will leave at five p.m. Hester will help him from ten to four p.m., when we have the majority of visitors. You are expected to arrive here at three p.m. For two hours you will be working in the archives, following the instructions you agreed to. Then, from five p.m. to ten p.m. you will be at the main desk, helping visitors with their requests. At a quarter to ten, you will remind the remaining visitors that the library is going to close in fifteen minutes. At ten, you will make every visitor leave the library. After that, you will put the books back in their shelves, finish the tidying, and then you may leave, too. You have my phone number: if you have any problem, you can call me at any hour."

"Yes, Mrs. Peewit," said Hermione.

"Understood? Tomorrow you are supposed to be here at three o' clock sharp."

"Of course, Mrs. Peewit."

"Good." Finally Mrs. Peewit placed the keys in her hand and waved her goodbye, not without continuing to look at her with a frown.

*So this is it, thought Hermione. This library will be mine for eight hours a day, for three months, and I will be beyond reproach*She clenched the keys in her fist.

And this is only the start. I want that post, I need that post, and it will be mine, in the end

On the next day, Monday June 1st, 2009, Hermione allowed herself to wake up late, very late.*If I'm going to work until ten p.m., there's no need to be an early riser*she said to herself. Not that she had been much of an early riser lately, in any case. One of the side effects of long-time unemployment was that a person allowed herself too many waking nights in front of a book page or of a computer screen.

When she finally decided to leave the soft mattress of her newly rented bedchamber, she felt rather excited for her new job.

Well, it's not a job. It's only a stage.

*It is more than you had in recent years*she conceded to herself.

You won't be paid. You will only be given a refund for the rent of this 3x3 metre room and for your meals.

*That's still more than I got recently*she concluded. *And I will cut off with my parents for a while, at least, and that's not a small gain*

The Emily Brontë Public Library in York wasn't of course the British Library, or the Bodleian, but it couldn't be dismissed that easily, nevertheless. It contained some three thousand manuscripts and eight thousand printed volumes, plus a solid collection of journals, all collected in an elegant Tudor house. The silence that reigned in the building was interrupted only by the creaking of the wooden parquetry under the occasional footsteps. Given that the collection consisted mostly of ancient texts mainly homilies of deacons of York Minster from the Middle Ages to the Reform the library was attended almost only by (sparse) scholars, and those were people who used to arrive in the morning and to leave in the first hours of the afternoon. According to the county rules, public libraries ought to stay open until ten p.m. during summertime, and the Emily Brontë conformed to the regulations. However, very few people crossed the gates of the building after six p.m., and they were random visitors who wished for the most part to take advantage of the free wifi connection available. They didn't ask for precious volumes that had to be picked up climbing on squeaking ladders. Thus, only one librarian was sufficient to watch over the place during evenings.

Hermione would have preferred a wizarding library, naturally, but the Emily Brontë was the only one that had accepted her plea for a stage during the summer, and allotting her a refund, in addition. Moreover, for what she was aiming at, the Brontë library was perfect. She would have to handle the ancient volumes without the aid of magic, to restore some manuscripts with her own hands, and to welcome the visitors with kindness and efficiency. She suspected the last requirement would be the hardest. *Kind. Smiling. Not to lose my patience when visitors act clumsily or foolishly. Sigh.*

A sudden encounter on the street reminded her how much the last requirement could be hard for her to accomplish. She was intercepted by a young girl, a folder in her hand, who asked her if she liked to read. One of those insufferable sellers who wanted her to join some book club, and receive books at home in different editions from their supposed ones. Hermione couldn't bear those book club promoters. *There's no use in a book outside its original edition. You cannot quote it as a reference unless you have the page count of the original.* Hermione almost yelled at the promoter to step away from her.*Sigh. So much for patience and kindness. And she was even younger than me, too.*

She arrived at the entrance door of the Brontë library at ten to three, and she stepped into the reading room to greet Jack, the daytime librarian, and Hester, his assistant. Jack, a fair-haired, middle-aged man with a broad moustache cut shortly before his lip, made her sign the staff's working time sheet and led her toward the archives room. While crossing the silent reading room, Hermione looked at the visitors. There were only four readers, bent on their volumes, deciphering handwriting and writing notes on their laptops. They clearly were all people well used in consulting ancient texts, and who must know how to treat them properly. Probably she wouldn't lose her patience with such guests.

Jack opened her the door of the archive room and let her go in.

"Have a nice afternoon, Miss Granger," he said, and he left closing the door behind him.

A fantastic afternoon, that would be. Three thousand manuscripts and eight thousand printed volumes minus the four held by the guests in the reading room would be hers for the hours to come. *And for the months to come, if I behave well*she thought.

Hermione inhaled the smell of ancient parchment. Mmh, how she had missed it.*How many years have passed?*she wondered. *Three or four.* Even one would have been too much, yet she had endured more than three years away from the archives of a library, and that seemed like a whole lifetime.

She walked slowly along the archive's corridor, watching the shelves with a loving eye, and stroking the books' spines with an imperceptible finger. At the end of the corridor, there was the desk on which she was supposed to work every day from three to five. The desk was provided with a pair of gloves, scissors, glue, sellotape, nylon threads, needles, assorted kinds of paper sheets, and a stapler. On a trolley beside the desk were piled the volumes that she had to restore during the summer. They were the five tomes of *The Twelve Patriarkes and the Twelves Prophetes Comparatened for the Benefice of the Youthnesse* by Brother Lucretius of Kirkham, a printed edition dated 1499. They didn't trust an unknown, newly-hired librarian with manuscripts, lamented Hermione. Not that restoring Brother Lucretius' work would have been much simpler, in any case. The bindings were untied *how many people could have opened that book in the last centuries?* and the pages had started to loose free. Hermione's work at that desk would be of pulling the pages together again and sewing them to the spine, so that a proper restoration, made by a team bindery and much more expensive, could have been postponed to a date to define.

She opened the first tome of *The Twelve Patriarkes* and smiled at the good, old-looking style of the front matter.*How could have I ruined it all?*she asked herself. The ancient paper looked so frail under her hands, yet it felt so reassuring. It felt like home, after all.

How could she have ruined it all? Four years before, in 2005, she had been working for a wizarding binding shop connected to Canterbury's Magical Library, and it would have been a paradise of a work if it wouldn't have been for her employer. An utterly incompetent fool, she still remembered in irritation. He was an eighty-something, blabbering old wizard, always complaining at his employees about their supposed faults, and always telling them they were too young to understand anything about ancient books. Hermione had swallowed her own bile for two years, until she couldn't bear anymore. She had shouted at Mr. Hullarder that she knew far better than him how to handle ancient books, and she had got immediately fired. *Fine*, she had thought. "Not that I wanted to work in your lurid shop anymore," she had added while leaving the bindery slamming the door. *I will find a far better workplace in no time* Hermione had told to herself Disapparating away from Canterbury.

But that, much to her astonishment, wouldn't be the case. Mr. Hullarder made sure that no other magical bindery or library would offer her a job, at least until his resentment would calm down. Magical bindaries and libraries in England formed really a small circle, and they were all led by old dotards such as Mr. Hullarder. They were all friends. And since Hermione Granger already wasn't in the good graces of the wizarding world anymore, none of them showed a bit of difficulty in complying with Mr. Hullarder's retaliations.

She was left without a job, forced to go back to her parents' house, and stick there for years until a new opportunity came out.

This is a lifetime occasion, she repeated to herself. *I want that post, I need that post, and it will be mine*

Time passed unnoticed when she was concentrated on something. The two hours she had to spend in the archives run out in the blink of an eye, and she had only started planning out the best method of repairing the loose sheets of Brother Lucretius's first tome when her alarm clock reminded her that she was expected at the help desk in a few minutes. Unwillingly, Hermione left the tome on the trolley and went back in the reading room.

There were only two people now, both with their backs at the help desk, and both buried into their books. Hermione smiled. It would be easy to keep her patience, there.

"You can order yourself some dinner by calling this number," said Jack handing her a small piece of paper with the number of a takeaway written upon. "I'll see you tomorrow at three. If you have any problem, you can contact me or Mrs. Peewit. Have a nice evening, Miss Granger," said Jack, and he left the reading room.

"Goodbye, Mr. Toole," she said, keeping her voice as low as he had kept his. They were not supposed to disturb the visitors with their conversations.

She was now the only staff member in the library. She opened a manual of librarianship and started underlining it with an orange pencil.

The remaining hours of her first day of work passed quietly. Only six new visitors entered in the library from five to ten p.m., and four of them were passers-by who looked for the internet connection, as she had expected. Two visitors asked for recent issues of scholarly journals, and their requests were easily fulfilled.

Of the two guests that were already in the library when Jack had left, one had handed back his book at seven p.m., asking Hermione to keep it in store for the next day. The other one was the very last guest to leave the reading room. He had spent the whole evening bent on his volume, calmly taking notes with a pencil on a notebook. At quarter to ten, when Hermione raised her voice to remind him that he was due to leave in fifteen minutes, he simply acknowledged it with a slight nod of his head. Two minutes before ten, the last guest pushed back his chair and stood up. As soon as she heard the squeaking of the chair, Hermione lowered her eyes and opened the drawer in which the visitors' files were kept. The only remaining file was under letter S. She pulled the visitor's file away from the plastic blue sleeve.

Oh no.

That was impossible.

Severus Snape.

She lifted up her head, and on the other side of the help desk, hovered Severus Snape in person, holding the book with both hands.

She gaped at him with her eyes open wide while she tried to stutter something through her dry throat.

"Miss Granger," said Snape. If he was taken aback, he could surely conceal it better than her.

Author's Notes:

Thanks to the generous growley464 (on deviantart) for the beta-reading. All remaining errors are mine.

The Emily Brontë Library in York, as well as Brother Lucretius of Kirkham are inventions, of course.

Bindings

Chapter 2 of 20

Hermione meets an old acquaintance in the Emily Brontë Library in York: Professor Snape.

I still have visions of you

I still have nights to get through

Heather Nova, *I'm Alive*

"Miss Granger," said Snape softly, "you wear glasses now."

Yes, I wear glasses now the result of too many hours spent reading with insufficient light *but then when was the last time we met?* Hermione wondered. She hadn't seen him for years, at least since the fifth anniversary of Voldemort's defeat in 2003, where he had made a brief appearance and had left before dinner. He didn't come to the tenth anniversary in 2008, and frankly, she couldn't care less at that time, with all of Weasley family still staring at her begrudgingly. Seriously, after all those years! Their reproving looks had ruined what could have been a happy night of celebration. And they made it harder for her to act politely toward Ron.

She knew that Snape had lost his magic after Nagini's bite, and in fact it was a miracle he had survived at all. But when those events had happened, Hermione had enough personal problems to think about anything else beside herself. He had simply slipped out of her mind, as many other people and facts had done through the years.

And now he was there, in that very Muggle public library, handing her the book he had been consulting.

He looked a little older than she remembered. There were stray grey streaks in his hair now, and there were a few more wrinkles around his eyes and across his cheeks, but he seemed somewhat calmer than he used to be his eyebrows looked more relaxed, and the sneer wasn't there anymore. He was wearing a dark grey cotton shirt, buttoned down to his wrists.

"Miss Granger," he said with the same soft voice, "would you mind giving me my visitor's card, please?"

Hermione realized she was still fixing him with wide eyes and her mouth half opened in amazement. She shut her mouth, gulped, and handed him back his card.

"O-of course, sir," she managed to mumble.

Snape took the card she was offering, turned on his heels, and walked out of the reading room. A few moments later, Hermione heard the clacking sound of the front door

being opened and quickly closed. She was now alone in the whole building.

She finally collapsed onto her chair, taking a deep breath, her heart still racing for the tension.

I survived it, she thought.

It was almost half past ten when Hermione finally stepped outside the front door and looked in her bag for the keys. She locked the library's door absent-mindedly while a determined expression appeared on her face.

Yes. I did pretty well, in truth. I did not tremble. I did not look away. And there are no images now. Everything is clear

As she walked back home, the expression on her face became even more resolute.

No images at all. Everything is fine. I must be proud of myself. I did very well

When she went to bed, she felt calm and relaxed, and she fell immediately asleep.

Restoring books without magic was pretty much the same thing as restoring them with magic. The limitations in the use of magic that had to be applied while handling ancient books were so many that discouraged most wizards from using extensive magic altogether. Ancient parchment was a very delicate thing, and even an imperceptible change in the flow of charms could alter the composition of the ink or of the support. Besides that, ancient parchment, still retaining the magic of the time in which it had been written upon for the first time, responded only to magic that had the same characteristics of the one that had created it. In practice, to restore a Saxon-dated manuscript, the restorer had to recreate a Saxon surrounding, filled with Saxon-time air the parchment was only too sensible to oxygen changes and to perform Saxon spells. Better if the restorer could turn directly into a Saxon. Yes, there were some restorers who used Time-Turners to reach their goal, but overall the whole magical procedure was so impractical that many wizarding restorers preferred to use simply their manual skills.

Hermione had discovered the pleasures of binding during her college days. Switching from what was inside a book to its exterior, and vice versa, seemed most natural to her after attending a lecture about the bindery industry in the Renaissance. She had started to practice bindings by her own, beginning with simple dust jackets for her books. Later, she attended classes about bookbinding and librarianship at Camberwell College of Arts in London, where she earned her MA.

Bookbinding was so relaxing. While working on a book, Hermione felt totally concentrated on what she was doing. She felt happy, oblivious of anything else. There were no more images, no more thoughts, apart those concerning the book itself. Time was completely absorbed by the procedure. Cutting, sewing, repairing. Maybe it was the physical activities involved that made it at the same time engaging and relaxing.

But it was more than a mere sequence of actions folding, sewing, pasting, and then over again. Binding was about ~~care~~ was about *love*. Care for the books as objects of art, as reifications of human thought through the centuries. Love for stories, characters, authors and readers. Restoring ancient books meant preserving knowledge and imagination for generations to come. It was a service given to dead people so that their words could continue to speak. It was conserving the memory of the world as long as possible. It was suspending time, travelling through the ages, grazing history under one's fingers.

It meant sense and stability. The past a past as far away as that represented by manuscripts and early printed books was sure, defined, clear. There were causes and effects that could be neatly summarized into an article for a scientific journal. The past contained all those reassuring features stability, clearness, decipherability that were missing from the uncertain present.

But now, there was a possibility of making the present a little less unsure.

A lifetime occasion.

The Director of the National Wizarding Library inside the Ministry of Magic had died at the end of April, at the ripe age of 164, and the newly appointed Director, Mrs. Viuna Vand, had called a public selection to form her new staff. The competition would be held on September 15 at the Ministry. Just after the ending of stage at Emily Brontë Public Library, and just before her birthday. Her thirtieth birthday.

Hermione had been introduced to Mrs. Vand during an anniversary party and knew her as a serious, well-organized worker. She also gave an impression of friendliness and honest courtesy. *She surely must recognize my skills,* Hermione repeated to herself. *She would surely be pleased to have me in her team.*

I want that post, I need that post, and it will be mine

The *Twelve Patriarkes and the Twelves Prophetes Comparatened for the Benefice of the Youthnesse* was an excellent exercise for a bookbinder. Hermione grew affectionate to the old, battered tomes after only a few hours of working upon it. From a wizard's point of view, it was an unusual object. It was an example of early printing, having been printed in 1499, only a few decades after William Caxton had introduced press printing in England. It would have taken years before seeing a magically printed text. The wizarding world, even more prejudiced against Muggle artefacts than it was presently, had accepted the Muggle invention only a couple of centuries later. The first books printed with magical presses dated from 1710s, and it was not before a decade more that the spells necessary to put the presses in motion had been perfected so that the texts would actually be *readable*. So, by all means *The Twelve Patriarkes* was unusual, not only because it looked like thousands of people had handled it with hammers instead of fingers.

Hermione patiently continued to restore the first volume for the next couple of weeks. Two hours a day was not much, and the alarm clock signalling she had to go always found her unprepared. While at the help desk, she continued studying her manual of librarianship in preparation for the September selection.

Snape visited the library every day. He was usually already there when Hermione arrived at three, and he was usually the last visitor to leave the reading room. He looked calmer than he had been during Hermione's school years, but that sounded natural there was no more Voldemort to fight against, no more dangerous spy tasks, no more meddling with Death Eaters. Still, Hermione sometimes wondered how he, who had been such an accomplished wizard, could live peacefully without magic. *Not that I couldn't have done it too, right after the war,* considered Hermione. *In fact, I did exactly the same thing*

The book Snape was consulting was a late Medieval manuscript about warfare and ballistics. Hermione, who had to put the consulted books in storage, noticed that he was copying all the text by hand on a notebook. One evening when there were only the two of them in the library, Hermione had left her seat at the help desk and had reached Snape at his table. She had proposed that he use one of the library's computers to copy the text, so that he wouldn't have to copy his notes again at home.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. I'll think about it," he had replied with a tone that implied, 'I would have done it myself, had I been interested.'

That had been the longest conversation they had had in the last two weeks. Snape was very quiet in the reading room, even when he was the only visitor present. When he went to recover his visitor's card at the help desk, he never stopped to chat with Hermione. At best, he greeted her goodnight and turned away. He never asked her anything, not even what she was doing in a Muggle library in Yorkshire. Hermione didn't know if she would have wished for more conversation or if it was better the way it was. *Maybe it's better like this,* she concluded. *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus. Memories hurt*

That day, a Friday, Hermione was working on Brother Lucretius as always. She had a strange sensation, though, like a thin increase of anxiety, that had accompanied her since the morning. Had she perhaps dreamt something that had made anxiety resurface in her? She didn't remember anything of the sort but well, with dreams, you could

never know. She could only hope the sensation would vanish without other consequences as it had come.

Hermione was sewing a page to the spine when her eyes fell upon the text instead of on the thread. Automatically, she read a sentence.

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

That was the Bible, for sure, quoted extensively by Brother Lucretius in his *Twelve Patriarkes* the part of Genesis about Eve, the snake, and that bloody original sin. Hermione shivered unwillingly.

The snake.

The woman.

Brr.

She concentrated again on the thread, the needle and the sheet, trying to pull the anxiety back in the recesses of her mind. She had done so well since she arrived at the library, even after meeting Snape again. She couldn't let a sentence influence her so much now. However, Hermione could hear the anxious beat next to her ear, like a sting waiting for her just outside her forehead. Waiting for her to surrender to its call, to pay it the attention that would surely torment her for the days to come. Still, she managed to keep the calling sting outside her brow. *You won't penetrate the skull. You. Won't*

But that didn't seem a day which she could pass through unharmed.

When Hermione went back to the reading room at five, there was a buzz coming from the help desk. The cleaner, Małgorzata, was showing Jack a kind of long rope, holding it with her strong arms and gesturing. As Hermione got closer to the desk, she couldn't repress a second shiver. *Oh sweet Merlin. That isn't a rope. That is a... a... a snake.*

Małgorzata was explaining to Jack how she had found the snake dead in the library's courtyard, and how unusual it was to find grass snakes in modern cities, even where there were a lot of gardens. The woman didn't seem troubled to hold the snake in her hand, though covered with rubber gloves, and was asking if she had to throw it in the garbage, bury it underground, or simply leave it among the plants. Jack told her to bury it in one of the flowerbeds outside the library. There were three visitors in the reading room at that moment one of them being Snape and none of them cared about the fact that a snake had been brought inside the building. They were all concentrating on their books. Snape, as usual, had his back turned to the help desk.

As Małgorzata proceeded to do as requested and Jack took his windcheater to leave, Hermione sat, very slowly, on her chair.

It had happened again. The image of the snake had fixed in her mind, like a photo placed between her forehead and the rest of the world, like a stopped frame on a video recorder.

The front door squeaked; Jack had left the library. Slowly, Hermione picked her librarianship manual from the shelf and forced herself to open it at the bookmark.

I've done this other times, she reminded herself. *I've always been able to study through the fixed images, someday. I can do this now. It is only a dead snake, c'mon. It will fade soon.*

She took her orange pencil from her pencil case and plunged into *Advanced Methods of Cataloguing*.

Hours went by. It was almost closing time. There were only two people in the Emily Brontë Library: Hermione Granger at the help desk and Severus Snape at one of the reading tables. Hermione had managed to read and underline some forty pages of her manual, despite the snake image dancing before her eyes. When she heard the familiar sound of Snape's chair pushed back, she couldn't repress a sigh of relief. *This is finally going to end. I'm going straight home, straight to bed, and a good night's sleep will clear this filthy grass snake away from my eyes.* She picked Snape's visitor card from the drawer and stood up, waiting for him to arrive at the help desk, her bag already in her hand.

"Good evening, Professor," she said, handing him his card, and she looked at him directly in his black eyes, smiling at the thought of being home, soon.

It happened suddenly. A moment later she shrieked, in terror. Her strength abandoned her, and she fell down, hitting the chair with her knees. Images and sounds rumbled above her, clouding her with panic.

When she could pierce through the veil of phantoms, Hermione saw Snape standing above her on the other side of the help desk, pulling her back on her chair. He was telling her something, but she couldn't understand at first.

"What is it, Miss Granger? What's happened to you?" he asked.

"I just saw Nagini bite your neck," she murmured with a dull voice.

A/N: Thank you to growley464 for her kind beta-reading, and many thanks to lyn_f for providing extra corrections.

Thank you all for the kind welcome to chapter 1! I am not a native speaker, and there are always more errors than I hoped when I write in English. If someone wishes to join growley464 in beta-reading, I will be thoroughly grateful.

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman..." *Genesis* 3:15.

The Contraindications of the Draught of Peace

Chapter 3 of 20

In which Hermione suffers the return of displeasing memories, and Snape tries to help.

Late at night
things I thought I put behind me
haunt my mind.
I just know there's no escape now
once it sets its eyes on you.
~ Within Temptation, *Stand My Ground*

"Can you remain seated? Eh, Miss Granger?" asked Snape.

"I believe so," murmured Hermione with the same monotone.

Snape disappeared and came back a few minutes later, holding a glass of water.

"Drink it," he ordered.

Hermione took the glass and sipped obediently.

Will it ever go away? Will I be stuck with these horrible, horrible fixed images forever?

Before her still floated the disgusting image of the dead snake found by Malgorzata, superimposed on the face of Severus Snape. It had been too much. The unbearable memory of Nagini had resurfaced again while she was looking at Snape right in his eyes, and she hadn't been able to suppress her terror. She had been tormented so much by similar sights after the war that she couldn't believe they could still take over with such a hellish violence.

She could still see the image, but the peak of terror was surely passed. Slowly oh, too slowly it was waning, and she could sense again the reassuring furniture of the library around her, behind the ghostly memory. The bookshelves, the wooden ceiling, the tables were going back to their places.

"Miss Granger, how are you feeling? Do you want to be taken to a hospital?"

Snape. She couldn't look him in the face, not yet, or else the image would regain strength. She shook her head, keeping her eyes down.

"Has this happened to you before?"

Hermione nodded.

"Do you want me to call someone for you? Do you know anyone in York?"

She shook her head again, her eyes still low. She had lived in York for twenty days now, and apart from her colleagues and her landlady, she didn't know anyone. She hadn't been much of a socialite, lately.

I want to go back to my mum, she thought. I want to be cuddled again, as she did after the Battle of Hogwarts, and cry out my fears. I want to hold Crookshanks in my arms and let him soothe me. I could Apparate back home. She closed her eyes. Fleeing will only reinforce my fears. I can face the situation by myself.

"Miss Granger, can you stand up?" inquired the blackish figure of the man in front of her.

No, this won't work, she decided. You know only too well. Avoiding looking at Snape will only make things worse in the future. If you start avoiding now, you will continue avoiding tomorrow, and that won't do. Be strong. Be a Gryffindor.

Hermione lifted her head and looked briefly at Snape. "I think so, Professor," she said with a small voice.

He helped Hermione to her feet. She grabbed her bag and rubbed a hand on her forehead, as if trying to dispel the remnants of her frightening memory. Snape was observing her intently, a deep line between his eyebrows. "May I call you a taxi? I strongly," he added before she could reply, "discourage you from Apparating."

Can he still perform Legilimency? she wondered.

"I live a couple of minutes from here, just on the other bank of the Foss. I usually come here walking," she muttered.

"Good. Would you let me escort you home, then?"

She sighed. *He doesn't leave me many options, does he?* Judging from his concerned look, he would not let her go alone. *What would be worse? To have Snape at my side, always reminding me of something I don't want to remember, or to be alone with the image of a snake floating before my eyes? It's definitely worse to go with Snape,* she thought.

"Nightmares come and pass, Miss Granger. A crash against a lamppost, or worse, doesn't."

So much for my avoidance plans. Hermione let him open the door of the reading room for her and followed him up to the front door. *Actually, if I walk slightly ahead of him or right at his side, I may be able to avoid looking at him,* she considered with relief.

They walked silently under a still-light sky until they reached Hermione's address. The street, where two lines of modern two-floor flats faced each other, was empty. Hermione stopped in front of the house she lived in and sighed.

Behind her, Snape said, "I suppose you have arrived, Miss Granger. Is there anything else you wish me to do?"

Yes, she thought. *Go away and leave me alone.* She turned and shook her head.

"No, thanks," she said uncomfortably.

"Are you still seeing... that image?"

In truth, the sudden, horrifying image of Nagini had almost evaporated, replaced by a self-complaining litany. "I must be too tired for it," she replied. "Now, if you let me, good night."

"Good night," said Snape, taking a couple of steps backward.

Turning to face the door, Hermione let her bag slip from her shoulder to the floor and started wrestling with the keyhole and a key that wouldn't fit. Snape moved forward, bent down, and after a quick search he pulled something out of her bag.

"There," he said, handing Hermione her wand, "this will probably allow me to leave sooner."

With a strained look on her face, Hermione took the wand and mumbled, "*Alohomora*." The door sprang open, revealing a dark entrance.

"I wonder, Miss Granger," mused Snape with a very low voice, as if talking to himself, "what on earth is a young witch doing in York, without her friends, and prone to scream in other people's faces at the recurrence of an unpleasant memory?"

"I will tell you someday," said Hermione, exhausted, as she stepped in.

"Very well," commented Snape. "Don't think too much about it."

Don't think too much about what? The unpleasant memory or telling you about it?

"I will try not to, Professor," she replied bitterly.

Snape snorted, almost gently. "Have a good night, Miss Granger. If they come back, let them pass," he concluded, then he turned back and walked away without hurrying.

For a moment, Hermione had the impression of robes billowing behind him, even if he was wearing trousers.

In the end, I must have finally gone crazy, she thought. I must go to bed.

Nagini's fangs emerging from the ragged shell of Bathilda Bagshot. Bellatrix torturing her. Blood gushing out of Ron's shoulders, of George's ear, of Snape's neck. The lifeless bodies of Lupin and Tonks. Bellatrix Lestrange Crucio-ing her. The little, frail body of Dobby, pierced to death by Bellatrix's knife. Harry, apparently dead, brought by Hagrid inside the entrance hall. Fred, still, motionless.

Blood. Blood. More blood.

Those images, frozen before her eyes, had tormented her for years after the Battle of Hogwarts. Unbearable images were with her while she took her showers, while she studied, while she tried to sleep, while most unbearable of all she was with Ron. This curtain of horrors had interposed between herself and the rest of the world always there, sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger, for three long years after the war. They had started to fade only when Hermione decided to take one more step away from the wizarding world and had broken up with Ron.

She used to be so strong. She had hoped the end of the war would bring only peace, happiness, safety. Instead, she had felt much more helpless when peace had come than she had while they were looking for the Horcruxes, isolated and without clues, in the woods. Peace had meant only to remember the war in fear. When peace had actually come, the war was still going on this time, inside her head.

For the first six months after the Battle of Hogwarts, she had done nothing but cry.

Hermione cried in the morning, when she woke up. She cried during meals, her tears watering the soup she was eating. She sobbed endlessly in the evenings. She had rejoined her parents in their lovely, cosy house in Salisbury. For the whole summer after the final battle, her mother had held her until she slept, while she cried her eyes out. At least the frozen deaths did not follow her in her sleep. Luckily, she never dreamt what had happened during the war. When she finally fell asleep, nights were a dreamless blessing.

Even that night, after the flash of Nagini had clouded her eyes again for a while, Hermione was able to sleep without dreaming.

The next day was a Saturday. Hermione woke up very late, at eleven. She munched some biscuits on her bed, indifferent to the crumbs scattered on the bedspread. The image of Nagini came and went away intermittently. She did not care; it did not frighten her as much as it did the night before. Much of the fear depended on the unpredictability of it. No, what she felt was, above all the rest, sadness. She was sad because she would be locked forever in that bleak pit with them, because the memories always repeated, because she wasn't able to chase those images away from her mind, because there was no escape. The wounds would bleed forever; forever would she have to cope with the unruliness of her mind.

Yes, many people had suffered in the war. They had nightmares. They had wounds that would never heal. Everyone saw how much the Weasleys' lives had changed after Fred had died right before their very eyes. But she had never heard of people plagued with fixed images, placed as macabre postcards between her eyes and reality. The more she tried to eject them, the more she tried to forbid herself thinking about them again, the more they persisted.

She was sick and tired of them. Those images no longer represented anything; they had taken on a life of their own, as if they were, literally, a veil hanging over her head. What she felt was not only fear, not only sadness: it was irritation, against them, against herself.

How she had enjoyed her last years at university, after breaking up with Ron, when the images had, inexplicably, left her alone for a long while! How happy she had been for twenty days, when images didn't come back even after meeting Professor Snape again! Why on earth had Malgorzata brought that damned snake into the library? Couldn't she just avoid every object capable of reminding her of the war?

I wish I was blind she said to herself. It wasn't the first time that she wondered if being blind would prevent the layering of fixed images on her mind. Study had already weakened her sight so much she had to wear glasses now couldn't she just pretend she was blind when those images appeared in her mind?

Eventually, she crawled out of her bed. She had to buy something for lunch; her stores were empty. She had planned to do her shopping on Saturday morning, in any case. However, she hadn't planned on feeling so nauseated.

When she came downstairs, her landlady, Mrs. Kathryn Neill, was rehearsing a concert for kettledrums in the kitchen, judging from the metal clangs she produced.

"Oi, Hermione," said Mrs. Kathryn, popping out of the kitchen with a flour smear on her nose. "A man brought a packet for you. It's on the chest."

"Ah, thank you, Mrs. Neill," replied Hermione. She had already noticed a packet wrapped in green paper on the chest in the entrance. She took it and unwrapped it.

Inside the paper there was a note and a vial, rolled inside plastic bubble wrap. The note, written in a spiky and cramped handwriting, said:

This is the Draught of Peace. As you will know, thirty drops dripped under the tongue would suffice for allowing you a couple of days of rest. You should already know the contraindications.

If you need a magical help, there are a few wizards and witches living in York. I would suggest you to contact Mr. and Mrs. Boddington, 23, Coppergate. Miss Easton lives out of town, in New Earswick, but I would recommend not disturbing her.

S. S.

For a while, Hermione kept turning the vial in her fingers. *The Draught of Peace*. Yes, she knew the contraindications very well. An increasing sense of addiction while you

were taking it; no solution at all for the problem once you stopped taking it. *The Draught of Peace was only an illusion. Yet, a tempting illusion* Would she succumb again to its lure? The last time she had taken the Draught of Peace was many years ago, and she had promised herself she wouldn't take it again.

Only for today, she thought. Only to stop this pain for a couple of hours. Only for the weekend, when I feel more alone

She unscrewed the cap of the vial and dripped twenty drops of the potion *oh, this smell* under her tongue, less than the dose recommended by Snape. She grabbed her light cardigan and left to go to the supermarket.

Less than half an hour later, Hermione started recognizing the familiar effects of the Draught of Peace. A pleasing dullness fell upon her. She wandered slowly among the aisles of the supermarket, taking a lot of time to pick the products she wanted. While her body relaxed, her mind began to empty and the thoughts, albeit more sparse, assumed a fuzzy connotation, like when you have a temperature.

How strange. Snape actually acted kindly toward me, she found herself thinking.

How could he know my address? Ah, yes, he accompanied me home yesterday evening.

But... the packet? Did he deliver it personally to Mrs. Neill? Or did he pay a courier?

Did he wake up early to bring me the potion?

And... by the way, how does he have potions now? Does he still brew them? Without magic? How can it be possible? Or does he buy them, maybe?

She regretted that her nauseating fixed memories of Nagini had to taint her mental image of Snape, all things considered. Before he killed Dumbledore, Hermione had spent years trying to convince Harry and Ron that he wasn't as bad as he seemed. And after discovering he had performed that heinous act in compliance with Dumbledore's wishes, she would have liked to acknowledge his merits as a faithful spy to the Order of the Phoenix. But the memory of what had happened in the Shrieking Shack prevented her thinking of Snape as anything else but a defenceless pawn at Voldemort's mercy. *Fangs. Blood.*

Snape had *not* simply slipped out of her mind, as many other people and facts had through the years. Hermione had put all her efforts in keeping *Snape and Bellatrix, and Lupin, and Fred* out of her mind, because thinking of him would only mean to remember horrible scenes she would have preferred to forget altogether.

Why do fixed images have to ruin everything? Why must fixed images only be terrible? Couldn't have I fixed images of something pleasing? She wondered while she paid and left the supermarket.

I could have a fixed image of Crookshanks purring in my lap she thought, and her lips stretched in a sad smile *I could have a fixed image of Alan Rickman in* Sense and Sensibility.

Pleasing images never stayed fixed in front of Hermione's eyes. While she dated Ron, she never had images of him haunting her. In fact, when she liked someone, she had difficulty bringing his appearance to her mind's eye. She would remember him in bits or as an overall blurred figure, but she seemed unable to remember the faces of her loved ones in details shortly after seeing them, without resorting to their photos.

See? she told herself. *Here is the solution. I have to push myself to like Snape, so that I won't have memories of him anymore* For the first time of the day, she giggled.

Ah, the wonderful contraindications of the Draught of Peace, she thought with a smile. *Absurd reasoning occurs all the time, and you aren't responsible for it*

Hermione kept her promise. She didn't take any more potion for the rest of the weekend. For precaution, she placed the vial in the lowest drawer of her wardrobe, close to the spare sheets.

Contraindications of stopping taking the potion: depression, physical weakness, apathy. And images could come back at any time.

Not even Brother Lucretius could cheer Hermione that Monday. She threaded the needle mechanically, lost in a long lamentation over her misfortunes that went on with the same tone of the ones she used to tell herself years before.

Leaving the archive for the reading room only worsened her mood. At least in the archive she could conceal her gloomy expression from other people. In the reading room she had to welcome the new visitors politely, and all the better if she could smile at them, too. She had to wear the mask of the obliging librarian, always helpful and easygoing. How lucky that the Emily Brontë library welcomed only a few visitors a day during summer afternoons.

The reading room presented also another disadvantage, and that was worse than all the rest. In the reading room there was Snape.

Thankfully, he was buried in his manuscript as always, with his back to the help desk. He was copying the ancient text on his notebook, apparently pausing only to take mental considerations now and then.

While she tried to study some more pages from *Advanced Methods of Cataloguing*, Hermione couldn't help lifting her eyes to check Snape's back. She feared the moment she would face him again. Watching his back was pretty safe, but what about seeing his face? *I have at least to thank him for the Draught of Peace* she reminded herself. *Yes, but what if his image remains in my brain?*

Having fixed images of dead people was one thing. Having fixed image of someone you had to see every day was a totally different matter. Hermione was at loss about how she had to behave with Snape. She had already made a terrible mistake in telling him that she had imagined Nagini biting his neck. She should have kept her mouth shut. She didn't like to have other people know what was going on in her mind, unless it was something brilliant and useful. It was better if the scum stayed secret.

In general, nobody understood her problem. When she tried to explain what fixed images were, she met only gawky faces, gaping at her as if she was mad. And surely Ron hadn't helped her in that department. Of course, he would hug her and tell her that everything was okay, and that he would love her no matter what. But he wouldn't understand exactly what she was going through, and his hugs wouldn't make her feel better, or dispel her shadows. Ron's ghosts took other shapes, it seemed. Hermione knew that he alternated nightmares with dreams about Fred. And the last ones were equal to nightmares.

Eight o' clock p.m. The last visitor apart from Snape had just left. *And now they start the two most difficult hours of the day* thought Hermione. *Just me and Snape. And my images between us.*

I have to thank him for the potion, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. *Now I stand up and go to his table and I thank him.*

No, I will wait until he leaves the library, she reconsidered. *When he comes to collect his card, I will thank him politely, and hopefully this matter will be over.*

"Miss Granger." Snape's low voice echoed in the almost empty room.

Oh, geez, thought Hermione. *He got there before me.*

She glanced at Snape, ready to look away as soon as possible.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Snape turned right forty-five degrees and leaned his elbow against the back of his chair. Hermione could sense Snape inspecting her under his intense, black gaze, as if he wasn't more than seven metres away but right in front of her.

"You don't look like you have abused my potion, do you," he snorted.

"I took only twenty drops of it," admitted Hermione.

"Humph. You did know of the contraindications, after all, Miss Granger," Snape said.

"I know only too well," she blurted out. With his tone of omniscience, Snape was making her feel uneasy. "By the way, thank you for giving me the Draught of Peace, Professor," she added hurriedly.

He snorted again. "My duty, Miss Granger," he said, and he rose to his feet.

"How did you come to possess vials of potions, Professor?"

"That's none of your business, Granger."

I deserved that rebuke, she thought. My damned tongue. Why can't I keep my mouth shut?

"Then, why do you care about me now? For twenty days, you barely spoke to me, and now you inquire about my health condition," she continued despite herself. *Bah. It seems that it's impossible for me to stay silent.*

"There's no use in scratching a scab that doesn't itch, Miss Granger. *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus*."

Strange. That was what I had thought.

"You didn't seem eager to speak with me, either," Snape went on. "But since an incident apparently brought on an unfortunate episode from the past that involved me as well, I feel obliged to put you, as a former student of mine, under observation, and to offer you health care, if that be the case. I also happen to be the only person to understand the need of a distressed witch around here."

He had reached the help desk by now and was staring her closely, black eyes under black eyebrows. Hermione found herself unable to look away from his inspection. She frowned.

"How could you understand me? You don't know anything about me now."

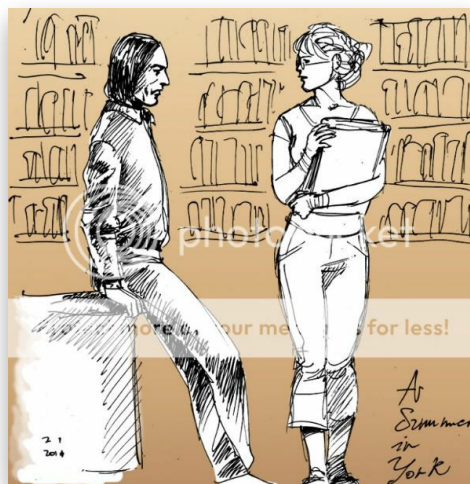
"Ah, Miss Granger. Trust me, I know everything about obsessions."

A/N: The quest for a second beta has been a long one. My deep gratitude to RobisonRocket and growley464 for their help.

Midsummer Nights

Chapter 4 of 20

In which Snape gives lessons about enduring the unbearable and Hermione protests. With a drawing by the author.



I have to try to break free

from the thoughts in my mind.

"Obsessions?"

"Undesired images, words or ideas that haunt you despite your will; their presence in your mind repeats, and each time it brings pain; you feel unable to free yourself from them, even if all your efforts are directed toward their disposal. Do you find this definition correct, Miss Granger?"

"I I guess so."

"Do you recognize yourself as subject to obsessions, Miss Granger?"

"Now that you give me that definition, it is possible, yes."

"Since when have you been experiencing obsessive images, Miss Granger?"

It's unfair. I don't want to say these things to him But Hermione felt unable not to answer Snape.

"Since the Battle of Hogwarts," she replied. "The day after the battle, I woke up with the image of Fred Weasley before my eyes."

"And it didn't go away."

"No. It didn't go away."

"For how long did it stay in your mind?"

Too long. "Weeks. I don't know. Soon it wasn't the only one I was seeing."

"Which were the other ones?"

"It shouldn't matter to you." *Bellatrix. Nagini.*

"Humph. Are they still hurting you this much?"

"You said you knew everything about obsessions."

"And I do," replied Snape with a gentler tone, narrowing his eyes. "I know. I know that the more you feel ashamed by them, the more they exercise their powers over you."

Hermione didn't reply.

"Tell me how these intrusions worked in your case, Miss Granger," asked Snape, raising an eyebrow.

"Intrusions?"

"The images."

"They stayed there. Then I tried to chase them off, and again, and again. My efforts could go on for hours; all the while the images stayed."

"You tried Occlumency against them."

"Yes."

"And you had no positive reactions."

"No, apparently I didn't," said Hermione, stressing the words through her teeth.

"Of course. You tried the wrong technique."

Another word and I will strangle you thought Hermione. *That would be the right technique*

"Occlumency is the technique that should be used against the aggression of psychic matter images, words, thoughts that comes from a source outside the Occlumens. Obsessions have their source in the obsessive person herself; therefore another method should be performed against them."

"Images didn't come from me; they came from outside."

"Is someone implanting them in your brain, Granger? No, therefore they are yours."

"I didn't invent them."

"You didn't invent their content, correct. Yet, it is your visual system that transmitted that content to your brain, and your defensive system that decided to always remind you of the presence of that image, instead of locking it inside the black boxes of your memory."

Hermione felt a bit dazed for a second.

"Why should my defensive system always remind me of these images, if I may ask? And what is my defensive system, please?" she asked sourly.

"Your super ego, if we want to use these surpassed definitions," replied Snape quietly. "The thing in your psyche that tells you what you are allowed to do and what you aren't. Evidently, your defensive system decided that you weren't supposed to hold those images in your memory and proceeded to remind you often of your... trespass."

"Trespass? Mine is a war trauma, sir. I have been seeing shocking images from a bloody war. What has my super ego to do with that? What did I trespass?"

"Your own, limited set of rules." Snape sneered. "As I was explaining, Miss Granger, you didn't allow yourself to have traumatic images from a bloody war, as you call it. Maybe you expected to survive the war without even a scar."

How can he say that? I separated from my parents; I expected to be caught by Death Eaters; I expected to be killed at any moment...

"Maybe you thought your intelligence would never suffer because of the war."

... Maybe I never thought my intelligence would suffer because of the war.

He may be right, she admitted to herself. "Why didn't I allow the images to be stored, sir?" she asked more meekly.

"Ah, Miss Granger, you should give yourself an answer. I'd say it's because you are a control freak."

What?

"If you are still the Miss Granger I used to know, you are a brainy control freak, believing everything can be controlled by your logical reasoning. But not everything is logical, Miss Granger, and not everything can be controlled."

No, not everything is logical. In fact, only a very few things can be called so She had learned that lesson through her misfortunes.

"Imagining dead people isn't logical, according to your standards. It is abnormal."

True.

"Your defensive system detected the anomaly and presented it to your controlling system, which each time branded it again as an anomaly. So the cycle went on forever, because each time you were labelling the images abnormal."

This is true, too.

"Each day you were trying to shield yourself from visualizing the images with Occlumency, because they were abnormal."

Right.

"But Occlumency only works against outside aggression, not against self-generated memories."

I grant you that, hedgehog

"Which brings us back to the correct method of dealing with obsessions."

"Which is?"

"Doing nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"Not trying to prevent images forming inside your head. Not trying to repel them when they are there. No avoidance tricks, Miss Granger," said Snape with a velvety inflection, leaning his head closer to Hermione's and digging inside her eyes with his look.

Hermione's breath quickened. Not trying to repel the images? They were unbearable. He must be crazy to suggest something like that.

"Even if this sounds strange to you, you must accept the existence of these images as something normal, not anomalous."

They are anomalous. No one would visualize your face for more than five minutes in normal conditions

"Unless you learn to let these disagreeable images cross your mind, there will be no Draught of Peace, no Pensieve that will heal you completely. Whatever image can be imagined, and whatever thought can be thought: this should be your philosophy from now onward."

My philosophy will be of avoiding anything that will make me have fixed images

"Stubborn as you may be, Granger, I will do my best to prevent you from falling back to your avoiding methods. You should reach a point in which the presence of certain images in your mind is painless."

You may have lost your magic, but surely you have kept your Legilimency powers Hermione considered.

"In fact, you should be able to tell your mind: do whatever you want, for me it makes no difference."

Being a Legilimens isn't inconsistent with being insane. In fact, Voldemort was both insane and a Legilimens

"We will spend the last hours in the evenings, when there are no more visitors in the library, practicing the letting go technique."

"What?"

"I will ask you to bring those images to your mind and to bear them for five, then ten, then fifteen minutes, without trying to dispel them. You have to learn to let them come and go without reacting."

"No, I meant you will ask me? We will spend?" she said, arching her brows in bewilderment.

"As I already said, I happen to be the only one around that can help you in this matter."

I hardly believe it. Yet, Snape had just proven to be the only person to have a glimpse about what fixed images could be.

"We have the longest evening of the year ahead," Snape went on. "Yesterday it was the 21st of June, the summer solstice, and here in York we have longer days than in London, almost as long as at Hogwarts."

"Why do you want to train me?" Hermione felt suspicious, even if she couldn't explain exactly why.

"For the third time, Granger, I repeat that I can understand how obsessions work." Snape smirked. "Besides that, I have to brush up my teaching skills now and then."

As she walked back home, Hermione's head was buzzing with all the new concepts Snape had brought in their discussion*Letting go. Defensive system. Control freak* Snape's confidence irritated her. He seemed right about the whole matter, and she couldn't stand to hear that she had to consider her images normal. She hated to hear Snape telling her flatly that attempts at Occlumency were doomed to failure, even if she had already experienced that failure by herself. She didn't want people to tell her what to do and not do. She didn't want Snape *of all people* to tell her what to do.

Worse. To train me in bearing the images in my mind without reacting

From nine to ten, more or less, Snape sat next to her, inviting her to choose one of her recurrent images and to visualize it for five minutes, without trying to interfere. It was already horrible to imagine doing something like that; doing it for real was five times worse. How could she be sure the image wouldn't stay for hours days? Apart from that, to evoke one image freely was different from having it intrude in her mind unexpectedly, against her will. It was... less powerful. Less shocking. She wasn't at all sure that was the right method of fighting obsessive images.

However, when she had left the reading room after two hours of having Snape's eyes fixed on her, the image she had chosen remained in the library and didn't follow her home. Also Snape's face remained behind her, vague, except for the glint of his jet black eyes inspecting her.

On Tuesday evening, Snape took up again training her.

"Tonight is Midsummer's Eve, Miss Granger. It is a very favourable moment for magic."

"This sounds bizarre, said by you." *Oh, damn.*

Snape seemed unaffected by the reference. "If I manage to make you understand anything about the workings of obsessions, that will be indeed a magical deed, Miss Granger. I was actually surprised, yesterday, to find out that you seemed to ignore the existence of such a concept. So, after all, there is something you don't know."

Hermione bit her lip. "It's not my fault if until now I haven't met someone willing to enlighten me upon this matter."

"So, you finally start to recognize how lucky you are for having me to help you?"

"Or rather to torment me."

"Incorrect, Miss Granger: it is you that torment yourself, as long as you don't even allow yourself to imagine unpleasant subjects."

"Why should I let myself visualize unpleasant images?"

"Because people live unpleasing experiences, Miss Granger. In case you haven't noticed, unpleasantness is great part of life."

"Why should I allow it to be part of my mind as well? I don't want to accept those images as normal."

Snape took a moment to reflect. "This is part of the problem, I see," he said eventually in a soft voice. "You blame yourself for visualizing obsessive images."

Hermione looked away.

"As it is not your fault you don't know what obsessions are, it is not your fault you have obsessions, Miss Granger," Snape said with an even softer tone.

It is a fault. I should have been stronger.

"You must not consider yourself responsible for what you think or visualize. You shouldn't blame yourself for the presence of obsessions. You are guiltless, lass."

Hermione could feel the prickling of tears trying to escape from her lids. She kept looking at the floor. *A person is responsible for their thoughts. To erase responsibility would mean anarchy.*

"Don't make my same mistakes, Hermione. Don't blame yourself for something which isn't a fault."

She sniffed, and, at the sound of her name, she lifted her eyes. "A person is responsible for their thoughts," she whispered.

"No. We are only responsible for what we make of our thoughts for the actions we undertake after we think. The content of our thoughts is not subject to moral judgment."

Hark who talks of actions and moral judgment!

"And here again we are going round the problem. You have to learn how to let go, to lower the walls of your controlling system and to relax your sense of responsibility. And the best way to start is to summon an image in your mind and to sustain it for five minutes. Ready? On my count."

To bear you and your bloody lecturing tone is worse than bearing the image of Voldemort using dental floss. Having fixed images is nothing compared to you talking of responsibilities. By the way, you should use dental floss. But you shouldn't use that tone with me. You shouldn't call me 'lass'. You shouldn't call me 'Hermione'. Oh, God, this isn't doing me any good. This is going nowhere. I have to make him leave me in peace.

Wednesday evening. At half past seven the library remained deserted, except for Hermione, of course, and Snape. When the last visitor left, Snape jumped up and approached the help desk. *He seems jollier than ever, as if poking that hooked nose of his into my personal life has rejuvenated him*

"Tonight is Midsummer Night, the 24th of June, St. John the Baptist. As he announced the truth in the desert, I try to proclaim the truth about obsessive disorders."

I knew he was insane. I didn't know he was a megalomaniac fool

"Ready for your practice, Miss Granger?" asked Snape with a smirk.

Hermione snorted. "I don't understand why I have to do this. I don't have particular fixed images lately."

"You will have more in the future if you don't learn to let them go."

"Yesterday you made me visualize an image I hadn't thought of in years."

"You have to learn a method. The image in itself isn't important."

"If I don't fear it anymore, would it do any good to practice with it?"

"Do you prefer to visualize something else already? Something more difficult? Maybe our dear Bellatrix?" His gleeful tone had turned sarcastic.

Hermione shivered. "What is the purpose of reminding me of something I had gladly forgotten? To make me suffer more?"

"No, to help you to deal with your future sufferings, Hermione." He sounded serious.

"You are making me suffer now. I don't want to think about my obsessions. I am here to do a job, and you are distracting me from my tasks!"

"Which tasks? There's only me in the library, presently."

"This task!" Hermione waved her copy of *Advanced Methods of Cataloguing* under his face. "I was studying. You are disturbing me."

Snape looked unconcerned. "You seem very eager to sweep what happened last Friday under the rug. I'm trying to convince you that the sooner you learn to let those things go, the better for your future. Even," he added, catching a glimpse of her book, "with the purpose of studying manuals of subjects you already know by heart."

She flushed. "I *am* letting things go. See? I'm so willing to let go that I want to move on."

"You surely can't fool yourself so much, Hermione. The images will return---"

"STOP IT!" she cried, louder than she expected. "Stop this. You are meddling with things that don't concern you."

"I am only---"

"You even rummaged in my bag! You even came to my home!"

"That was for your own sake." Snape's voice was but a cold whisper now.

"This is not my own sake! This is making me go mad!"

"You will go mad, unless you accept the truth for what it is."

"Do you consider yourself the voice of truth? Do you really want to play the role of my saviour? I didn't ask for your help!"

"Miss Granger, when someone offers help that is evidently *needed*, it would be a very elementary act of courtesy to show some signs of gratitude. Ah, but I forgot you learnt gratitude from Potter."

"Enough! I knew I shouldn't have talked with you from the start. Leave me alone!"

"You are making the wrong move, Miss Granger."

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" shouted Hermione.

"Fine," said Snape, his voice now icy. He turned back, went to collect the manuscript at his table, placed it on the help desk, and hissed, "my visitor's card, please."

Panting with rage, Hermione handed him his card. "Goodbye, Professor."

"Good night, Miss Granger. Enjoy the rest of your Midsummer night."

He spun on his heels and headed at the door. As he left the room, Hermione heard him mumble something like "Father was right, after all," followed by the banging of the door.

"Fine!" she cried at the empty tables. "Oh, yes, I will enjoy my Midsummer night, now that you've gone! How do you dare to lecture me, to insult Harry, to treat me as a helpless idiot!" she addressed at the invisible audience, and she finally allowed some angry tears to stream down her cheeks.

When the outburst died down, Hermione found herself surrounded only by furniture. The library was absolutely empty. Her only companions were chairs, tables, bookshelves and books. Possibly, no more visitors would come for the rest of the night.

That's actually creepy, she thought. I've never been totally alone in this building. There was always at least Snape here

Being alone in Hogwarts library or in the library of Camberwell College was a secret pleasure. But here, at the Emily Brontë library, she was in charge of everything. What if thieves tried to enter in the building? What if something unexpected happened? When she had accepted the job, Hermione hadn't considered the possibility of being totally alone watching the place at night. She had counted on the presence of at least a couple of visitors sharing the space with her. *At least, of Snape. He seemed to go to sleep with the library.*

There's nothing to fear, she told herself. I am a witch. Oh, where has my courage gone?

That was a curse, she decided. 'Enjoy the rest of your Midsummer night.' He knew perfectly well that this place is creepy, when you are the only person in it.

He can not only still perform Legilimency, but also cast jinxes she considered.

He wanted to punish me, she realized. By leaving me alone, he wanted to punish me for not practicing withstanding the images with him. Oh, but it's me who sent him away. And rightly so. Damn.

Maybe I should not have yelled at him. He would have continued to read his book in silence and left the library at ten.

I am not going to ask his forgiveness. He was wrong, oh, how very wrong, and deep inside he knows that.

I am still very angry at him.

This is not my punishment. It's his punishment. I still have all of the world's books around me, while he has left his reading inside and will spend a very miserable night without his manuscript.

Not that I should pity him, in any case

Whether Hermione's or Snape's, that was definitely a punishment. For the rest of the week, Snape left the library at half past seven or earlier, and Hermione found the place each night creepier than the previous one.

A/N: "I grant you that, hedgehog" is a slight variant of Lady Anne's line "Dost grant me, hedgehog!" from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, I, ii, 104.

Thank you to growley464 and RobisonRocket for their kind beta.

Building bridges

In which Hermione complains about Yorkshire county rules, protects the library against a (not so) stranger, discovers where Snape went during his absence, and agrees to a pact on a bridge.

If you need a friend

I'm sailing right behind

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will ease your mind

~ Simon & Garfunkel, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*

What should I do? Conjure some spirits so they can talk with me? Hang a talking portrait in the hall? Play a dvd? Listen to music? Go home?

The Emily Brontë was a Muggle public place. Hermione couldn't cast a shielding spell against Muggle visitors entering, hoping that it would identify thieves from normal readers. They were Muggles, after all, without a magical aura announcing their intents, as Moody would have regretted. Hermione couldn't make herself invisible either. She was there to serve.

After the weekend, Snape hadn't returned to the library at all. *For the best.* Late afternoons were an endless string of people leaving the library. There had been a couple of visitors now and then that remained longer in the evenings, but none stayed there after nine p.m. Hermione had even called Mrs. Peewit, telling her that the library was deserted from nine p.m. onward.

"I know, my dear," said Mrs. Peewit. "What can we do? We must keep in line with the county rules. In autumn and spring, we close at six, and in winter, at five. You must endure."

Endure. Endure. Everyone wants me to endure.

Why don't Yorkshire inhabitants take advantage of the opportunity to read a book on summer nights? Why don't they come to read a homily by a deacon of York Minster? What have they all to do outside, wandering along the Ouse, enjoying the still-light blue sky, smelling rosebuds blossoming everywhere? Maybe I should charm the library so that it would attract more visitors.

She was furious. Working at the Emily Brontë Library began to lose its appeal. *Not that there weren't signs of it already.* The *Twelve Patriarkes* only soothed her for a couple of hours a day.

He's unforgivable. How did he dare tell me not to feel guilty, when he's doing all this to make me feel guilty about our discussion? He wants me to blame myself for what happened. He wants me to run after him, pleading with him to come back. 'Please, Professor, I'm sorry, teach me all you know about fixed images, I need you!' Bah! He will be thoroughly disappointed.

During the second week after Snape disappeared, she asked Jack, the daytime librarian, if he knew why the dark-haired visitor always dressed in black who frequented the library every day had suddenly stopped coming.

"Ah, you mean Mr. Snape," Jack replied. "I believe he has finished consulting Ayrmidon's *Engines of War*. He must be on his summer vacation, I suppose. He visits the library for a couple of months every semester, more or less. An exquisite gentleman, isn't he?"

Hermione began to spend her late evenings in the archive with Brother Lucretius, after the last visitor had left the reading room. She had started restoring the second tome. Concluding her day with a bit of bookbinding was far better than patrolling the empty reading room, too nervous to study her manual of librarianship. In the archive, with all her dear tools around her, she felt protected.

At least there were no images.

A quarter to ten p.m. Hermione smoothed a crease in a page of Brother Lucretius' second tome. It was almost time to go. *And this Wednesday is almost over.* She could give one last caress to the ancient paper before she had to put her tools in order, rinse her mug, turn off all the lights, and leave.

As she stood up, her mug in hand, to go to the sink, she tensed. There had been a sound. *Yes. Like an old wooden door opening.* She pulled her wand out of her bag and tiptoed, quiet as a cat, to the archive's door. She peeked at the reading room. Nobody. She reached the door of the reading room, clasping her wand in her hand.

Could she have imagined the sound?

A squeak in the old parquetry of the hall proved she hadn't.

She clasped her wand harder. *Wait, she told herself. It could be just a Muggle. Or Mrs. Peewit. In any case, there's nothing that can be stolen in the hall. Apart, well, from the paintings, but there is the burglar alarm protecting them.*

The footsteps approached the reading room door.

CONSTANT VIGILANCE!

The door's knob turned counter clockwise.

CONSTANT VIGILANCE!

The door slowly began to open.

CONSTANT VIGILANCE!

"Miss Granger! Is it this the way in which you welcome visitors to your library?"

Hermione lowered her wand. In front of her was the last person she expected to see at that hour, in the reading room.

"Professor..." she murmured, mortified.

"And if I was a Muggle, how would you have explained a wand pointed at me?" asked Snape, curling his lip.

A Muggle, I don't know, but it served you well "I... I would have said that it's a baton from a choirmaster of York Minster, a possession of the library trust that I was restoring."

Snape sneered. "Not many choirmasters of York Minster would have liked to know that they could chase audiences away by waving their batons, though I guess some of them achieved that end, indeed," he said.

"Am I an unwanted audience, Miss Granger?" he added after a pause.

"No, you aren't," answered Hermione, pushing her wand in the pocket of her jeans and blushingly reminding herself of her role as the kind librarian. Having said that, however, she discovered that she had spoken truth. Snape's presence was not totally unwanted in the library.

"Pity. I wanted to keep up with my standards," said Snape, witnessing her mortification with an impassive look. Then he observed, "So this is what you do, locked in the archives. You restore objects."

"Books," Hermione corrected him, "I'm a bookbinder."

"Of course," said Snape, raising his eyebrows in understanding.

"And a librarian. On trial."

"I see. I would advise you to stick to bookbinding, Miss Granger. At least there's no shortage of books, here," said Snape, gesturing at the empty reading room.

"It's the summertime, you know," explained Hermione. "People prefer to stay outside."

"How foolish of them," commented Snape with a straight face.

"Have you come here to request a book?" asked Hermione hopefully. "I'm afraid to say that the library is going to close in a few minutes, but I could put it in storage for tomorrow."

"No, I didn't come for books now. I merely came to pay a visit."

"To Ayrmidon's *Engines of War*?"

"To you, Miss Granger. I was in town, and I said to myself, 'Miss Granger must be all alone in the library, enjoying the company of good old parchment. Why don't I go disturb her a little?'"

"You are not disturbing me," reassured Hermione.

"Then I am not making progress. The last time I spoke with you, you made it clear that I was disturbing you, and I counted on that basis to further any disdain you may have for me."

"I hold no disdain for you, Professor." *Weird. I was angry with you, but now I must admit that I'm not much anymore*

"You disappoint me, Miss Granger. I came here to taunt you, but you are putting a spoke in my wheel."

"How?"

"There's no pleasure in taunting someone compliant."

Hermione sniffed. "You seem in a good mood, Professor," she remarked.

Snape didn't change his composure. "Heaven forbid. I still fear I can be poked with a baton by an out of tune choirmaster of York Minster."

Hermione smiled, and Snape's eyebrows went down and relaxed over his slit eyes, ever observing her. After a while, he said with an almost gentle snort, "We started out on the wrong foot, Miss Granger."

"We did, Professor."

"Well, let it start over, then. Let me escort you back home."

Once in the street, Hermione considered her behaviour in disbelief. Why was she walking home at Snape's side? Why hadn't she told him she didn't want him to escort her? She had already told him that he wasn't an unwanted guest. But that was in the library. *Damn my always forgiving attitude*, she thought. *He tricked me into not telling him no.*

But wasn't that a way in which Snape too, perhaps, tried to atone? She couldn't see Snape as willingly chaperoning her unless he, too, was seeking forgiveness in a certain sense. The sham in the library could only signify a wish to settle their quarrel. In Snape's style.

"Ah, my tendency to justify anyone," she said, shaking her head.

"What did you say, Miss Granger?"

"I was thinking out loud. I'm sorry."

"Please share your thoughts with me, if it's not asking too much."

"I said that I'm not a vindictive person, Professor."

"How very wise of you, Miss Granger."

"But you, on the other hand, you are. There was no need to desert the library to prove me wrong."

"What are you getting at, Miss Granger?"

"You didn't come to the library for two weeks, to make me reconsider my position about our lessons."

"I never intended doing such a thing, and you are giving yourself too much credit in what I do."

"Why have you stopped visiting the library, then?"

"I've been out of town. Firstly, I went to Wimbledon to see the second week of the Championships."

"... Eh?"

"The second week has always been my favourite. Especially the fourth round," added Snape as an explanation.

Snape likes tennis.

Snape smirked at her gaping expression. "Tennis is about strategy, Miss Granger," he said.

"Only when it is well played," replied Hermione.

"A good play is a matter of strategy," specified Snape. "After Wimbledon, I continued to stay in the south. I went to pay my annual respects to Malfoy Manor."

Hermione stiffened. Malfoy Manor... so close to home, yet in another galaxy. It was not a place to which she would pay an annual visit, even for all of Narcissa's jewels.

Snape noticed her unease and halted as well. "I see," he said. "Dear Bella could give really unforgettable gifts."

"How do you know?" asked Hermione, frowning.

"Everybody knows what happened to the Golden Trio during their rise against the Dark Lord," replied Snape. "But it happens that I was informed of the infamous night of your capture directly by the people involved."

"Of course." Hermione's frown deepened. "I wonder how you can still go to visit those people."

"Lucius and Narcissa are my friends, Miss Granger."

"You disappoint me, Professor."

The street lamp that illuminated the part of the bridge where they had stopped cast a yellow light over Snape's harsh features, hardening the shadows under his eyes and under his nose. The waters of the Foss streamed with a low murmur under them, glittering as they caught the glow of the street lamps.

"Lucius has changed over the years," said Snape softly. "And he can understand what we both went through better than other people can. We can speak to each other with a relieving honesty sometimes."

"I understood that you had broken it off with... the past, Professor."

"To cope with the past doesn't mean to sever whatever tie we might carry from our adolescence," replied Snape with his lecturing tone, a yellow glint in the dark pools of his eyes. "It is not suitable for anyone to totally forget where he comes from, Miss Granger. Once a year, it is good to remind oneself of one's history. Apart from that, at the beginning of July we come together again to celebrate Scorpius' birthday. I'm Draco's godfather, as you may know."

Hermione's mind raced. She didn't want Snape to harp on about coping with the past, and even less to discuss the merits of hanging out with the Malfoys. "Scorpius... how old is he, now?" she asked.

"He's three years old."

As old as little Albus, Hermione considered. *Harry and Draco share the birth year of their sons*

"Listen, Professor," she said tentatively. "In two weeks it will be Harry Potter's birthday."

Snape snorted.

"Listen, please. Scorpius and Albus Harry's younger son are of the same age."

"And by that...?"

"They will go to Hogwarts in the same year. Hopefully, unlike their fathers, they will be friends. I am still Harry's friend though much has changed and you are still Lucius' friend, though, as you say, much has changed between the both of you, too. Moreover, you are Draco's godfather. As long as we will meet during my stay here in York, let's put aside our reservations against our respective friends. Do you agree?"

"You seem to suggest a pact, Miss Granger."

"I am, yes."

"And do you wish to include other conditions in our pact, Miss Granger? Maybe that I stop being who I am?"

"I'm fine with who you are and with who you were, too," she declared with a deep breath. "But I do wish that you would stop lecturing me about how to deal with memories. It is already difficult enough as it is. I'm working at the library for my future, not for my past. Agreed?" And Hermione smiled and stretched out her hand to shake Snape's and seal the pact.

Snape observed her hand for a while, like a kind of strange animal. Eventually he pulled his own right hand out of the pocket of his trousers and drew it closer to Hermione's. He was going to touch Hermione's fingers when he stopped, as if he had second thoughts.

"You have to offer something as well, Miss Granger," he said silkily. "Pacts should not benefit only one party."

"Right," said Hermione.

"You have to promise me that, should you feel really ill for whatever reason, you will contact me, and I'll do my best to help you."

"Granted."

"And the second condition is that you will let me escort you home when you stop working. You never can tell who hides in the corners of this old town at night."

"I'm not afraid of walking around at night, Professor. I have a wand."

Snape suppressed a laugh.

"What is that?" retorted Hermione, crestfallen.

"Never mind, Miss Granger," he replied with a rather amused tone.

"Excuse me, but I have a certain experience in defending myself from harassers."

"Do you? In that case, don't deny me the pleasure to be present at that scene." Snape smirked. "So, do you agree to my conditions?"

"I agree," sighed Hermione.

"Good," concluded Snape, and they shook their hands.

Be escorted home by Snape every night? To err is human, but to persist in the mistake is diabolical thought Hermione while she got undressed in her room. *I could say that I usually Apparate back home.* But that wasn't the truth. Her walks to and from the library, as well as her visits to and from the supermarket, were her daily fitness exercises. She liked to cross the bridge over the Foss. She liked York's bridges. Some of the railings were decorated with the symbol of the city, the white rose, and around it, they were brightly painted. She liked to be surrounded by the fragrant air of summer nights. It reminded her of another time, of another place. A happy time of her past.

Ascona, Switzerland. The smell of jasmines and camellias. His laughter.

Am I supposed to replace that with Snape? She kicked off her shoes.

Why do I speak of replacement? This is not the same thing. I don't understand what Snape will gain from these walks, but certainly they won't go in that direction She pulled off her socks. *Rather, what do I have to gain from this arrangement? Nothing. Everything Snape may say could be dangerous for me. Every moment he can remind me of something unpleasant.*

Yet there were no images; there had been no images after that unfortunate Friday when she had seen the grass snake. And the fault, then, had been the snake's, not Snape's. At that time she had already gone through three weeks meeting with Snape.

Of course, she suddenly realised while she took off her tee. Despite what he may have promised, Snape wants to continue teaching me this way. He believes that I must learn to bear the images without reacting. He may not give me proper lessons; still he intends to train me through practice. He wants me to bear his sight without forming fixed images. Or, what he calls, obsessive images. Whatever. How cunning. I almost didn't catch that.

Watching me almost faint under his eyes on that Friday must have shocked him as well as me. After all, he always cared for his students. Only, he cannot push himself to say it explicitly. It must not have been easy for him to hear that, in some way, he was stirring unpleasant memories in me. And for certain, the thought of Nagini must be much more unbearable for him than for me.

Surely.

Maybe he's right, after all. Maybe the endurance will do me good. At least, until now it hasn't harmed me. I haven't had any more fixed images after the snake.

Neither did I have any fixed images in the last four years, prior to that damned Friday, to tell the truth. But, alas, what's done is done. I can't go back in time.

Snape means good, in the end. I cannot completely put down his attempts in healing me. He's a poor, damaged thing as well. And he doesn't have magic anymore.

She put on her nightdress. *Arguing with Snape will not make this whole situation easier,* she told herself. *Agreeing to a pact has been a right step. The Ministry selection is in two months. I must concentrate. Bookbinding and librarianship.*

She slipped into her bed. *Bookbinding and librarianship.*

She placed her glasses on the bedside table. *Bookbinding and librarianship.*

She switched off her nightlight. *Bookbinding and librarianship.*

Strange how this little light in the dark of my room sparks the same yellow gleam of Snape's eyes under the bridge lamp

A/N: *Engines of War* by Ayrmidon is the book Tyrion Lannister was consulting in the library of Winterfell at the beginning of Martin's *A Game of Thrones*.

Humble thanks to growley464, valady and RobisonRocket for their beta-reading.

Mrs. Neill's suspicions

Chapter 6 of 20

In which Snape starts escorting Hermione home after work.

Ooh, he's a moody old man.

Song of summer, in his hand.

Ooh, he's a moody old man.

In his hand 'Hmmm'

To be sung of a summer,

Night on the water,

Ooh, on the water.

Thursday, July 16th, 2009, 10:21 a.m.

Luckily, the library is close to where I live. You only have to walk through the library's gate, turn left, leave the large hawthorn tree behind you, cross the street, cross the bridge, turn left again, cross the street, continue on that road until the first junction, then turn left again, and my house is just on the other side of the street. 51, Haworth Road. Only thirteen minutes from the library. Ten, if I walk quickly. Well, ten minutes and forty-six seconds.

Thursday, July 16th, 2009, 2:42 p.m. (going to work)

If I'm really supposed to be escorted home by Snape, in no way am I going to let him talk about obsessions. Or Malfoy Manor. I have to plan a different series of subjects we could converse about without risks.

We could talk about:

the weather;

York. He seems to be quite well known here; he does know other wizards in town, the ones he mentioned in the note accompanying the potion. By the way, where does he live? I hadn't thought about that before.

And why should he be wandering around the Emily Brontë Library at ten p.m.? Oh, whatever. That must be Hogwarts' imprinting. You don't patrol corridors at night for twenty years without keeping that habit afterwards.

Seventeen years, not twenty.

Sixteen years and... seven months.

He could just be an insomniac.

I could talk about bookbinding. Books are always a safe subject. I could go as far as to ask him why he was consulting Engines of War. Yes, to ask a few harmless questions would count as a polite attempt to care about what he's presently doing.

What is he doing, by the way? Apart from visiting the library, of course.

Remember to avoid any questions about the loss of magic.

After all, talking about the weather is always the safest choice.

Thursday, July 16th, 2009, 4:07 p.m. (at work)

Oh, Brother Lucretius, you surely beat Ayrmidon 6-0, 6-0, 6-0. Hail, hail to the Twelve Patriarkes.

Thursday, July 16th, 2009, 10:04 p.m. (walking home)

Damn. He anticipated me.

"So, what do you think about our city of York, Miss Granger?" asked Snape.

"It's charming," Hermione said politely. "I like ancient towns."

"Have you been here before?"

"No, this is my first time in the shire, actually," she admitted. "I've been in Northumberland, but not in Yorkshire. I fear there's still a lot of England I have not yet seen." *Excellent. Polite and generic conversation. And we've almost arrived to the bridge*

"What have you visited in town?"

"Well, York Minster, of course. And the Merchant Adventurers' Hall." She paused.

"That's it?" Snape raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Only two monuments?"

"Then I visited the libraries. And bookstores," she said, biting her lip.

The corner of Snape's mouth quirked. "Ah, still the little bookworm, addicted to roving through the shelves," he said with a sniff.

"You see what I do for a living," replied Hermione. "Libraries and bookshelves are my job now."

"I see," said Snape in a clear, slightly mocking voice.

They walked across the rest of the bridge in silence.

"You should visit more of York," Snape went on once they had crossed the street. "The Guildhall, the castle, Yorkshire museum... not to talk about magical places. There are a couple of sites from the age of Goodwin Kneen in the neighbourhood."

"I don't know if I'll have time for that," said Hermione curtly. Snape eyed her, but stayed silent until Hermione continued, "During the week I work, and on weekends I want to study."

"Don't overload yourself, Miss Granger, as you have always been prone to do."

"I have a selection in two months," she offered as an explanation. "I don't want to be found unprepared."

"As if that could even be assumed, knowing you," commented Snape with the same slightly mocking tone. "A selection for... what?"

"The National Wizarding Library at the Ministry of Magic," she said. "They are renewing their staff."

Snape arched his eyebrows, mimicking disbelief. "That's one place where I would not seek to be part of the staff, if I had the option, Miss Granger," he remarked with a serious inflection. "Do you really aspire to give yourself as prey to the wolves?"

"I am walking home with you."

Snape sniggered as if he was more pleased than offended. "Well said, Miss Granger."

They had almost reached the front door of Hermione's house. There was a light shining through the curtains of a window at the first floor that was Mrs. Neill's room. Snape halted and declared softly, "The wolf carried you safely home, Miss Granger."

Hermione turned and said, "Thank you, sir," before slipping into the entrance hall. *Sometimes, I wish I could borrow his sarcastic tone to full extent* she thought. *I may be participating in this farce for my health, but I don't have to kiss the hand that gives the medicine.*

Friday, July 17th, 2009, 10:08 p.m.

"Why are you still around at ten p.m., Professor? Surely you have better things to do than accompanying me home."

He always managed to irritate her, in the end. Even if she began walking at his side with the intention of making a polite, inconsequential conversation, she ended up nervous and irritated by the tone in his voice. Her bedtime plans of pitying him for being the unwilling cause of the resurgence of her obsessions which luckily had lasted only for a weekend evaporated during their nightly walks.

"Taking you home is but an interval in my usual stroll, Miss Granger. It gives me a... break from my thoughts."

"And what are you thinking of?" she asked before reflecting that it was a question that could lead to a more personal territory than she wanted to invade.

"Old stories," he answered, but those need not be sad stories, for his tone didn't lose its self-satisfied quality, neither the corner of his mouth stopped to be quirked in a smirk.

"You could take a break from those stories by going to sleep, Professor."

"They aren't unpleasant stories, Miss Granger," he said, confirming what his attitude had already made obvious. "I fear I am more of a night person. I don't usually go to bed before four in the morning, you see."

"So you spend your nights walking and thinking?"

"In the summertime it happens frequently, unless the road is so muddy it distracts me from my reflections to avoid the puddles."

"You could cast a Drought Charm before you." *No, he cannot. Damn me. Damn my tongue* "I'm sorry," she panted, contrived. "Please, forgive what I said."

Something close to a warm expression danced before Snape's eyes, and he slightly shook his head. He had never replied to any of her untactful mentions to his loss of magic, Hermione realised. This was probably the most undecipherable aspect about his present self. First, Hermione had trouble imagining a Snape without even a scrap of his former, strong magic. And secondly, she would have sworn that losing his magic would drive him mad not that he wasn't a bit crazy, of course, but he was nowhere as furious about it as she would have expected. *She* would be furious in the event that she lost her magic and someone pointed it out to her.

"If I had the possibility, I'd prefer to skip puddles by flying, Miss Granger," he said, the unconceivable veil of warmth shrouded over his voice as well as his look. "How did your mates use to call me? The grown-up bat?"

"The overgrown bat," she murmured, subdued. Now she felt totally ashamed. The only thing that prevented her from feeling humiliated was the fact that Snape's tone, for once, had sounded sincerely amused rather than sneering in a circumstance in which a sneering tone would be perfectly justifiable.

"Ah, right," Snape seemed to recall.

"Professor, I'm sorry," Hermione reiterated. "That was thoughtless of me."

"There's no offence taken, Miss Granger," he reassured her.

"I should show more consideration for your present condition," she added, and that phrasing seemed lame to her as soon as she was pronouncing the words.

"My present condition?" Snape repeated. "I can safely tell you, Miss Granger, that for once in my life, I am enjoying myself." And with that said, Snape spun on his heels and left Hermione on her landing.

As if it wasn't enough to feel in order irritated, puzzled, ashamed, and mortified for what Snape had told her, Hermione was surprised to find Mrs. Neill waiting for her in the entrance hall, arms crossed over her breasts and a look on her face that went from condemning to worry. It was highly unusual to find Mrs. Neill a woman in her early fifties, but looking much younger, divorced, one daughter now living on her own whose bedroom Hermione occupied waiting for her at night. She worked as a nurse in a private clinic nearby, and according to her shifts, by ten p.m. she was either at work or deeply sleeping after a hard day's job. More striking and worrying, in truth to see her with a deep frown crossing her usually cheerful face. That frown could only mean that something happened. Something really serious. What could she have done to deserve such a welcome? Did she perhaps leave the bathtub tap open, and the water had leaked through the floor?

"Good evening, Mrs. Neill," said Hermione, attempting to smile.

"Good evening, Hermione," replied Mrs. Neill with an ominous voice. "I have to talk with you before you go to your room."

"Surely, Madam. What's wrong?" asked Hermione, clutching the strap of her bag through her fingers.

"I thought you were a judicious young lady, Hermione. You agreed to a certain set of rules when I let you into my house."

"Please, Madam, what have I done?" asked Hermione while her breath quickened. *My room is nice! Please, don't throw me out!*

"You agreed not to take men into this house."

"Eh? I haven't"

"I saw you, Hermione. For three evenings in a row, you have arrived at my front door with the same man. I don't care what you do outside you are a grown up, and you can do what you want but you signed a contract, and it said, 'no male guests come into this house'. You aren't allowed to bring your boyfriend into my daughter's bedroom, is that clear?"

During Mrs. Neill's speech, Hermione's face had flushed scarlet red, then pea green, until it settled on pumpkin orange. "That ~~that~~ *man* he is not my *boyfriend*, Mrs. Neill, and if you have believed so, I have to say that you are totally misled. No, no, that's absurd. And in any case, I would never let him in your house I remember very well what I've signed, and I have no intention whatsoever of breaking our contract," she bristled.

"Uhm. It better be so," grumbled Mrs. Neill, the tone of her voice clearly signalling that she didn't believe what Hermione told her to be true. "I would judge you rather poorly, otherwise. He's too old for you, from what I tell from a distance. I suppose he's closer to my age than to yours."

"He was my teacher," said Hermione defiantly. *And Dumbledore's murderer. And a war hero. It's ridiculous discussing who Severus Snape is with Mrs. Neill. This whole conversation is ridiculous.*

"A teacher," echoed Mrs. Neill, plunging her hands, until then still crossed on her breast, in the pockets of the pink, fluffy bathrobe she used as a nightgown. Also, her expression relaxed as she paced the entrance hall directed toward the kitchen. In the doorway, she paused and she swung from one foot to the other, opening and closing her mouth as if she had preferred to repress what she was going to say. Finally, she said, "If he's a teacher, we can hope he knows how to behave himself. As for you, don't forget your contract, Hermione."

"You don't need to worry about that, Mrs. Neill."

Mrs. Neill went into the kitchen, closing the door behind her, and before she could hear the metallic clink of the door closing Hermione zoomed upstairs to her bedroom. *Time must be out of joint. Mrs. Neill believes Snape is my 'boyfriend'. Snape doesn't shout at me when he could. He uses the 'overgrown bat' as a joke. Either they or I must have finally gone crazy.*

And to match me with Snape is as preposterous as matching him with Mrs. Neill, in any case.

Saturday, July 18th, 2009

Thank God it's Saturday.

Sunday, July 19th, 2009

Ah, but the day before yesterday it was Friday the 17th. It was only bad luck all together

Monday, July 20th, 2009, 10:03 p.m.

"Thank you for not shouting at me on Friday, Professor."

"I don't need to shout, Miss Granger. You seem to perform all the shouting necessary in our conversations."

Hermione bit her lip at the memory of the night when she had ungracefully asked Snape to leave the library.

"That was a month ago," she said. After a pause, she continued, "Seriously, Professor, I've been terribly rude. I'm grateful for your understanding."

"You said nothing that could trouble me, Miss Granger."

The light rain that was falling from the Prussian blue sky intensified, and in a moment, the gentle shower turned into heavy and noisy drops. Snape lifted the black umbrella that he had used as a cane to punctuate his steps, opened it, and invited Hermione to shelter herself under it. Hermione hesitated, but when a drop splashed directly on her nose, scattering smaller drops onto her glasses and making her blink instinctively, she accepted the offer.

Side by side under the umbrella, Hermione said thoughtfully, "I don't know if it's a good idea."

"What?"

"To arrive home under your umbrella. On Friday, Mrs. Neill reproached me."

"Who is Mrs. Neill?"

"My landlady. She believes you are my suitor."

I told him As Monday evening approached, Hermione had pondered a very difficult decision. Should she tell Snape about Mrs. Neill's suspicions, or was it better to stay silent? If she were to tell Snape about Mrs. Neill's conclusions, she would intend it as a means to make those night strolls of theirs come to an end they were folly, indeed, and it was better to stop even good-intentioned follies. Everyone could see her walking home with Snape from Mrs. Peewit to the supermarket cashier and everyone could come to the same conclusion as Mrs. Neill, who wasn't, to tell the truth, the brightest mind around. And if Mrs. Neill could deduce that they were intimate, everyone could, really.

The bad side of informing Snape of Mrs. Neill's deductions was, of course, to get the opposite wanted effect. She would reinforce the idea that there was actually something to care about their walks. Worse, she could sound coquettish. Even worse she could plant strange ideas in Snape's mind.

The safest choice would be to stay silent, as it had always been since she had met Snape at the Emily Brontë Library. As long as they had ignored each other, everything went well. But a part of her wished to tell someone of Mrs. Neill's ridiculousness *craved* to comment about her absurd arguments and the only person who would appreciate its absurdity, alas, was Snape himself.

"That's preposterous!" observed Snape, outraged.

"I know! That's what I told her," replied Hermione with a clear voice, and then she added, in a lower key, "also because I am aware of the real reasons why you asked to accompany me home."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I've figured it out. You wanted me to continue the endurance practice. Since you found yourself to be the cause of the resurgence of my fixed images, on the unfortunate night in which Malgorzata brought the grass snake inside the library, you felt obliged to provide me a cure for them. When your lessons proved... untimely, however, you decided to try another coaching technique, which consists of making me share your company ten minutes a day. So to speak, it's like taking one drop of a certain poison every day to get used to it, until its poisoning effects don't work anymore in your case. Not that you're poisonous, of course; it was a terrible example, in truth. But you understand what I mean. I'm sorry if I involved you in this. It's not your fault that the grass snake reminded me of Nagini, of course, and I acknowledge that actually you had every right to become irritated with me because *I* reminded *you* of that loathsome beast. I apologize because I've been selfish, and I should have thought twice before mentioning the name of that beast to you. I'm sorry if I shocked you with my half-faint and with the subjects of my fixed images. But I can assure you that what resulted from seeing the grass snake lasted only for one weekend. It happened one month ago, and for all this time, I haven't had any more occurrences. I can't honestly say if it's because that was an isolated episode anyway, as I didn't suffer any fixed images in recent years, or if it's an effect of your lessons. In any case, I thank you, Professor. I know that under your bark you always cared for your students, even long-time graduated students like me."

At the end of her tirade, they had almost reached Hermione's house. The rain was still falling, but in a more regular, less violent way, and its murmur was echoed by the streaming waters of the Foss, now behind them.

"I'm impressed," said Snape with his softest, most velvety voice. "I'm unwilling to admit that you guessed my intentions, Miss Granger. It was true what they said about your intelligence, after all."

Hermione sighed in relief. She had sensed that her intuition was correct, but she doubted their effect once expressed aloud. And being complimented by Snape was not

something that happened every day. For a second, she felt as if she were back at Hogwarts, behind her cauldron in the Potions class, having just faultlessly brewed a most difficult elixir.

They turned the corner that opened onto Haworth Road. Hermione's house was just a few metres away.

"I don't want to upset your Mrs. Neill, Miss Granger," said Snape. "I would leave you here, if it wasn't for the rain."

"Oh, I can cover these few metres in the rain. It's not that my hair could get worse, in any case," replied Hermione with a smile, and she pulled her head out from the umbrella's protection.

"No, but rain could damage the books in your bag," pointed out Snape.

"My bag is completely waterproof, Professor. It's interwoven with Impervius Charms, you know," she said brightly.

"I see," said Snape, and his figure mingled with the rain as Hermione approached the doorway of her house.

A/N: Deep thanks to valady, RobisonRocket and growley464 for betaing it.

Trust...

Chapter 7 of 20

In which Hermione discovers what Snape does for a living, goes to a Viking circus and meets the Boddingtons.

Our world go beyond the moon,

Our words go into the shadows.

The river sings the endlessness.

We write of our journey through night,

We write in our aloneness,

We want to know the shape of eternity.

~ Enya, *The river sings*

Tuesday, July 21st, 2009

It was raining again, and Snape waited for her at the front door of the library under his black umbrella, glossy with water.

"So, what do you prefer to do, Miss Granger? Do you want to continue taking your daily drop of poison?" he asked.

Hermione's shoulder lowered in frustration. "That was an unfortunate turn of phrase," she justified herself, abashed. "A terrible example. What I wanted to say..."

Snape smirked. "You are too easy to make uneasy, Miss Granger. I may even consider the possibility of ceasing my efforts to discomfort you, because you offer satisfaction without any effort."

Hermione looked confused for a moment. *Is he trifling with me? Was that a joke?* The quirk at the corners of Snape's mouth deepened, and she knew she had not offended him.

"I've told you already that there's nothing you can say that would offend me, Miss Granger. I'm used to quite harsher definitions of myself than the ones you could make up. Now come," he said, lifting the umbrella up a little in her direction, "or tell me honestly that you have had enough of this cure and that you prefer to go home by swimming."

"I could always Apparate, you know," she remarked with a slightly petulant inflection as she took her place at Snape's side, under his umbrella.

"That would be rather boring and predictable."

"You almost sound as if you find this task of accompanying me enjoyable, sir. But I've revealed you; I know you are doing this out of duty." Hermione smiled. *Snape may know everything about obsessions, but I know everything about duty. And, for what I know of him, Snape knows a lot about it too. There's nothing wrong with acting out of duty; in duty, there is certainty.*

Rain was coming down loudly around them, surrounding them with a noisy curtain of water that dripped from the rim of the umbrella. Hermione pulled out her wand and cast a quick water repelling charm in front of them, to prevent them from sliding on the pavement stones.

"You can make yourself useful sometimes, Miss Granger," commented Snape. "I cannot totally complain that you have agreed to oblige this old man's wishes."

"You are not old, Professor," she replied with automatic politeness.

From the deepening edge of Snape's smirk, Hermione understood that she had said exactly what Snape wanted to be told. *How vain!* She shook her head in indignation. *He knows perfectly well that he's not that old. He's only forty-nine, after all. Almost a youngster, by wizarding standards.*

But can he still be judged by wizarding standards? He has no more magical powers. Does he still have the life expectancy of a wizard?

A thoughtful expression fell on Hermione's face as she followed her considerations. She clenched her wand more strongly as she continued to repel the water beneath

their feet. *I shunned the wizarding world for so long, she thought. But I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost my powers. This man has survived through more than I could imagine.*

A jolt of fear ran through her as she considered the scenario of living without magic. She quivered, and the involuntary movement made her shoulder contact with Snape's right arm holding the umbrella.

"I don't know how you can do it," she whispered almost imperceptibly, regaining her balance.

"Do what?" he scowled.

"Live without magic," murmured Hermione with a querulous voice, feeling on the verge of crying.

"For Merlin's sake, Granger, spare your tears for when you'll start working for the Ministry," hissed Snape, disgusted.

Hermione snuffled. "I haven't been selected yet."

"Oh, I'm sure they will be happy to wear you like one more war badge, Miss Granger. In fact, I wonder why you aren't the Head of some department yet, like some of your good old friends."

Hermione snored while her lips widened in a nostalgic smile. "They ask me the same thing all the time, you know. Everybody expected me to make an instant career after Hogwarts." *I expected that as well, before 1998*

"Instead, you preferred to restore Muggle books."

"I did," Hermione nodded. "Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased that I decided not to pursue my studies in a magical university."

"Minerva wasn't pleased about many things," Snape remarked curtly. Then he added with a silkier tone, "But pray do enlighten me, Miss Granger, as to why a person who showed enough sense to keep herself out of Hogwarts and the Ministry for ten years now wishes to relinquish her well-being for a dog's leash and to exchange freedom for slavery."

"They didn't inform me you cared so much for other people's well-being, Professor."

"It's a most recent habit of mine, Miss Granger. I just developed it."

Hermione repressed a laugh and shook her head one more time. *I was right. Snape is joking with me. He wants to put me in a good humour. But he is also evading my question. And I'm just as bad.*

Hawthorn Road appeared in front of them, blurred behind the waterfall of rain, and Hermione, believing nobody would see anything from the windows, let Snape accompany her to the front door.

On Wednesday night, Hermione had just entered into her room and deposited her bag on the floor next to the bed when something knocked at her window. Pic pic, pic pic. She turned and she saw an owl fluttering outside the glass.

"Hedwig III!" She welcomed the bird, opening the window. Harry's owl flew inside and landed on the bed's headboard, where she shook the drops of rain off her feathers. For the third evening in a row, it was raining. Hermione took a biscuit from a pack on her desk and offered it to the bird. Then she proceeded to untie a roll of parchment from the owl's claw.

Dear Hermione,

How are you? They tell me there's horrible weather in York these days. Luckily, here in the south, we don't have similar problems. The temperatures are even too high and the children are always outside, playing in their plastic swimming pool. Ginny is constantly complaining because the garden has turned into a swamp and the kids drag mountains of mud inside the house. Do you know if there is a general anti-dirt, anti-spots, anti-disaster spell that can be performed to protect houses from children? Ginny would like it very much, but even Molly seems to ignore the existence of such a spell.

Even if the house is turned into a pigsty, we would be glad if you agree to join us for Neville's and my birthday party next week, on Thursday 30th. You can arrive here anytime after you finish working.

We are having a small dinner here at Godric's Hollow on the 30th, and then there will be a bigger party at the Burrow on the 31st. I invited you to our home because I know that you prefer not to frequent the Burrow. However, should you like to come, you are welcome to the party there as well.

On the 30th, there will be only the eleven of us - me, Ginny, you, Neville and Hannah, Luna, Ron and the kids. On Friday, everybody must go to work, so it will be a really constrained party. At midnight, we will eat the cake, and then the party will be declared over.

Speaking of Neville, he told me that at Hogwarts they are looking for a new DADA teacher. Each year the same story. Minerva wants me to finally accept the job, but I reminded her that the post is jinxed, and that I wouldn't last there more than the other teachers did. But she's terribly stubborn about that. She says that if I accept to teach DADA, the jinx will eventually be broken. I told her to look somewhere else for miracles.

Ginny wants me to put the children to bed. We will talk longer when you come here next week. All the best,

Yours,

Harry

No matter how much she had distanced herself from her Hogwarts mates, Harry's birthday was an annual appointment Hermione never missed. It reminded her of better times: when she was brave and strong, strong enough to give Death Eaters the slip in a crowded London night. For the occasion, she could be even willing to meet Ron again. She also looked forward to meeting Harry's children again - James, Albus, and little Lily. They had surely grown.

She picked up a quill and scribbled an answer.

Dear Harry,

I will surely come to your party. I can't wait to see Ginny, Luna and Neville again, and to see how much your kids have grown. I finish working at ten p.m.: I will Apparate in Godric's Hollow by five past ten at the latest.

I think Minerva may have a reason why she pursues you. Even for one year, you would make an excellent DADA teacher. Students would adore you.

That reminds me, I've met an old acquaintance of ours here in York. I will tell you more next week.

Kiss the children for me. See you soon

Yours,

Hermione

Hermione tied the parchment to Hedwig II's claw and she stroked the bird's head. "Go and fly back to Godric's Hollow. I will follow soon," she murmured, and she pushed the owl toward the rainy night sky. Then she closed the window behind her, took one of the same biscuits she had offered Hedwig II, and grabbed Harry's letter to flip through it again while she munched her biscuit.

She stopped when she re-read 'the eleven of us me, Ginny, you, Neville and Hanna, Luna, Ron and the kids.' *Me, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Hanna and Luna make seven, and the three children make ten.* Harry had never been a genius in maths, but surely, he knew how to count up to eleven. Had he simply misspelt eleven instead of ten? Or was there going to be another person with them in Godric's Hollow?

On Thursday night, the rain had luckily dwindled into a gentle shower, and Hermione declined Snape's offer to use the umbrella. Instead, she accepted the refreshing, tickling touch of the light drops that rested in her hair like morning dew but who cared? Her hair had always been impossible, resisting every kind of magical and Muggle brushing, so a little more humidity wasn't certainly going to change her looks that much. After all, she was only going home with Snape she was not showing off on a catwalk.

The light rain carried the smell of grass and heather, and it was a pleasure to walk among it after staying closed for so long inside the library. Hermione felt crossed by the same feeling of an inebriating summer night she had known in another time, in another place. She felt... well, simply too positive to risk a perilous subject.

"I received a letter yesterday, from Ha a friend of mine. Concerning Hogwarts." Sensing no objections, she continued, "He tells me they are looking for a new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher. Again."

"The job is jinxed," commented Snape flatly.

"Headmistress McGonagall would like Harry Potter to apply for the post."

"This may be the time a job succeeds where the Dark Lord failed."

"Professor!"

"I may be actually lucky. I earned said title in teaching another subject than DADA, considering the consequences."

"Headmistress McGonagall believes that Harry could break the jinx surrounding the post."

Snape snorted. "Minerva, as many of her fellow Gryffindors, is totally misguided about the matter."

Hermione frowned. "Why, sir? Do you believe you know more about it?"

"As it happens, I do."

"And what is the solution you suggest, sir?" asked Hermione with a shrill voice.

"The job is jinxed because it's founded upon the wrong premises. Hogwarts should not teach only to defend against the Dark Arts... it should teach the Dark Arts, period. The castle senses it."

Hermione's frown deepened and she took a step away from Snape. The rain, which hit her, was suddenly cold and sharp on her skin. "I would not have expected you to still harp on the Dark Arts, Professor," she remarked, seriously.

"The Dark Arts are dark only if you call them such. Label something 'forbidden' and people will be more attracted towards it. Creating taboo only generates fascination, and fascination for the forbidden may be worse than the prohibited object itself. That's what happened in this country, at least." Snape's face was extremely serious, too, and his black eyes, glimmering in the dark pools under his brow, were fixed on some distant point in front of him.

"In Durmstrang they teach the Dark Arts, and Grindelwald came out of it."

"He was expelled from Durmstrang because of his behaviour. And in Bulgaria, people don't wander around killing each other all the time, or was that your impression, Miss Granger? Now that you make me think about it, it seems to me that you met a selection of students from Durmstrang, very long ago, during that disgraced Triwizard Tournament. Did they look like a mass of dangerous criminals to you?"

Hermione fell silent. No one was more distant from the ideals of a Dark wizard than Viktor. They had actually discussed a lot about that problem, in a past that now seemed a fairytale.

"You can't prevent homicides through a death penalty, Miss Granger. And you can't stop wizards who abuse their powers by keeping them in the ignorance of a substantial part of magic. Instead, you push the most curious of them to seek that knowledge by themselves, unguided, with greater risks for themselves and for the others." Snape's mouth was but a thin line when he stopped talking.

"Until, you mean, they find a guide who is willing to feed their curiosity for his own ends, a guide who is not a respectable teacher of Hogwarts, but someone far more dangerous and untrustworthy," Hermione continued slowly. She raised her eyes to meet Snape's and looked firmly into those shimmering tunnels.

"Exactly, Miss Granger, that is the greater risk," said Snape, returning her gaze. Their pupils reflected into each other for a long moment, and when they broke eye contact, Hermione had the terrifying, exciting impression of having grasped a meaning that dissolved in the next second. It was frightening and irresistible to talk about Voldemort with Snape, as walking on a narrow path encircling a gorge from whence comes an intoxicating perfume.

She wasn't sure she agreed with Snape, possibly not. The Dark Arts were out of question for her. It was a dangerous subject, too dangerous, no matter how Bulgaria and other countries had decided to tackle it. Despite his athletic build, Viktor was kind at heart, but other people were not. However, she could not dismiss the fact that there were many ways of harming a person, without ever resorting to any Dark enchantment. To plunge a knife into another person's breast was not considered Dark but it was fatal all the same.

She could not say she was pleased to hear Snape suggesting that Hogwarts should teach the Dark Arts, and that a Dark Arts teacher would last longer than *Defence Against* the Dark Arts one. It reminded her of her discussion with Harry after their first DADA lesson with Snape, in their sixth year. But she couldn't help but be amazed at the way in which Snape talked about Hogwarts and magic in general. Despite his mild resentment against Minerva (that was only too understandable, at least from his point of view, she considered), Snape managed the topic with an impressive ease as if he wasn't once powerful wizard deprived of his magic and more or less voluntarily shut out of the magical community. He didn't converse about magic with nostalgia or hatred or bitterness. He seemed... at peace with the whole matter, as if he could be satisfied with his present, non-magical life, as he was with his previous, magic-filled existence. In fact, he seemed even happier now than he was before.

Could living in peace, without fighting in a war that never seemed to end, repay the loss of magic? Did he consider it the right price to pay for a life without Voldemort or the right punishment for his deeds?

Hermione may not agree with him, but she be damned if she didn't admire *envy, is the word* the apparent state of contentment that Snape had reached during those years in which she had struggled to keep herself just a step above depression through a succession of misfortunes. Snape, somehow the grey emblem of what a war could ask from a man had managed to leave the wretchedness behind.

It may not be pleasing to admit, but it was easier to go through the last, lonely hours of work in the reading room, bearing in mind the idea that there was someone waiting for you outside the door, even if that someone was someone like Snape. The library seemed less lonely, less isolated, and the bookshelves were again her dear friends, not some irregular, threatening shapes. Hermione was halfway through restoring Brother Lucretius' third tome, and there were only two more to go before her stage would end.

But concerns about work could wait. It was Friday, and ahead of her, there was a long weekend of peaceful study and chores. She closed *The Twelve Patriarkes* with a loving caress, put her tools in order, took her bag, switched off all the lights, and walked out of the library. At the front door, as regular as clockwork, was Snape, his usual anthracite shirt buttoned down to his wrists and black trousers. The umbrella, luckily, had been left at home.

Hermione smiled at him, and a certain curve at the corner of Snape's mouth could pass for returning the smile. The man stepped back to let Hermione walk through the door, and as she passed, Hermione heard a tiny noise behind her, as if something had fallen on to the chippings. She turned and she saw Snape bent to collect something from the ground. Before it disappeared from Snape's hand into his pocket, Hermione could recognise a small Moleskine notebook and a pencil.

By the swiftness with which Snape had fastened those objects back in the pocket of his trousers and above all by the expression with which Snape withered her when he had caught her watching him doing so Hermione got the impression that she had discovered something that Snape didn't mean for her to know. However, she heard herself asking, "Do you take notes during your night strolls, Professor?"

"Yes, about the indiscretion of women," he barked.

Hermione scowled, but she held her tongue. She simply turned on her heels and proceeded toward the library's gates. A moment later, she heard the cracking of Snape's steps behind her.

They walked silently up to the bridge. There, as they passed under the first lamppost, and Snape spat, "All right, Miss Granger. You had already asked it, and you would manage to discover it in any case, sooner or later. Yes, I do write."

"I had not asked," she said.

"You insisted on learning what I do for a living, and now I repeat: I write."

"About potions?"

"Oh, no; no more of that. It grew tiresome. Now I like to waste my time on trifles."

Hermione blinked. "Do you mean novels? And what kind of novels do you write?" she asked, bewildered.

"Spy stories, of course," replied Snape, and finally the now familiar smirk came back to its place.

"Nobody ever told me, and I would have never discovered that by myself," she said, as a wave of enthusiasm rose in her.

"That's the meagre utility of using a *nom de plume*."

Which is? Which is? "I thought you received a war pension from the Ministry, actually."

"They offered me one, and I was not decent enough to decline their cheques, to tell the truth," Snape smugly said. "Writing is not an activity one does for the money."

"But you are published, aren't you?"

"Yes; they published the first two volumes of a series. I'm writing the third now"

Which are their titles? "So, the manuscript you consulted at the library..."

"Was for reference, yes, Miss Granger."

"Medieval warfare?"

"My series is set at the end of the Middle Ages."

"And I was the one fixed in the past." There was an exquisite delight in mocking a sarcastic man, especially when she knew that her remarks would be accepted in the same spirit.

"Not past enough." Snape slowed his pace and turned to peer at her. He searched Hermione's face with an intense stare, until she felt uncomfortable *Stop staring at me and tell me more about your books*, she thought. Eventually, Snape asked with a velvety inflection, "Have you already been to Jorvik Centre?"

"Eh? No, I haven't," Hermione replied.

"Mr. and Mrs. Boddington helped to create a few of the rooms of the exhibition." In response to Hermione's blank expression, Snape explained, "The Boddingtons are the other wizards living in town, Miss Granger."

"Ah, right. You mentioned them in your note."

"Uh-uhm. They are usually in the Centre on Sundays. You might enjoy a visit there, perhaps."

"Are you inviting me there?"

"Why, do you want me to accompany you?"

"No! I mean... why not? If you like the place..."

"To say that I 'like' the place sounds rather bombastic; it's a caravan with too many people in it, both in flesh and bones and in wax. But for you it could be instructive."

"Are we going there on Sunday? Morning or afternoon?"

"Afternoon, for heaven's sake... But I've already visited it."

"If you don't come, how am I supposed to be introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Boddington?"

"You could always ask, Miss Granger. And, unfortunately, neither I nor you need to be introduced to any wizard in Britain."

"You could always ask, Miss Granger." Gnah gnah. Your velvet tone can be really obnoxious at times. Would you have replied had I asked you the title of your books? You were trying so hard to hide that notebook from me. But I will discover their titles.

As soon as she reached her room, Hermione opened her laptop, ready to give up her night's sleep to find those damned novels on the web, if that were the case. She knew the internet would only provide her with information about books sold to Muggles, but somehow she sensed that she would not find Snape's novels in Flourish and Blotts.

At one o' clock, she was in the same blindness as before. She had surfed through amazon.com and other bookselling sites, but it was impossible to find something with such a general subject as 'spy story' and 'medieval'. Stories of Brother Cadfael tumbled upon her at each query. She tried sites specialized in detective fiction and was at a loss at the sheer quantity of titles, enlisted under subcategories and subcategories of subcategories. Nothing had offered her a clue.

At two o' clock in the morning, she gave up. *I have lost three hours of sleep for you, Severus Snape. One day you'll repay me them*

Saturday was for shopping and doing the washing and home chores. Hermione could easily dust her room with a flick of her wand, but she preferred to have real water poured through her clothes, and the washing machine was downstairs, in Mrs. Neill's bathroom. She wasn't allowed to use it when she came back from the library, for it would have awakened Mrs. Neill.

Of all these household activities, going shopping was by far her favourite. She loved supermarkets; she loved them since her childhood, when she would sit in the trolley's baby seat and get pushed around by her mother. She was no great cook; neither did she like to spend more time than needed in Mrs. Neill's kitchen. Therefore, her home-prepared meals consisted mainly of heated-up vegetables, soups, smashed potatoes and the like. She blessed every day the inventor of the microwave.

That Saturday, Hermione didn't go to the usual supermarket around the corner. Instead, she crossed the bridge to go to the big Sainsbury downtown that casually obliged her to pass by a Waterstone's. By chance, she decided to make a detour into the bookstore, and by anything but mere chance, she found herself in the section of detective fiction. Every title there was new to her, apart from the Agatha Christie ones she had read when she was twelve. The covers ranged from brutal depictions of gore to elegant, old-fashioned vignettes. All those books had only two things in common: they were too many, and none of them had been written by Snape.

Until she saw it. On a lower shelf. Thin. Less than two hundred pages, at a rough guess. A watercolour-painted wall on the jacket. Title *Against a Brick Wall*. Author: Leslie Prince. She read Prince and she knew that had to be him. Cursing mentally the system of cataloguing, which had placed the book with historical novels and not with spy stories, Hermione picked up *Against a Brick Wall* and read the description.

"A spy has only one enemy: his heart, if he has one." Jacob Norton code name: Funnel returns in this breathless adventure, that continues unravelling the web of court intrigue and political manoeuvres we had experienced in Smoke From the Chimneys. The battle of Stoke Fields put an end to Lambert Simnel's claim to the English throne. Francis Lovell is missing. Funnel returns to Burgundy only to discover that Maximilian of Habsburg has been taken prisoner. What would Funnel do to save the son-in-law of his patroness, the dowager duchess Margaret? And which will be his role when a new pretender to the English crown appears under the name of Perkin Warbeck?

Suspense will make your hair rise as you follow the turn of events that lead Funnel through his fight against his enemies and his friends as well in this gripping tale masterly told by Leslie Prince.

Well, it seemed historical enough to be placed under the historical fiction section, after all. It was published by a little publishing house Hermione had never heard of it probably local, and this could account for her difficulties in finding it on the net. She searched the shelves, but *Smoke From the Chimneys* the first book in the series, it seemed was nowhere to be found. She asked a shop assistant and was told that the book would need to be ordered. She let that go and proceeded to pay for *Against a Brick Wall*.

She did her shopping in a rush and returned home, almost running. She shoved the milk bottle and the lettuce in the fridge and fled upstairs. She sprawled on her bed and sank into the book.

It was not a masterpiece of literature, that was sure. But the prose was carefully crafted and abounded in wit. An undercurrent line of ironical scepticism invested both characters and actions, and it smacked foully of Snape. In truth, it was a refreshing change from the usually pompous phrasing of historical novels set in the Middle Ages. Hermione might not sport a significant knowledge of detective fiction, but she was quite acquainted with historical reconstructions. In general, her favourites involved libraries, typographers and the like and were set in the Netherlands. Flanders was a close choice.

A memory came back from a very distant region of her mind of when she was a young girl, all determination and bravery, and she had spent the summer leading to her thirteenth birthday reading of Gilderoy Lockhart's adventures with banshees and yetis. She sighed. The man was a fraud, and she had been almost as foolish in falling in love with his blatant inventions. Yet she could not dismiss the memory of that sentiment altogether; the object of her affection had been despicable, however, the feeling itself, of being in love, had been cheerful and exciting and could still bring warmth to her chest. She tenderly smiled at her younger and brasher self.

People say that adolescence is a difficult age. Hermione would gladly give all of the years after her eighteenth birthday to live again one day as a thirteen or fourteen years old to hold again the spark of recklessness, the untainted joy of living, the not-rationalized sensation of being alive. She cherished the memory of a time in which she hadn't feared her own mind, hadn't experienced yet the frailty of the one thing she valued above all the rest: her thought. No matter how much Voldemort had put her and her friends in peril, peril was recognized as such only when it became internal. The real enemy was not aggression it was cancer.

Hermione observed the orderly, moss-covered bricks painted on the jacket. *Against a Brick Wall*. That's where she was, wasn't she? Hermione Granger, once a promising prodigy, now almost thirty, without a paid job, without a boyfriend, a promising expert in self-deprecation. To all appearances, so little had changed. Seventeen years after that summer, she could still be found reading her professors' books, and thinking higher of them because of that. She couldn't help but grow a little reverence for the people whose prose she valued. Maybe she shouldn't be in a mood for self-complaint after all. Jacob 'Funnel' Norton wouldn't approve.

Next morning Sunday, July 26th when Hermione went downstairs to prepare her breakfast, Mrs Neill waved an envelope under her nose. "This was in the mailbox for you, Hermione," she said. Inside it there was only a small note scribbled on a pale green card:

Sunday afternoon Jorvik Viking Centre three p.m. Coppergate. S. S.

"There isn't a stamp on the envelope; someone must have dropped it personally in the mailbox during the night," added Mrs. Neill, giving Hermione a piercing look, as if she knew perfectly well who that *someone* was and disapproved of him completely.

"It's possible," replied Hermione, and she addressed a malevolent smile to Mrs. Neill when the older woman turned her back *I wish that next time Snape would send me an owl, and that it would land directly on the kitchen table just to make an impression on Mrs. Neill.*

She didn't spot him immediately. The city centre was crowded with inhabitants and tourists enjoying a Sunday walk. For once, the day was sunny and hot, and people flowed in the streets holding ice creams and beverages. Hermione reached the entrance to Jorvik Viking Centre and peeped inside, worrying at the sight of the long queue waiting at the ticket office. When she turned toward the street, Snape was right behind her.

"Miss Granger," he said with a nod of his head.

"Professor," she greeted him. Instead of his usual gray, black or green, Snape was wearing a dark blue shirt. Blue and shirt were a combination Hermione couldn't proclaim herself indifferent to. *The article fits even Snape. A magic out of the blue*

"No 'Professors' here, Miss Granger. No one in town knows me under that title. You can call me 'sir' or 'Mr. Snape' or as you wish."

"Maybe... Leslie Prince?"

A concerned look erred for a moment through Snape's eyes and was gone before Hermione could blink. If she hadn't known the man, Hermione would call *that* fear.

"If you wish," said Snape silkily, and Hermione decided it was better to avoid the matter for a while.

Jorvik Centre was a caravan, as Snape had said. He had insisted on paying for her ticket, however, and had made only mild remarks on the boorishness of the place. As for Hermione, she had enjoyed it immensely. They had been asked to take seat on a 'time machine' which, by all means, looked like a roller coaster car and had been carried on a ride through a reconstruction of the old Viking York populated with wax figures. Hermione happily submitted to the idea of a time machine that could turn you back in time at the mere sound of a registered voice on a screen. It made Time-Turners sound so complicated. It was very ironic when you considered, as Snape said, that two wizards, Mr. and Mrs. Boddington, contributed to the concept of the building. But the lulling voice of the speaker seemed indeed able to cast a spell on the visitors, and Hermione abandoned herself to the suspension of disbelief.

The one element of reality Hermione could not forget was Snape sitting at her side in the car. God, a dark blue shirt could have an effect on her, even when it was worn by an ugly man. Black made him look too pale, and rifle green only emphasized his sallow complexion. Blue, on the other hand, made an interesting contrast with his black hair. The glossy quality of the fabric Egyptian cotton? would surely make it smooth to the touch. It surely depended only on the colour combination, but she could almost feel a heat, surging from her and directed toward the shirt...

The content of our thoughts is not subject to moral judgement

At the end of their tour through the galleries, Hermione headed to the toilets. When she emerged, Snape was in the gift shop, talking with two middle-aged people.

"Hermione, these are the Boddingtons, Adele and Eustace."

"Ooh! The famous Miss Granger! Can we call you Hermione too, please? We are honoured to meet you, finally!" Eustace Boddington shook her hand enthusiastically and Adele beamed at her.

Hermione smiled faintly and glanced at Snape. He looked supremely serious, which only meant he was keeping his sarcasm for himself. "I'm pleased to meet you too, sir, madam," she said.

"Ahah! Well, it's a pleasure for us to have you in town, and we are glad that Severus decided to show you our humble Jorvik Centre."

"Please honour us with your company. Come to lunch one of these days. Our house is right in front of Jorvik."

"Ehm, Adele, dear, I don't know if we deserve to have Miss Granger as a guest."

"Why so?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"You see, Hermione, we are not of the brave kind. When You-Know-Who came back to power, twelve years ago, we fled to France."

"We left the war to heroes like you and our Severus here. We have been selfish... and cowardly."

"We are so grateful that Severus bestowed us with his friendship when he came to live here. Ah, but we imagine he would feel more at ease with someone like you."

Then Mrs. Boddington prayed them to excuse her and went to speak quietly with the shop assistant. When she rejoined them, she invited Hermione to take whatever she wished from the shop.

"Let us give you a gift, dear. We made Severus confess that he did ~~pay~~ *pay!* for the entrance ticket, and that's absurd. He could ask us free tickets every time."

"I don't want to bother you, Adele."

"Nonsense. People like you and Miss Granger saved this country. We owe you more than an entrance ticket."

They insisted so much that she should choose something from the gift shop that eventually she resigned.

"I was sure you would choose a book."

"It was more expensive."

"Humph. It's as well you liked the Jorvik circus so much to have a mug with their logo."

"You said I would find it instructive."

"I meant that meeting the Boddingtons would be instructive."

"It was instructive to watch you keep your tongue while they greeted the 'famous Miss Granger.'"

"I forgive them because they did that for themselves, not for your sake. They seek our absolution. Do you know they are purebloods? Mrs. Foxcroft Adele's grandmother would host my mother in her manor during summer holidays. She considered herself ah a philanthropist."

"So, you have known Mrs. Boddington since you were a child."

"We visited the Foxcrofts only in summer, when we came back to Yorkshire. Adele is ten years older than me, so we would likely ignore each other when we were young."

"I'm surprised to learn that you are friends with people who call themselves cowards and declare you a hero."

"Do you?"

"I meant... Oh, never mind. Why do you find the Boddingtons instructive?"

"They live on the Muggle side, as you can see. They work with and for Muggles and limit their use of magic to silly charms like enhancing the appeal of the speaker's voice."

"So it was charmed, then."

"Absolutely. The whole place is charmed to please visitors. Pity that the Entrancing Enchantment is badly cast, so that visitors also end up finding each other attractive."

"Ah." Hermione paused. "In any case, I approve of two purebloods willing to work in a Muggle environment."

Snape sneered. "They do that out of guilt. When they came back to England at the end of the war, unscathed, they believed themselves unworthy of using magic again. They craved their share in the general suffering, and they gave up their magically pampered life except for idiocies, of course. Jorvik that's the pureblood survivor's guilt."

"You are actually fond of them."

"Adele is a great cook, and Eustace can play a decent match of Gobstones. You have to go there for a lunch, one day."

Snape bid Hermione goodbye at Monk Bar Court, telling her he was busy, and walked away depriving her of the sight of his blue shirt. She took her time before going home, pacing slowly and bathing in the yellow light that was what she liked the best in summer afternoons.

She could see the relation between herself, Snape, and the Boddingtons. Their reactions were a variation on the same theme. She had left Hogwarts in fear, crushed by the images of what magic could lead to. She had chosen a Muggle university and possibly a Muggle job to escape from a world that no longer seemed as dreamlike as she had believed for so long. The Boddingtons, as far as she could deduce, were ashamed by their magic and their pureblood birth. They lived among Muggles as a penitence. As for Severus, he had not relinquished his magic willingly, but he had apparently reached this mysterious contentment with his condition that Hermione found so admirable. He wrote for Muggles about Muggle history and his demeanour seemed devoid of regret.

Did I call him Severus? Did I think his composure admirable? To be badly cast, this Entrancing Enchantment is quite strong.

But she was well out of Jorvik now, and she did know there wasn't any Enchantment at work. That had simply been the first time she had met Snape in a public space, outside of their night strolls and the library. Among the unknown and unnamed York crowd, he was the only one she knew. There wasn't anything notable in the fact that she felt a stronger connection with him than with those strangers. And it was only fair to say that Snape had played a big role in her life.

What she was more grateful for in that glorious summer afternoon was that the Snape she could say she knew was no more a trembling form on a dusty floor, spilling blood from his slashed neck. That foul image had thankfully been replaced with a new one. In the future, when she would think of Snape, she will not remember that night at the Shrieking Shack, but the low murmur of the Foss as he accompanied her home.

A/N: This chapter was a savage beast, and I'm grateful to the people who aided me in taming it. Pink Raccoon brainstormed it with me and helped me invent the titles of Snape's novels. Valady and RobisonRocket kindly betaed it. Thank them for my sake. Thanks also to W., with whom I visited Jorvik in June, 2008.

Snape writing thrillers bears reference to the present job of Italian (ex) terrorist Cesare Battisti.

... and betrayal

Chapter 8 of 20

In which Hermione has a nighttime revelation and tries to talk about it with Snape, but everything goes to the dogs. With an illustration by the author.



I've never felt this before

See you dead on the floor

I can't recall a single day

That's gonna make this pain slip away

My senses have been so cold

Didn't know how to feel or hold

For a second I felt something in you

For a second I believed in you

~ The Verve, *Feel*

She opened her eyes wide and was suddenly and completely awake. Under her neck, the pillowcase was drenched in sweat and the sheet was crumpled at her feet. Her arms lay rigidly at her sides. Her body was sunk in the mattress, and her mind was racing. The clock said that she had had only two hours of sleep, but an impellent realisation had made its way through her slumbering self.

It wasn't Fred. It was Snape. Fred came afterwards

She had believed that Fred's was the first image of death to stay fixed in her mind. That wasn't the truth. The image of Fred's body fixed in her mind only at the end of the Battle of Hogwarts, when she had been dragged back, almost senseless, in the Great Hall, where the bodies of the dead lay.

Fred's death shocked her *shattered* her and with that shock bouncing in her chest, she had entered into the Shrieking Shack. There she had witnessed Nagini's attack on Snape. And *then* the dreadful images started to stick in her mind.

She could not remember that night without feeling the air chill in her nostrils, screams thundering in her ears, and a black shadow falling on her and stretching out a hand to suffocate her.

There, in the Shrieking Shack. She stayed there, lurking behind Harry, listening but not watching to the dialogue between Snape and Voldemort. She peeped over Harry's shoulder only when she heard the snake's terrible hiss. A sparkle caught her eyes through the cracks in the wooden boards, and to her horror, she realised that it was a reflection of the light on Nagini's fangs. A moment later, those fangs sank into flesh.

Voldemort left the room, followed by his snake, as Harry sneaked inside. There were no obstacles to her sight. She watched.

Red. Black. Dust. Vapours emerging from the quivering black shape on the floor. Danger.

Harry shouted her to do something, and to do it quickly. She could do naught. She was paralysed against the wall. Her body did not obey her. It was frozen in panic, and her mind was frozen, too.

A snake and a body and blood and a neck and fangs and holes and Snape and over and over again.

Harry knelt by Snape's side and looked at him, and she looked at that scene while her legs refused to take a step onward or backward. Her mind was blank but for the plastered image and her voice had left her forever.

A snake, a body, blood, fangs, and I can't do anything, and I didn't do anything

Seven years of magical education wasted on her. She, the brightest witch of her age, had been betrayed by her brains.

Hermione rose up from her bed and poured herself a glass of water. She approached the window and looked down in the street. Haworth Road slept in front of her under a misty blue sky.

So, Snape had been right all along. She was guilty. She felt guilty, at least. She hadn't helped him as he lay dying. She was able to leave the Shrieking Shack only because Harry clasped her arm and pulled her away. He had received some special information from Snape and couldn't waste a minute. He hoped someone would aid Snape, because he didn't know what to do. Hermione followed him like a mummy, unable to speak, to think, to understand. Her eyes could watch, though, and she had watched.

Obsessive images cemented over her remorse, on her inability to save them all from pain, to save herself from the irrational. Now she could see how she had felt responsible for what went wrong, how her errors had splintered her sense of being in control. She was Hermione Granger, after all. Everybody had told her she was the one you could count on for order, safety and planning. Everybody expected her to be highly efficient and resistant. If Harry had to deal with Voldemort, Hermione was left the task of controlling, so that everything else went well. And she had *failed*.

She looked back at her eighteen-years-old self, the one who thought herself superior to all the rest of the world because of her intelligence and skills and her amazing *culture*. She had stopped feeling superior after she spent four months crying. Sorrow had brought her down, together with all the little creatures suffering. The proud girl who believed in her super-powers seemed so naive to her now.

How ironic that she would be set in the right direction by the man who had started it all. The clues had been right under her nose all along, but she lacked the key to decipher them. Responsibility and control were indeed the reasons behind her disease. While the wizarding world proclaimed her a hero, she felt undeserving of that title. The pattern appeared so clear to her now, in that moment of nighttime revelation. Magic could falter and play tricks with those who were also not committed to Dark Arts. You cannot trust it to shelter you forever from mistakes and troubles. She had reverted to Muggle, to stay with people allowed to make faults and be imperfect.

Sorrow had increased her understanding of other people's suffering, but there was one person who hadn't elicited her solidarity before, and that person was Snape. After the Battle of Hogwarts, she was reluctant to meet him again. She refused to visit him in St. Mungo's. Harry and Ron did go and kept at a safe distance from him during anniversary parties and ceremonies at the Ministry. Blame, fear and guilt intertwined in her reaction toward him at that time. She blamed him for becoming an object of her despised fixed images. She feared staring at him would create more images. She felt guilty for being unable to prevent all the former. Now she possessed a name for all those issues and she called them the effects of being there, in the Shrieking Shack, watching without intervening.

It wasn't irony. It was only justice that she would find the solution where her problems had started.

The things that seemed so clear during the night were messier under the bright morning sun, when she was not simply a stream of thoughts, but a social being committed to a job and to relationships with living people.

She felt unsure about the best way to deal with a very alive Snape coming to escort her home after work. Thank God he hadn't died that night in the Shrieking Shack. Otherwise, she would not suffer simply from fixed images, but of bloody psychosis. Thank God Minerva had found him before it was too late.

She had to ask forgiveness. She needed to be forgiven by him. She would be free then.

As she pondered her next steps on her way to work, Hermione remembered a few verses that used to soothe her in the past. In the library, she picked a worn-out paperback edition of Shakespeare's sonnets and read:

Sonnet 35

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:

Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud:

Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,

And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

All men make faults, and even I in this,

Authorizing thy trespass with compare,

Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,

Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are...

She had given them a different meaning then, but now they made even more sense.

"You seem silent this evening, Miss Granger. Already tired on a Monday? Or did bookworms eat your tongue, finally?"

"I don't know where to start."

"Speak a little bit louder, would you. I don't perceive infrasound."

"I have to tell you something, but I don't know where to start."

"Always with the most unpleasing part, please."

"I did you a wrong."

"You did a what?"

"I DID YOU A WRONG!"

"I'm not deaf; there's no need to scream."

"Are you listening to me then? I said I did you a wrong."

"Therefore you conformed to all the rest of humanity, that's what you mean?"

"I'm serious; I realised this last night."

"Why, I don't consider it a wrong yet that people think of me at night."

Hermione inhaled. "I remembered the Shrieking Shack. During the Battle of Hogwarts. I remembered as I was there, paralysed..."

"Ah, have you finally realised that you didn't lift a finger to help me, Granger? Belated apologies, aren't they?" Snape sneered in his nastier fashion.

Without a word, Hermione Disappeared.

How stupid, stupid had she been. Of course, Snape would bear a grudge against her. She was indeed the most naive of all women to expect comprehension from him. Maybe to accompany her home was just a way to inflict her punishment, to take a delayed revenge on her misdemeanours. He didn't want her to heal; he only wanted that she became aware of her past faults! He was cruel and mean and all the epithets she had refused to apply on him while she was at school. It was foolish of her to hope for a dignified scene of mutual understanding. As soon as she met him back in June, she had known he would do her no good. And it was absolutely rich to feel pity for him; he deserved none. It was absurd to seek peace in the reconciliation of their experiences, for she would get nothing but troubles from him. She had been a fool to give him leeway, to trust him, to...

And tea that night tasted foully of salt.

She wasn't pleased to see him again, on Tuesday evening. She hoped he got the message from her Disapparition and would disappear as well. Instead, he was there, set on the bench placed in the front garden of the library. The weather was awful as usual thank you very much, British summer and Snape was soaked from the rain. He had forgotten his umbrella, it seemed. Streaks of hair trailed down his brow, sleek with water, and under his frown, his eyes were cold and distant. He sat perched on the bench, elbows plunged into his thighs, his chin resting on his joined hands. As soon as he noticed her, he got to his feet and drew near her.

"Explain yourself," he said, crossing his arms on his chest.

Hermione closed the door behind her, clenching the knob as if it was guilty.

"Explain what?" she replied tartly.

"Don't treat me like a stupid idiot, I'm not; why did you Disapparate yesterday?"

If you were not stupid, then you would get it yourself "Wasn't that clear?"

"Evidently not, or I wouldn't bother questioning."

"I apologise, all right? I know now that I failed you in the past, and you have every right to be angry, but there was no need to be ~~that~~ that harsh. The memory of that night... it all clicked, finally. It was rather hard for me to put the pieces together and to express what I realized, what it does mean for my situation. It was important, for heaven's sake! There was no need to make it harder!"

"So that's it? I spoil the big moment?"

"Of course! I wanted you to forgive me, and then to hear you with that revengeful tone..."

"Damn, Granger, you should know it better by now than to take my words to the letter. Mine was a joke, obviously."

It bloody didn't look like that "I was in no mood for jokes." *Say it. Say it.* "You hurt me."

"And you hurt me by Disapparating," he replied gravely. "So now we are quits, Miss Granger." His frown deepened. "As for the matter in the Shrieking Shack, your apologies are useless."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could feel her cheeks burning while all the rest of her face went pale.

"They are useless because you did nothing wrong, that night. Listen. I have already tried to shove it into your stubborn head: there's nothing you can do that could seriously offend me, except, perhaps, leaving me looking like a fool in the middle of the street. Honestly, Miss Granger, did you expect me to blame you for what you may have or haven't done when you were eighteen? In that fucking situation? Nobody could hold you personally responsible, and surely I won't be the first."

"I should have done more," she said with a trembling voice.

"Dumbledore put you lot in that devilish maelstrom and you blame yourself? Seriously, that man has something more to answer for."

"Don't speak of Dumbledore! You!"

"Yes," he snarled. "Hello, Miss Granger, nice to meet you, my name is "

"Oh, shut up! You and I, Severus Snape, we could never get along. I knew that. I shouldn't have agreed to spend time with you from the start. That was a bad, bad move."

"Very well," said Snape, a muscle twitching in his cheek. "I suspected that too. It was a lost cause."

"What?" *I'm not a lost cause. Take back those words*

"It was ridiculous to take some good material out of you."

"Sorry to disappoint you," she pouted, disgusted.

"You should rejoice, Miss Granger," he declared with the same disgust. "You didn't make your way into the new Funnel instalment. Congratulations. I'm going to cross out all the parts containing you."

"What? Did you put me in your book?" she said, arching her eyebrows in bewilderment.

"An error that can be easily repaired." Snape pulled his Moleskine notebook out of his hip pocket, tore a page away and crumpled it in his palm. "Don't worry, Miss Granger. This time you got yourself freed of me; I'll choose another circuit for my night patrols." He turned and took a step toward the gate.

"Wait!"

"Ah, now you ask me to stay," he sneered. "The vanity of women will never cease to impress me."

"How would you think you could use my story for a book? I cannot believe it. What did you write? About a girl who went nuts after the war? Thank you very much! I'm flattered, indeed!"

"It would have been wiser!" Snape shouted, tossing his notebook on the chippings. The notebook opened and raindrops started to splash on the pages.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, sharply and unblinkingly.

"My editor wanted me to introduce a female character at Funnel's side," Snape sighed eventually. "I thought I could take some inspiration from you. That's why I insisted on our meetings. Sorry to shatter your theory of the Good Samaritan, Granger. It was as ingenious as insulting."

"Well, we are quits with insults, I believe. You took liberties with me you should be ashamed of," Hermione said, taking a few steps onward. When she arrived in front of Snape, she bent down and collected the rain-sodden notebook from the ground. She handed it to Snape.

"I will have no more scruples about asking your understanding, sir, for I know I'll get none. I hope I'll have no more occasions in the future to speak to you. I'm done with this story. Good night, sir." She forced the notebook into Snape's hands and walked away.

"Wait, Hermione!" She heard Snape begging behind her. She moved on. She could feel Snape's eyes on her back, but she wouldn't turn for any reason. A moment later, she heard a curse. The rain muffled the rest of Snape's words.

Liar. Liar. Liar.

Duplicious bastard.

Using me as a source of inspiration, pull the other one! He reckons I'm some kind of museum freak. Maybe he wants to describe how Funnel manipulated an innocent girl to go to the dark side of the Force. And I cared to ask for his forgiveness. And I felt guilty for him. When he made a fool of me. The way he mistreated me. He makes me sick.

I will never, never forgive him.

The visitors of the Emily Brontë Library all turned their heads and stared at her in reproach. They had never paid so much attention to the young, plain and usually quiet librarian, but Hermione had just broken the Libraries' Rule Number One: never raise your voice in a library. She flushed and returned an ominous gaze to her audience. Then she gracelessly shoved the book requested into the hands of a poor reader.

Am I not even allowed to be nervous? Because if you were in my place, you would.

The Twelve Patriarkes suffered her wrath as well. She threaded and needled like a sewing machine, until she decided it was better to cast a Calming Charm on herself before she did any damage to Brother Lucretius' precious tome.

She felt in no mood for a party. However, on Thursday morning she pushed herself out of her room earlier than usual to go buy a present for Harry and Neville. The choices for an original gift had run out years before, therefore, she resorted to food, lately.

Her Crammed Galaxy Guide to York suggested Monk Bar Chocolatiers and there she went. She could remember passing across the shop after she visited Jorvik. Snape had bid her goodbye so gently and the stony surface of the Bar had been bathed in her favourite yellow summer light. It had happened only five days before.

She couldn't understand. On Sunday afternoon, they had got on so well. Of course, there was the blue shirt and despite the Boddingtons' vocal charm, she remembered feeling a certain heat for the blue shirt even before entering the museum. And then the next evening only twenty-eight hours later he had hurt her in a most unjust and ungenerous way. He had even bothered to come again to her, just to insult and offend her beyond any conceivable measure. While she wanted to apologise. It was he who should apologise to her, now.

She felt so tired, and all she could wish for that evening was to go to bed early, possibly with a Dreamless Sleep Potion. But it was Neville's and Harry's birthday and she would go celebrate with them. She opened the door of the shop and her eyes settled on a mouth-watering extravaganza called 'Happy Birthday Chocolate Celebration Bottle'. She also asked the assistant to fill her paper bag with a dozen truffles, pralines and creams. *When all is said and done, there's always chocolate*

At ten p.m., she switched off all the lights in the library, checked the windows, closed the front door from the inside and Disapparated to the south.

A/N: Say thanks with me to valady and RobisonRocket who betaed this chapter.

The Happy Birthday Chocolate Celebration Bottle is a real treat made by Monk Bar Chocolatiers in York. Check their website: <http://www.monkbar.com/>

"Unjust and ungenerous" from *Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 34.

Harry Potter's birthday

Chapter 9 of 20

In which Hermione goes to Harry's and Neville's party at Godric's Hollow, meets the eleventh guest and learns something she'd prefer not to know.

I've forgotten you just like I should,

Of course I have,

Except to hear your name,

Or someone's laugh that is the same,

But I've forgotten you just like I should.

~ Chet Baker, *I Get Along Without You Very Well*

Five minutes later, she Apparated in the graveyard of Godric's Hollow. As usual, there was nobody around. Even in summer's nights, the little village was very quiet.

Hermione walked through the graveyards without paying attention to the tombs. Her radar automatically signalled to her the position of the tombs of Dumbledore's mother and sister and of Harry's parents, but she didn't want to stop. She felt too sour to pay her respects to the dead.

She closed the kissing gate that protected the entrance to the graveyard behind her, and she looked at the square in front of her. Apart from the pub, whence came the muffled sound of voices and clacking steps, the square was bordered by cottages, which seemed already asleep. Hermione proceeded towards a narrow lane between the cottages.

As she passed by, the sculpture placed in the middle of the square transfigured from a war memorial into the statue of the Potters. Hermione halted and lifted her head.

The magically carved figures of James, Lily and little Harry cast a pale blue gleam against the indigo of the sky. Hermione used to take it for a gleam of hope. That night, however, she didn't feel the same spirit. She scowled at Lily's smiling face, and with an unknown grudge she murmured, "You're dead."

Feeling more lighthearted, she slipped into the alley.

She had just laid her hand on the gate to Harry's house, when a dark bolt zoomed out of the door, screaming, "HERMIOOOOOOOOONE," crossed the yard and clutched her knees. He was followed by a woman's voice shouting, "JAMES SIRIUS POTTER, HOW MANY TIMES DID I TELL YOU TO NOT RUN?" A moment later, Ginny's silhouette appeared in the doorway.

Hermione looked down on the little marauder and said, "Hullo, Jamie."

The boy clutched her knees harder, threw his head back to look at her and grinned. "Auntie Hermione, there are a lot of things you have to see!" He hadn't even finished talking when he grabbed her hand, dragged her inside, ignoring the frown and crossed arms of his mother. Hermione had barely the time to say "Hi, Ginny" and to hand her the Monk Bar packet before she was forced to follow the kid.

For a boy of four, James Sirius possessed a remarkable strength. Pulled by his little hand, Hermione could hardly catch a glimpse of the living room where a small group of people sat on the sofas. With her free hand, she waved a general greeting and hurriedly wished a "Happy birthday, Neville, happy birthday, Harry". Inexorable, James drew her upstairs. Ginny's "BE WISE, JAMES, AND LET HERMIONE FREE" found no reply.

In his room, James proceeded to show Hermione his collection of Quidditch players' cards, of Quidditch players' action figures, and of Quidditch teams' shirts. "And this is the most important thing," he said at last, holding a child-sized model of a Nimbus 2500 which had already caught Hermione's attention, as she had almost stumbled over it while getting into the room.

"That's lovely, Jamie," nodded Hermione with a smile.

"Mum doesn't want me to ride it," he told her seriously, "because it's very fast. It can reach thirty miles in fifteen seconds, you know."

"Mmh, that's very fast."

"But Dad lets me ride it in the garden." James smirked.

A dim knock on the door made Hermione turn. Little Albus peeped timidly over the threshold. He was paler, thinner and quieter than James was, with huge green eyes and sleek black hair. "Mother wants you to stop bothering Hermione," he said. "She has to go downstairs with the other grown-ups."

"I'm not bothering her; and you'd better come here and play with us instead of listening to what Mum says."

"Truly, James?" Ginny appeared behind Albus, with her arms crossed on her chest and a smile announcing no good. "You kids, it's time to go to bed. Lily is already sleeping and you should follow her example. Say goodnight to Hermione and to our guests and put on your pyjamas."

"Oh, Mum, but the party isn't over yet! You promised us to stay up for the cake!"

"If you continue to behave like this, Jamie, you'll see no cake at all. C'mon, start to put your pyjamas on."

"But MUM!"

"Let the children stay up until the cake, Ginny," interceded Hermione. "They will be wise, won't they? And they will let me go downstairs." James and Albus nodded furiously. "Good boys."

"But put your pyjamas on!" repeated Ginny, leaving the room.

"They are terrible, Hermione, believe me," she told her as they were going downstairs.

"They are adorable," Hermione replied.

"Adorable, of course, but terrible," concluded Ginny. "You have no idea what they did to the garden a few days ago. That's why we organised the party inside this year."

Finally, Hermione was able to get into the living room and greet everyone properly Harry, the always dreamy Luna, Neville and Hannah. She hadn't seen them all since Christmas.

"You have to excuse Ron," Harry said. "He went a moment to the Burrow to collect the cake."

"Yes, my mother wanted to prepare it this time," explained Ginny, "and with all the traffic already in this house, I couldn't agree more."

"I've brought sweets too," said Hermione. "Ginny, where did you put the packet I gave you?"

"Ah, it's in the kitchen; I'll go get it."

"You know, Hermione," Neville spoke, "we are not celebrating only our birthdays today."

"Oh?"

"We are expecting a baby," stated Hannah. Neville beamed at her and squeezed her hand.

"That's wonderful! Congratulations, Hannah, Neville!" Hermione hugged the both of them. "When is your child due?"

"Thank you, Hermione. The beginning of February," replied Hannah.

"It's the best time to go searching for Kruntzels," observed Luna. "You'll have to catch a basket of Kruntzels for your child, Neville. It's a good omen for newborns. Traditionally, it's the father who collects them."

"Ah, surely, Luna." Neville nodded, politely. "Where can I find them?"

"They live in the Svalbard, mostly. They like to share their nests with the polar bears, though I believe the Kruntzels would get on very well with sea lions as well."

"It sounds lovely. Would you go to the Svalbard in February for our child, Neville, dear?" asked Hannah.

"Of course, love," replied Neville, surrounding Hannah's shoulders with one arm and drawing her closer to kiss her forehead. In that moment Ginny returned, holding the Monk Bar packet in one hand and Levitating a tray of beverages with her wand in her other hand. The packet was placed along with the other presents on the table, next to half-full plates of sandwiches and canapés.

"So, how are things at Hogwarts?" asked Hermione when drinks had been distributed and everybody had sat back on the sofas.

"Nothing has changed," replied Neville, and he took a sip from his butterbeer. "Minerva grows old, Blaise grows slimier and we lack a DADA teacher."

"Harry told me that. He said Minerva continues to torment him about it."

"Gosh, let that go for now. I don't want to hear about DADA on my birthday too."

"What do you have to complain about? You two are only twenty-nine. Me, I'll be thirty in September."

"Yes, let's talk about you, Hermione. Tell us about this library of yours."

"It's not mine, alas."

"You seem the person in charge there. Didn't you tell me you were the only librarian during the evenings?"

"Yes," Hermione grimaced, "but it's not as pleasing as it may sound, you see."

Harry blinked. "I'd swear you would love to work in a library."

"Oh, I do; it's only tedious to be there alone. Luckily, the book I'm restoring, *The Twelve Patriarkes and the Twelves Prophetes Comparatened for* "

"Ah! Wait, Hermione," Harry interrupted her, "you wrote to me you've met an old acquaintance of ours in York; we wondered who he could be. Maybe Cormac McLaggen?"

"No, he's from Northumberland and lives there now, I believe," said Neville. "Maybe it's Professor Vector?"

"I believe it's Snape," chirped Luna.

Hermione pinched with three fingers the triangle of skin between her eyebrows and her nose and shook her head, then nodded. "You got it, Luna," she sighed. "He's Severus Snape."

"Oh, God," said Ginny. "How is he?"

"Oh, for his own standards, well, I suppose. He's giving me a hell of a time."

"I have no difficulty believing that, Hermione," commented Neville, and he visibly shuddered. Even Luna seemed concerned for a moment.

"Trust me, Harry: for the first time in our lives, I agree with everything you and Ron thought of him while we were at school."

"How could that be? He's a most brave "

"UUUUUNCLE ROOOOOOON!" James' voice bellowed from the corridor.

"JAMES, DON'T RUN!" Ginny shouted in return. "Excuse me; I have to put the cake in the fridge." She stood up, and Hermione imitated her.

"Hi, boy," said Ron from the corridor. "How long, eh?"

Hermione rubbed away the sweat from her hands with a napkin and moved towards the entrance, just as James zoomed back to the living room.

In recent years, every time she had met Ron, she used to have only three thoughts. First: 'How could I go out with him?' Second: 'How could I go out with him *for so long*?' She didn't like freckles. Not in particular, at least. She didn't like Quidditch. Not in particular, at least, unless it was supported by a nice boy such as James Sirius. But most important of all, when they had gone out together she was in no position to help Ron with his nightmares, broken as she was herself. They had plunged one another into depression.

"Why didn't I leave him earlier? We weren't meant to stay together for three and a half years. We were splendid friends. Why did our friendship go away with our love?" This was usually the third thought.

When she popped into the corridor, however, her eyes laid on Ron's tall figure only for a moment. Her attention was quickly caught by the young woman at his side, tucking her hand under Ron's arm. She had short, black hair, large brown eyes bordered by long lashes, thick with mascara, and fleshy lips emphasized by a pink gloss. A blue and green striped top with narrow straps, a denim miniskirt and a pair of high-heeled sandals suited her petite body. She radiated happiness, energy and sex appeal.

"Sandra!"

"Hermione! Oh, dear Lord!"

Hermione ran into her opened arms, and the two women hugged and kissed fondly. When they parted, they started giggling and clapping their hands together like little girls.

"What are you doing here?" asked Hermione.

"Can't you tell? I'm with this gentleman here." Sandra nodded to Ron. "He made me Apparate!" She giggled.

"Wait! So, you know...?"

"Of course I know! Not that Ron can't keep a secret, of course, it's only that I'm an awesome sleuth. Well, once you're invited to Apparate to the Burrow, you cannot feign not to notice magic." Sandra winked at Ron and they both laughed.

"My aim was to convince her I was the only, and most powerful, warlock in the world," said Ron. "Family apart, of course."

"I would expect it from Ron, but I'd never guessed you were a witch, Hermione. You seemed so respectable," remarked Sandra, trying to look serious, and bursting out laughing a moment later.

Hermione joined the laugh. "So, you finally settled down," she said warmly, eventually turning to Ron.

"Yep," he said, "Hermione, let me introduce you my girlfriend, Sandra. Oops, but you already know her." And they both laughed again.

Ron found a girl. Therefore, maybe...

"C'mon, people, move along. You occupy the entire corridor," said Ginny, leaving the kitchen. "There's a whole living room waiting for you."

They returned in the living room and took their seats. Hannah and Luna were sitting on the floor, playing with James and Albus. Harry interrupted his discussion with Neville and smiled to Hermione. "See? This is our second surprise for you. Ron found a girl, finally!"

"I know! But now you have to tell me everything from the start, please."

"Let me see... well, you already know Sandra..."

"You knew Sandra?" asked Neville. "This is not a surprise, Harry."

"Oh, but I didn't know she was going out with Ron!"

"How did you meet Sandra, Hermione?" asked Hannah from the floor.

"We attended Camberwell together," said Sandra. "Camberwell College of Arts, in London. Many, many years ago." She giggled.

"Right. But you haven't changed a bit, Sandra."

"Neither have you, Hermione. Ron told me you are working in a library."

"Exactly; I'm working in the Emily Brontë Library in York. I'm restoring a series of tomes printed in 1499."

"Cool! You were the best in book restoration classes, Hermione."

Everybody nodded in unison. "That's no wonder, Sandra," commented Harry.

"But you have to tell me how you met Ron."

"How Ron stumbled on her, you mean," Harry smirked.

"Stumbled *against* her, precisely," said Ron.

"So, what did happen?"

"I was getting out from work. I work in the bookshop of a museum, you see. And this gentleman here wasn't looking at where he placed his large feet, you see. He literally bumped against me." Sandra giggled. "We fell together on the pavement."

"That's a sign I was falling for you from the start," Ron said with a pleased tone.

"So, the thing we splashed in was a puddle of love, wasn't it, dear?"

"And the next day he brought her flowers to apologise," Hannah continued, "that's my favourite part!"

"What I haven't understood is what Ron was doing next to a museum," Hermione insinuated.

"Snape is influencing you, Hermione," observed Neville. "Did you know that, Ron? Hermione met Snape in York."

"Oh, really? How is he?"

"He's far too healthy."

"Oh, Hermione," said Hannah. "After all he went through..."

"Who is Snape?" asked Sandra.

A perplexed silence followed Sandra's question. "He was a professor of ours at Hogwarts," replied Ron eventually. "He was a difficult man, and he wasn't kind to his students, but he fought valiantly during our war with Voldemort."

"You speak of him as if he was dead," remarked Sandra.

"Almost. He lost his magic as a consequence of a wound."

"The Healers conveyed his magical energies to his injury to cure it," explained Hannah with a dramatic tone, "and the wound healed perfectly! Not even a scar! But his magic was consumed in the process. I don't know what it would be like."

"You make it sound as if life depended on having magic," said Sandra resentfully.

"That's not what they meant," said Hermione, looking murderously at them. "It's only that our relationship with this man was very complex. Please, continue to tell me how this wretch was able to get you."

Through many other interruptions among which, James threatening to destroy a vase belonged to Aunt Muriel Sandra told how she had accepted Ron's flowers, then Ron's invitation to dine together, and then to have a drink after dinner. Although it was already known to Harry, Ginny and the rest, Sandra's first visit to the Burrow gave everyone a good laugh. For a Muggle, she seemed to accept the existence of wizards in a very matter-of-fact way, yet her reactions to magical objects and wizarding habits were amusing to say the least. No wonder Arthur had adopted her with an unrelenting passion. "My dad wants to steal my girlfriend," Ron joked. "He has never been as proud of me as when I started dating a Muggle."

Ron found a girl, she went to the Burrow, and Arthur is fond of her. So, maybe, Molly's curse is over thought Hermione. Among meeting Sandra again, playing with the children, and learning that Neville was going to become father as well, the party was going far better than she had expected. She felt no jealousy for Ron; she had hoped for so long that he would eventually find a girl who could give him what she could not. Sandra seemed perfect for him: she was determined, headstrong, adventurous, and possessed a keen sense of humour. She exuded confidence and a joy of living. Hermione couldn't be happier that Ron found a companion like her. When she had broken up with him, he was devastated; he tried to patch things up, he wrote her imploring letters, he popped up at university to talk with her. She felt sorry for him, but she knew she had done the right thing in leaving him. It was neither good, nor right, to stay with someone you didn't love anymore.

Molly Weasley wasn't of the same opinion, it seemed. The idea of her son marrying his former school mate, a girl she had brooded under her wings, was planted so deeply in her brain that she had taken their break up much worse than Ron himself. She called Hermione a traitor of their family, a profiteer, a heartless, selfish dissembler. If Ron had sent owls, Molly sent Howlers. Hermione had a heart of stone to leave Ron after what he had gone through. She could stop faking God knows which invented war trauma, since she had lost no relatives in the war and had not been injured. She was ungrateful. And so on, and so on.

But now Ron had totally recovered and he had found a new girlfriend, if Molly was happy with her, maybe...

Ginny interrupted her reflections, carrying a tray of fruit skewers. Guests gathered around the table, preceded by the kids, who grasped three skewers each. Chewing a peach slice, Luna observed casually, "It's nice to see that Ron went out with two girls from the same university. It gives a sense of fidelity."

"That's because Camberwell produces the best looking girls in London," said Sandra, winking at Hermione. "Honestly, Hermione, Ron was worried about bringing me here tonight. He didn't know how you would react to the two of us together. I told him to shut up, because at the most you would complain about me settling down so low."

Hermione laughed. "I'm happy for the both of you. Truly. You fit well together."

"I knew I could count on you, Hermione. Thanks."

They continued eating their skewers. When she finished, Hermione asked, "Tell me, Sandra: have you seen other people from Camberwell, recently? I pretty much lost touch with everyone, apart from Irene and Pauline."

"Mmh." Sandra swallowed her last bit of plum. "I met a lot of people in May, actually. Alberta, Nick, Geoff, Sarah, Michelle... We were invited to a wedding. Jill got married."

"I didn't know that! Oh, God!"

"We wondered about you, in fact. But Nick said you didn't know Jill very well."

"That's true; I knew her only by sight. And who did she marry?"

"Uhm. He's called Chris. Chris Darrell. He graduated from Camberwell as well, a couple of years before us. A fine figure of a man, if I do say so." Sandra giggled. "Hermione? Are you well?"

Any colour had left Hermione's cheeks. Yet, she managed to reply, "Oh? Yes, of course... Yes."

"That Chris Darrell... Not only is he handsome, he's also highly intelligent. He works at the British Library. Jill was very lucky."

By heavens, very lucky, indeed.

She sat back on the sofa, next to Harry and Neville. They were discussing about the DADA problem in Hogwarts. She didn't hear a word of it. Jamie and Albus encircled her and asked her to play with them. Hermione didn't answer, and the kids turned to Luna. On the stroke of midnight, Ginny came out of the kitchen holding a large, rectangular cake covered with strawberries and cream. The children screamed in excitement. Ron called out "*Nox!*" and everybody sang "Happy Birthday" while Neville and Harry blew the candles out. Hermione moved her lips without uttering a sound. The guests of honour opened their gifts; Hermione's chocolate bottle was praised, opened, and the chocolate pralines that filled it were distributed around along with the cake. Hermione ate the birthday cake automatically. It had to be delicious, as everything prepared by Molly Weasley, yet she took no pleasure in eating it.

As Harry had promised, after the cake the party was over. Neville and Hannah were the first to bid goodbye; as a pregnant woman, Hannah had to rest regularly. Ron and Sandra followed them soon after. Sandra made Hermione promise to visit them in their flat. "When you come, I will show you the photos of Jill's wedding," she added. Hermione's stomach twisted.

Once her brother had left, Ginny grabbed James and Albus by their hands and declared, "Uncle Ron has gone and you ate the cake. It's now time for the both of you to

brush your teeth, finally put on your pyjamas, and go to bed." Deaf to the kids' protests, Ginny dragged them upstairs.

Hermione followed them. As soon as Ginny installed herself in the bathroom to preside over the tooth brushing, Hermione slipped into Harry and Ginny's bedroom.

She closed the door behind her and cast a Silencing Charm on the room. Little Lily was sleeping peacefully in a cradle at the foot of the bed. Hermione half-smiled at her; so pure, so innocent, so unaware, yet, of life's tragedies. Non-verbally, she Accioed a vial, which flew into her hand from the drawer of Harry's bedside table. She tucked the vial in her pocket, removed the Silencing Charm and exited from the bedroom.

In the bathroom, Ginny was still struggling with the kids' pyjamas. Hermione ruffled the kids' hair and kissed them goodbye. Ginny hugged her and thanked her for giving such a warm welcome to Ron's girlfriend.

"I feared you would be upset, but Harry told me you'd take it well. For once, he was right."

Once more, he was wrong. I am awfully, horribly upset

At the bottom of the stairs, Luna was looking at the pictures on the wall, holding a dish with a slice of cake Ginny had reserved for her father Xenophilus. When she heard Hermione's steps, Luna turned toward her and pointed to the picture she was observing. It was an old photograph of Ginny, Harry, Hermione and Ron at the Burrow, taken on Christmas, 2000. Ginny and Harry beamed and waved enthusiastically at the viewers while Ron looked away and Hermione was sulking.

"After you spoke with Sandra, this evening, you assumed the same expression you have in this photo," said Luna. "For a while, your eyes lost their light, and you seemed lost in thoughts. What did Sandra tell you?"

"Ah, it doesn't matter," replied Hermione, clutching the vial in her pocket. "Nothing we could work out, anyway."

"Mmh. I don't think it involves Ron."

"No, it doesn't."

"Good. Because, you see, now that Ron has found a girlfriend, I believe that Molly's curse is over."

Hermione drew a hand to her mouth. *Luna knows it! But it's not over. It's working more than ever!*

"Yes. Everything will sort out."

"Take care, Luna." Hermione hugged her.

"Give my regards to Snape. He was never as bad as he seemed."

Harry opened the front door and squeezed her hand.

"Thank you for coming, Hermione. It means a lot to us. The kids adore you."

"This isn't worth mentioning."

"You know, tomorrow there's the other party, at the Burrow. You're always welcome. Now that Sandra is with Ron, I suppose that Molly would be nicer to you."

"Thank you, Harry." She knew she wouldn't go there, now more than ever.

"Have a good time, back in York."

"Happy birthday, Harry."

She stepped out in the garden and Disapparated.

She Apparated at the corner of Haworth Road. At a quarter to one, the night started to be definitely chilly, and against the light of the lamppost, little drops of humidity were visible. Hermione staggered up to number 51. *I have never smoked, but God knows if I'd like a cigarette now* she thought, giving a glance at her window.

Without caring for the Muggles who could possibly see her, she opened the door with an *Alohomora!* and proceeded upstairs without switching the light on. She leaned on the banister to climb the stairs and somehow limped to her room. Once there, she locked the door and performed a Silencing Charm on the walls. Finally, she allowed her bag to fall on the floor and she followed it. She crawled to the bed and she abandoned her arms and head over it, clutching the sheets and drawing them closer to her face.

A long, mute howl came out of her mouth and invisible tears formed at the corners of her eyes. She cried soundlessly, biting the sheet and crumpling it with her fingers, until her body stopped trembling. For an endless moment, she stood still, catching hold of the bed, with non-existent tears virtually streaming down her cheeks and burning her lids nonetheless.

Chris Darrell has married.

OOOooourghOOooowwwwWWWUUUUUUUHHHHHHHaaaaAwwWWw.

When, through her blinded gaze, she saw the clock saying twenty to three, she forced herself to stand up. Her knees were sore for the protracted contact with the floor and her neck was aching. She pulled the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion out of her pocket and she sipped it. Her fingers were icy and the liquid disgusted her. Without getting undressed, she lay on her bed and waited for the potion to take affect.

This one ranges a high score among the most miserable weeks of my life

A/N: This chapter was inspired by chapters 12-13 of **Solace** by northangel27 (<http://northangel27.deviantart.com/gallery/9364472>). Northangel knows it.

Deep thanks to valady who betaed it family business notwithstanding, and to RobisonRocket for her further corrections.

Molly's curse

Chapter 10 of 20

"What am I doing here, listening to Snape telling me a story?"
With an illustration by the author.

Dear readers, I still don't know how many chapters this fic will be long, but with this we are approximately halfway through our tale. If this storyteller is able to entertain you, please let her know with a comment! Thank you.



I know of love as a hot white light

That knocks you down and then leaves you dry

Oh, how can it be, sweet mama tell me why

Why all love's disciples have to wither and die

~ The Cardigans, *Please Sister*

It is curious that twice in English history the royal libraries have been given to the nation. The ancient royal collection, containing manuscripts from the reign of Richard III, was added to by each sovereign in turn; but it seems to have been brought into notice and taken special care of by Prince Henry, the eldest son of James I.

Hermione had the impression the passage above was quite simple, but it was the ninth time she read it, and she didn't understand anything.

The last visitor had left the library hours, maybe ages before, and once the reading room remained empty she took refuge in the archive, where she was at least surrounded by her familiar tools. She hadn't even tried to open *The Twelve Patriarks* that afternoon; she knew tears would ruin the ancient paper. For a while, she attempted to read an easy, old manual about royal bookbinding in England, but it proved too difficult nonetheless. She gave up and instead was contented to stare into the void.

That morning, after her dreamless sleep, she had woken with a masochistic vein in her. She wore a t-shirt of Camberwell College and a pendant she had bought in Ascona when she had been there with him.

She walked to the library under a perfect blue sky, with the early afternoon sun shining above her. It offered her no warmth. A man riding a bike surpassed her on the bridge over the Foss. He wore a red polo shirt and beige shorts. A flash, and her eyes filled with tears. *Those were his colours.* The cyclist had even the same brown hair and build as Chris. A new assault of memories stormed into her. Her steps swayed and she nearly hit a lamppost with one shoulder.

She sat, very quietly, during her working hours. After all, this wasn't anything new. She had experienced this chasm before. The Dreamless Sleep potion awaited her at home, but she was in no hurry to go. *I just want to stay one more minute with my thoughts* There was a movie made of eight years old memories playing in her mind, and she intended to watch it all before leaving. It all came back to her in waves. The cup had to be drunk until the last drop.

She gasped when she sensed a hand descending on the back of her chair.

"Granger! What are you doing here?"

She looked at him astonished. He was the last person she wished or expected to see. She frowned.

"What are *you* doing in the archives? Who gave you permission to enter here?"

"Granger, it's past midnight. I saw the lights from outside and came in to see what was happening. I looked for you everywhere."

She noticed he was slightly panting, and glanced at clock on the wall. She grimaced.

"Well, you found me. Now you can leave."

"After you."

"Have you come here to taunt me?"

"There's no pleasure in taunting someone so evidently upset to stay at work for hours once weekend has begun. What's wrong?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Nothing."

Snape crossed his arms and shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Then you can go home."

"Sure."

"Excellent."

Hermione grasped her bag and followed Snape out of the archives, a deep resentment igniting in her chest.

How dare he... how dare he come here after what happened on Tuesday! I didn't want to see him anymore. He has no right to be here. This doesn't make sense. Chris' marriage wasn't enough? Why is the world conspiring against me?

Before she could notice, tears were rolling down her cheeks, real tears, unlike the invisible ones she had cried the previous night. They scorched her skin like boiling oil. When her nose started to run too, she sniffed.

The sound evidently arrived to Snape's ear, for he halted and turned. Hermione hoped that, in the dim light of the library's hall, he wouldn't see her tears. That would be simply too embarrassing.

Snape narrowed his eyes and took a step towards her. "Miss Granger?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

Hermione flushed under her tears. She would just like to run away, either to reach the front door and disappear in the night, or to retreat in the archives and seclude herself there. Anywhere else, just to escape from the glimmer of those puzzled eyes. She couldn't bear that ultimate humiliation. But her legs wouldn't cooperate; they were nailed to the ground. She ordered herself to stop crying immediately not in front of Snape but all she obtained was quite the opposite effect.

"Awwhh!" she sobbed loudly while her tears rolled more abundantly, clogging her lids. The sounds she had repressed the night before came out, and she howled, her face now covered in tears, mucus running from her nose, and saliva from her mouth.

"Miss Granger..." Snape held out his hand.

"No!" shouted Hermione, stepping back, and she stumbled. Snape grabbed her shoulders and guided her toward one of the sofas against the walls, until he made her sit down.

"Hush, Hermione, hush," he pleaded, kneeling to face her. "Stop crying."

Her reply was only another loud "Bwaaah!"

"STOP!" he ordered, standing up. "Please, stop. I can't bear to see women crying."

She sniffed.

Snape drew a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to her. "It's clean," he specified.

Hermione took it with a trembling hand and observed her fingers clutching it. New tears began to pour from her eyes.

"Now STOP!"

Hermione started and lifted her eyes on him. She blinked, and tears streamed down her face to her chin, dripping off over her breast. She unfolded the handkerchief and blew her nose.

"Now you will explain to me what is happening, Hermione," he enjoined her.

"That that's none of your..."

"No excuses. You promised you would tell me what was making you ill."

"You didn't seem so willing to listen to me on Monday," she scolded.

"You misinterpreted my intentions."

"Why do you always twist the argument over me? Fuck off, Severus!"

She expected an irate reaction. Instead, Snape smirked. "Good. Rage is always better than depression."

Hermione looked at him, feeling the tears dry on her cheeks.

"Now you will explain to me what's wrong. You can shout, you can swear, everything is more acceptable than to start crying again."

She stared at him the hooked nose, the prominent cheekbones and chin, the thin lips, the sharp contours of his face and a glimpse of Lily's statue in Godric's Hollow flashed through her mind. *He won't dare laugh at this story*, she thought. *If he laughs, it would only backfire*

It was well past midnight she didn't know how much past and she was still at the library. She was sitting on one of the sofas in the hall, in the semi-darkness with Snape, pacing in front of her. None of them had the right to be there at that time. She had cried. In front of him. The world was evidently ruled by the absurd; nothing made sense, and so she decided to dive into absurdity.

"I will tell you," she offered, "as long as you aren't going to make comments."

"Agreed."

"Yesterday I was informed that the guy I've been in love with in my whole life got married," she said plainly. If she had to spit it out, better do it at once.

She was right; Snape would not sneer about something like this. In fact, in the faint light of the hall he seemed to pale even more, if possible, and he knit his brow.

"Continue," he said.

"What more there is to say? I haven't seen him in ages; he never understood I was after him; he got engaged and married another woman." She snorted. "Nothing new under the sun."

"Nothing new," Snape echoed her. "Who is he?"

"Who, if not the most perfect, the most handsome man I've ever met?" Hermione's mouth twitched bitterly and she rubbed her eyes.

"There is a kitchenette here, isn't there? I'll go make some tea."

With a mug of tea in her hands, Hermione told him the whole story.

In late August of 2001, after getting her B.A., Hermione participated in a summer school at the Centro del bel libro in Ascona, a renowned Swiss centre for bookbinding and book restoring. There she met Chris Darrell, two years her senior, with a fresh Camberwell M.A. in his pocket.

The summer school was highly selective. There were participants from all Europe; Hermione and Chris were the only two from Camberwell. It came very natural for them to chat about Camberwell's professors, about London, none of them being a Londoner, and about odds and ends. They discussed books, manuscripts, paper and bindings. Hermione told him of Salisbury and Chris told her of Norwich. During meals, they sat together; after dinner, they walked together along the streets of Ascona, enjoying the gentle breeze, the starry skies, the perfume of jasmines and camellias that filled the air.

For seventeen days, Hermione was in heaven. She was too happy to think about the very simple act of declaring her feelings. She had regretted that ever since.

When the summer school finished, the two of them returned to England, Hermione to Camberwell College for her master, Chris to Liverpool, where he would do a stage at the University's library. They kept in touch with e-mails, never too personal, never too detached. Sometimes, Hermione gave him a call. As for Chris, he never called, but she didn't complain.

At the end of November, Chris passed from London. They met in Camberwell, went for a walk, and had lunch together. Hermione invited him to stay at her flat for the night. He accepted. Nothing happened. They slept in the same room Hermione on her bed, Chris in his sleeping bag (he had insisted).

Hermione didn't sleep a wink. Unable to stretch a hand to touch him, she watched his profile as he slept, holding her breath. Next morning, Chris went back to Liverpool. Hermione didn't know that would be the last time she saw him.

She invited him to Salisbury for Christmas holidays, but he didn't come.

In March 2002, a conference was held in Liverpool about the history of press. Hermione went there with a couple of other students from Camberwell. She wrote an e-mail to Chris, and the evening before arriving in Liverpool, she rang him. Chris assured her he would pick her up after the conference. She couldn't wait.

He didn't come.

Hermione refused to call him any more. That was the final proof if she ever needed one that he didn't reciprocate her feelings. Instead, she wrote him a letter from London a paper letter, not an e-mail. She confessed him her love and told him goodbye. Her hand shook so much while she was writing that her handwriting was almost illegible.

Chris replied with an e-mail, in which he called himself a boor and asked her forgiveness for being so insensitive to be unaware of her feelings... but he didn't offer much more.

Hermione wished to run to Liverpool, to wait for him at his door, to implore him. Her friends dissuaded her. He obviously didn't love her; running after him would only make her look ridiculous; she had to protect her emotions. Hermione, who had told herself she would do anything for Chris, resigned. She had regretted it ever since.

A week after these events, she went to Prague with some friends for the Easter holidays. That trip saved her. She came to terms with her 'break up' with Chris so to speak. She stayed in love with him for years.

She contacted him only once afterwards, to communicate to him about her master's degree, but she never truly forgot him. She wrote poetry for him her only iambic pentameter sonnets and she regularly dreamed about him. She Googled him and found his name on the website of the British Library. However, she didn't know anything about his private life. She wondered when he had started going out with Jill.

She took years to move on. It was only in 2005 when she fancied another boy. That time, she tried to be more enterprising. It didn't work. And it didn't work even with the next boy.

"It's Molly's curse," complained Hermione. "When I broke up with Ron, she cursed me. I could swear it. If I'd made Ron miserable, I was going to be miserable as well. An eye for an eye."

"Uhm," mumbled Snape, who during her tale hadn't made other comments except for mumbling and nodding. He sat at Hermione's side on the silk covered sofa, toying with the empty tea mug in his hands.

"And now Chris is married. I had secretly hoped we would meet again, one day, and that everything would be different, that he would finally look at me... but now that scenario won't happen."

"It could still happen."

"No! Can't you see? Ron found a girlfriend, but the curse is still working against me. Chris got married this is definitive. The definite sign, I mean. I'm never going to have a boyfriend again. But that is not the worst part: the terrible thing is that I'll never love someone else as I loved Chris. This is stupid, isn't it? I spent so little time with him, yet I still believe we would get on so well together we shared so many interests..."

"But this is not a matter of interests, is it? You spent only seventeen days with him and continued to think about him since then. He lived in your head and will continue to live there if you let him stay."

Hermione turned slowly to him. "Are you saying I was in love only with my mental image of Chris?" She took a deep breath. "But isn't it always like that?"

"More or less. All our reactions to reality depend on our mental interpretation of it."

"It is not a fault to love someone in your head if you cannot love them in reality."

"It's not a fault, and it is safest. In the sense that is always a safe harbour to return to."

Hermione's lips trembled. "The fact that I was lost in thoughts about Chris helped me get through September 11th," she murmured. "I'd just come back home from Switzerland when the attack happened. I feared that Chris would be recalled for military service. I worried so much for him that I forgot the rest." She paused. "And now he's married."

"He wasn't yours from the start. In a certain sense, nothing changed. He could inhabit your imagination as before."

"It's bigger than that! Time is changing. Harry's married and has three children. Neville Longbottom and Hannah Abbott are awaiting their first. Even Ron found someone a girl from Camberwell, to boot! My Muggle friends are marrying one after another, or passing from one relationship to the next. People tell me it's unhealthy to harbour feelings for someone long lost. They appreciate everlasting love stories only in songs and novels."

"Well, we are in the Emily Brontë library, aren't we?"

They both snorted. Hermione opened her arms and placed them on the back of the sofa, her right arm behind Snape, her left arm half swaying in space.

"We are all messed up, Severus," she said with a half-hearted smile, shaking her head.

Snape tensed slightly, but replied with his usual steady tone, "You won't remain alone forever, Hermione. And in any case, to suffer for love is always better than other forms of suffering."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed? There is always a certain amount of pleasure in yearning for someone who doesn't reciprocate your feelings; the soul still rejoices in the echo of the sparkle that set up your affection. A heartbreak, though painful, is still better than suffering from obsessions, for example, especially for people who are attuned to being alone."

"It's a different kind of pain," conceded Hermione. "Fixed images come with fear and leave an anxious lump in my throat. Chris' marriage covers me with sadness and fills my mind with whys. But you're probably right; there's something sweet in thinking about him, no matter what."

"There is more sorrow than in unrequited love. You haven't known despair, child; you haven't know hate, lust for vengeance, or the horrendous hell of emptiness," observed Snape softly.

They were talking more slowly, now, and lowly. Hermione huddled on the sofa. "War asked a great price from us."

"The problem is not war, it is the aftermath."

"I used to be so strong." Hermione cringed. "Best student, Prefect, probable Head Girl, co-leader of Dumbledore's Army, always at Harry's side during the war... and then I crumbled. Everything fell upon me at the end of the war. Images. Tears I had kept back while we were on the run. I cried every day for months, afterwards. I took my N.E.W.T.s reluctantly during the special session in the summer after the war, and my grades weren't anything special. I escaped from the wizarding world, for the Muggle side seemed suddenly safer. When I went back to work in a wizarding library, I was fired. I've been unemployed for years. I haven't had any boyfriend after Ron Weasley, and now Chris Darrell got married. In September I will be thirty, and the last twelve years of my life were a failure."

"Cheer up, Granger: thirty years ago I joined the Death Eaters. We can have a double party."

Hermione looked at him. In the shadows, Snape's eyes seemed almost warm, like the oil colours of the portraits hanging from the walls. For a moment, she felt dragged inside their gleaming blackness.

"Just hope, Hermione," he whispered, "never to feel more failure than that. No house points are deducted to those who aren't lucky in love, and don't consider yourself less for not working like a plutonium machine. What you experienced was only predictable; you were put under a stress greater than any of your age should bear, and the only logical consequence was to crack under its weight. After the war, I wanted to kill myself."

Hermione winced. "For losing your magic?" she asked with a thready voice.

"No, and I shouldn't have told you that." Snape got up. "It's very late, Miss Granger; you should go home."

It was indeed awfully late; Hermione didn't even know what time of the night it was. But she had long surpassed the moment in which sleep risked to prevail over her; she was floating in a hypnotic state of post-sleep. The dizziness caused by her prolonged wakefulness was an appropriate companion to the sense of unreality given to her by the fact that she was sitting in the library's hall, in the middle of the night, talking about lost loves with a man she hated.

"I'm not tired; I want to listen," she protested.

Snape made a movement toward the door, then retraced his steps and sat back on the sofa.

"I crumbled as well at the end of the war. Until it's still going on, it pushes you onward. War feeds you with adrenaline. It consumes you from the inside and leaves your brain vigilant. The tension and the duplicity are both a sickening stress and a thrill. You make plans you have a purpose. The aim of winning over the enemy carries you over through the nights. You should be acquainted to that."

Hermione nodded.

"That purpose carried me on also during that hellish last year at Hogwarts. Do you see these?" He gestured towards the paintings on the walls. "I hate portraits. I spent that year listening to the portrait of a man I killed. Can you imagine the cruelty of that? Ten thousand times, I wanted to tear that portrait down and be free of that voice. I didn't even know who I hated more, the Dark Lord or Dumbledore. I'd killed him over again if I hadn't already done it. Hogwarts was a rotten prison. I just wished Potter would find those bloody Horcruxes soon and put an end to the whole stinking business. I even started to think of Azkaban as a pleasurable heaven."

Snape noisily switched position on the sofa. "Then everything happened as I wished. Potter crushed the Dark Lord. The war was over. My task was accomplished. I never had to go back to Hogwarts. And I had nothing more to do altogether." He brought his hand over his mouth and chin. "I lay on a hospital bed for months, with nothing to do apart from thinking. I didn't feel the satisfaction I expected for helping to dispatch the Dark Lord. I felt no elation or realisation, only emptiness. What did I have to do now? What was I still living for? Which was the sense of my life? I got lost in the spiral of questions."

He switched position again. "My body was weary; however I didn't recognize for myself the right of being drained. That magic had gone seemed only a metaphor for my physical and mental exhaustion. Only later, had I started considering it like a real state. But, in a certain sense, I wasn't interested so much in reality then. At that moment, I was more concerned with my philosophical self."

He turned to Hermione with wide eyes. "This is not advisable for your ears, Miss Granger. Unrequited love is a safer subject."

"Tell me what happened next," she demanded in a whisper.

"All right. Well, I understood that the most dangerous thing is not to suffer for love or to risk your neck in a war; it's to despair of yourself and to get lost in a maze of unanswerable questions. This is why I'd rather have rage than depression."

"What happened," reiterated Hermione.

"I thought about jumping out of my window in St. Mungo's and panicked. Suicidal obsessions ensued. I told you I have quite the experience with obsessions."

"Are there obsessions about suicide?"

"About suicide, about harming other people, about religion, about sexuality, about whatever you want. The obsessive world has a flourishing imagination. You think they are unbearable, but let me tell you that obsessive images rank very low in the scale. Love's turmoil... is but a piece of cake, in comparison."

"What did you do?"

"I followed some advice. I travelled. I searched."

"What?"

"The Grail. Peace. Sense."

"And did you find it?"

"With time. A bit. Time heals, but relapses are always possible."

"Was it then that you started to write?"

"More or less. I actually started writing later, but it was during my travels on the continent that I got the idea to do it."

"How?"

"A person said I had a way with words." Snape smiled, closing his eyes.

Hermione watched him. His profile stood more clearly against the background; a pale light began to filter in through the windows, the first sign of dawn coming. She kicked off her sandals and drew up her legs on the precious striped silk. She stretched her arms and reclined her head on the back of the sofa.

"Tell me a story." Her request ended in a yawn.

A minute passed in silence. When she couldn't help her eyes from closing, she heard his voice saying softly, "Once upon a time there was a young witch. She had many virtues, but above all, she praised her cleverness. She read a lot of books and could quote many pages by heart. In her mind, everything would forever be calm and clear as a printed-paper.

"But, on a sad day, war raged over her country and threatened her peace. The young witch, who was very resourceful, made an allegiance with her friends to fight against the ugly, dark enemy. They put down their books and brandished their swords.

"The battle was hard and eventful, but in the end the good prevailed and won over the evil side. The dark enemy was vanquished and the witch and her friends became heroes. However, their school was destroyed and its library was dispersed."

What am I doing here, listening to Snape telling me a story?

"Thus, the young witch embarked on a second quest, to collect all the books that once belonged to the library. She waved goodbye to her friends and walked alone, for that was an adventure she had to pursue by herself."

We hate each other. We shouted against each other. We shouldn't be here together

"During her quest, the young witch met new friends and new foes. She got lost and she found her way again. One day, she crossed a tangled, black forest. She was very frightened because she didn't know where to go. But then a white doe came out from the trees and reassured her."

What's the matter with me? Yawn. Since when did I encourage absurdities?

"The doe told her she had to ask Uyulala, the Southern Oracle, a way to retrieve her books. Thus, the young witch decided to go to the Oracle. She mounted her broomstick and flew southbound. There..."

This is so unreal. I should be home. Yawn. Ya-AAA-wn. YAA-

A/N: Thanks to Valady and RobisonRocket, valiant betas, who fights against wrong commas and verbe tenses.

This chapters opens with a quote from the prologue to *Royal English Bookbindings* (1896) by Cyril Davenport, a book in the public domain which can be found here: <http://www.aboutbookbinding.com/Royal-English-Bookbindings/Prologue.html>

The Centro del bel libro of Ascona is a real place (<http://www.cbl-ascona.ch/>).

"The tension and the duplicity are both a sickening stress and a thrill" is quoted from the fabulous one-shot *Reflections in Liquid* by purplefluffycat (<http://community.livejournal.com/hoggywartyxmas/4406.html>) with her permission.

Uyulala, the Southern Oracle, is borrowed from Micheal Ende's *The Neverending Story*.

Middleham Jewel

Chapter 11 of 20

Sapphire is the stone of loyalty and fidelity. It is also the gem of wise rulers.

Every single day, for the rest of my way

I live without my love my God I have to stay in shade

When I'm old and gray, I remember that day

When she came, that perfect dame, and she blew me away

~ Sonata Arcica, *San Sebastian*

She blinked twice and looked around. As her myopic eyes brought to focus the severe portraits, which decorated the hall, the truth of what she had done came back to her from the recesses of sleep: she had fallen asleep in the library. Her neck was aching from using the back of a Georgian sofa as a pillow. She stretched her arms and massaged her aching nape.

Apart from her, the hall was empty. She turned to her right while her neck protested. She observed the bumps in the stuffing of the sofa, indicating that someone remained seated there for a long time. Luckily, Snape appeared to have made the right choice and left by now. Evidently, she had been lulled by his voice into sleep... the last thing she remembered was listening to some absurd story he was telling her. She remembered plunging into the unreality...

Hermione didn't know what time it was exactly, but she knew she had to leave the library as soon as possible. If she were to Disapparate, she hoped she would Apparate directly into her room and convince Mrs. Neill that she had come back home as usual. It would be quite embarrassing to Apparate in the kitchen, instead, next to Mrs. Neill preparing her breakfast. Obliviating people made her uneasy. Anyway, extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. Hermione bent down to collect her wand from her bag.

At that moment, she heard the loo flush and the toilet door open. Then Snape popped in the corridor and strode into the hall, fastening his wristwatch on his bare left forearm. When he noticed her, he halted.

"Miss Granger? Have I awakened you?" he asked.

"No, you didn't," she replied, standing up.

"We have to leave," he said, rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them before she could catch a glimpse of his Dark Mark.

"I agree." She nodded, rubbing her eyes behind her glasses. "What time is it?"

"It's almost ten o' clock."

"Ten o'clock! And it's Saturday! How long did I sleep?"

"About six hours, I believe. It was about four when you drifted off to sleep, and a little later I dozed off as well."

Oh, God. "We have to get out of here, and let's hope that no one will notice us. I would Disillusion us both, but someone could see the door open... We can Side-Along Apparate." *Praying no one will see us when we Apparate in the middle of York* "Unfortunately, this place doesn't have a rear entrance."

"Don't fret so much, Miss Granger. Nobody will care about a library door," remarked Snape, stepping forward and flinging the front door open. The bright sunlight encased Hermione, and she shielded her eyes with a hand. With circumspection, she trotted along Snape outside the library.

Halfway through the front garden walk, Snape turned and peered at her. "There's something I would like to show you," he said with a grave voice. "Would you mind following me?"

Hermione took a moment to make her decision. *You've come this far, you might as well finish* "Let me at least go to the toilet, first," she replied.

She followed him through the streets of York, with the trail of their nocturnal conversation still lingering in her. August proclaimed glorious its arrival, for the day was sunny and hot, and tourists and inhabitants alike swarmed in the roads like lizards. Snape and Hermione walked down Monkgate and went on to Deangate, passing across York Minster. A huge crowd surrounded the cathedral, brandishing cameras and water bottles. Hermione's stomach growled.

Snape turned left on Duncombe Place and continued toward Museum Street. At their right, the green of the Museum gardens was shining, and groups of people lay on the grass, enjoying the sun. Hermione's stomach growled again.

Snape agreed to take her to a bakery where Hermione bought a buttermilk scone. He didn't take anything for himself, explaining that a cup of tea usually sufficed him in the mornings.

Munching on the scone, Hermione followed Snape as he entered the gardens, and up to the classical palace, which hosted the Yorkshire Museum.

"There," he said. They climbed the flight of steps and found themselves engulfed in a large queue.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologise for the wait," announced a rotund young woman with a long, carrot red braid at the ticket office microphone. "Since August the first is Yorkshire day, we offer free entrance to our collections. However, due to the number of visitors, we are forced to allow entrance in turns. The next group will be allowed in at half past eleven."

Snape checked his watch. "It's a quarter to eleven now, Miss Granger," he said. "What do you want to do?"

"Now that we're here, we can wait," she replied. "I've never visited the Yorkshire Museum before, and today is free, in addition."

"Tsk. This is one of the finest museums in York," he paused, "I have never come here with someone, though."

Hermione lowered her eyes. She was still wearing the Camberwell t-shirt from the day before, obviously, which was all rumpled and now started to become sweaty, too. Snape's shirt was creased as well, especially on the back, and the shadow of a beard was growing on his chin. They both had a terrible aspect, as if they belonged more in a shower cubicle than in the white columned hall. Hermione was sure she had dark circles under her eyes, and she didn't even wash her face after crying the night before. Her glasses were dirty with dried tears and fingerprints. Among the relaxed faces of visitors waiting to get into the museum, they had to look like the most improbable. Not to speak of their respective hair.

"What did you want to show me here?" she asked.

"An object related to what we were discussing yesterday," he replied. There were circles under his eyes as well.

"About that... I wanted to ask you something, if you don't mind." After his nod, she continued, dropping her voice, "You told me you were going to... dispatch yourself after the war. Then you explained it as if it was an obsessive thought. I don't understand."

Snape snorted gently. "It's easy to take your obsessive reflections for reality once you're inside them. In truth, this is one of the basic mistakes made by people with obsessive tendencies: to mistaken their thoughts for reality, imagination for their will. To think about something doesn't necessarily mean to wish it to happen, yet it's a common misunderstanding." He took a breath. "No matter how well you may know these rules in theory, you will always fall in the same trap when anxiety interferes with your logic. I'm not exempt from this mistake either."

"So you didn't actually want to kill yourself?" she whispered.

"Caring, Granger?" he sneered. "You lost the chance to attend my funeral. I never actively tried to kill myself, if that's what worries you. I didn't even plan to do that on any said day. As for thinking, I thought about it a lot, I won't deny it. Sometimes I believed in what I was thinking, sometimes I didn't. The thought penetrated deeply in my mind, along with the emptiness and the feeling of senselessness, and stayed with me for so long, that even after leaving the hospital, that I found it hard to distinguish between what was generated by my anxiety, and what were my real convictions. And then I started brooding over the loss of my magic."

Standing in the middle of people packed at the entrance to the Museum was supposedly opposite to being sat on a silk-covered sofa in the hall of a deserted library, yet it felt like a continuous event. The buzz of people queuing covered their voices, and they were talking as if they were alone. Snape was calmly speaking of suicide, like he would of a bubotuber. In a certain sense, it was comforting; it prolonged the sense of release she had strangely felt when she had confided in him about her failures. Snape's way of dealing with obsessions was so matter-of-fact to deprive them of their threatening aspect. In his words, the tricks of the mind were not a symptom of insanity; they seemed a subject like any other.

"Have you healed, now?" she asked. "From the suicidal obsession, I mean."

" 'The goal of all life is death' ", Hermione. We always live in order to die." The corner of his mouth turned up in an ironical smile. "But yes, I've long overcome the period when I thought about it every day. With time, all kinds of obsessions fade. You cannot totally eradicate them from you; once you develop the disease, you know you'll always have the predisposition to obsessing."

"Uhm," Hermione commented sadly.

"But experience teaches you how to make intrusive thoughts more manageable. You recognise them coming, and you start to differentiate them from normal thoughts because they pretend to have an immediate, irrefutable answer. You learn how to deny them that answer, or to delay it, at least. Eventually, the thoughts that previously alarmed you begin to pass through your mind without harm, as I've already tried to explain to you in vain."

Hermione shook her head, faking a reproachful look while smiling.

"Some phrases you used to repeat yourself would remain in your head like an echo, though, as well as some avoidance habits," he continued. "I'm still afraid of heights, for example, and I feel uneasy stepping on balconies."

"Of heights? Because because you feared you would throw yourself out of the window?"

"That's where it all began, I believe," he snorted, then frowned. "My moment of trespassing. When I jumped out of the window of a classroom, chased by Minerva and Filius. Your friend Potter was somewhere and I couldn't find him. I thought everything was going to the dogs."

When he spoke like this, with such calm and honesty, without the spite that had hurt her so much, she felt herself fill with calm and relaxation. Even if the conversation could appear depressing, at that moment Hermione was pervaded with peacefulness.

When they were finally allowed in, Snape headed directly towards the Medieval Galleries on the ground floor, skipping any other gallery, up to a room equipped with wood and glass cabinets. There, he led her to an aisle in a corner, tight between two cabinets, and he stopped in front of the one placed against the wall. Next to the display case, a panel announced 'Middleham Jewel', showing two enlarged pictures of the item and the portrait of Richard III below them.

Hermione got closer and looked through the case. The Middleham Jewel was a little, rhomboidal work of gold, engraved with a Crucifixion scene and decorated with a sapphire set between its top angle. For a jewel, it was simple, almost austere, but the deep blue hue of the sapphire was enthralling, giving it a really royal allure. She loved it at once.

"It's a reliquary pendant," explained Snape, "it was probably worn for protection. It was discovered by a metal detectorist near Middleham Castle, hence the name, and there's no proof it actually belonged to Richard III. But I like to believe it is somehow connected with him."

"It's beautiful," whispered Hermione. She admired it for a while, until Snape touched lightly her shoulder to inform her that other visitors came. Hermione moved away from the display case. They remained in the narrow aisle while a group of people crowded around the case.

"Why did you want to show me this?" she asked quietly.

"Richard III is a person I can easily relate with. You should be able to tell, by reading my books."

"I've read only *Against a Brick Wall*," she minimised. "But I suppose I understand what you mean."

"He spent his last year among rumours and suspicions, suffering first the loss of his son and then of his wife," he said lowly, "the only woman he had ever loved."

Hermione bit her lip. She realised she hadn't thought of Chris' marriage since she woke up. She marvelled at her quick recovery. Was her pain superficial, after all? She had fancied other boys after him, but those were lighter attractions; she still considered Chris the man she had loved the most. Circumstances had forced her to put the thought of him aside. Yet she wouldn't delude herself: he did fade with time, and the news of his marriage came out of the blue. Could you really stay in love with someone only by having him near?

"Do you still love her?" she asked with a hollow voice, without looking at him.

When it arrived to her ear, Snape's voice was soft. "I have been in love with one woman for a long time, yes. For years, after we parted our ways, I continued to remember her and to cherish her memory." He paused to swallow. "But she was dead, murdered, and beyond my rage life was going on. I stirred up the embers of my love, but they couldn't burst into a blaze."

The group of visitors went away, and they moved closer to the Middleham Jewel case again.

"Despite my oaths, she slowly slipped away. Time changes, and nothing stays the same. We are subject to change, to history, to the present."

"But you seemed to admire the fact that Richard III was in love with only one woman," she murmured.

"She was his wife," Snape specified. "She was always his present. In youth he fathered two bastards, but after his marriage, Richard III seems to have been faithful to the person he chose." He indicated the Jewel. "Sapphire is the stone of loyalty and fidelity. Richard's motto was 'Loyauté me lie', loyalty binds me. Middleham Jewel represents that bound, for me. Something between the living. Because he was the king and had to have an heir, after Anne's death Richard looked for a new wife. He did that unwillingly, perhaps; but nevertheless, he set off negotiations to marry Joana of Portugal. Sapphire is also the gem of wise rulers."

He turned his gaze to her and she looked back, finding herself blushing even if there wasn't any reason to blush. In that cramped aisle, disturbed by other visitors, she felt driven to step even closer to him, almost to stretch out her hand and touch him, even if it had no sense. She searched his face and smiled awkwardly before averting her eyes.

When they left the museum, it was past one o'clock and they had visited but one room. The sun was burning. Snape apologised with an unusual clumsiness and walked away. Slowly, Hermione made her way home.

The sensation of unreality was still with her. Where had all their harsh words gone? Their Tuesday discussion was forgotten, as if it had never happened. Did they need to argue to get on so well?

Resentment had vanished. That day, as the night before, he had been serious and caring, and he had listened to her attentively, without offending or scoffing at her. He told her a story. He behaved like a friend... or something close to that. Did their quarrel remove something between them? "Rage is always better than depression," he had said. Was rage necessary to settle whatever might have started in the Shrieking Shack?

He opened up to her, too. They had talked for hours. He revealed to her something very personal, whereas he had previously been so secretive. When he was sincere, when he was serious, he elicited all her attention without effort. She wouldn't mind an occasional sneer if it was delivered with such warmth in his eyes.

Maybe it was all a bubble. The next time she met him, he would be again unjust and ungenerous. But even if it lasted just for one day, it was a pleasing bubble. Under that bright sun, in that summer afternoon, there was only the present, as Severus had said. Their past, the past that had brought obsessions to the both of them and had painfully associated them when she had almost fainted in the library, was so far away, erased by the sun's rays.

Severus had lent a sympathetic ear to her musings over Chris, and to spill it all out had done her good. It had been an absurd decision to confide in him, yet it had proved right. It had lightened her sadness with the balm of a shared experience. Company in distress makes sorrow less.

However, at present she didn't know if her sorrow was made more of realising she had lost Chris to another woman, or of acknowledging that Molly's curse was still working and that she was going to die a spinster. *The painful thing is to have all this love inside and not have anyone to whom you could give it. It's not to be unreciprocated, but to be unable to send your love out. To watch it consume in yourself, unused.*

She wasn't a woman who would value herself only if she had a man at her side. She knew she could stay on her own and enjoy it she had done it for years. She had never actively gone out to seek a boyfriend. But she knew as well that she would be good to someone going out with her proven that he suited her, of course and that she would enjoy a closer company, sometimes. *That's why people have children* she considered. *To have constant company.* The idea of having children had long been discarded from her plans, but she still foolishly hung onto the hope of having a relationship one day. She might well discard that too. But it was harder to abandon, for sometimes she simply felt overwhelmed by the need to give out the flaming beam radiating from her chest.

That afternoon was too hot, and she wished she had a hat. She could smell her own sweat and she could feel sleep approaching her again. By the time she reached the bridge over the Foss, she felt positively done in, but she remembered it was Saturday shopping day and she dragged herself to the supermarket. She also bought a pre-made sandwich and nibbled on it along Haworth Road. She opened the door imagining Mrs. Neill, arms folded, ready to glare at her, but the house appeared deserted. Hermione gulped the last bits of sandwich, removed her sandals and threw herself heavily on her bed. She would take a shower later; the sheets had to be washed, in any case. In a few minutes, she was asleep.

On Sunday, she dutifully studied *Essays on the Status of Witches in Librarianship, vol. XXI: 1952-1972*, without letting her mind wander.

Mrs. Neill, who went visiting her daughter in Leeds, never found out that Hermione had spent Friday night away and never complained.

(Long) A/N:

Dear readers,

This (and a following scene that I can't reveal you yet) is the chapter whence all this fic originated. Those of you who already knew me from deviantART may remember my fascination with Richard III (I even wrote a graphic novel about him), therefore, won't be surprised to find him peeping in this story as well. The Middleham Jewel is of course real and it's on display at the Yorkshire Museum in York. A replica can be found in the church of St. Mary and St. Alkelda in Middleham (North Yorkshire).

In 2010 the Yorkshire Museum undergone a general refurbishment and the Middleham Jewel is now in the lower floor, not in the ground floor. My deepest gratitude to Mr. Bateson of the Yorkshire Museum, who kindly described to me the new exhibition. You can find a photo of the old layout here: http://a4.sphotos.ak.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ak-ash1/20451_299569588468_38539983468_3362841_4973774_n.jpg

August 1st is indeed the Yorkshire Day, but I don't know if museums really allow free entrance for the occasion.

Of course, I'm not the first person to draw a parallel between Snape and Richard III. Please check, for more details, "Snape Castle, Richard III and Professor Snape" by Serpentine (http://www.thehpn.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=19&Itemid=9) and "Loyaulte Me Lie" by Red Hen (<http://www.redhen-publications.com/Loyaulte.html>).

'The goal of all life is death' is a quote from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and the following sentence is adapted from James Hillman's *Suicide and the Soul*.

"I stirred up the embers of my love, but they couldn't burst in a blaze" is adapted from *Little Women*, Part 2, Ch. 41, *Learning to Forget* (the original sentence is "He carefully stirred up the embers of his lost love, but they refused to burst into a blaze").

Essays on the Status of Witches in Librarianship refers to Kathleen Weibel and Kathleen M. Heim, *The Role of Women in Librarianship, 1876-1976: The Entry, Advancement, and Struggle for Equalization in One Profession*, Phoenix: Oryx, 1979 (with supplements).

Deep thanks to valady and RobisonRocket for their beta-reading.

Chez les Boddingtons

Chapter 12 of 20

In which Hermione is summoned by Mrs. Peewit, has a dream, reads two books and goes to a Sunday lunch.

It's as plain as the nose on your face

Nobody can deny

That sorrow must find its rightful place

~ Silje Nergaard, *So Sorry for Your Love*

Mrs. Neill might not have noticed, but other people did.

Shit, Hermione thought as Jake, the daytime librarian, informed her as soon as she arrived to the library, on Monday afternoon that Mrs. Peewit wanted to confer with her.

With her heart sinking down to her stomach, Hermione went upstairs, knocked on the Director's office door and pushed it open.

Mrs. Peewit, immaculate in a powder pink, silk crape blouse, sat at the other side of a large, wooden desk swamped with files and sheets of paper. Behind her stood an oil portrait of Emily Brontë, whom the library was dedicated to, surrounded by a photo of the Queen, few diplomas, and more paintings. Mrs Peewit finished typing something at the computer before turning to Hermione.

"Hermione, my dear," she said softly, taking out her glasses, "what have you done?"

"Mrs. Peewit, I "

"I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing in hiring you for the summer. Yes, you had graduated brilliantly, but had no other references."

"I can explain "

"Now I know that my instinct was right. The report of the National Centre for Book Conservation arrived this morning."

"..."

"We sent the first two volumes of *The Twelve Patriarkes* you had restored to the National BookCon for a final check, and they were impressed. They write me here," Mrs. Peewit tapped on a printed letter on her desk, "that the restorer's work was faultless, and that they had rarely seen a binding mended with such ability. But don't just stand there, come take a seat."

Hermione reached the chair with a blank expression on her face. Mrs. Peewit went on, "The National BookCon assures me they are going to consider your name when a new restoration project of national relevance turns up. They also suggest to me to not let you slip away yes, to not let you slip away and I find it a sound advice. I shall talk to the Library Board at our next meeting, proposing that they hire you after your stage. With a contract for one more year, at the beginning, and then it will depend on you. Well? What do you say?"

"I don't know where to start, Mrs. Peewit," stammered Hermione, dumbstruck. "I'm honoured by what you say and by what the National Centre wrote you."

"You have been working with us for two months, now, dear, and we are very happy with you. You seem born to work among books. I hope the Board will back my proposal and that we will have you here for September, as well."

"I I thank you, Madam."

"You're welcome. Of course, we know you are from Salisbury, but it won't be a problem to stay a little longer here in the north, will it? York may be charming also in winter, you know. I hope you aren't you afraid of a little snow."

With all the snow there was at Hogwarts, I daresay I don't.

Suddenly, Mrs. Peewit's smile faded and she gave Hermione a piercing look. "You don't have a sweetheart in Salisbury, do you?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Ah ah, forgive me." Mrs. Peewit's smile broadened anew. "You see, with such a patroness," she turned in her chair and winked at the portrait of Emily Brontë, "it's easy to take love matters seriously."

Hermione hinted at a smile. If Mrs. Peewit had known of her conversation with Snape...

"Of course, the library wasn't always entitled to her," continued the Director. "It was an ecclesiastic library, before. Emily came here one day with her father Patrick, who was a curate. Somehow, while her father talked with the librarian, she sneaked into the archives and she stole a book. *Amoretti* by Spenser, if I'm not mistaken. Charlotte Brontë found it among Emily's possessions after her death, and she sent it back to the library with the manuscript of one of Emily's poems as an apology for keeping their book for so long. In return, when the library became public in 1872, it adopted Emily's name as its own. It was quite a brave decision, since Emily was a woman and the status of *Wuthering Heights* was so contested."

Hermione nodded. She had read the story behind the library's name before she went to work there. "You know, Mrs. Peewit," she said with a conspiratorial tone, "as much as I appreciate *Wuthering Heights*'s literary merits, still I prefer *Jane Eyre*."

"This surprises me. I'd said that you young people would go for tragic passions."

"I'd rather have the heroine marry the man she loves," concluded Hermione.

See, Granger? Nobody cares about a library door opening on Saturdays.

As she returned to the archives, Hermione's confusion wouldn't decrease. She had been offered a job. A pleasing job. But in a Muggle library.

What about the selection for the National Wizarding Library? What am I supposed to do in September?

She had been preparing for the selection for months. She had been studying wizarding librarianship just the day before. The National Wizarding Library was where she was meant to be. Or not?

The report given by the National Centre for Book Conservation made her proud. Flattered. But it also messed up her plans.

Did she have to give up the selection? Revert forever to a Muggle life? Waste her magical talent? Was she allowed to do that? How would the wizarding society consider her, if she decided to hide her powers indefinitely? Was it right *moral*?

Granger, don't fret like that.

She inhaled, closing her eyes, and breathed out, reopening them. On the table in front of her stood tomes four and five of the *Twelve Patriarkes*, the only two left to restore. As she had planned, restoration would be completely finished by the end of August; she had already started with tome four. She stroked lightly its battered cover. *What should I do, Brother Lucretius? I've loved tending you. Would you prefer if I stay?*

She needed advice. She had to ask somebody else's opinion on that matter.

By the way, now that they were on friendly terms again, would Snape come after work to accompany her home?

She quite hoped so.

With a sense of expectation, she put on her rubber gloves and gently opened volume four at the bookmark.

It was a bubble, after all.

When she got out of the library, at ten o' clock, there was nobody waiting for her at the door, and nobody came for the rest of the week. He disappeared again, as he had already done once, as if their reconciliation had never happened or didn't mean anything. As in Jorvik, their confidences were the effect of a strange charm, fuelled by the night and a fitting subject, but hadn't survived the weekend. Every day, the night spent together in the library's hall seemed more unreal to her, as if experienced by two people who didn't exist anymore.

Of course, he wasn't obliged to come to her. And she didn't need anybody's help to cross a road and a bridge.

It was only that, for the first time, she missed him. And it wasn't only because of the job proposal or other mundane business. The thought of him visited her through her days, and it was neither anxious nor displeasing. It kept her company, like a scent in her nostrils.

He was somewhere. Where, she didn't know. She didn't have his address or his number. York was a small city, true, but it was big enough for a man to vanish in it.

She waited for the moment when he would pop up again, and they would resume their conversation.

Having Muggle friends who didn't know what the National Wizarding Library was, and magical friends who weren't likely to appreciate it nevertheless, added a nice schizophrenic touch to Hermione's confusion. In her divided life, she used to hide from her friends the things they wouldn't respectively understand.

Eventually, she called home and reported to her mother Mrs. Peewit's offer.

"Do as you feel, dear," said Jean Granger. "For us it's the same. There's still time to make a decision, though, and you still have to pass the selection with Mrs. Vand. You can choose later which post you prefer."

Don't fret, Miss Granger.

Hermione didn't tell her mother of Chris' marriage she didn't discuss matters of the heart with her. Since Jean had dismissed the existence of Molly's curse as a 'paranoiac nonsense', Hermione kept those things to herself.

She dreamt of him, as she thought she would. She hadn't stolen a vial of Dreamless Sleep for nothing even if it lay, untouched since Friday, in her drawer.

In her dream, she went to visit her University tutor at her home. Both of them spoke in German, even if in reality they were both English and Hermione didn't know German. The apartment was filled with books small surprise and among them stood a volume of *The Twelve Patriarkes*. Hermione asked her teacher why she hadn't handed it over to her, as its rightful owner.

They were waiting for two persons with whom they would go downtown. The first was Sandra. The second, of course, was Chris Darrell. Hermione's tutor wasn't aware of their intimacy.

As soon as Chris showed up, the tutor and Sandra disappeared.

Chris looked older, with receding hair and a beard. It took him a little time to recognise her. Dream Hermione wondered if she would fall in love with him had she met him now.

After the civilities, it began a tender scene in which Hermione and Chris embraced. They were sitting on a conversation chair. First, they squeezed hands, then wrists, and then Hermione would hug his torso. She held his beautiful, statuesque back close, and rested her head on his shoulder. It wasn't a sensual embrace; it carried mutual forgiveness. Chris told her he was going to marry, and Hermione replied she knew that.

Then Hermione found herself again with her tutor. They were suddenly in Ascona and they were walking along a river. Used books stalls bordered their path. Hermione told her tutor how she had met Chris and what happened between them. Then she woke up.

Still in her bed, she wondered if she had really forgiven Chris. She had never considered him in need of being forgiven, actually. Even when he hadn't come to meet her in Liverpool, she didn't blame him. In her eyes, he was faultless.

When they had spent some time together, he was always gentle, with a sunny smile and laughing eyes.

He was beautiful.

He was perfect.

And now Jill would be the one to enjoy all his virtues.

She could almost hear his sneering comment. "Virtues, Miss Granger?" Snape would say. "Do you call perfect a man who dumped you, didn't recognise your feeling for him, and told you goodbye with an e-mail? Who left you alone in Liverpool, a city good only for fathering the Beatles?"

Severus was right, probably, but she could not forbid herself to think of Chris as the man with whom she could have lived in a shimmering, perfect communion, if only she had been intuitive enough to declare herself when she still had the chance.

"He would have rejected you all the same, Granger" was a disheartening consideration, but had it happened, then maybe she wouldn't have wasted eight years on him. She would get over it earlier. Maybe. She couldn't forgive herself for not speaking when she had the occasion.

"He would have ditched you sooner or later in any case, Miss Granger" wasn't that bad a remark. *I would have at least touched those shoulders. And that bum* Which now was Jill's playground. Jill's!

"You would have died of boredom with him, Hermione, had you married him." This had simply turned out too unrealistic to be actually proven.

She went to Waterstone's and ordered a copy of *Smoke From the Chimneys*. Published by a local publishing house, the book arrived the day after. She returned to collect it. On her way to the cash desk, Hermione stopped in front of the psychology section. She browsed the shelves, occasionally shivering at titles mentioning death and suicide. Eventually, she picked up a book titled *Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts*, by David Clark and Christine Purdon.

Being the first week of August, the library was more deserted than usual. Hermione spent her afternoon reading, alternating *Smoke* with *Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts*.

Overcoming was illuminating. She recognised herself in so many of the features described. Need to control. Predominance of thought over other aspects of life. Need to be reassured that what she did was right. All things Snape had pointed out to her, albeit in a moment when her defences were kept too high to let them in.

She learnt about the different types of obsessions, about the 'washers,' the 'counters,' the 'checkers.' At the bottom, there was what was called 'pure obsessions.' Intrusive images, as well as obsessions about self-harm, belonged to the 'pure O' category. It could almost pass for the name of a perfume, if it wasn't for the stink it gave forth.

The book firmly contested the natural tendency to avoid situations, which would provoke the insurgence of obsessions and insisted on the necessity of learning how to let intrusive thoughts pass without reasoning with them.

When reading about obsessions made her feel too uneasy, she would lay down the textbook and leaf through *Smoke From the Chimneys* instead.

The novel started with a younger Jacob Norton aka Funnel than the one present in *Against a Brick Wall*. He came from a family of Lancastrian sympathies and was taken into the service of Margaret Beaufort, the mother of the future Henry VII. The harridan recognised some qualities in the young man – quick mind, agile body, fine ear – and sent him to Richard III's court as a spy. First biased against the king, Jacob would soon be won by Richard's personality, meanwhile winning his trust in turn. Through various turns and twists – among which his mother perishing in a mysterious fire set to their house – Jacob would eventually become a double agent for Richard, supporting the Yorkist cause in the depths of his heart. He witnessed the king's breakdown after the deaths of his only heir and of his wife, barely concealed behind his stoic countenance. Despite all his efforts, however, he wouldn't be able to save Richard from losing battle, crown, and life at Bosworth Field. He managed to find out – and to punish – the culprit of his mother's death, though, and in the aftermath of Bosworth he would join Francis Lovell (Richard's best friend) in his attempt to restore the Yorkists to the throne.

She continued to read through the evening, and once home, she took the novel to her bed. She wouldn't switch off the table lamp before finishing it.

It was Thursday; one week earlier she had gone to Harry's party and discovered about Chris' marriage. One week after, she was comfortably sprawled on her bed with a copy of 'the breathtaking debut of Leslie Prince'. Go figure about life's changes.

She wouldn't dispute with the back cover. *Against a Brick Wall* looked like an assignment dutifully completed; *Smoke From the Chimneys* was another piece of cake. Whatever happened to Snape, had he lost his edge at the second book? Or was he simply drained after writing the first one? *Smoke From the Chimneys* was a vibrant tale; disguised under its historical veil, it seemed to hide an autobiographical subtext she hadn't perceived in *Against a Brick Wall*. Possible that the autobiographical impulse was exhausted in *Smoke*, and *Against* was only a product of craft?

She fell asleep still engaged in an imaginary debate with Snape about the merits of his book. He had, as always, the last word, even in her monologue.

Next morning, before going to work, she searched amazon.co.uk for reviews for *Smoke From the Chimneys*. Satisfied by what she read, she Googled 'Leslie Prince'.

Among bookseller sites and other reviews, she found a link for 'An Interview with Leslie Prince,' dating back to March. The journalist wrote:

I am with historical mystery author Leslie Prince, here at the York Literature Festival, promoting his last instalment in the Funnel series Against a Brick Wall. It's not easy to meet Mr. Prince; he tries to avoid large festivals and attends only small, but prestigious ones, like the York's. He has been here for the last two days signing copies of his last novel.

Q. Mr. Prince, you are accused of being a reclusive author.

A. (laughs) I've never been one for exposure, you see.

Q. Your readers begin to doubt in your existence. You refuse to be photographed.

A. An author of mystery has the right to be mysterious.

Q. I met some people who thought you were actually a woman.

A. I chose Leslie as a penname on purpose.

Q. Really?

A. Ha ha, no. It's a lie. [Note: I believe he wanted to make a pun on Leslie.]

Q. So Leslie Prince isn't even your real name.

A. Jacob Norton uses a code name as a spy. Leslie Prince is my code name as a writer.

Q. You turned to fiction late [Mr. Prince is around fifty]. What did you do before?

A. I can't really answer that question.

Q. Mr. Prince, you have to reveal something to me or this interview is going to be very poor!

A. (laughs) It's only that my job wasn't really glamorous. Revealing it would disappoint my readers.

Q. I asked because you seem to have first-hand knowledge of Funnel's job. I thought you were a spy.

A. (laughs) Nothing of the sort. I was a teacher. In a boarding school.

Q. This explains a lot of things. [Mr. Prince's laugh, at this point, is contagious.] Why did you revert to fiction? And to historical thrillers, in particular?

A. I was sacked, once, and found myself with a lot of free time. They told me writing was the most time-consuming activity for unemployed people, and I carried out. Since I'm not gifted with imagination, I thought I could rather use a subject I knew well, and I chose history. It was easier to write along an already established line.

*Q. Actually, critics believe you are blessed with a sparkling imagination. The Mystorical Review wrote that *Smoke From the Chimneys* 'is a gripping tale, blending history and mystery in a relieving fresh, inventive manner, bringing prestige to both genres.'*

A. Thank you. But that's only an illusion created by style, in truth.

Q. Every review I've read about your books praised your style.

A. Don't tell that to my students.

Q. Did you teach history, perhaps?

A. No, I only inherited my mother's interest for it. She named me after an historical figure – I won't tell you who – and the stories she would tell me as a child were almost always historical legends. I also owe her my Yorkist allegiance, since her family was from York.

Q. You aren't kind towards Lancastrians in your books.

A. You always need villains in fiction. The biggest bang for the buck: Margaret Beaufort and Henry VII do the job easily.

Q. How many books in the Funnel series there will be?

A. At the moment, there are five planned. I've just started collecting references for the third one.

Q. Can you tell us something about it?

A. Its working title so far is Creeping Like a Lizard. Funnel will return to England from Burgundy and infiltrates at Henry VII's court while still at the service of Margaret of York, Richard III's sister.

Q. Many readers ask for Funnel to have a love interest.

A. That's what my editor tells me as well (laughs). But I don't plan to give him one, at the moment. I don't trust my skills with romance (laughs again).

Hermione closed the site. "I thought I could take some inspiration from you," she remembered Snape saying during their quarrel. "That's why I insisted on our meetings." Her heartbeat was resonating in her ears like a low thunder, and when she passed by a mirror, she saw that her cheeks were purple.

That afternoon, she received a call at the library. It was unusual for her to be specifically requested at the phone, since few people knew she worked there.

"Hermione? Is it you?" said a female voice.

"Yes, it's me. With who am I "

"I'm Adele, Adele Boddington. Do you remember me?"

The Boddingtons... "Of course. How are you, Mrs. Boddington?" she asked politely.

"Ah, dear, I'm so happy I found you! We didn't know how to contact you. Severus wouldn't answer at home, and that impossible man still refuses to get a mobile. We wanted to ask him your number, but he must be out of town. Luckily, Eustace thought we ought to look for you at the library."

... they should know where Severus is. "How can I help you?"

"I know it may be a little late, dear, but we took time before figuring out how to find you. We wanted to ask you if you would come for lunch, on Sunday. Or do you already have other plans?"

"I would love to come, Mrs. Boddington. Thank you for inviting me."

"Wonderful! I'll tell Eustace immediately. You know where we live, don't you? Right in front of Jorvik Centre. Sunday at twelve. If you have problems, you can call us. I shall give you our number."

"Sure. Let me grab a pencil..."

"Oh! Hermione, dear, before I forget. Do you suffer from any food allergy?"

Resigned to the evidence that Snape was out of town and that she wasn't going to see him again soon, when she met him at the Boddingtons', Hermione was surprised. A lot. She tripped up in her words while she greeted him and that made her snort nervously.

The Boddington's house was an elegant, three-floor house in the middle of the city. You could detect an architect's touch in the way it was furnished. The dominant colours were white and beige, giving an impression of light, air, space. White curtains whipped with the breeze, and white flowers placed everywhere provided a discrete, sweet scent. One wall in the living room was covered with family photographs. Sofas and chairs were made of wicker and covered with white cushions. Mrs. Boddington was tastefully dressed in white, too; white brought out her blonde hair with ash streaks and her blue eyes.

In all that white, Snape was the only black spot.

She saw him as she entered into the spacious living room, standing on the other side of it, talking with Eustace with a book in his hands. He turned as she walked it, preceded by Adele's voice. His lips curled in a faint smile. She smiled too, shyly, as she stepped forward.

"Hermione! You don't mind if I call you so, do you? Welcome to our house; we are honoured for you to be our guest," boomed Mr. Boddington. "Oh, but you are splendid. Cornflower blue suits you wonderfully."

Then she floundered.

"And here we are," said Mrs. Boddington, serving the appetiser. "I tried to please everyone's tastes. Figs with walnuts and Richard III Wensleydale. Is that good? You eat cheese, right?"

"Yes, I told you so; vegans don't eat cheese, or rather animal by-products, but vegetarians do. Thank you for caring, Mrs. Boddington."

"Call me Adele, dear; of course I would keep to your habits."

"I didn't know there was a cheese named after Richard III."

"Ah, I discovered it thanks to Severus. Has he already tired you with his beloved Richard III? He can get annoying with it, sometimes. No need to look me that way, Severus: you know that perfectly well."

"I didn't know you were a vegetarian, Miss Granger. Always keen to save the world, uhn?"

"I do my best, *Professor*."

"Tut, tut. What are these titles? Miss, Professor. When you wouldn't let anyone call you Professor anymore, Severus."

"I'd say that to be called Professor by Hermione Granger can rightfully make a person proud, Adele," intervened Eustace. "Though I really don't understand how someone may choose not to eat meat. Sorry, dear, but I have to have my sausages in the morning."

"There's nothing to be sorry for, Mr. Boddington."

"Eustace."

"Eustace. Vegetarianism is a personal choice; I wouldn't impose it on others."

"However, Eustace, for this time you'll content yourself with a meatless meal. I cooked only dishes Hermione could eat."

"That's too kind of you, Adele."

"Why be only a vegetarian when you could be directly a vegan?" Snape asked with a mocking tone.

"I'm afraid I can't give up some true milk in my chocolate, unfortunately," she confessed bluntly, biting her lip.

"It's reassuring to hear that the world is still half in peril, Granger," Snape remarked before returning to his Richard III cheese.

Hermione was under the Boddingtons' crossfire all through the meal. Did she like York? What had she visited? How long did she intend to stay? How it was working at the library?

With the intention of making Snape aware of it, she told them of the possibility to remain at the Emily Brontë, mentioning the selection for the National Wizarding Library in September. Snape didn't comment but for an arched eyebrow, and stood generally quiet during the rest of the lunch. After all, the Boddingtons were already doing much of the talking.

The lunch was all vegetarian, lavish and luscious. On the white china plates, followed aubergine salad, grilled mushrooms, courgette velouté, crepes with cheddar and vegetables, capped by a chocolate banana flan with ice cream.

Hermione was ready to burst. Adele Boddington was indeed the great cook Snape had praised.

"It was all delicious, Adele, really," she said, declining a drop of the Chambord raspberry liqueur Mrs. Boddington was serving.

"Thank you, dear, but it was all very simple, in truth." As she handed a shot glass to Snape, Adele added, "Next time we have to be your guests, Severus."

"If you want something rustic..."

"Why so modest? Hermione, tell him his cooking is perfectly fine."

"Er... I never had the occasion to try it out."

"What does it mean? Severus, haven't you invited Hermione to your house?"

Snape frowned, and Hermione became suddenly interested in the napkin on her lap.

"Let me tell you, you don't seem to be a very welcoming host to Hermione since she's in our city, Severus. The only thing I'm glad is that you didn't bring her to the Richard III Museum; that place is ridiculous."

"She came here to work," muttered Snape. "Not to visit my house." He emptied his shot.

"He lives in this beautiful cottage on Stockton Lane, which once belonged to his grandparents," continued Adele, unabashed. "I remember when we would go there, over the summer. Do you remember, Eustace? The Yorkshire parkin prepared by Grandma May? Mmh."

"I remember. By the way, how is your father, Severus?" asked Eustace, sipping the Chambord shot Hermione had refused.

"As usual. You know him; he rants about being moribund, but he will survive us all. Hypochondriac if there's one. I don't know how Nancy can stand him." After toying with it for a while, Snape placed his glass on the table.

"It's her job. You were lucky to employ a good nurse; they're so difficult to find, nowadays."

Adele turned to Hermione. "Have you ever met Mr. Snape, dear?"

On her way to plunging into a placid after-lunch numbness, Hermione's first reaction was going to be *he didn't even know Snape had a father*, but it wouldn't be correct. *I didn't know he was still alive* was more exact. Eventually, she replied simply, "No, I haven't."

"I suspected you didn't. He lives in Wimbledon, now. Severus goes visiting him, from time to time."

Hermione eyed Snape. It wasn't difficult, considering they were sitting facing one another. He was still grumbling about his father with Mr. Boddington and wasn't looking at her.

Going to the Championships, eh? Will you ever speak plainly? She shook her head, faking a disapproving smile.

Adele tried to dissuade her, but Hermione insisted. She helped to clear the table while Eustace pulled out a set of Gobstones from an old chest. He invited Snape to sit down in the wicker armchairs and placed the set between them, on a low table. Bent over the table, with his elbows on his knees, Snape seemed to play a yin-yang figure against the white upholstery.

"Their matches can go on for quite a while," said Mrs. Boddington. "Would you like to see the rest of the house, in the meantime?"

Hermione nodded and followed her hostess upstairs.

A/N: I bow to Pink Raccoon, who stood up late with me to invent the Boddingtons' menu. Thanks to valady and RobisonRocket for their beta help.

The National Centre for Book Conservation is invented. The York Literature Festival is not. In 2009 it took place between 28 February and 15 March.

Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts: How to Gain Control of Your OCD by David Clark and Christine Purdon, is a real book. I've never read it, though.

On the Wheel

Chapter 13 of 20

With a finger, she traced little spirals on her pillow, Crookshanks' soft purr coming to her mind before she would fall into a peaceful slumber.

I fell into a burning ring of fire

I went down, down, down

And the flames went higher

And it burns, burns, burns

The ring of fire

The ring of fire

~ Johnny Cash, *The Ring of Fire*

With her right foot already on the first step of the staircase, Hermione turned and looked back at the two men absorbed in the Gobstones set. Eustace was filling a pipe with tobacco and asking Snape if he would have a drag. Severus replied, "D'you really want me to start smoking again, eh?"

Her eyes lingered over Snape's back. Wearing black, surrounded by all that spotless white furniture, he seemed even smaller and frailer than usual.

Mrs. Boddington had to notice the raising concern in her expression, for she leaned toward Hermione and spoke softly to her ear, "Don't worry, dear. The stones have been permanently enchanted to respond to Severus' touch. It was one of the last charms Eustace performed, actually."

Startled from her reverie, Hermione opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, then closed it and continued to climb the steps, deep in thought.

It was not until the two women went into the bedroom white and as fresh-scented as the rest of the house that Hermione decided to speak.

"Forgive me if I sound intrusive, Adele," she formulated slowly, "but there's something I wish to ask you. Since I entered into your house, I could not perceive any magic. The photos at your wall are Muggle pictures: they don't move. There are no magical wards, or charms, no magical items, nothing. The magic sent out by Gobstones is almost imperceptible, except when they spit. In short, a Muggle could come here without recognising it's a house inhabited by wizards."

"Uh-uhm," nodded Adele. "Yes, that's true. We made a point of living like Muggles after the war."

"But *why*?" Hermione almost yelled, despite herself. "Why?"

"I suppose it would be hard for you, as a heroine for the wizarding world, to understand our choice," said Adele softly. "Mmh. How can I explain it to you?"

The older woman sat on the edge of the bed, and Hermione sat beside her. "Let's see: we witnessed the horrors magic could produce, and we didn't want to be part of that anymore. It's like your vegetarianism."

"Magic is not bad." Hermione trembled as she said that.

"Neither is meat. Animals eat other animals; it's a law of nature. But you consciously decided not to eat it anymore. I acknowledge your reasons for choosing vegetarianism, but you probably recognise that a good steak is tasty and tempting. We know magic can do some good, but it can also do harm. We, Eustace and I, willingly abstain from performing magic, as you refrain from eating meat."

Adele paused while Hermione reflected. Then she continued, "Of course, watching Severus' admirable efforts to live without magic gave strength to our decision."

"But he told me you *were* performing some magic." Hermione's voice cracked with emotion. "He told me of the Entrancing Enchantment you cast at Jorvik. How can you perform magic outside and not in your own home?"

Adele's brow furrowed perplexingly. "There is no such Enchantment at Jorvik," she said, nonplussed.

"No? Didn't you help to create a few of the rooms at the exhibition?"

"We did, as interior designers. But why would we cast an Entrancing Enchantment in Jorvik Centre? The Ministry of Magic would never allow a Charm to be cast on a Muggle attraction. We would be at the mercy of Improper Use of Magic Office by now."

"Ah." *Right*. "So you just designed the place."

"Eustace and I were wizarding architects before the war and turned to interior designers when we went Muggle. It took us a while to use set squares that wouldn't calculate measures by themselves, but eventually we adapted." Adele smiled and gestured around with a proud look on her face. "We designed this house, too."

"It really gives a summer sensation."

"Indeed. White is my favourite colour."

I would never have guessed

"Severus can come up with such stupid jokes sometimes!" Adele wrinkled her nose in an amused snort. "An Entrancing Enchantment at Jorvik! I must tell it to Eustace."

"Er... please don't, Adele. I must have misunderstood."

"It's never clear whether he says something in jest, or in earnest. That's just how he is."

You bet. A series of little clues were lining up in her mind, like Hop-o'-My-Thumb's crumbs of bread.

At four, Hermione and Severus were outside of the Boddingtons' front door. The day was still bright, and the sky was clear, but the wind blew cold. Shuddering, Hermione put on her cotton cardigan while Snape held her bag.

"Thank you," she said as her hand came out from the sleeve to take back her bag.

"Uhm," he nodded in return. "They said I'm not playing a good amphitryon to you, Miss Granger. Do you want to go for a digestive walk? Is there something you wish to see?"

"Mmh, let me see." She reflected for a moment. "Yes. There is a place I'd like to visit. Hopefully it's still open. Let me guide you for once."

They passed by All Saints Church and walked along Coney Street, still busy with people who were shopping. Snape stopped to show her the Guildhall and they went in for a minute, to see a plaque commemorating Richard III's commitment to the city.

The plaque called Richard the 'most famous prince of blessed memory'. Hermione looked at the man at her side, deep in contemplation of the carved, wooden board. She felt more relaxed, there with him in a public space, than she had been at the Boddingtons'. Conversation was more fluent. In the open, they were alone together, in the unreal bubble that was taking shape again. She took a step closer.

"On the wheel? Do you have a screw loose, Granger?" barked Snape when Hermione pointed to the big wheel on the opposite bank of the river Ouse.

"I've wanted to go there since I arrived in York." Hermione grinned with shining eyes.

"But it's an eyesore! A theme park tat! A garish knick-knack for tourists!" he snarled, exasperated.

"Please. I know you are afraid of heights. But you told me not to yield to avoidance tricks, didn't you? There's nothing to fear. I will be there with you."

"I told you also not to provide reassurances on irrational fears. If I didn't, I'm telling you now," he grunted.

"Oh, come on," she said, moving on to cross Lendal Bridge.

He had to capitulate, for she heard his steps behind her, a minute later.

To be admitted to the wheel, visitors had to go through the National Railway Museum first. It was not a place Hermione was particularly interested in, but the steam locomotives on display reminded her of the Hogwarts Express, and the connected excitement she felt at every start of term. Snape grumbled that it was a place only someone like Arthur Weasley would like, all the while continuing to follow her. Eventually, through his protests, they reached the entrance to the wheel.

There were only a few visitors when they got into the pod assigned them. A few moments after the door closed, the pod rocked slightly and started to climb. Slowly, the York skyline appeared in front of them, from the train station to the treetops of the Museum Gardens, up to the Minster's front, with its two decorated towers.

Snape had fallen silent since they entered the pod. He sat casually, apparently enjoying the view, but Hermione could tell that his calm was but a façade. However, sure that suffering the ascent would do him good, she refused to surrender to his repressed nervousness. She gave him a warm smile, then abandoned to the peaceful sensation of being carried up, up, up, and then down, down, down.

However, what was pleasant for her didn't evidently feel the same for Severus. As the wheel started its second rotation, Snape stood up and drew closer to the glass wall, looking down as the ground grew farther away.

"Do you feel dizzy?" asked Hermione with a wavering voice. Averting his eyes from her, Snape shook his head, as his lips quirked in a fleeting smile.

She got up as well and came to his side. Silently, she stood beside him, her right arm brushing against Severus' left sleeve, until the wheel's revolution reached its highest point. Then it stopped to allow the best sightseeing, while the pod swayed gently on its pivot.

"Yes," she said softly. "It's a..." She began the sentence, but suddenly didn't know what to say, so she simply repeated, "Yes". Gently, she reclined her head over Snape's shoulder. It fitted perfectly under her ear.

She could feel his body tense for a moment, and when he breathed out, a little later, she knew that he must have been holding his breath. With a tiny squeak, the wheel resumed its spin downward.

Snape's heavy breath through his nostrils was the only sound she perceived. A deeper sigh, and he brought his arm behind her back, placing his hand on her left shoulder. Hermione's head slid slightly forward, between his collarbone and his jaw-line, while her side rested against his black-shirted chest. She pressed her cheek against the shirt collar, the smooth fabric stroking her skin, as she slipped her arm around his waist, sensing the flesh under her palm, beneath the soft cloth.

They stood in silence during the wheel's third revolution, looking at the city straight in front of them, holding each other tightly side by side while the sky's azure became deeper and the yellow of the Minster's walls turned darker.

"Hermione! We didn't expect you today. Did something happen?"

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "Nothing, Mother. I just wanted to greet you and to give this to Dad," she replied, showing a bag from the National Railway Museum.

"Ah, good. But why such elegance? The cornflower blue dress, two-inch heels shoes... Did you go somewhere?"

"I was invited for lunch at a posh house," explained Hermione, entering the living room and looking around. "Crookshanks? Where are you?"

"Last time I saw him, he was in the back garden with your father," said Jean Granger. "Did you eat well?"

"Wonderfully. This couple, the Boddingtons, they are wizards, but live like Muggles. I met them at the Jorvik Centre. Do you remember? I told you of that place *Minus the Severus part*.

"Ah, right. Well, do you want something to eat for dinner or was the lunch enough?"

"I'm full, Mum, really. Thank you. But I'd like a cup of tea."

"Sure, dear."

While her mother stepped to the kitchen, Hermione headed to the back garden. Her father was sitting on a deckchair, reading a book under the garden lamp. Old Crookshanks was curled on his tummy, in the exact position where his weight would feel heavier. As soon as the half-Kneazle noticed her, he jumped off his comfortable seat making her father cry, "Ouch!" and turn and trotted to Hermione's feet, rubbing against her ankles. Then he held out his forepaws at her knees, requesting to be picked up. Hermione took the cat in her arms and moved closer to her father.

"Hermione! What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to give you this, Dad," she said, kissing him on the cheek and handing him the bag. "I went to a train museum this afternoon."

"Why, thank you, dear," said Mr. Granger, observing the little model train Hermione had bought for him. "That's very nice. How are things going at your library?"

Crookshanks climbed on her shoulder, tenderly digging his claws in her back. "Everything is fine at the moment," she replied, leaving aside the job proposal. "I had a beautiful day."

"Great. Are you staying for the evening?"

"No more than a couple of hours. I want to go back to York for the night."

"All right. We could watch a film together, then."

Sitting before the television, between her mum and dad, Hermione kept stroking Crookshanks' fur absent-mindedly, lost in reverie.

Had he said something, that afternoon? Probably he did, because she didn't remember him staying quiet, except for the few minutes ages? they had spent on the wheel. But when she returned home, she didn't remember any of his words in particular, as she usually did, a sign perhaps that she was indeed getting older, or that he was capable of speaking in a forgettable way, sometimes, or rather that there was nothing important to say. The specific words had gone; all she remembered was the warm force emanating from her, and that was actually still with her, surrounding her like a light-made skin. She remembered the softness of his waist squeezed under her fingers, and the shape of his shoulder bones under her temple. She remembered the heat surging in her breast as it pressed against Severus' side. The touch of his fingers on her shoulder. Did she really need to remember his words? Her conversation hadn't stood out in brilliance, either.

With a finger, she traced little spirals on her pillow, Crookshanks' soft purr coming to her mind before she would fall into a peaceful slumber.

A/N: This chapter features one major poetic license, as the Yorkshire Wheel, after carrying almost a million visitors, was dismantled in November 2008 and still has to be relocated somewhere. I hope you will accept my decision to let it stay next to the National Railway Museum in August 2009. I wanted Severus and Hermione to go there ;)

'Eyesore' and 'theme park tat' are definitions I found in the comments to this article www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/8715738.Big_wheel_set_to_return_to_York/

My deepest gratitude to Pink Raccoon for her warm support during the writing of this chapter, and to Valady and RobisonRocket for correcting it.

5 Days of Summer

Chapter 14 of 20

After their ride on the wheel, everything was settled, without their arranging anything about it.

We're walking hand in hand, we'll walk this way forever

Our eyes have risen to the water's edge, watching with the tides

The stars have fallen to another day, and the sun warms our path to find

The reason leaves us far behind in our strange world

It's a strange world

It's a very strange world

~ Sarah McLachlan, *Strange World*

After their ride on the wheel, everything was settled, without their arranging anything about it.

On Monday, Snape resumed coming to the library to escort her home, and neither of them commented about it.

They had taken but a few steps when Hermione seized him by the crook of his arm and walked leaning on his side up to her door.

"Are you seriously worried about the National Wizarding Library?" he asked.

"I am."

"Why do you care so much?"

"It's my great opportunity."

"Why would you prefer that place to the Emily Brontë Library? Don't you like it?"

"Oh, I do."

"Does Mrs. Peewit mistreat you, perhaps?"

"*Mistreat* me? I can understand that your ideas about mistreatment aren't exactly widely shared, Severus, but you should have taken lessons from her, as a teacher."

"Humph. Then you know Mrs. Vand."

"No, I only met her once."

"In this case, I don't understand. What does that have to offer you that the Brontë Library does not?"

"It's the *National Wizarding* library, Severus."

"You made me aware of that, yes."

"At the *Ministry*."

"So do you crave it because the Ministry sounds more important to you than a provincial library? The bigger the spotlight the better? Tsk. A Gryffindor can't change its spots, apparently."

"Oh, *please*! Had I craved for attention, I wouldn't opt for something no one cares about like bookbinding, would I?"

"Then name me one positive feature of the Ministry of Magic."

She bit her lip. "It's a magical place. Where I can perform magic."

"I could make that out."

"Severus, I know that you... I... ehr. But I cannot give up magic altogether."

"Nobody asks that of you."

"I cannot!" she continued, talking more to herself than to him. "I cannot do as the Boddingtons. Yours is a different situation, but what they do makes me uneasy. You are right; theirs is a kind of survivors' guilt. We all have our own, it seems, though in different guises. But I have a hard time believing that it's moral to abstain from performing magic, I'm sorry. Magic is my talent. It's not right to leave it unused."

"So, it's a question of what is wrong and what is right."

"Of course!"

"Of what you should and shouldn't do."

"Well, if you "

"You still feel in debt to them, the wizarding community."

"I don"

"Do you believe you owe them something? Because you don't owe anything to anybody, Hermione, if this is what worries you."

"I have to do the selecting for myself."

"Stay assured that you don't have to prove anything, either. You aren't defined by the prestige of your job. The time for exams is long gone."

"I received a gift, and I can't throw it completely away."

"And d'you think the National Wizarding Library is a good place to display it?"

"What's the matter with them in particular, Severus? Do you have it in for them?"

"It's only that, as far as I know, you don't need magic to restore books."

"... You made inquiries about bookbinding."

"I am quite well-taught, Hermione."

"With ancient books, it's counterproductive to use magic, but if you are to look after a whole library, magic can be quite useful."

"I suppose that Mrs. Peewit wouldn't notice if you were to use magic in the Emily Brontë."

"But the Ministry would. Or do you think they always make an exception like in Jorvik, where you wanted me to swallow that the Boddingtons would cast a spell over the place?"

"You did drink it in, however."

"Listen, Severus. I'm already leading a split life. My Muggle friends don't know I'm a witch while to my Hogwarts mates I'm one who fled, a quitter. I cannot keep one foot here, one foot there any longer."

"One more reason to choose just one side."

"You're bringing grist to your mill, Severus."

"Hermione. How many spectacular deeds have you really seen accomplished by magic?"

"Well, I have lived to see the end of a dictatorship, through the sacrifices of many."

"A dictatorship based on magic as well."

"Evidently."

"Hermione, I don't need to tell you that I once believed in the power of magic much more than you may ever have, so much so as to go against my Muggle father and against other principles as well."

She nodded.

"But what can actually magic do? We can't save people from dying. We can't save ourselves from our faults. Wizards haven't overcome world hunger or pollution. We are impotent. We elected magic as our god, but it's a god as helpless as we are. Unawares, we I believed in a fraud."

His arm stiffened under her fingers.

"After too much brooding over this subject, I eventually opened my eyes. Magic is only a golden calf we idolise. Better be left without it, and struggle with our strengths alone, I say now."

"Magic can do some good," she murmured.

"Oh, it can. But it's not omnipotent. I stuck with that idea for too long. I became a Death Eater for it, for wanting to defend the wizards' privileges. But I was only bowing to the idol.

"Don't think I didn't miss my magic. Oh, I did regret the loss. After all, all I'd done before was trying to protect our world, didn't I? Why was I repaid with surviving without magic? Even the Wizengamot thought it was a price enough to ask from me for killing Dumbledore and had me cleared. What could a Muggle do against them, after all? There was no necessity to lock a poor, weak Muggle in Azkaban: I was prevented from killing again anyway," he sneered.

Hermione held only a hazy recollection of Snape's trial, from a time when she didn't want to hear anything about him. She could remember an afternoon, though, when Harry came visiting her and had announced to her that he was declared free.

"It had to be a joke, of course, that I, the Dark Arts supporter, was left powerless by a snake! For some people, it was justice. A way to make me atone for what I had done. Humpf. It wasn't certainly me who needed to atone."

On Tuesday, Severus let his hand slide down on her forearm, until it touched her palm.

Raindrops slipped in between their intertwined fingers.

"Let me tell you what magic did to me. It lured me to think less of my father's work. On the other hand, it made me join a band of sociopaths. Swept away my generation. Enchained me to work for an old poofster who betrayed all of us, including your friend, Potter. And now what magic didn't do. Didn't save my mother from cancer. Didn't protect that silly girl I was in love with. Didn't turn this into a better world, a fairer place to live in. In the end, we are no better than Muggles, only more foolish, since we fanatically put our faith in a savage deity."

He gripped her hand more strongly.

"Once I realised that I no longer had to serve that god, I felt liberated, as if I'd been released from a crueler master than Dumbledore or Voldemort. I could tell them all to sod off and walk by myself. Ah. I could breathe afresh. No longer had I to perform an endless duty. I could do what I wished for the first time. Nobody had expectations about Severus Snape, the Muggle.

"And by the way, how do the majority of wizards employ their magic? For foolish wand waving, cleaning their house, flying on broomsticks, Transfiguring into Animagi for pranks? None of them is able to create a single thing of beauty. You did a right thing in choosing a magicless job, Hermione. Don't step backward."

"I do believe magic did a good thing for you, Severus," she spoke softly. "It saved your life. Your magic sacrificed itself in order to let you live. You're alive thanks to your own magic, and that's a fair deal as far as I'm concerned."

On Wednesday, arriving at the corner of Haworth Road, Hermione continued walking forward.

"You live along Stockton Lane, don't you? It's not far from here," she said.

"It's not near, either."

"I can go for a little stroll, now and then," she replied. "And I can always Apparate back if I'm tired."

"Someone did sacrifice for you for once; someone saved you when others couldn't, and it was you. You saved yourself in the end."

"Uhm. So I don't owe anything to Lucius. He cheated me."

"Lucius?"

"Lucius found me in the Shrieking Shack. Didn't you know that? Ah, right you've been told the story of Minerva helping me, haven't you?"

"Yeah... I though McGonagall was behind your recovery."

"Umph. That's what she thinks as well. Lucius fled from the Shack when he heard someone approaching. Luckily, he had already provided me first aid, so Minerva only completed the work."

"Why didn't Lucius make it public? It was an honourable act on his part."

He snorted. "Who would believe him? His word was worthless against Minerva's. She treated her saving of me as a way to make me forgive the horrible way she treated me during my last year at Hogwarts, and nobody would stop her. Lucius was content to make an honourable act in secret, for once."

"You should inform the press about this, you know."

"We prefer it like this, in fact. Everyone has his own way to pay for what he has done. Lucius doesn't want publicity about this. I told you he's changed."

"Why didn't you testify for him at his trial?"

"I wasn't invited, Hermione. I was in St. Mungo's. But it's better like this, trust me."

Thursday. Heather and wild herbs bordered Stockton Lane, their wet surface glistening silvery under the moonlight. Rain was gently tapping on their leaves and on the pavement.

Absent-minded, Hermione set her foot in a puddle. It came out all muddy, her sandal greasy with slime. She cleansed it with a flick of her wand, unconcerned.

"What a great employment for magic," quoth he, arching an eyebrow. "Go home, Hermione, and have a shower."

"What a jerk you can be," she answered back. "I'm going to leave right now," she continued and kept walking, pulling him by his hand.

He didn't move. "You had better do that or you'll catch a cold, and it will be your fault," he said, drawing her closer.

"Impossible," she replied, "the fault is yours, usually." Her hands slipped across his sides, then joined on his back, crumpling his shirt.

"So it seems," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

And then he kissed her.

His lips grazed only her lower lip, briefly, weightlessly, no longer than an instant before departing from her.

"Go home, Hermione," he repeated in a choked voice.

She caressed his cheek with the side of her hand, and then ran away, laughing.

"I am beginning to understand why you're still friends with Lucius."

"No, you can't consider me that opportunistic, Hermione."

"Sorry..."

"I only enjoy being received at Malfoy Manor and to play the member of the ton now and then."

"Idiot." There was an undeniable satisfaction in calling Snape an idiot.

"I only hope you don't want to work at the National Wizarding library for the money, Granger, because you'd be the idiot in that case. Starvation wages for new employees in the Ministry, I've been told."

"This is the silliest thing I've ever heard. I'm not seeking the job for the salary!"

"I thought as much. Do you get a war pension from the Ministry, don't you?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"A little one, and only thanks to the joint efforts of Minerva and Potter."

"I'll tell Harry of your gratitude."

"I have grounds to believe that you wouldn't need a job for financial reasons only."

"No, luckily I don't. But I cannot stay unemployed; I'm not made to twiddle my thumbs. I want a job so that I can feel useful to other people."

"Again with the old story of duty and sense of guilt."

"Please. You're worse than I am in this regard. And you should know me well enough to tell that I don't condone selfishness."

"You could be helpful to Muggles, if you'll stay at the Brontë library."

"Tell me, honestly: would it be right if I left my magic to rot?"

"It's never been up to much, honestly."

"Severus!"

"What?"

"You are an arsehole."

"Why, for so little." He patted her head, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "Honestly, Hermione, leave the Greater Good to some babbling old fool and do what you want, not what you think you should do. You are blessed with the possibility of not depending on money, or other people's will; take advantage of it. As far as I'm concerned, you could start a crusade for abolishing the wall between wizards and Muggles, but probably you'd be happier just dedicating yourself to something creative."

"But you don't write just because it's a challenging hobby, Severus."

"Do I?"

"I've read *Smoke From the Chimneys*, and I daresay you don't." She smoothed a crease of his shirt, on his back. "There was truth between those pages."

"I can't really speak about my own stuff, since that's nothing more than a variation over a well-known plot. But I do believe in the power of written words, yes. They can have more consequences than political manoeuvring, sometimes, because they teach people how to think."

"I don't understand how could *Against a Brick Wall* be inferior to *Smoke*, though."

"It's not inferior; it's only that Richard III is dead, by now."

"I want Brother Lucretius to make a guest appearance in *Creeping Like a Lizard*. He lived exactly at that time, you know."

"Who told you of *Creeping Like a Lizard*?"

"I have my informers."

"You read the interview with that bosomy journalist, haven't you? She was quite good looking, if I remember rightly."

Hermione nudged him. "Move away, would you?"

He didn't let her arm go. "I have my own theory, of course, of why you want to work at the Ministry," he said with sudden steel. "You want to move to London to stay closer to that Chris Darrell of yours at the British Library."

Hermione paled. "On my honour, I swear that what you say was never a motivation for me. I'd try the selection even if the Ministry were in Birmingham."

"How would you explain to a Muggle boyfriend you are a witch?"

"How did you mother do it?"

"Oh, my father suspected it from the start. He watched by chance a match of Gobstones in a pub. Or that's the story I was told, at least. Now answer to my question."

"I don't know. What was your father right about?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I threw you out of the library, on Midsummer Night, I heard you muttering, 'Father was right,' or something like that."

"I don't remember."

"I heard it."

"Maybe that women are a plague upon humanity, or that it's useless to help someone who doesn't want to be helped. Maybe that trying to help a woman is a thankless task."

"Oh, but I'm very thankful. And you've helped me a lot. Truly. But I won't give up the selection."

He kissed her on the threshold of the library, on Friday night, until his teeth clicked against hers and he stood back to let her pass. He had grasped only her lower lip at first, again, nibbling at it as if it was a fruit or maybe it was she the one who was thinking of cherries, or redcurrant, or raspberries, something red and juicy, in any case. In a second attempt, their lips had met in full, and the little fruit was squashed.

Normally, it would take thirteen minutes to go from the library to Haworth Road. That night, it took thirty. Every step was interrupted by a kiss, a hug. She moved, clinging at his side, head thrown back to receive more kisses, in a trance.

They walked past the point where Hermione had Disapparated the night before, and the night before it, and kept walking and kissing until a cottage loomed up at their left, pale against the dark blue sky. Severus took the little path among the weeds that led to the cottage, walking backwards to continue kissing and nibbling Hermione's mouth.

They embraced, leaning against the rugged wall of the cottage. Hermione let her hand run through his hair, finding his nape, following his trapezius under the collar of his shirt. With deliberation, he took off her glasses; put them on a wooden form that was there under the window, sat down on the form, and made Hermione sit on his knees. She rubbed her cheek against his temple, eyes closed, while he kissed her under her lobe, around her ear. With his fingertips, he followed the contours of her cheek, her jaw, her chin, his touch as soft as a feather. She nuzzled his hand, relishing the smell of his skin, and then planted a kiss on his wrist, circling the mount of Moon with her lips.

Around them, was nothing but the rustle of heather and the moonlight.

Feeling Snape stir his legs under her, Hermione whispered, "Am I heavy?" and she got up, remaining close to the form.

Severus stood up as well and handed her her glasses. "It's late, Hermione," he muttered. He searched his pocket for his keys and unlocked the door, then went in and switched the light on. The door swung closed behind him.

Hermione's eyes adjusted to the sudden light coming from the window on her left, hesitant about leaving. She kicked a peat clot away from the path.

Snape peeped out of the door and held out his hand to her.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked.

A/N

Thank you: Valady, RobisonRocket, Pink Raccoon, Alfavia de Montsegùr, readers & reviewers.

Please note that some background explanations may become more AU from now onward.

Heart Asks Pleasure First

Chapter 15 of 20

In which Hermione does something she didn't plan. With an illustration by the author.



I will meet you in some place

Where the light lends itself to soft repose

I will let you undress me

But I warn you, I have thorns like any rose

And you could hurt me with your bare hands

You could hurt me using the sharp end of what you say

But I'm lost to you now

~ Jewel, *Break Me*

Hermione raised her head from the sink and watched the rivulets of water streaking down her face in the mirror. Her fringe and the strands of hair closest to her temples had got wet as well while she washed her face. They would surely turn even more frizzy once dry.

She looked closer at her reflection. Minuscule lines were visible on her brow and around her eyes, the only sign that time had passed for her, too. By any means, she looked younger than her age, and people would believe her without second thoughts if she said she was still twenty-three or twenty-four.

She didn't take a towel to wipe her face. The bathroom window was open and the night breeze quickly dried her wet skin.

Did she look different from the day before? No. The lines hadn't increased, nor had any pimple showed up overnight.

Had her face changed? No. Her eyes kept their usual, placid brown colour while her eyebrows as usual needed to be plucked. Her nose was still little and straight. Her lips looked a bit pale as usual. Everything was as usual.

Yet there had to be some differences somewhere, or maybe they were just growing under her skin, for the world had gone through a remarkable change in the last hours.

She had made love with Severus.

It was three in the morning, and he was sleeping when she had decided to go to the toilet to freshen herself up.

She had made love with her former teacher, a man who had once corrected her homework, covering it with red, spiky marginalia!

And the world didn't stop spinning and no divine lightning descended to punish her.

A man with a terrible past, who had performed horrendous deeds, who had killed and watched killing, whose near death had tormented her for months.

She could still feel the trail of his kisses down her spine, resting in the valley between her kidney dimples.

She had gone to bed with a man who had infuriated her and had never properly apologised since, though she had been so forgiving to speak with him graciously afterwards.

He had kissed her wrists, her eyes, her neck, had sucked her lobe, gently, softly, slowly, oh.

She had had sex with a man she didn't even love!

He had leaned lightly on her, chest against chest, skin on skin, and her breathing had slowed down in a sensation of expansion. It was such an elementary contact, that of a breast to another breast, so simple, that there was really no reason, each time, to feel so marvelled; yet inevitably, whenever it happened, she was thankful that a man's skin could feel so warm and properly placed against hers.

She didn't even like him, she was sure of that. He was decidedly unattractive and, in any case, he wasn't her type.

Ron was her type bright eyes, bright smile, tall, athletic. He had grown up nice, with his broad shoulders and the marvellous blending of the red of his hair with the peach of his skin like a golden autumn that shined lusciously before her. It certainly wasn't his looks that had pushed them apart.

Chris was more than her type; he was her ideal man come true. Or maybe he was simply a mirror image of herself, turned into a man and potentiated to its utmost degree: brown hair, brown eyes with golden straws flickering inside them, if you looked attentively soft pink on his cheeks, all beloved colours that spoke to her of intimacy and tenderness. He was tall maybe not as tall as Ron, but still tall and she refused to think of his body now.

And *no*, Viktor Krum didn't count as a precedent. It was utterly ridiculous to make a comparison between him and Severus.

She could remember Ron, in a distant past, criticising her for appreciating handsome men like Lockhart or Cedric Diggory blessed be his memory, the poor soul. She had replied to him that she didn't like people only because of their aspect, but that had been a pretext. In fact, she liked handsome men. She might be plain, but that wasn't an excuse not to seek outward beauty.

Severus Snape did not fall within that category. In truth, he didn't fall into any of her many categories. What they had done didn't fit any of her patterns.

If Hermione looked younger, Severus looked older than his forty-nine years, would that depend on the crease his perpetual frown had left between his eyebrows, visible even when he wasn't frowning, or maybe the lines marking his jaw.

When he smiled, the thin skin of his cheek would fold in a double wrinkle at the corners of his mouth. You could almost catch that fold between your fingers, as thin as the skin edging the navel. Hermione's cheeks wouldn't fold like that; her skin was thicker, plumper. Severus' little wrinkle made her happy.

Severus' shoulders were narrow, and when he lay on his back, his prominent ribs would stretch his skin. Only a certain relaxation around his waist, not enough to be called love handles, gave account to the ten years the man had spent in almost sedentary peace.

His sparsely haired chest was covered with moles, and his nipples stood out burgundy against the pale background.

Yet his skin was soft to the touch and comfortable to press against, and his arms had welcomed her in an embrace as soft as ploughed earth.

His face was angular, his features irregular, with all those projections and recesses: his oversized nose, his sharp cheekbones, and his pronounced chin. It wasn't a face light would bathe unimpeded; it gave birth to shadows and not to a uniform shade.

She had tried to curl herself into that shadow, between his jaw and his shoulder, to become little, little, and dive into the pillow, at the side of his head, following the coil of his scent down to a place where she could inhale it deeper.

As Hannah Abbott had said, his neck presented no scar whatever. The skin there was perfect, without any wrinkle, as smooth as a child's was. Like a newborn child, it gave the promise of a new life. It was the skin that Severus' own magic had created, the last gift his old self had given to the present one. Beneath that tenuous, fragile peel laid his breath, his voice, the beat of his heart pumping his blood up. All signs of the bite that had shocked her were gone, erased, as if maybe, one day, even the memory

of what had happened that night wouldn't hurt them anymore. She had pressed her lips on his throat, as if that snowy skin bore the assurance of replacing her memories with some new, pure ones.

His hair was oily, too long for her tastes, uninviting even as she ran her fingers through it.

But who was she to judge other people's hair? Her locks had twisted into a messy fuzz, spreading everywhere but in a definite shape as they dried.

Possibly, the only appealing feature in Severus' appearance were his eyes – jet-black, resplendent, luring her to be absorbed into their depths. She enjoyed being able to gaze freely into them, finally, without having to look away. Their polished surface drew her closer, like the stars appealing to mortals to look up at them in the summer night sky. She had the right to look, after all, once she had found herself in his house first into his room second, and then on his mattress. Severus had left the lights on, albeit softened. She had the *right* to watch, this time, and she did *watch*.

He was silent throughout their lovemaking, and she was thankful for that, because she loved silence and the room it left for wishes. She was also grateful that he was lightweight and delicate in his movements.

A distant barking of a dog came from the open window. Hermione collected her glasses from the sink shelf and returned to the bedroom, where she nestled at Severus' side and fell asleep.

The cottage was single-storey, with a dormer attic topped by a thatched roof. The rough walls were painted white, both inside and outside the house. The ceiling was low, suitable for two not-very-tall people. A stony fireplace dominated the main room, darkened by a hundred years of soot. A few photographs stood on the mantelshelf, depicting some stern-looking people in late XIX century dresses, in front of a stamping tools shop, or around a well.

All the furniture looked very old and made of dark wood, occasionally worm-eaten. Even the dishes were plain, in baked clay, without frills.

In a corner of the main room, under the window, stood a solid desk covered with notebooks, loose sheets, and stationery. A pendulum clock hung over it from the wall on its left, ticking rhythmically.

Books were scattered all around, sometimes gracelessly, sometimes piled up in unsafe stacks. None of them was about magic.

Afternoon. A yellow light filtered in through the curtains. It was her favourite light of the year, and maybe she should urge Severus to go outside and enjoy it. The garden that surrounded the cottage was lovely, even if the grass was a little too long (as the hair of the cottage owner), and it would be good to be outside, enjoying the good weather. However, she was lying lazily at Severus' side on his bed, and she didn't really want to leave her place, after all. With a finger, she was tracing spirals on Severus' chest, connecting mole to mole like in a game of connect the dots. He was stroking her arm, distractedly, and the yellow light could wait another day.

They were talking with the same idleness.

"Why me?" she asked.

"You look nice with a library around you, Granger."

"Tell it again with more conviction, if you want me to believe it."

"You are a tremendous pain in the arse, and I don't know what you are doing here."

"Now I recognise you." She pressed closer on him.

"You are a self-complacent and irritating bluestocking."

"Try again. You can do better."

"You are stubborn, thankless and with too many intolerable defects to counter-balance your few good points."

"And which are these few points?" she teased.

He brushed her chin with his thumb and then lifted it so she would look him in his eyes. "For all your mania to change the world, Hermione, you didn't try to change me, and I appreciate it. You didn't follow the current stream of pitying me, squeaking 'poor Severus!' all the time, as other people took the habit of doing. You didn't start a campaign to help me recover my magic, or some bullshit like that. You kept your mouth shut about how I'm leading my life, and that is of no little importance for me, you ever-chirping dove."

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles, as her lips curved into a proud smile.

"Apart from that, what heart of stone do you believe I really am not to worry when you fainted in front of me? That was an old women's trick, if there's one! Confess!" he said, shaking her wrist.

She put on a stark expression. "I did not faint," she specified, "and I never attempted at using ruses with you, Severus! It was you, who played covertly, as usual. I bet you schemed to escort me home just to take me to bed in the end."

"Uhm. This sounds like a good plan, forsooth. Unfortunately, I was just trying to be helpful, little ingrate. There was a time when to feel attachment for a lady in distress was a sign of chivalry. Women *longed* to be saved by a charming prince. Then it came, the movement for witches' liberation, and to show care for a suffering woman turned out to be the patronizing designs of a miserable bastard. Prince I may be, but charming I am not; therefore, I must be the miserable bastard, as I always happened to be."

"I am *so thankful* you accompanied me home," she said, with a slightly mocking tone. "I bow to your chivalry, Mr. Prince. But I'd preferred," and she started tickling him, "if you had told me fewer lies."

"That ah!" he replied, trying to grasp her hands and eventually catching one, "would have made things less funny." And he tickled her in return with his free hand.

"No, no! Stop!" begged Hermione, collapsing in giggles.

He kept hovering over her, propped up on all fours. "I may have told you many lies, Hermione, but I've been sincere about this: I'm a vindictive man," he said, his hair falling down to curtain his face.

"I know it!" she puffed, still panting for the laugh.

"No. I'm talking seriously now." His voice turned grave and steely. "You must know this."

"What?" she asked, suddenly worried by his tone.

He pierced her with his gaze, his eyes turning larger and possibly darker. "I killed Albus out of vengeance, Granger," he hissed. "Now that you came here, you should know this. It was not an act of mercy or a strategy. It was ruddy, filthy, disgusting vengeance."

"He asked that of you," she murmured.

His fingers skimmed her side as he straightened up on his knees and backed off to lean against the wooden headboard. "You didn't seem of this opinion the last time you brought up the subject. It was the only time you really threw something in my face."

Hermione propped on her elbows to look at him. "You made me furious, that time, and I said something I shouldn't have. I know you were trapped in a dead end a deathly end. You were left no choice."

"And I would probably never have done it hadn't he pushed me in that stinking mess. But when I found myself before him, on the Tower, I hadn't to look that far to find the reasons to curse."

"I remember when you came out of your office, that night, and asked me and Luna to take care of Professor Flitwick," Hermione recalled softly. "You were protecting us. And I remember the way you stared at us when you told us to get in. It promised us that everything would set back to normality soon."

He dismissed her words with a gesture. "I said vengeful, not violent. What I meant was revenge, not a slaughter."

"I also remember another episode," she continued. "When you followed us through the Whomping Willow. You threatened to kill Sirius Black, should he give a reason to do it. Yet, you didn't even touch him."

"Because you prevented me, you snoopers. Had I had my way, maybe Potter would still have his godfather. In Azkaban, yes, but alive."

"This only leads me to conclude that, as hard as it may be for me to say it, Dumbledore had to provide you an inescapable reason, after all," she whispered.

"He was our general." Severus sat up straight. "And he kept on betraying and betraying us. We followed him like sheep, deceived by his assertiveness and his fame as the wizard who had defeated Grindelwald. But he was jealous of us; he wanted to clip our wings. He didn't allow us to plot against the Dark Lord's life when it would still be feasible, with the excuse that it would be too dangerous. He seemed to care for us ah! Frank Longbottom a fine man, unlike his son volunteered to lead the plot, but Dumbledore discouraged him. He stopped us from chasing the Horcruxes, once it was too late to kill the Dark Lord directly. Too risky, he said, we couldn't expose ourselves so much. And we all baaed behind him." Snape shook his head. "But he wasn't a trustworthy shepherd. For all his words, he failed to protect us all. Some of us were disposable, in the end."

He threw the sheet away and got up, setting off for the window, thin and bony against the light.

"Dumbledore wilfully let the Potters to be put in peril until the very last moment, so that the Dark Lord would smell out the prey and pick them as sacrificial victims. He was so in love with that pet project of his, the Prophecy! He wrote it, he made me report it to the Dark Lord, and I was such a fool to play a part in that act."

He twisted the curtain's border under his fingers, turning his back to Hermione. She crouched on her heels and hitched up the sheet to cover her goose bumps.

"He didn't save the boy's parents," continued Snape. "And he would have gladly disposed of Potter's life, at sixteen, more than he would of us, the old guard, when we were twenty-something. We were useless, for his plan. Because Potter was raised as his brainless weapon, the one who would function in place of him in the fight against the Dark Lord. Because Albus Dumbledore, who had once vanquished Gellert Grindelwald, wasn't now able to make the Dark Lord sneeze."

His shoulders cringed.

"We thought he was a just lord. Instead, he asked Potter's sacrifice as Moloch requested children to be offered at his statue. That or Draco's death. So I killed him, for it is written, 'Whosoever he be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that giveth any of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death'. Potter might dispatch the Dark Lord, I did of Dumbledore; I don't know, now, who was the most dangerous between them."

He turned to her. "You told me that my magic burnt out to save me. It may be, though I doubt it. I see it as a representation of departing Albus from his body: I kicked it out of me, false idol and false god, as I expelled Nagini's venom. Venom, magic, Dumbledore and the Dark Lord: I was freed of all of them at the same time, for maybe they were the same." His eyes glittered fiercely from the shadow.

Hermione blinked back her tears. The sheet slipped down her shoulder and she pulled it up again. "Theirs was a twisted love," she whispered. "I began to suspect it when I read the biography by Rita Skeeter. I suppose that Voldemort would appear like a replica of Grindelwald for Dumbledore. Scorched by what had happened with Gellert, Dumbledore didn't allow himself to love Tom Riddle. And to think that Voldemort modelled his title upon Dumbledore's surname... I can see that the Voldemort's rise to power sparked off as some kind of private challenge set by the pupil to his master.

"Nevertheless, it's strange to think of Dumbledore like that. For a part of me, he will always be a benevolent grandfather who loved us all. In my own memories, he's always wise, kind, and skilful. It pains me to think of him as ruthless. But love can turn into hate sometimes," she said quietly.

"Bah. Their private matters grew a little too large for my tastes. He asked a disgusting favour of me and died in an accordingly disgusting fashion." Snape's protruding rib cage rose and went down in a deep breath. "You must understand this. For me, in the end, it was justice. Sharp and old-fashioned, if you will, but still justice. Now that you've heard this, you have to make up your mind. You can walk away." His nostrils flared. "Or stay. Your choice. If you stay, we'll put the question aside forever."

Silence fell as Hermione stared at him with wide eyes, furrowing her brow. At that moment, the pendulum clock in the main room stroke half past five. Hermione started at the sound, and the sheet slid completely down her back. With a sudden inspiration, she laid one bare foot on the floor, then the other one, and slowly stood up. She put her hands on her hips and walked toward Snape.

"So, this is how it works, then," she said menacingly. "Now that you took your pleasure with me, and that your yearning was satisfied, you ask me to walk away. Men." She shook her head and continued, without waiting for a reply. "Make yourself useful, instead of talking of things that happened twelve years ago: go prepare dinner."

Then she noticed that Snape had clenched his fists while she was speaking, and that his knuckles had turned white. They scowled at each other for a while.

"There's only meat in the freezer, now," he spat eventually, looking away. "Saturday is usually the day when I go shopping, but today you prevented me from going to buy provisions. And now it's late."

"There will be a grocery around here," she pouted. "Won't there?"

"We have to go back to York to find a shop still open," he replied. "I didn't foresee you would stay for dinner."

"So, you really intended to throw me out of your house, sooner or later." She snorted. "You know, you can also invite me to dine somewhere else."

"I have to buy butter and Marmite in any case."

"Marmite? Do you like Marmite? Urgh."

"Had I had any of it at home, still, it would have been your breakfast this morning." He picked his shirt from the back of a chair. "C'mon, get dressed if you want to go anywhere."

Some time later, they were walking along Stockton Lane, heading back to the cottage. Snape was carrying a bag of supplies while Hermione held, in a small backpack, a change of clothes she had quickly collected from her home. A light rain was falling upon them as the sky light turned dim.

"You didn't even correct me when I said that I wasn't charming," he said. "I expected you to come up with some compliments, just like I did lavishly with you. Don't you find me handsome?"

"No, in truth."

He lifted an eyebrow in a mocked scoffing. "No?"

"No, I... 'I find you rather alarming, when I examine you close at hand: you talk of my being a fairy, but I am sure, you are more like a brownie.'"

"Who spoke of fairies? Wait Are you quoting from a book?"

"Yes, from *Jane Eyre*." Hermione smiled.

"Little bluestocking."

"Why, I paid you an enormous praise in comparing you with Mr. Rochester! It's more than you may ever deserve!"

"That's chick lit."

"How do you dare to speak like that of an absolute masterpiece? With all the detective trash you have at home."

"That's serious literature. Crime, punishment, and someone clever enough to catch the murderer. Consistency between cause and effect. And you still haven't said anything nice about me, in any case."

"Well, then... 'For he had great, dark eyes, and very fine eyes, too...not without a certain change in their depths sometimes, which, if it was not softness, reminded you, at least, of that feeling.' "

"Another quote."

"Yes."

"You know that book by heart, Hermione."

"It may be." She giggled.

"So that's it? My eyes won me your favour?" He sounded surprised.

"No, actually," she paused, embarrassed, "it was your blue shirt that had me. The one you were wearing when we went to Jorvik. Why haven't you worn it again?"

"It got stained," he stated simply. "Besides, I don't like blue that much."

"It suits you. You should wear blue more often if you want to charm me."

"Uhm." He searched her from top to toe, rubbing his chin with his free hand. "Too much effort for too little reward."

"In this case, you'll sleep alone this night," she threatened him, pretending to leave.

He smirked. "Excellent. I can eat all your rice salad and your artichokes by myself."

"Go eat all your meat, instead, you greedy man," she said, trying to steal the food bag from him, but Severus clutched it closer, pushing it away from her.

"Keep still or you'll make me throw it down," he warned her. "We'll resume our tickle fight later."

Later, much later, Hermione whispered to him, "Don't even think about waking me tomorrow, Severus. Once, I lost three hours of sleep because of you, and you still have to repay me them."

A/N: Chapter title obviously by someone mightier than me.

Ron and Hermione talking about Lockhart and Cedric from GoF 15 (British paperback p. 207).

"Whosoever he be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that giveth any of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death^{*Leviticus* 20:2}.

"I find you rather alarming..." and "For he had great, dark eyes..." evidently from *Jane Eyre*, chapter XXXVII and XIV respectively. "Intolerable defects to counter-balance your few good points" is also from ch. XIV, but don't tell it to Snape.

I thank RobisonRocket, Valady, Pink Raccoon, Alfavia de Montsegür, readers and reviewers on bended knee.

The Yew House

Chapter 16 of 20

In which Hermione and Severus go to visit a graveyard, have a genealogical recollection, and find shelter from a storm.

More AU warning applies.



The stars, the moon, they have all been blown out
You left me in the dark
No dawn, no day, I'm always in this twilight
In the shadow of your heart
I took the stars from our eyes, and then I made a map
And knew that somehow I could find my way back
Then I heard your heart beating, you were in the darkness too
So I stayed in the darkness with you
~ Florence and the Machine, *Cosmic Love*

The white cottage, she learnt, was originally called the Yew House, even if the exact tree it was named after had died centuries before. When Severus' great-great-grandfather, Joachim Princewicz, had moved to England from Poland halfway the XIX century, it was nicknamed the Jew House, for a while.

The house was in a state of ruin, and Joachim was able to buy it for a few pounds. He had finally needed a safe place for his family, instead of just a shelter for the night, because he was a married man and a father to be, now, after toiling at his little trade by the sweat of his brow. He worked hard to restore the thatch and the walls, to keep the cold outside and the warmth inside, and by the time he finished the rebuilding his first child was born, a daughter, and his wife was healthy and safe, for any man should keep his vayb safe, in a house of their own. A couple of years later, his first son Ruben was born, born free and independent, though in a different country from their homeland. But, after all, where was homeland for a Jew?

Ruben, Rachel the firstborn daughter and the others who followed them were good children for Joachim. They were obedient and observant of the Law, and had all made good marriages, blessed be the Lord. But Ruben's own son, Elijah, was a different matter. Oh, he was a friendly fellow, knowing more Yiddish jokes than all their relatives in Poland did, but for other aspects of life, he was a disaster. He sported all kinds of modern, weird manners, since he was born exactly at the turn of the century, in 1900. He had gone to the war and survived and employed a lot of time to find a wife. And when he had, he did a terrible marriage.

For May was not only a gentile. She was also a witch. Or in reverse order.

They said they loved each other, but that ought never to justify disparaging marriages, in any case.

They had but one girl, Eileen, and Elijah imbued her with notions about England and Yorkshire, their history, and such nonsense. Joachim had come to England and had found himself in the north, because there was work there for him, but did not go to the big town, York, for it had been unkind to his kin. Better to stay outside the city walls, near the country, because he was a rich man who owned his own house, with a patch of land to cultivate just in case. Elijah, on the contrary, was enamoured of the city, he went there and ate there, in defiance of the cherem. Unconceivable. For Elijah, their ancestry was worth mentioning only for humour's sake, not for remembering where, and with how much effort, they came from. He refused to be called Princewicz and had shortened his surname to Prince, that made him sound more like an Englishman, he said. He wanted to *mix* in.

And what a mixture did he choose. When she was young, May was as lovely a thing as her name promised. Pureblood, but of the lowest rank of purebloods, the country folks. She prepared philtres and potions for the common people, and they would call her a witch without really believing she was one.

Their little girl had been the first in the family to go to Hogwarts. The Second World War and the Grindelwald war had just ended, then.

Eileen was a sweet, tender girl when she had left for school. By the time, she finally returned with her N.E.W.T.s, she was radically changed. She, a little half-blood of Jewish, Polish and Northern origin, had struggled her way through purebloods that lived in manors, with house-elves and silverware, who celebrated Christmas by a profusion of gifts, and who spoke with received pronunciation. She had to suffer the nastiness of other houses' teachers and students alike for being a Slytherin. She came back harsher, using sarcasm for defence, with a frown to mar her pale brow.

"To endure the patronising manners of Mrs. Foxcroft of Foxcroft Park was one thing. She and Adele's mother, Nora, would shower attentions upon her, filling her with teacakes and letting her play with the puppies. Mrs. Foxcroft would give my mother Nora's cast-off clothes, and she would like them because they were pink and flouncy, or something girls would like, anyway.

"To endure Hogwarts was a horse of a different colour. As my grandfather recommended, she had to cudgel her brains," Snape concluded. "Dark tricks came in useful to impress the purebloods and to keep the bullies at bay."

"I see."

They were standing in front of Eileen's grave, the ground around it drenched from that night's rain, in the small cemetery of Stockton-on-the-Forest. A star was engraved on the granite, and below it, simply,

EILEEN PRINCE SNAPE

Beloved Wife and Mother

Hermione had asked him to go visit Eileen's tomb while they were having breakfast, and when they had finished, he had taken her there, under a leaden sky.

"There was some boy from Hogwarts who went after her. A Hufflepuff, if I'm not mistaken. But she, as her mother, chose a Muggle. Poorer than her. A Slytherin in all but in ambition, my mother was. She was happy enough to move to Manchester and to become an anonymous housewife." Severus snorted gently. "She didn't marry a goy, at least, but the line was broken in any case. We had to put up a bit of a fight to have her buried here. Great-great-grandfather Joachim wouldn't be very pleased with us."

Curiosity about Severus' family had seized Hermione after watching the photographs on the mantelpiece. On that dull Sunday morning, he had been content just talking and she just listening. Dirty-white rags of clouds speckled the sky, now, and the grass kept leaving a wet trail on her feet, covered only by sandals. The land oozed humidity and thunder rumbled in the distance. The smell of rain spread across the field, and the green looked ecstatically brighter.

The landscape was immense, and she imagined herself as its mistress, conveying electricity from heaven to earth, able to make clouds and wind spin around her in a whirling dance. She was a powerful and benign goddess and swirled as well; at the same time, planted as she was at Severus' side, she wouldn't actually change her place for somewhere else.

Rather, she would like to grab Severus and roll with him on the grass, to sink deeper with him in that earthy scent and to knead the soil with her fingers like dough. She wouldn't care for her jeans, or her t-shirt, or even for the blue shirt, he had worn for her after she had cleaned it. She could clean them all over again, for what it mattered. But they were in a graveyard, after all. A bit of dignity was called for, damn it.

Graveyards didn't sadden her. They used to remind her that 'there's nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life the sense that we remain.' For the point at issue were the both of them, the two affected survivors, not what lay behind the marble. They were the improbable mixture that resulted from improbable mixtures in the past. The dead slept peacefully in their tombs, while the living was charged with the dangerous, difficult, and inebriating half of the trade.

Hermione noticed that Severus' mother was only four year older than he was at present when she had died, and that when it had happened, he was of the same age as she was now. She gripped his arm more tightly, resting her head on his shoulder as she had already done once. She rubbed her face against his deltoid, and then pressed a kiss on it.

"She was still young," she said. It was a banal thing to say, she knew, and more reasonless her fear, since Severus' father was still alive.

"It all happened very quickly, and there wasn't much to do. We discovered her illness in September, and she died two days before Christmas. 'She is a half-blood,' the Healers told us in St. Mungo's, 'you cannot expect her to react to cures like a pureblood.' Potions, apparently, only worked as painkillers."

Her stomach squirmed.

"My father would read her newspapers about the fall of the Wall, and that kept the both of them occupied throughout the therapy. She was actually happy that my father would stay by her bedside, reading. As far as death goes, it was quite peaceful."

She only knew she couldn't ever stand watching Severus dying again.

"Some people later said that it was appropriate for my mother to die of ovarian cancer, since she was the mother of a murderer," he continued, grimacing. "One of the many tragic ironies of my life, I believe. Like that I would be wounded by a snake, of all the bloody beasts, or that Dumbledore's portrait would give evidence for me during my trial *in absentia*."

By then, her eyes were full of silent tears. She wouldn't say, "Oh, Severus," because she knew he wouldn't like it.

His eyes flashed and his expression somehow changed. "Or that I would waste my time with a whiner," he added. "Someone who would go into hysterics for the fear of watching me die."

Now she couldn't help. "Oh, Severus," she choked, and she flung herself into his arms.

She hugged him as if air was an enemy to be expelled from betwixt them. She hooked his shoulder blades and sobbed against his collarbone, grateful that his chest was of the right size to imagine it could actually merge with hers, like a platonic androgynous. Severus stroked her hair; or rather, he crumpled it up with one hand, wrapping her from shoulder to shoulder with his other forearm. He rocked her for a while, until her sobs subsided. Then, giving pecks on her forehead, he told her to hush.

"When we argued, all I truly wanted was to cry with you," she sobbed in reply.

"And all I wanted was to prevent it, having got the message. But obviously, once you chose a path, you had to walk insistently along it," he retorted softly.

"You listened to me rambling about another man. How blind I've been," she moaned against his neck.

Soothing strokes petted her back. "That was my biggest chance. I've read so many times of men who, consoling after consoling, win a girl to their bed."

"Severus!"

"But it's true! I immediately thought I should put it into the book."

"You became a writer because you're a liar, like all writers are," she rebuked, brushing away her tears. "Except for Brother Lucretius. I trust only him."

He freed her from the embrace and looked at her, quirking his mouth in a lopsided smile, half-amused, half-regretful. "I'm really sorry of what I heard, honestly. It was somehow comforting to listen of your humiliation. I could have never got on well with the optimistic pest you were once."

"Why, since when are you getting on well with me?" insinuated Hermione with a final sniff. "You have just said I had to suffer to gain your attention."

"Everyone has to suffer to gain something worthwhile."

"Ha!" she puffed, cleaning her glasses.

Severus' slanting smile fell as he turned to the grave. "To go on well doesn't stop men and women from suffering because of each other. My mother was not well repaid for sticking with my father." He tucked his hands into his pockets as he gazed at the stone, eyebrows knit in reminiscence.

"Harry related to us some unpleasing memories about your father," Hermione offered, sounding rude to her own ears. The 'beloved wife and mother' on the granite didn't give her the impression of a lie.

"Potter saw only what I understood about the situation as a child, that is to say, a digit close to zero," Snape said grimly. "My parents argued a lot, that's true, and I got upset by their raised voices. Whenever they became loud, a danger bell would ring in my head. But, in the end, nothing actually happened to worry about; they didn't break up, not even when my father was in prison, neither were they precisely shouting because they couldn't stand each other anymore. Mine was only a childish fear, born out of things I didn't understand at that time."

"Your father was arrested?"

"A couple of times, during strikes, manifestations, or other public gatherings like those. He was always released after a few months." At her inquiring look, he added, "Some time after the mill in which he worked closed down, and he was left unemployed, my father joined a trade union and went into militancy. He would stay away from home for weeks or even for months, following the workers' protestations all over England. However much she might share his ideas, my mother wasn't much happy for his protracted absences. Every time he came back home and announced he would be leaving again, they would become short-tempered well, my father still is and fight. She would implore him not to go; that sooner or later he would be arrested again, and in the end he was."

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be. Prison was a budgeted possibility for his actions. Besides, at that time I wasn't much pleased, either, with him spending so much time away, caring only for the wellbeing of other Muggles. Weren't my mother and me just as important? In my tortuous reasoning, I came to the conclusion that the Death Eaters could be a kind of trade union for wizards. One of the finest manifestations of deductive skills ever sprung to my mind." He made a wry face.

"A trade union for wizards?" Hermione's eyes widened. "What else, a charity?"

"Charitable indeed. I had been in the gang for half a year when two of my comrades arrived in Spinner's End to pay homage to my mother. She was home alone my father had been arrested for the second or third time and they bullied her for being married to a Muggle. 'See? Muggles are good-for-nothing; they can't even keep themselves out of trouble! What did your husband do now, eh? In jail again. Right? That's what you get for marrying a Muggle!'

"When she attempted to reply, they told her, 'Go back to Israel, the both of you! There's no place here for your scum!'" She hexed them out of the house, but was shocked. They had been her mates at Hogwarts."

Somewhere above them, it thundered. "Who were they?"

"It doesn't matter. They're dead. Killed during the first war." Severus' mouth twitched.

"When I came back home from a meeting with Avery, I found her in tears, collapsed on the floor. The way she looked at me... it wasn't even angry, only weary. And resigned. My dear comrades had done a fine job, *Confringo*-ing windowpanes, blasting the sofa, mucking up the house with jinxes. They did even know I was one of them, but they didn't care about that, or they came here on purpose. Not even my own mother was shielded by my party membership. I had made a colossal blunder, shooting myself in the foot like the duped nar I was. Protecting the mice by joining the cats."

The level of humidity in the air was increasing, and the echoes of thunders were getting closer. Hermione stepped back, chewing her lip, the moist ground bending softly under her soles. She turned her gaze on the rows of tombs a handful of rows, a small community, only the members of four or five families drawn together, somehow, in that little corner of England. Most of what was written on the marble slabs she couldn't read. For a swot, she knew so few languages.

Her curiosity broached sour memories, but Severus was recalling those to her willingly and with moderate spite. He could have said no. They could have stayed at home, playing Gobstones, or whatever other game, even if she was a terrible player. He could have read to her. Instead, he had agreed on carrying her there, and was telling her more than what she demanded, as if it was more important for him to let her have that information than spare himself the pain of remembering. For reasons that still escaped her in full, she had been honoured with his confidence along with his company. When did she earn it, exactly? Once she, too, had crossed failure?

She wondered if she, a Muggle-born, wouldn't ever fall with the best intentions, or even with second-best ones into the attractive cobweb of a self-proclaimed pro-Muggle-born party. It was, after all, only too easy, and too convenient to take matters about blood status to an extreme. The nasty comments of Mr. Hullarder, her employer in the Canterbury binding shop, still rang in her mind sometimes. He often indulged in sniping at her for attending a Muggle college. "The Daily Prophet may call you a heroine as much as it wants, Miss Granger, but nothing changes the fact that you know nothing about bookbinding, because you were taught it by Muggles. There's no future for you in this profession." On those occasions, she wondered if he had contributed to the typesetting of *Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society*

She imagined herself being torn between two parents, one magic-full, and the other magic-less, while her mother and father were not only both Muggles, but also practiced the same job, in the same dentist's surgery, and had come out unscathed even from their hazardous hiding in Australia. Then she figured Severus, scrawnier than today, younger yet surlier, a little punk listening to the Pistols and the Clash (he still kept LPs at home) and hanging out with Avery, Mulciber, or others of their sort, while his father led strikes during what was fittingly called the Winter of Discontent. Her brow furrowed in thought.

What would it feel like, being torn between magic and Muggleness as...as...as she was, after all. And she was not above cherishing magic like a spoiled child, as everybody educated in Hogwarts did, deep inside, no matter what legacy they have. What she had told Severus was true: she didn't know how she would have really handled the talk with a Muggle boyfriend. A Muggle-born she might be, yet she reckoned there were things a Muggle could never understand about her; issues like fighting against a monster who had split his soul into eight parts, or losing friends by the simple utterance of two words. Or grasping that spells could devastate a house or torture you until you screamed for death yet couldn't buy you happiness, or shelter people from cancer.

For all its flaws, though, magic could save people, as it had saved Harry, and later, Severus himself. There was a protection that could be offered without magic, as he had protected her them her from harm or from being caged into the obsessive images again, or even from feeling alone in that unknown, little walled city. There was a comfort that could be given, no matter how it was fuelled.

She had to distract him from his recollections, she thought, which she knew was costing him more than his casual tone implied. But Severus was going on, "I reported the attack to our squad leader, Regulus Black, telling him I wouldn't tolerate more disrespect toward my own family as long as I joined the party. He told me to run away as fast as I could, so long as I still had the chance."

Enough.

"What happened to Spinner's End?"

Severus finally looked back at her, his eyebrows smoothing as a gust of wind blew behind her and her hair sprawled everywhere. She pulled her ruffled strands away from her face, fighting in vain against the electrostatic effect.

His tone was warmly bored when he replied, "Sold when my father retired. He hadn't been living much there anyway, after my mother's death. He kept saying that he would move south, to the sea to care after his health for once but stopped in Wimbledon eventually. Not exactly seaside, is it?"

"No, it is not. But there are the Championships, and it's in the same line to Kew. I suppose you like Kew."

He smiled fleetingly, enough for the double wrinkle to form at the side of his mouth. Thin, graspable skin.

The first drops of rain started to splash on the ground, large and far from one another.

"Let's go back home," she said and finally admitted to herself that hers wasn't just curiosity. It was more like closing a circle sketched many years before. Justice, debt, however you would call that kind of repairing.

With a circular motion, she Conjured a single, white rose and she placed it gently on Eileen's headstone.

"Let's go home," she repeated.

By the time they reached Yew House, a true deluge had broken from the clouds, and buckets of water had sloshed over them faster than she could *cry* *impervius*! Once safely inside, she dried off the water blotches that had rushed with them into the house and proceeded to cast a Drought Charm upon herself and Severus, but he slunk away from her wand's range. When he appeared back, he was wearing an old black short-sleeved shirt he evidently reserved only for home usage. She glanced at him, but didn't comment.

They ended lunch with a bunch of grapes he had bought the day before. A grape in her mouth, Hermione stood up to look at the heavy rain laving against the windows. She spat the tiny seeds in her fist, clutching them with three fingers as she plucked another grape from the little branch she was holding with her other hand. When she turned, commenting innocently that there was no hope of go out again, for a few hours at least. Severus gestured for her to throw the seeds in his plate.

She took it as a proposal.

On the ground floor, the Yew House hosted only four rooms: the main room, functioning as hall, living room, and writing nook; the bedroom with its adjoining bathroom; the kitchen, plus a small storeroom. The children's room and another, larger storeroom were placed in the attic.

The storm that was raging outside had almost a tropical quality washing the land with sultriness instead of coolness, extrapolating heat from the ground and making the air almost unbreathable with humidity. With doors and windows shut against the downfall, the house had quickly turned into a little greenhouse.

As long as they weren't directed upon himself, Severus accepted tacitly her spells. She roamed through the house casting Cooling charms everywhere, pontificating that every house should have double-glazing to better ward off heat or cold and that it was a great energy waste not to have a properly insulated building. Snape watched her with his arms folded, sometimes pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head.

"I take back what I previously said, Granger. As expected, you *are* trying to change my way of living."

"Only the indispensable parts of it," she panted, fretting around. "You wouldn't have me sleeping in a baking oven, would you? Besides, a lot of mosquitoes will arrive with such a heavy rain. We have to repel them before they get inside. Why don't you grow pelargoniums in the garden?"

"Tsucheppenish."

"What?"

"Pain-in-the-ar-se," he spelled.

"Why, for so little." She smiled sweetly. "And you have already called me that. Whoever told you had a way with words?"

Severus closed his eyes and his mouth curled in a satisfied smirk. "Oh, she was a beautiful woman."

Lily?

"Is a beautiful woman. Raven hair, ebony eyes, dark complexion, a true championess of her country."

Where?

"She was the one who put hope in me again after my lapse in the quagmire of suicidal obsessions, and the one to urge me to become a writer."

Hermione's wand arm slid at her side, strengthless. *This was to be foreseen*, she thought. "Why didn't you take her as inspiration for your novel, then?" she asked sourly. "Provided that I didn't serve as a model for the madwoman, of course."

Severus' lips curled again, dangerously. "She lives too far for daily observations."

"Well, you could always use imagination."

When it came, unexpectedly, his laugh sounded genuinely amused. "Granted, I'm turning my dishonourable attentions on you now, Hermione, but I'm not such a paedophile. She was ten or eleven at that time, so how old she would be now? Seventeen? Eighteen? And I haven't even met her since."

He held out a hand for her but she scorned it, trying to keep on sulking. Nevertheless, she asked with a mollified tone, "Who was this girl?"

At a second attempt, his hand reached her and caught one of her ringlets, twirling it around his forefinger. "The daughter of a distant relative of mine, in Portugal. A hundredth-some cousin from my father's Sephardic side. I visited them at the end of my wanderings or what turned out to be the end of them. This little girl, Teresa, barely knew a string of words in English, but was determined to learn more and resolved that I / would be an adequate teacher for her. She wasn't deterred by any of my attempts to drive her away bizarre child. Eventually, I decided that the best method to get free of her would be, instead of keeping taciturn, flooding her with discourses she wouldn't understand. I started by reciting to her the conquests of Britain from the Romans, to the Saxons, to the Normans, hoping that she would be bored to death. On the contrary, she seemed to love those incomprehensible tales, and would forever ask for more. You see, Teresa could be really obnoxious sometimes, just like someone else I know."

"You could read her *Hogwarts: A History*."

He leant against the table's edge he had followed her in the kitchen during her cooling fury and smoothed the fading remainders of her pretended sulk with his thumb.

"The purpose was to repel her, not myself. Besides, she is a Muggle. Quite an insistent one. 'You should write them down,' she repeated to me, half in English, and half in Portuguese. Later, I thought it couldn't be that wrong to obey. But maybe I simply misunderstood what she was telling me."

She stepped closer, subsided, enclosing his shoulders with her arms and bending over his ear to whisper, "If things went as you say, Severus, she just liked your voice."

A/N.

I warned you about the non-canonicity of this chapter, didn't I?

"There is nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life...the sense that we remain" from Henry James *The Portrait of a Lady*, ch. LIV.

Yiddish: vayb = wife, goy = gentile, nar = fool, tsucheppenish... well, you got it.

My beta, Valady, adds: Cherem= (Old Testament) literal translation "something removed from common use and set apart for a special purpose." Also: "Nine times out of ten the use of the word 'cherem' is to mean a type of spiritual excision or excommunication. There are different levels of cherem, but a person in 'cherem' is not allowed to be part of the religious community" -- "excommunicated!" York was subject to a cherem because of the pogrom in Clifford's Tower in 1190.

The episode with Teresa was inspired by an Italian song, *La canzone della bambina portoghese* (The song of the Portuguese girl) by Nomadi. You can hear it here, with English subtitles: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJkDFaP8-8k>

Creeping Like A Lizard

Chapter 17 of 20

In which Hermione returns to work, has a chat with Mrs. Neill, and reads an excerpt from Severus' new novel. With an illustration by the author.



A poetic genius is something I don't see
Why would a genius be trippin' on me
And he's looking at me now
But what he can't see
Is that I'm looking through his eyes
So many lies behind his eyes
And tell me stories from your past
Sing me songs you wrote before
I tell you this my poison prince
You'll soon be knockin' on heaven's door

~ Amy MacDonald, *Poison Prince*

The night swept away the storm, but left back the heat. When morning came, the day was exceptionally hot, the sky was a light cobalt blue and the sun was brightly shining; one reason more to hate the fact that it was Monday and that she had to leave the Yew House to resume working.

While Hermione fastened back her unruly frizz with a hairgrip to let a breath of air touch her nape, Severus was buttoning his cuffs, despite the evident sultriness. Seated on the bed, she glanced at him from the bottom upwards for a while before deciding to speak.

"You can wear short sleeves also outside, you know."

He spun around, glared at her, then returned his look to his cuffs.

"I'm overjoyed by your promptness in offering unsolicited directions, Hermione. Please, help me to remember... what did I venture to say only two days ago?"

She got up, walked next to him and cupped her hands round his face. Forcing him to stare directly into her eyes, she repeated slowly, "You ~~can~~ wear short sleeves."

Sighing, he pulled her hands gently away from his face as he replied, "I did, when I was in Portugal, and people complimented me for wearing such a cool tattoo. Do you find it preferable?"

She smiled. "It's good to hear that you did. Next time, perhaps... you can tell them it was a terrible Dark wizard's curse, or that... it's just a congress of your moles. Harry's scar turned darker after Voldemort's death, too, you know."

He snorted. "The Dark Lord was always fair in his rewards."

After lunch, supplied with a couple of his Moleskine notebooks, Snape followed her to the Brontë library. He took a seat in the reading room while Hermione slipped into the

archives.

The two hours she devoted to the fifth and last tome of *The Twelve Patriarkes* were the longest time she stood separated from Severus in the last three days, after sixty-five hours spent together.

It felt a painful cut, like a breath jammed in her lungs, unbreathed. Still, she sensed his presence on the other side of the wall, beyond two rows of overburdened bookcases, beyond covers and jackets and paper and threads and bindings and leather and ink. Beyond their work, he was waiting for her.

To thread the needle with him looked so natural, in the end, to feel almost obvious. It happened with the inevitability of things that were meant to happen.

As she left the archives and crossed the reading room for her duty at the collection desk, Hermione was only too acutely aware of him sitting at his usual table, in the third row from the desk. For the first time, he sat facing the desk, and even if he didn't lift his head, she could feel his eyes surreptitiously following her from the archives' door up to her chair. Once she sat down, their eyes met and locked, and for the rest of the afternoon they just gazed at each other, eight metres distant, oblivious of other visitors surrounding them. *Edwardian Bookbinding Practices* lay unopened in her lap.

"So? What do you want to do this evening?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to go home this night, Severus. I haven't studied anything for three days, and *must* study tomorrow morning."

"As you wish."

"Do you realise this? The selection is in a month, or rather less than a month! Only twenty-nine days, and I don't know *anything!*"

Severus chuckled.

"It's true! I'm not adequately prepared yet. And you distract me."

Severus laughed openly.

Too soon, Haworth Road appeared in front of them, with its two lines of anonymous, photocopied buildings. He bid her goodnight in the little walk that led to the door of number 51.

When she raised her head for the very last kiss (out of a series), Hermione finally got a glimpse of the light coming from Mrs. Neill's open window and of the very same Mrs. Neill overlooking at them from the said window, arms crossed on her breast.

Severus noticed her, too. "Mrs. Neill," he greeted her with a gracious bow of his head. "Good evening. As you may see, I have not trespassed your threshold, neither is it my intention to bring my ill repute into your abode. However, let me express my high regard for you. I had already the unparalleled delight of meeting you once, but I didn't know then that you possessed such great powers. I must now acknowledge that they vie with those of Mother Shipton. You are a Seer, Mrs. Neill, and had I the chance, I would like to introduce you to the other great Seer of our century, Professor Sybil Trelawney."

Mrs. Neill drew the curtains.

"That was amazing! Amazing!" cried Hermione, seizing him by the front of his shirt and planting a kiss soundly on his lips. "Twenty points to Slytherin!"

"Only twenty?"

When Hermione entered the house, Mrs. Neill was sitting in the dining room, wrapped up in her fluffy pink bathrobe, a weary expression aging her features. Her mouth twitched as she watched Hermione passing in the corridor.

"One word, Hermione."

Hermione stopped in the doorway, trying to assume the most neutral expression she could master despite her flush.

"You probably think I'm an old meddler, poking my nose where I shouldn't," Mrs. Neill said with a tired voice, "but I'm sincerely concerned about you. You could be my daughter, and that aside, you have been living under my roof for almost three months now. You've been a nearly perfect tenant, all things considered, and it's obvious that I care for you."

"I'm a nurse, and I see all kinds of people around. All kinds. And as much as you'd rather ignore relatives, patients, doctors and colleagues alike, you cannot help but observe the way they behave. And you understand many things."

"I've also my experience with men. Well, my divorce wasn't an easy one, so you can maybe blame it for my caution, but in any case I've learnt a lot, to my cost."

"This man you're going out with... He gives an idea of being untrustworthy. Shady. You probably think he's funny, considering those incomprehensible theatricals he put on to mock me. But I'd say it's a parade to fool you as well. I don't know, but I have this impression that there's something dangerous tailing him. He looks suspicious, probably... even evil."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Evil is a strong word, Mrs. Neill," she stated calmly. "But otherwise you are absolutely right. He is indeed as disreputable as you declare."

Mrs. Neill sighed. "Hermione, Hermione. You are still young, and thus you're easily tricked in believing that a dubious halo constitutes a fascinating appeal in men. But please, listen to me: things don't work like that. Blackness is only blackness, in the end; it never turns out as interesting as you supposed. Look for a good man, instead, not for some unrespectable allure that is even blinding you in believing that... that man of yours is attractive."

"Oh, but I don't contend it: I think he's horrid. He is ugly, nasty, disagreeable, and I'm not even talking about his flaws." Hermione pressed her index finger on her lips, musing. "In fact, Mrs. Neill, you are not so far from truth. Let me tell you more about him. In his youth, he joined a terrorist group."

"Oh, God. IRA?" cried Mrs. Neill, bringing a hand over her mouth.

"Then he was recruited by the Intelligence, and worked for them for twenty years. His teacher job was but a cover."

"Oh, dear Lord. An agent of MI6," Mrs. Neill said in a thready whisper.

"No, of Mossad," replied Hermione impassively. "And it's as bad as it seems. Let me destroy the myth that the service is something glamorous. Theirs is a filthy, ruthless job that can be performed only by stonehearted people. In truth, there are few offences he stopped short of committing. If it wasn't for his license to kill, he would be judged a criminal."

"Are you making it up, Hermione?"

"Oh, no. Why would I slander him?" *He only saved my life some two or twelve times*

Mrs. Neill gaped at her for a couple of minutes, then murmured, "Do you think this relationship is wise, Hermione?"

"I definitely don't," she agreed.

"Then why are you pursuing it?"

"Maybe I gave myself to the irrational," she replied, and went off.

She could remember his lessons about obsessions, and hadn't she put them into practice? She had welcomed the absurd, without resisting it, and it had proved the best solution. She had plunged into that unreal sensation in Jorvik and she had abandoned herself to it after the night spent in the library's hall. She surrendered to the notion that she missed him when he wasn't there, as she was missing him in that moment, in her rented bedroom. The abnormal, for once, had turned out pleasing and good and right. That she had included him in her was right incontrovertible. That he stood with her was right undeniable, at least for the present. The time they had shared couldn't be taken away from her memory (*no, no, please, no more Obliviate, I don't want to hear about that spell again*), no matter what might happen next. To what they were doing there were no objections, no oppositions in her mind. The path was clear.

It was the third week of August, and students and scholars alike were returning to their studies. When, for the first time, she wouldn't mind being left alone in the library with Severus, visitors finally flowed in and remained there till ten o'clock.

Defying Mrs. Neill's disdain, Severus came every day to her home shortly before three, and they walked together to the library. Once there, they pretended not to know each other. During their strolls to and from the library, they started talking about *Creeping Like a Lizard*, discussing its plot and characters. Hermione was finally introduced to the character she had apparently helped to shape: Magdalene Stone, lady-in-waiting of Henry VII's wife.

The plot of *Creeping Like a Lizard* went as follows:

Jacob Norton, better known as Funnel, returned to England from Burgundy with a plan to kill Henry VII on Margaret of York's (Richard III's sister) behalf. The spy frequented Tudor's court and studied the situation for a while. When everything was ready for the blow to strike, Funnel laid an ambush for the King. To his surprise, he was not to lead an attack, but to witness one instead. As he waited in the shadow, a masked man assaulted the King and disappeared faster than the blink of an eye. In his moment of bewilderment, guards arrived, and Funnel was caught fleeing from the crime scene. He was imprisoned for the King's murder. News reached him in prison that the murdered man was not the King, as he thought, but his double. Funnel had no idea who this double was, and nobody seemed to care. He was still considered guilty of the murder, in any case, with the aggravating circumstance that everybody believed he was aiming at the King himself.

Who was the dead double? Who had killed him? How was Funnel going to escape from the Tower?

A young woman came to visit him in prison...

"Now, isn't this a bit of a cliché?" commented Hermione.

Magdalene Stone, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, came repeatedly to visit him. Somehow (bribery? Through the Queen's intervention? This part had yet to be properly resolved) Magdalene helped Funnel to get out of prison. But he was still on the run and had to hide. Magdalene became his only contact within the court. She brought him news and investigated for him. Together, they tried to solve the case of the murdered double.

"And? Do they solve it?"

"Do you want to know the end?"

"Sure. How can I judge the novel's balance otherwise?"

"What, you proclaimed yourself editor-in-chief number two?"

"Number one, please. And yes, I already know how you are going to call me."

"In the end, they all die. Horribly."

She laughed, and Severus asked her, "How would you end it?"

"Mmh, let me see. The double was an ordinary man who had just happened to walk along the same path as the King. He was killed by a creditor because of his debts. The murder has, in the end, no connection whatsoever with a plot against the King. No great conspiracy behind; all very casual."

"An interesting try, and quite close, actually."

"Sweet! Have I won the right to know what happens to Magdalene, at least?"

"She's accused of witchcraft."

"Seriously?"

"What do you think?"

"It may work."

"It's Funnel's turn to help her escape, this time, and they end up both on the run," Severus went on. "And this leaves room for the fourth book, in which Funnel will again plot against Henry VII."

"But he can't kill him, can he? Or do you plan to deviate toward alternative history?"

"No, he won't kill the King. But there will be trouble brewing."

Lamenting that 'she would read it anyway, sooner or later,' Severus handed her the notebooks with the first draft of *Creeping Like a Lizard*. The handwriting was so cramped and small to be almost unreadable. When it was written with a pencil, the text was barely visible, and when it was written with a pen, the ink had blotted the other side of the thin paper as well.

"I'm glad I studied Ancient Runes and Palaeography, in addition to being used to your hieroglyphics," she told him in accepting the notebooks.

"That's what second-hand editors get in volunteering," he said softly, arching his eyebrows.

"First-rate editors, please."

After Monday, when she wasn't busy with visitors' requests, Hermione spent her time at the desk reading, while he sat bent at his table, writing.

The fabric of her dress is not made to scrape against the filthy floor of my cell. Still, a part of me rejoices in watching the ruin of something paid with Tudor's money.

"There is nothing beyond death, Stone," I say, trying the words sounding empty futile as I utter them.

"This cannot be," she replies. "The fulfilment of our life will be when we will be rejoining God in his heaven."

If I were to tell her that neither God nor heaven exist, would she cry? Run away?

"Maybe for you," I snarl. "You are the one for which paradise can be imagined"**Funnel can't say something like this**

"We find our own hell or heaven on earth, lass." God, how young she is.

"On earth we simply found the basis of what we'll receive in heaven."

I avoid pointing her that my basis are quite shaky. Instead, I tell her, "This is the way you console the Queen? The honeyed words of women, necessary to sustain a life which they haven't chosen?"

"Console her of what?"

"Don't be so dumb daft, Stone. Everybody knows she was in love with her uncle, and now she's obliged to shag the man who had him killed." *

"And you tried to kill him."

"That's what you think? Then why are you here?" I wanted to sound harsh, but in the end my voice is only weary.

* I expected her to squirm. Instead, she just looks firmly into my eyes, and I pretend to scowl and to not observe the fullness shape of her lips.

"And you tried to kill him."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because because I wanted the King dead, too."

I should be surprised, but I'm not, that a girl so young harbours such feelings of disdain hatred. I'm more surprised to see her expression frightened by what she has just finished to say. No, teach not thy lip such scorn; for it was made for kissing, lady, not for such contempt. **No, I can't really quote the whole damn play here**

Hers can be only a trick, of course. Who is behind her? Whom she reports to? She could be anybody's spy, just trying to make me speak. Never can I wear my heart on my sleeve. I have, once more, to lie. Lie with her, on her, what you will. To my dismay, I have to admit that it's not completely brainless the one who sent this little dove to me.

"What? With your own hands?" I sneer. They are made to stroke, not to strike **(Now STOP!)** "What reward would you get in the heavens, then? Let murder to the soulless ones, and go back to embroider with your Queen."

Wait. What if it is the Queen who wants the King dead?

And if this child works for the Queen, aren't we on the same side?

But this can be a trap. As the rest. Her true master can be anyone but the Queen.

And what if the Queen actually fell in love with that repulsive sly fox of hers?

Magdalene stares at me as if she was refraining from confiding me a painful secret, in fear that I wouldn't understand. But I understand she is here because she's guilty, because a sinner always seeks the non-judgmental company of another sinner.

"I stitched the doublet worn by the false King," she whispers eventually.

"This Magdalene is nowhere like me," said Hermione.

"Perhaps she is a fictional character invented independently from you."

"Then what kind of information did I provide you?"

Severus stared at her as if she had suddenly turned into a dunderhead, then replied slowly, "I had already outlined what Magdalene would do in the novel, but couldn't ever get over the physical description of her. I have a very limited imagination when it comes to inventing characters' facial features and things like that. But I knew readers would want a description of her. I'd want one too if I were a reader of my own book. Besides, I *knew* Magdalene couldn't have red hair. When I went to visit the Malfoys in July, I kept observing the young ladies around there Astoria and her friends trying to decide whether one of them could lend her features to Magdalene. But they all looked too aristocratic for her, too polished and painted. Then, as I stood in the train coming back to York, the irritating memory of our lessons came back to me, and I understood that you could made a decent model for her. With that thought in mind, I went to check you again at the library."

"But there's no physical description of Magdalene in the book."

"There isn't... yet. Maybe there never will be. It's not that readers can have everything, is it. But I need to know what she looks like, to be able to imagine her while I'm writing. I need to imagine habits."

"Habits?"

"Habits, like biting your lip, fiddling with your hair, pouting all the time, walking usually on my left to leave my right hand free..."

"I don't pout," she murmured affectionately. She felt emotional. Not only because of what he was saying, but also because, somehow, he had reserved a place for her in the world he had created, because there was a room waiting for her before she had stumbled into his life again, since he had decided that a plain, no-nonsense, not red-headed girl would end up on run with Funnel.

A/N: Pink Raccoon 80 was peerless in her assistance with the plot of *Creeping Like a Lizard*, which we discussed in front of a Chinese meal. Any interesting aspect about the book actually depends on her suggestions. Thank you, dear.

Mother Shipton is an English famous prophetess, born in Knaresborough, Yorkshire.

"Teach not thy lip such scorn; for it was made for kissing, lady, not for such contempt" *Richard III*, ii, 171-172.

"Lie with her, on her, what you will: *Othello* IV, i, 35.

This chapter was generously betaed by stgulik. Thanks a lot! Thanks also to RobisonRocket for the additional corrections.

It is very possible that, at the end of this fic, there will be a companion from Snape's POV (working title *I've Always Thought You Were Stupid*). In the meanwhile, chapter 18 will be quote fest. Beware!

Someone To Watch Over Me

Chapter 18 of 20

In which Hermione and Severus have a keen encounter of their wits to celebrate the anniversary of the battle of Bosworth, and Hermione repairs something.

Chapter 18 Someone to watch over me

You don't need no crystal balls

Don't fall for a magic wand

We humans got it all,

We perform the miracles

~ Kate Bush, *Them Heavy People*

The next Saturday, the 22nd of August, was the anniversary of Richard III's death. Hermione asked him if he wished to go to Bosworth for the occasion, but Severus replied that it was only a field, with grass and trees and a memorial stone set in an arbitrary place, not in the (unknown) spot where Richard was killed. Instead, if she desired so, they could go for a walk in town.

They skirted Jewbury and climbed on the Monk Bar to greet from the outside the supposedly garish Richard III Museum, where Mrs. Boddington had hoped he would never bring her. Then they toured the city walls southbound, up to Bootham Bar. There they went down the stony steps and on toward the Museum Gardens. They passed by the Multangular Tower, built during the reign of Septimius Severus, and sat down beneath the branches of a tree, where they had a little picnic.

The sky was overcast, but there seemed to be no rain in sight, and that was all one could ask for. After their meal, Severus pulled a tiny paperback out of his pocket. The cover was completely worn-out, with several deep lines crossing the spine. The corners had been repaired with a now yellowed Spellotape. The inside pages were alternatively stained with tea, scribbled on the margins, or dog-eared.

"Is this any way to treat a book? To treat Shakespeare?" she scolded him, taking the book from his hand and turning it around like a wounded bird.

"I showed it to Madam Pince once." He smirked. "Her reaction was far more satisfying. And in tune, actually. She sounded like Margaret of Anjou." He quickly flipped through the volume until he found a page. "Ah. Here:

"Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog!

Thou that wast seal'd in thy nativity

The slave of nature and the son of hell!

Thou slander of thy mother's heavy womb!

Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins!

Thou rag of honour! thou detested

"My books prompted some of her most inspired epithets, I believe."

"I can understand her," replied Hermione, sternly. "Book-destroyer! I wonder how they let you near manuscripts in the Brontë library. What were they thinking?"

Snape flipped again through *Richard III* and read in a mocking tone, "Sweet saint, for charity be not so curst."

Hermione took over the book and continued reading from the following verse.

"Foul devil, for God's sake, hence, and trouble us not;

For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell,

Fill'd it with cursing cries and deep exclaims.

"A bit harsh, but appropriate," she commented, pretending to glower at him.

"Are you suggesting a duel?" Severus' eyes gleamed. "I used to read scenes from the play by myself, on this day, but maybe we can arrange a duet, if you apply to acting on cue."

"I can manage acting." She smirked back. "But I don't understand why you would celebrate Richard's day by reading a play that libels him."

"Do you think so? I'd say it's his greatest publicity anyway. Besides, in case you failed to notice, it's a fairly good reading."

"I won't deny it. So, the duel? Or duet, as you prefer."

"Elementary, Granger. You read Lady Anne's role, and I read Richard's."

Hermione settled closer to him in order to read from the same page. Severus was still wearing one of his long-sleeved shirts, but he had rolled up the cuffs just one round so that his pale, slender wrists were visible as he pinned the book open with one hand, his thumb on the left page and his little finger on the right page.

As requested, she resumed reading Anne's accusations against Richard. She hesitated, cringing, while reading aloud of Richard's 'massacres,' 'butcheries' and 'heinous deeds,' but Severus seemed to be thoroughly exhilarated by the parallelism, as if it was some kind of private joke, and by the time they reached the double entendres, she was hardly stifling her own giggles.

ANNE. He is in Heaven, where thou shalt never come.

RICHARD. Let him thank me that help to send him thither,

For he was fitter for that place than earth.

ANNE And thou unfit for any place but hell.

RICHARD. Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.

ANNE. Some dungeon?

RICHARD. Your bed-chamber.

ANNE. Ill rest betide the chamber where thou liest.

RICHARD. So will it, madam, till I lie with you.

ANNE. I hope so!

RICHARD. I know so. But, gentle Lady Anne,

To leave this keen encounter of our wits,

And fall somewhat into a slower method...

Hermione laughed out loud, interrupting him. "A keen encounter of wits? This is what we have?"

"I hope so," replied Severus, echoing Lady Anne's line. He enclosed her shoulders with an arm and whispered to her ear, "But we do fall into slower methods sometimes."

She let herself slide slowly on his side, until her head rested on his lap, and she looked up to smile at him, at his glimmering black gaze. Then she closed her eyes to savour the sensation of his closeness. As she adjusted herself against his thigh, she felt his hand descending over her head and his fingers making their way through her thick hair to massage her scalp.

"If you continue like this, I'll fall asleep," she murmured, to quell the flush that was spreading over her face and caused her cheeks to burn.

"Nobody is running after us, Hermione," he replied, without stopping to stroke her hair.

She turned to face him, again, and he took off her glasses. They looked at each other for a long time.

Above him, the branches of the tree swayed gently in the breeze, the leaves hazy in the distance. Over the afternoon, the cloudy sky had gradually become clearer and clearer, and by then it was cream-coloured, almost bright. Beneath her back, the sparse withered leaves cracked whenever she moved, while the new grass bended docilely under her weight.

Summer is black.

Then, when he lay down on his back as well, she shifted at his side, hands crossed behind the back of her head.

The branches rustled. A ripple of voices, somewhere, chatting. Ants were surely climbing on her legs.

Peace.

Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun/son of York...

They continued to glance lazily at the sky as noises arrived from a distance, followed by bumps, voices, a distorted howl, and then by beats.

"There is music playing," he said.

"There is," she replied. "It's jazz. My father's favourite music."

She stood up, shook off the leaves and dirt from her jeans. Severus brushed her back and she did the same for him.

They gathered their bags and threw the leftovers of their picnic in a litterbin. Walking out of the gardens, they came upon the source of the music. On a stage set up in Exhibition Square, a band was rehearsing whilst some crew members were ranging plastic chairs in front of it. The band featured drums, piano, bass, trumpet, and vocals; the quintet was rehearsing jazz standards.

They sat on the edge of the long, rectangular fountain placed in the middle of the square, watching the rehearsal for a while. Bits of songs, mostly, to tune the instruments, the mikes and the speakers.

Music is an art that develops through time, like reading, and not through space, like visual arts. Its beauty unravels through a succession of different notes, a progression from one state to the other, from one tempo to the next. During its flow, the music changes, turns, and returns over its phrases. Music makes you aware of time revolving.

Live jazz is peculiar in its aim to offer a distinct, personal version from the original one; given a tune, the challenge is to explore different possibilities from the same departing point, possibilities even ignored by the musicians before they start playing. Once the tune starts, the journey toward the conclusion is unknown. Improvisation and unexpected twists are always hiding around the corner. The musicians pursue variation, whether in tempos, in melody, or in performance times. Even the singing lines may vary dramatically from version to version. The challenge is to offer a new interpretation that retains enough of the original, in the turn of phrases, to be recognisable as pertaining to it. A bit like historical fiction.

Then suddenly, all the songs were about him, or the two of them, and what had happened over the summer.

Holding hands at midnight

'Neath a starry sky...

Oh nice work if you can get it.

And you can get it, if you try.

Just imagine someone

Waiting at the cottage door.

Where two hearts become one

Who could ask for anything more?

Was he thinking the same things as her?

He'll look at me and smile

I'll understand;

And in a little while,

He'll take my hand;

And though it seems absurd,

I know we both won't say a word

And it occurred to her that it wasn't that plainly obvious that he would stay there, listening to music he probably didn't even like (had his father brought him to jazz concerts since he was too young to put on a record on the player by himself, because he would damage the needle, as her father did with her? She doubted) without making even a single objection about it. It flashed through her mind that, when he piled up motives of why he had chosen to escort her home whether to annoy her, to heal her, to take inspiration after her the only true reason was that he had wanted, simply, uncomplicatedly, to stay with her, to spend time in her company, even if he wouldn't ever say it. His explanations were his own way of justifying himself, of rationalising, of providing motives where motives weren't to understand the drive that had set, the both of them, on a journey to the land of the unknown, where the unforeseen had tasted possible, like a variation in a song, like an obsession when the fear expired.

Although he may not be the man

Some girls think of as handsome

To my heart he carries the key

Had that been written about him?

Impulsively, she grabbed his hand, laced her fingers with his, and squeezed it tightly. When he turned, she asked softly, "Do you mind if we stop at Haworth Road before going home? I forgot to collect something."

She was sitting on a bench in the rear garden of the Yew House, looking up at the starry sky. Severus peeped out of the kitchen door, holding two glasses of wine. He took his place at her side and handed her a glass. He clicked the brim of his glass against hers.

"To slandered kings," he toasted and took a sip. Then he tilted the glass and poured the remaining wine on the ground, where it quickly sunk.

"And slandered princes," she toasted quietly. She raised her glass in his direction and drained it.

Severus watched her perplexedly as she stood up and went inside.

"I brought something to read as well," she said in returning, switching on the bare light bulb that dangled from the wall. She handed him a book.

It was *The Winter's Tale*.

He revolved the volume between his hands.

It was an in-quarto, hand-sewn, no glue; bound in leather, decorated in such a way that its honey hue looked darker or lighter according to the depth of the inlay. The text was printed on a thick, lightly textured, ivory white paper, the edges of which had been cut with a knife, judging on the indentation. The typesetting was made with an old printing press, not digitally, considering how the characters were embedded into the paper, perceivable to touch. Black and white etchings headed any new scene.

"This is a story of slander as well," Hermione said. "But unlike *Richard III*, the slander is undeserved. As *Othello*, it's a story of unwarranted jealousy and suspects, but here peace is restored, what was lost is found and everything ends well. You may like this too," she said hopefully.

"I certainly appreciate the edition," he remarked, contemplating the volume.

Hermione smiled. "I bound it myself. During the years I've been unemployed, I sometimes did little works on commission, or for my pleasure. This was one of them." She put her hand over his on the cover. "It's yours now."

Severus looked surprised for a moment and replied unsteadily, "I cannot take it." Then he resumed his composure and added petulantly, "don't take other people's books."

"It is not you who are taking it," she said gently. "It's mine to give freely if I want, to whoever I want."

As he continued to look at her, dumbfounded, Hermione flipped through the pages up to the beginning of Act I.

"Listen, if you don't know it, I'll begin with the start. Enter Camillo and Archidamus. Archidamus: 'If you shall chance, Camillo, to visit Bohemia '"

"No," he interrupted in a whisper. "Start when enters Hermione."

"That's just the second scene," she observed.

"Then we'll have almost all the rest of the play to read."

It was the 24th of August (Saint Bartholomew, patron of bookbinders), and two months had passed since she had chased him away from the reading room.

It was Monday, and she stood again in the library's archive.

They were separated and it felt like an aching tooth.

Brother Lucretius' fifth tome was almost done. It was coming along nicely. The seam was almost perfect, if she could say that of her own work.

He had called her nice (but that was in jest, wasn't it?) and had told her Magdalene looked like her (but there was no description, yet, and maybe there would never be). When she considered the way he held her gaze, Hermione was under the impression that he indeed found her agreeable to look at, even if she had a hard time in believing that of herself. Yes, she had come to accept that there was no solution for her hair, that her eyebrows looked better when plucked, and that makeup could make her look prettier, but in the end plain was just plain, and he had loved a true beauty, once, and she was none. As for her, she still believed he was ugly beyond repair. Exceptions might be made for his eyes, the secret double wrinkle, his moles, his hands, his voice (hardly surprisingly), the softness of his skin, the unmistakable allure of his smell, and that indefinable quality that provoked *the heat* that hit her whenever he was around *oh the heat* but of course she hadn't been exactly conquered by his charms. And she surely hadn't changed her opinion just because she had slept with him. After all, they were both quite rusty when she had told him, on that first night in his cottage, that surely his bed would be more comfortable than an old armchair in front of the mantelpiece for snogging.

She didn't love him or, at least, she knew she could never love him in the fluttering way she had loved Chris Darrell, or in the *don't want to know* way he had pined for 'the silly girl'. She hadn't desired him from the start; she hadn't dreamed of staying with him, or kissing him, or the rest before it had happened. And maybe it had happened only because it wasn't on a schedule.

He wasn't Chris, and she wasn't Lily and that was okay. Better, maybe. She didn't look for a replacement for her great big love; neither could she play the fill-in for someone who was clearly irreplaceable. They were not, respectively, rivals to the acknowledged existence of their beloved ones. How could they, if they didn't even love each other?

When she was with him, she didn't even think of the dreaded four letters word, she was only aware *of the heat*, that she was happy, and that she was happier arguing with him than on her own.

Because love hurt so, it was fortunate that theirs was only a little, inconsequential summer flirt.

Yes. What was between them was only a chemical reaction on one hand, and a kind of bond built over mutual knowledge on the other. For all his pleasantries, he seemed to have an insight on everything that happened to her. She was not obliged to secrecy or to simplified explanations. Spending time with him was stimulating and relaxing at the same time. She didn't have to worry about what might or might not please him. She didn't have to hide. For if words would slip again between them, they would not be considered a definitive sign of non-attachment. And all thanks to fact that they didn't love one another.

On the other hand, despite the fact of him being so unattractive, she wouldn't say she wasn't attracted. Certainly, her body, that for the majority of the time served but a dummy to carry her mind around, declared itself attracted enough, like a magnet actually, thank you very much. It was sufficient for him to skim her shoulders to make her flare, and the situation was only getting worse with the days, as their bodies adapted to one another, as she learnt and he learnt and it wasn't so cautious and tentative as the first time. In the library, he would graze her fingers as he passed by the collection desk, and she would still feel the touch by the time he was back at his seat again.

When Ron was particularly disappointed with her attempts at cheering him up, he would call her frigid. He was probably right at that time, but then she liked and loved him, and his words hurt her. Therefore, she was glad that she didn't like or love Severus, and that she was simply accepting what the season brought.

When they joined, there was only *the heat*, whoever thought the man was cold was oh so wrong, and this luminescent sensation of expansion, like a candle halo. He solidified and burnt for her and she burned and melted for him in an alternate game of matter.

She was overtly aware of him staying in the reading room and could hardly care for other people when he was sitting in front of her. When she stayed in the archives, she would think of nothing but him, behind the book-shelved wall, in the reading room. And yes, there was something sensual about him that was only too evident since she had properly *watched*, but after all, there was a reason if she wore glasses now. Her vision had been troubled after the war.

Beyond the wall, there was this little dot of ink that she was now tied to, and she apologised if it sounded like a cheap metaphor, but with a needle and paper in her hand she couldn't think but of threads and bindings and bonds. In the other room, he was bent, like her, over a page; he wrote for memory, for not forgetting the past, while she mended the shells which preserved that past. Content and mould, pearl and oyster, shelter and wanderer, ink and paper; the ink percolating through the fibrous pulp of paper the words forming on its surface were just arabesques among moles and---

---she tore a page of *The Twelve Patriarkes*.

She fixed it, horrified, dumbstruck.

She *tore* a page of the book she was restoring.

That she was supposed to be restoring.

That she *should* be restoring.

The damage was minimal, in fact; a rip no longer than a couple of centimetres. No one would notice. No one would tell it wasn't there from the start. The tome had much more severe cuts.

Still, this was unbearable.

She fixed it, and it looked like an earthquake.

It crept in faster than she could say *Protego!*

Did you want to rip it?

No, of course.

If you didn't want to rip it, then why did you do it?

I didn't want to rip it!

Then why? Do you want to destroy all the other books there are here?

I didn't want to!

Then why? Don't you know anything about bookbinding, Granger? That was Mr. Hurler's voice. *Vanquishes You-Know-Who and doesn't know how to put a jacket on a hardback. Is this the way a good bookbinder behaves? Tearing books apart instead of mending them?*

There's no future for you in this profession. You shouldn't stay among books.

No, I cannot stay away from books, please! Please. Don't take even this away from me. Books are my blood.

Then why did you enjoy ripping a page? A page moulded and printed in 1499? You enjoy watching blood dripping.

No! No! I didn't enjoy it! NEVER!

Then why have you done it? Did you want to rip it?

...!

This is an obsession, she realised. It's an intrusive thought. It's not me speaking. It's a question that repeats itself, craving for an immediate answer.

To think about something doesn't necessarily mean to wish it to happen This was Severus.

He was speaking a lot inside her mind lately.

They will block you. They would prevent you from doing normal things, as the 'allowed' things become fewer and fewer. Don't cut your wings yourself, Hermione. Don't let them win.

This was Severus again, though he had never said that.

How very touching, this cooing, but did you want to rip it?

I must not answer, she told herself. I have to let it go.

Why did you rip it?

Did you enjoy ripping it?

Do you want to rip all the other books in the library?

No, I don't want to destroy, she replied in her mind. *I am here to restore.* She had resisted three questions in a row and it was the best she could do for the moment. Maybe, the next time, she would resist longer.

Then why?

It simply happened. There was no will, no hidden meaning

She took a deep breath and reached out for her wand. Deliberately, she pointed it to the torn page and whispered, *Reparo*." The paper sealed back in an instant, as if the rip had never existed. The page was pristine once again. Just because it was a Muggle book, and magic worked on it despite of its age.

The scar on his throat, it should be there and yet there isn't, though I saw the piercing with my very, deceivable eyes.

He survived because he's half-Muggle, she suddenly thought, even if it didn't make sense. Arthur Weasley had been attacked by the loathsome snake as well and had equally survived.

She closed *The Twelve Patriarks* and waited, patiently, for an owl from the Ministry to arrive. *Miss Hermione Granger, according to the International Statute of Secrecy, paragraph P, clause 87...* But the owl never came, as it hadn't come when she had opened the door in Haworth Road with an *Alohomora* (twice!). Did nobody care for a bookbinder, after all? Didn't the Ministry even care for a book, albeit Muggle? Or was it just the town, for which rules didn't apply?

Three days later, she finished restoring *The Twelve Patriarks*. With her heart pounding in her chest, she forced herself to open up the volume. It wasn't easy, after her anxiety attack, but she told herself she must not play avoidance tricks, and somehow she managed to touch the paper again. At the end, she went upstairs, to Mrs. Peewit's office, to sign her contract for September (*a temporary arrangement, until the NWL selection*).

On Saturday, at the end of her three-monthly contract at 51, Haworth Road, she moved in the Yew House. A temporary arrangement, just until the National Wizarding Library selection. Actually, she didn't even contemplate the possibility of renewing her contract with Mrs. Neill, or of looking for another accommodation.

While packing, in the lowest drawer of her wardrobe she found the vial of the Draught of Peace Severus had given her back in June, and, in the drawer of her bedside table, the flask of Dreamless Sleep she had stolen from Harry's bedroom. She thought of Vanishing them, but eventually emptied them in the sink, hoping they would clog Mrs. Neill's pipes.

~x~ ALMOST AN END ~x~

I know you love me not... I do not love you

Only at dead of night

I smile a little, softly dreaming of you

Until the dawn is bright.

I love you not; you love me not; I know it!

But when the day is long

I haunt you like the magic of a poet,

And charm you like a song.

~ Agnes Mary Robinson, *Love Without Wings*, 1886 (Song VII)

A/N: Dear readers, thank you for sticking with this appalling, swotty fic for so long. Only two more chapters to go. Thanks to Pink Raccoon 80 for alpha-ing and Valady and RobisonRocket for beta-ing.

Richard III's quotes are from Act I, iii, 228-33; I, ii, 49 and following; I, ii, 108-120. And the very first two lines, of course.

The songs are *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, *The Man I Love* and *Someone To Watch Over Me*, all by George and Ira Gershwin.

Reception

Chapter 19 of 20

In which many surrounding characters say their piece about Hermione's and Severus' relationship while they Floo to London for the selection.

With all the years between us

(I know your heart)

You know I'd never lie

Let other people judge us

With all their own assumptions

You know with me you never have to hide

We could pretend, we could pretend

But that never suited us somehow

~ Heather Dale, *For Guinevere*

Sunday, September 13, 2009

"Are you ashamed?"

"Of what?"

"Of going to Diagon Alley with me."

"Why ever should I?"

"Then why are you suggesting a Muggle hotel?"

"I thought, after what happened with Blaise, that you wouldn't like to stop at the Leaky Cauldron. Actually, I thought you didn't want to accompany me at all."

"Mrs. Longbottom offered you a room for free. Why should you pay for a room in another hotel?"

"I was suggesting it for you. At the Leaky Cauldron there could be anybody, and they "

"I have the right to go wherever I want."

She smiled. "I also thought you wanted to watch the final."

"Why would I? There's only Federer playing."

Previously

Time ran very fast after the incident in the library. The selection was approaching. Every spare moment was used to revise. Sometimes ~~she~~ *he* ~~thought~~ returned, like the sting of a bee, and, if not engaged in a debate, it would go away after a while.

The news of her new location went around, maybe not as fast, but in a steady progression.

Informing her mother was the first unavoidable step, and it ran actually smoother than expected.

"Will you renew your contract with Mrs. Neill?" her mother asked.

"Uhm... no, Mum. I'll go somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Ehm... do you remember Molly's curse?"

"Oh, Hermione, honestly. Still with that rambling story?"

"Once more, it was all true, Mum. But it's over now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going out with a person. I'm going to move to his house for the next two weeks, at least."

"What's his name?"

"You know him, Mum. He's Severus Snape."

"The one you saw..."

"Yes."

Mrs. Granger stood silent for a long while and then said simply, "Whatever method you choose, magical or normal, just don't forget to use protections, Hermione."

"No, Mum."

"Good."

And that was it.

Mrs. Peewit, on the contrary, scared the hell out of her.

"You are shining, dear," she told Hermione when she went up to sign her contract for September. "Am I right in supposing it is because you are going out with someone?"

"Ehr..."

"Don't deny it, dear! I've seen the two of you walking together to and from the library. I kept a watch over you, actually."

"Ah, really?" giggled Hermione, beyond embarrassment.

"Indeed. I did because, you see, I happen to know who your partner*really* is."

"Do you?" Hermione squeaked. *Oh, Merlin, maybe Mrs. Peewit is a squib, or she had a less than agreeable encounter with some Death Eaters, or...*

"He is Leslie Prince! I knew that sometimes things like this had to happen, that writers had to go out with their fans. This is a librarian's dream come true!"

Hermione coughed nervously.

"My dear, I cannot say how happy I am for you!" Mrs Peewit went on, beaming. "You are so lucky!"

I suppose I am.

Just a couple of nights before leaving Haworth Road, Hedwig II returned to her window with a new letter from Harry.

Dear Hermione,

How are you? The kids ask about you sometimes, and Ginny and I would be happy if you showed up one of these days. Soon, Jamie and Albus will return to the kindergarten. Lily's cut her last tooth one week ago.

I know you were interested, so here is the big news: the Hogwarts board decided that the DADA job would be bestowed on Dumbledore's portrait. I think this is the best solution ever, as the jinx will never concern a painting. And it will be a great benefit for the students. I almost want to get back to school just to follow Dumbledore's lessons.

Good luck with your selection.

Love,

Harry

Feeling in a wicked disposition, Hermione grabbed a quill and replied on the back of Harry's parchment:

Dear Harry,

I'm glad to hear that you are all fine. Yes, one day I'll pay you another visit. At the moment, I'm busy packing my stuff. I'm going to move in soon with our last DADA teacher. We don't like talking about Dumbledore that much, so forgive me if I don't rejoice.

Speaking of which, can you tell me why do we draw 600 Galleons a year as a war pension and Severus 60? One zero slipped in spelling? Could you please ask Kingsley next time you meet him? That would be lovely.

Hugs,

Hermione

PS. Unconsciously, Severus hugs you too.

PPS. Tell Ginny her Contraceptive charm is still the best.

Hermione re-read the last sentence and then thought she could persuade the owl, with a couple more biscuits, to bring a note to her apothecary in Diagon Alley before returning to Godric's Hollow.

She got no reply from Harry, but the batch of *Procreobstans* (the effect of which lasted a fortnight) arrived, as expected, the following day.

The incident with Blaise happened on Sunday, August 30.

The night before had been awkward. She had just moved in, and among packing and unpacking and Merlin knew how much stuff and books she could pack in one suitcase it was understandable that she had overlooked all the implications. Severus had already slipped a finger in the waistband of her jeans when she remembered and gasped. He froze.

"What's happening? What have I done?"

"Sorry," she hastened to say, "sorry. There's nothing wrong." She grabbed his hand. "I simply forgot to tell you that I have my menses. I'm sorry."

His eyes darkened (how could they? But sometimes they darkened) and he asked, "Does it hurt?"

"No, no. I don't have painful menses, thankfully. Besides, it's the third day. But I don't know if... ah, ah, I mean, it's only... kind of weird, you know?"

"May I just hug you?"

"Eh? Of course, there's nothing..."

He had held her, then, and murmured, "*Az got vil shtrofn an apikoyres git er im a frum vayb*" against her hair, and she hadn't ask what that meant because she had kissed him.

In the morning, they were awakened by a crackling of flames in the main room and a haughty voice calling, "Professor?"

"Oh, fucking fuck."

"Mmh? What's up?" she mumbled in her sleep.

"Stay here and don't make a sound," he whispered back. "Ward yourself in, if you prefer, but don't worry. It's only my idiotic successor. I'll be back soon." He slipped in a pair of trousers and a shirt before leaving the room.

"Zabini! For Merlin's beard, can't you even inform me when you are going to pay your visits?" His voice hissed from the main room.

"If I inform you, Professor, you would make yourself unreachable."

"And what should you deduce from that? And isn't there really any treat I can give you to make you stop calling me by that title?"

"You will always be a professor for me, sir. In truth, you should come back to Hogwarts and teach, no matter what. You should still be the headmaster, sir. I also believe that, with the opportune cures"

"I am not moribund! Stop treating me as one! Zabini, you have been repeating to me this same litany of bullshit for ten years. What have I always replied to you?"

"To tell you what I wanted and to bugger off. But I think---"

"Then?"

"Well, Professor, if you..."

"Zabini, tell me what has led you here today and bugger off. You are much less welcome now than ever."

"Professor, the new school year is going to start in two days, as usual, and I came now because I'll later have less time to talk with you about our projects."

"Yours, not mine; I don't want to have anything to do with your bungles."

"True, Professor, I'm the potioneer, but without your suggestions, I wouldn't get such results."

"Fawning will get you nowhere, here. Any suggestion, including the one I'm giving now, is offered with the intention of making you leave sooner. I'm only obliged listening to you, whenever you have the indecency of Flooing into my house uninvited, because I am prevented from hexing you away."

"With all due respect, Professor, I believe that if you followed the Ministry programme for magic-deprived wizards"

"Do you know where you can stick that blasted respect of yours, Blaise? I was peacefully sleeping with my Ministerial programme in my bed before you woke me up!"

"Forgive me, Professor, for waking you, but I was impatient to show you this. I spent all summer working on the refining the Elixir to Induce Euphoria for lithium-allergic patients affected by bipolar disorder, and I brought you a sample."

"Bring it to St. Mungo's, you loafer! What use do I have for all those vials you bring here?"

"But you contributed to perfecting them, Professor! Your name should be but sniff is that true? I can sense magic performed here. Oh, Professor, have you finally recovered?"

"The magic you sense comes from your own bloody lithium-free potion! And spare me these melodramatic tantrums, Zabini, would you. The last time you sensed magic here it was actually a clogged sink."

"A clogged sink, Professor? But you can't really appreciate this kind of empty, worthless excuse of a life? In this Muggle environment?"

At this point, Hermione couldn't help herself anymore. She got up and peeped out into the main room. "Hi, Blaise." She greeted him with a radiant smile. "How long has it been? Forgive my attire..." Kitten-decorated pyjamas didn't seem very appropriate to welcome guests, unwanted as they might be "but pray tell me, what is worthless?"

Jaw dropped, Blaise gaped at her as if she was a Martian getting out of a spaceship.

With the same cheery smile, Hermione continued, "Can't you even tell a lady's magic from a man's, Blaise? And have you ever considered asking Severus if you were disturbing him, or other people in the house?"

"Granger," Blaise muttered at last. Snape's neck was scarlet, and his face was blotted with red as well.

"In person. Oh, Blaise, one last question do you know that it's seven in the morning on a Sunday?"

She reached out for him and patted him on the shoulder, directing him toward the mantelpiece.

"Please, when you arrive back to Hogwarts, give my love to Neville," she asked sweetly.

"Remind me to ward the fireplace later," she told Severus with a yawn as soon as Blaise Flooed away.

With September 1st and the ending of summer opening times, Hermione's work shifts passed from three-ten p.m. to twelve-six. The library was running at full capacity now, and all seats were occupied by readers. Severus stopped accompanying her there.

"It's early enough to come back by yourself, when you finish working," he said. "There," he added, pointing her to a bike that had always stood propped against the western wall of the house and that had probably seen Grindelwald's war. "You can take it, if you want to go for a ride instead of Apparating or waiting for the bus."

On August 31, the US Open started. Within a few days, Severus would stay up late to watch the matches on the decrepit television perched on the chest of drawers in his bedroom. After suffering the noise in silence for a while, eventually Hermione would cast a *Muffliato* and a *Delumos* on it and return to her pillow.

At least, Quidditch matches weren't broadcast on TV!

But it gave her a comforting sense of familiarity that they would share his bedroom also for such mundane habits, and sometimes she would stay awake with him if he told her that there was a good match on.

One evening, the phone rang. There was only one telephone in the house, in the main room, and Severus, busy with the oven, asked her to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Severus?" croaked a voice on the other side of the phone.

"Tell them to hang on!" bellowed Snape from the kitchen.

"Please excuse him: he's busy at the moment, but will arrive in a minute," said Hermione at the receiver.

"You are Severus' shiksa," said the voice, and it wasn't a question.

"I'm Hermione Granger, and you must be Severus' father. Nice to talk with you, sir."

An unidentifiable swearing came from the kitchen.

"Humph. Severus was always fond of shiksas and... how do you say? Madbloods?"

Should I cry? Laugh? Shut off?""We say Muggle-born, sir."

"Oy vey. He's just like his grandfather, the one who married a witch."

Hermione considered reminding Mr. Snape he had married a witch as well, but he was already going on. "Severus always had this schmaltzy nature. He was a weak boy and remained soppy ever since. All those books, no active participation in society, no interest in public welfare. Never understood anything about politics. But this doesn't mean you should take advantage of the fact that he lives in the clouds, is that clear to you what was your name? He is too delicate for all the women's devilments, so don't mess up with him. And now shut up and call him at the phone. This is a long-distance call."

Luckily, Severus arrived, and Hermione robotically handed him the receiver.

"It's your father."

"I got it. What the hell did he tell you?"

As Hermione shook her head, Severus shouted in the receiver, "What kind of *meshugas* were you telling her? Why did you call? What's happened with Nancy this time?"

Hermione walked back to the kitchen, where she distractedly heard bits of a half-hour long complaint about Federer, and the general decadence of tennis players after the eighties.

The Boddingtons had gone visiting their son and grandchildren in France. Hermione suspected Severus had bought them the tickets, or had somehow taken other measures not to be disturbed by them at the present.

Monday, September 14, 2009

Hermione obtained two days of leave from Mrs. Peewit. It was awfully easy, in fact, as easy as lying.

"It's my first month anniversary with Mr. Prince," she told her. "He would like to take me to London for an extended weekend."

When Mrs. Peewit went mawkish, it felt like cheating.

When she Flooed with Severus to the Leaky Cauldron, holding his hand to allow him to ride along, it almost felt like she had said the truth. If only it wasn't for the selection.

"Thompson."

The thirty-something man behind the bar of the Leaky Cauldron was staring at them like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Thompson, even if your results in a Potions classroom were abysmal, I believe it may be within your reach to give us the key for our room. It's just there, behind your head, if you manage to turn it."

"Please, Mr. Thompson. I'd like to go upstairs as well."

All the clientele of the pub had been gaping at Hermione and Severus since they had come out of the fireplace, hand in hand, both in Muggle clothes, and had dusted each other after the ride. Mr. Thompson looked like a first-year who had irritated Peeves.

Luckily, Hannah Abbott came out of a 'staff only' door, her growing belly more noticeable now than in July under a salmon-coloured robe.

"Professor," she greeted Snape, somewhat sheepishly.

"Mrs. Longbottom," nodded Snape in reply.

"Russell, give them the key for room 11, and continue the check in, please," said Hannah.

Eventually, Russell Thompson took the key from the hook and pulled out a registration form that Severus began to fill in.

"So," said Hannah, turning to Hermione. She kissed her on both cheeks before taking her by the hand and carrying her away to a private parlour down a narrow passage. With a click of fingers, Hannah lighted a flame in the fireplace and sat in one of the armchairs, inviting Hermione to sit opposite to her.

"How are you, Hannah? And the baby?" started Hermione.

"Oh, everything's fine, thanks. But we'll have plenty of time to talk about this later. Now you have to tell me everything, Hermione," Hannah replied with huge, curious eyes. "Is that true? Are you living with Professor Snape, now? Zabini told Neville. Harry wrote us, too."

And you'll read it on the Daily Prophet tomorrow, as soon as Rita Skeeter catches us here.

"I am."

"I knew it! I knew it! I suspected that something was brewing sorry from your attitude during Neville's party. You had never spoken that badly of Snape, never. And you looked as if you had been trodden on by an Erumpent. I spotted it immediately that you had to suffer for love's afflictions."

"Hannah, there was nothing between us at that time..."

"And you suffered for it, didn't you? I know. It must have been hard for you. You always had this kind of missionary tendency, also at Hogwarts. Oh, Hermione, this is so brave of you. Knowing you, it was obvious that you would try to comfort him once you had met him again. To help that wretched man out of his misery, to make him accept his deprivation... And, with your patient devotion, you were able to break through his desolate, despairing shell. Oh, this is so romantic!" Hannah clapped her hands in admiration.

Hufflepuffs.

*I think the only less romantic thing of being with Severus, was being with Ron, at his bes*Even during intimate moments, their only exchanges were stupid jokes Severus had a penchant for puns based on 'nothing' and trifles like that and sometimes they even indulged in silly childish games, like measuring the respective size of their feet, and then pushing. Hermione had once fallen out of the bed for a match of feet against feet.

She hadn't even stopped laughing then.

"When are you going to marry?" Hannah asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, you're thirty and he's what? Sixty? Given his age... I imagine he would like to make up for lost time."

"He's forty-nine and eight months." *And I still haven't decided what to give him for his birthday. Damn.*And we have been seeing each other only for a month now, Hannah."

"But you two are living together."

"Yes, but that's only a temporary arrangement, until this issue with my job is settled."

"Sure, you want to look for a new, larger house, I see. Finding a good place can be difficult, nowadays. Will you two stay in the north?"

"Listen, Hannah, there will be no marriage. This is just a little, inconsequential summer flirt."

"Hermione, people don't have summer flirts with Professor Snape. Your devotion"

"No, no, you are totally misled. Ours is merely a friendship with benefits," she chuckled. "A friendship with benefits minus the friendship makes only benefits." That was a favourite joke between them, currently.

Hannah looked at her as if she had grown a beard. "Forgive me, Hermione, but no woman in her right mind would accept... benefits from Snape unless she's mad about him."

"This is not true!" Hermione almost yelled, slamming her fist on the arm of her chair. Before she could help it, she added, "And you're in no position to talk*Merlin knows if I love Neville, but... to sleep with him? No way.*

Hermione had just been unfair, but Hannah simply laughed. "You are so cute. Always as straightforward as water. And I wouldn't have thought that of him, but he was looking at you as if you were a krapfen. I wish you every blessing."

Hufflepuffs.

After dinner, they were back in their room. Hermione was pacing across it in a bundle of nerves. Severus was sitting on the bed, reading the first*Daily Prophet* in years and looked as relaxed as he could. The Ministry selection was scheduled for the next day at nine in the morning. What would it consist of? What kind of questions was she to expect? Would she have to do a practical demonstration? She had no idea. No information had been given to the candidates. The mode of the interview was secret. Would her name be considered a recommendation? Would it harm or help her? And what if she ripped an early print? Or, worse, a manuscript?

Do you want to rip it?

Then there was the matter with the Emily Brontë. While waiting for a new book to restore, after finishing with Brother Lucretius', Hermione had helped in cataloguing the new additions and filling the visitors' requests. But there were already Jack and Hester for them, and even if the number of visitors had increased, the last two weeks had been quite uneventful. Without a bookbinding task at hands, she felt a bit superfluous.

Isn't it better? Otherwise, you would tear another book.

The fact was, simply, that she loved bookbinding and wanted to be able to return to it, despite the incident. It wouldn't do her any good to avoid restoring books: she had to continue doing it, leaving the repetitive questions in her mind to rot.

You don't have a future in this job, Granger.

Then there was the little problem with Severus, namely, where she would stay after the selection. She really had no wish to leave the Yew House, if possible, but she couldn't lean on him that much. Probably he was already fed up with her tendency to interfere with his routine, to monopolise the toilet, to rearrange compulsively the stacks of books in the main room. He hadn't commented when she had invaded his bathroom with her hundreds of hair products, true, but woe betide her if she dared misplace the kitchenware. He didn't look pleased when she had found the cabinet with Blaise's potions in the attic. She had found also a very old cauldron covered with scratches, but polished, a mortar and some empty vials, as old as the cauldron. A bunch of notes in loose sheets was tucked unceremoniously into the cabinet. She couldn't tell to when they dated back. Severus had asked her, quite imperiously, to stop ransacking the attic and she had obeyed, crestfallen. She had also been altogether dispensed from cooking. She wouldn't blame him if he were tired of his demanding guest. Maybe he wanted back his privacy, his habits, and he would be satisfied with meeting each other on weekends. But she didn't really want to go away.

Did you like to rip the page?

She could travel. Unless he preferred so, there was really no need to move out, or so she hoped. Look at Neville and Hannah. She lived at the Leaky Cauldron and him at Hogwarts, returning to London whenever he could. Sometimes she went visiting him at the school. They worked apart, and *they* were married. Not the most comfortable solution in the world, but they made the best of it. A functioning fireplace was always very convenient.

The Yew House had a fireplace, too.

As long as he isn't bored of me, as long as he wants me there...

"Stop pacing back and forth like a man in a maternity ward. You're getting me anxious. Come here and have a rest."

Hermione turned and saw Severus folding back his newspaper and patting the empty side of the bed at his right.

Sighing, she stepped out of her slippers and nestled at his side, her head on his shoulder, her right arm across his chest, while he began to fiddle with her curls.

"I had another episode," she murmured.

His hand halted for a moment, then resumed twirling her hair distractedly. "What? Images?"

"No, a thought. I did something I shouldn't have; I thought things I wouldn't have." She summarised what had happened in the archives.

"You are simply under stress, Hermione, and it makes easier for the unwanted thoughts to come. All this fuss for the selection... How many books did you study for it?"

"Thirty-seven. Monographs. Some sixty-four articles. Few, I know. I haven't even completed my list. I should have"

"Read less, you fool. Anyway. After your selection, a bit of stress will peel off. When did you say this episode occurred?"

"On Monday the 24th."

"And," he scowled for a moment "if I haven't miscalculated, you had your cycle on Thursday the 27th. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"I am privy to the fact that women may be upset by the coming period, even when they don't suffer any physical ailments... mmh... There were potions I brewed for the infirmary, once. Magnesium and hellebore and powdered moonstone and---"

"Thank you, Severus. That's very kind. Maybe next month."

"Maybe this new... arrangement stressed you."

"Moving in with you? No. I feel so at ease there. But probably you felt the pressure."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I know I'm not a sweet company."

He gripped her shoulder. "Why haven't you told me earlier of this attack?"

"I am aware that I should not seek reassurances. I have to face it by myself. I know I'm supposed to not give a damn about the thoughts."

"And are you succeeding in it?"

"In letting the thoughts go? More or less. They come, but I try not replying them."

"Good." He nodded. "Rest, now. You have resisted enough. Try to calm down before your interview. So, where have we got up to?"

"With what?"

"The tale."

"Your tale?" She raised her head, looking at him, and then rested it again on his shoulder. "I don't remember. I fell asleep somewhere in the middle. There was a witch, books, and your Patronus."

"Ah, right. I remember." He brought a finger to his chin. "So, the young witch went to the Southern Oracle, and Uyulala told her that, to retrieve all the books that once belonged to the library, and that went lost after the war, she had to bind a book herself. Because in each word is potentially encapsulated an entire language, as in every sound there is the potential for every kind of music, therefore in any book is mirrored any other book of the world. If she put together the pages for just one book while pronouncing the right spell, the dispersed books would come back.

"The spell was *Filo*, because in Latin *filum*, *fili* means thread. But you also know that *philia* in ancient Greek means friendship, love, affection; *phileo* means to love, and *philos* means dear, beloved. So, I am not sure whether the spell referred to the thread she had to use to stitch the pages together, or to the love she felt for the books and that would allow her to find them again. Probably it implied both meanings, because binding, I am informed, is about shaping a bond."

While he was speaking, Hermione unfastened the first buttons of his shirt and bent on his chest to kiss his sternum, then his nipple on the other side. His nipples, she liked. What did a man feel when someone sucked his nipples? She was under the impression that Severus' nipples were more sensitive than her own were.

" 'But I have no paper,' said the witch.

" 'Collect as many leaves as you can find in the forest, and those shall be your pages,' replied Uyulala.

" 'I have no thread and no needle to sew them,' said the witch.

" 'Transfigure the nail of your left thumb into a needle and use your hair as thread,' replied the Oracle.

" 'But I have no story to write on the leaves,' said again the witch.

" 'Collect a phrase from each bird of the forest, and that shall be your story,' replied Uyulala."

More buttons loosened, her hand travelled further down, stopped to plop a finger in his navel, and then grazed the trail of fine, black hair with her fingertips. She unbuttoned his trousers, unzipped his fly, slipped her hand in his pants, and found his hardness. As she encompassed the delicate head with her palm, she lifted her face up and kissed him, hard.

"There again, it seems that you don't want to listen to the end of this tale," he said when she let his lips free.

In reply, Hermione crouched on her heels and took off her jumper, unhooked her bra, rolled out of her jeans and knickers. She lied down on her back, parted her knees, and stretched her arms toward him.

"Come here," she said, her voice mellow.

He looked down at her body, then back at her eyes, and gently took her glasses off.

"Do you know that we did this for the first time one month ago?" she asked as Severus finished stripping off his shirt.

"I know." Trousers and pants joined the shirt on the back of the chair.

"I'm sorry. I didn't buy you anything to celebrate."

"It looks like we are celebrating."

Severus leant on her and there it was again, the skin, the contact, and the yearning, throbbing in her chest.

"Touch me," she begged, spreading her legs farther.

His nose brushed against the line between her breasts, and his kisses circled one of her breast while one of his hands cupped her other breast. His other hand stroked her down, back and forth, and she felt herself liquefy in the warmth of his touch. She pushed her hips closer to his hand while his shmok pulsed against her thigh. Lacing her legs with his, she rubbed her ankles along his calves, her toes circling the back of his knees. She rolled her knuckles along his neck before tracing the muscles and bones of his back, running her hands down his spine, widening her fingers over his cheeks. One finger glided in the crack between his cheeks, and she squeezed the little, soft triangle of flesh above it.

Eyes closed, she stirred her head, plunging it deeper into the pillow, and Severus' hand left her breast, found her nape, and grasped her hair. He kissed her and her hands flew to his head too, ruffled his hair while trying to pull his face closer, the secret in his mouth closer. She grew languid then. She drew her tongue out and licked his lips, slowly, the upper lip, and then the lower lip. His tongue touched hers, tip to tip, until she caught it between her lips and started to suck it. His mouth closed over hers as their tongues continued to play.

"Severus," she whispered between breaths. "Let me stay with you. At the Yew House. Even if I pass the selection. Please."

He stilled. "You want to stay."

"I'll understand if you don't want me there anymore."

"You thought that I would say no, had you asked it in another context?"

His eyes smothered her, gleaming like fresh oil paint, a flicker of incredulity? joy? in their depths.

"I don't know... Maybe you want back your privacy, and that would be perfectly reasonable, I believe."

"Did I give you that impression that I didn't want you there? Because because I watched the blasted tournament?"

"Oh, no! It's your house; you can do as it pleases you. It is not like you have ignored me altogether, you know." Her smile died on her lips. "But I don't want to be a burden on you."

"Hermione, the house is yours." He cleared his throat. "At your disposal. As I am, right now."

"Really? I can stay?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Summer hasn't ended yet, and you have, after all, to hear the end of the tale."

"I will. Oh, thank you, thank you!"

"There's also a tail, here, that awaits to be taken home."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Then take it home, sir."

He slid into her, then, and more 'yeses' were repeated until they both fell asleep, sated.

A/N

Az got vil shtrofn an apikoyres git er im a frum vayb Yiddish proverb: When God wants to punish an unbeliever, He gives him a pious wife.

Shiksa - (pronounced shik-seh) non-Jewish girl; maiden. Especially one attracted to a Jewish male.

Oy vey - oh no!, woe is me!; oh!, ouch!

Schmaltzy shmalts, cooking fat, usually chicken fat, melted or rendered; excessive sentimentality; mush.

Meshugas (pronounced meh-shoo-gaas' / meh-shi-gaas') craziness, madness

Krapfen German for doughnut or cruller

Shmok vulgar for penis, dick, asshole

Glossary kindly provided you by my fantastic beta, Valady!

"At least Hermione's on Snape's tail" (Harry Potter, age 11, *PS/SS* 16, UK ed. p. 196)

The Selection

Chapter 20 of 20

In which Hermione ponders what she knows and what she doesn't while waiting for her interview at the National Wizarding Library. With an illustration by the author.



and eventually something from Manchester!

You're not the one I need

You're just the one that I want

Makes perfect sense to me

You're not the one I need

But you're the one that I want

Ain't no sense in love

It's not logical

That's the way I feel

It's not logical

psychological

It's heaven underneath my skin

~ Take That, *Ain't No Sense In Love*

Tuesday, September 15, 2009

Hermione turned over in the bed and felt the empty side on her left. It was normal to find Severus already on his feet in the morning, but that morning it didn't feel quite right. *She* should have been up before him on that day.

"Severus?" she called, holding out a hand toward the bed table. She grabbed the watch placed there and shrieked.

"SHIT! OH, FUCK!"

She jumped out of the bed, throwing away sheets and blankets in a graceless rumpling.

"What was that?" Severus peeped out of the bathroom, one cheek white with foam, one hand holding a razor.

"You were here! Oh, God, Severus! It's a quarter to nine! Why didn't you awake me?"

She stormed into the bathroom, passing him by, and sat on the toilet. He observed her, unimpressed.

"You forbade me to awake you."

"What? But but that was one month ago!"

"You never lifted the order."

"Order? Which order? It was a trifle!" She looked at him and shook her head. "Good grief, Severus. Orders? You'll be killed a second time because of orders!" She flushed the toilet. "Oh, Merlin, what can I do? The selection is going to start in a few minutes!" She joined Severus at the sink and washed her hands while he resumed shaving. "I'm lost! Why didn't the alarm ring?"

"Maybe you didn't set it," he mumbled, scraping his upper lip.

"I didn't set it? I normally wake up at four, when I have an exam, without any need of alarms!" She wiped her hands, flustered. "All this training for nothing. I'm hopeless. Mr. Hullarder was right."

"If you hurry up instead of whining, you'll be able to reach the Ministry in any case."

"I'll be late. They will never admit me to the interview. It's over," Hermione objected, frowning, and in the meanwhile, she started to get dressed. Underwear, trousers, a shirt, a cardigan quickly wrapped her body. "I can't believe you didn't rouse me once you got up. What if I had continued sleeping past the selection time? I can't believe it," she repeated, putting on her shoes.

Severus rinsed his face and then turned to her, looking stricken. "It was in your instructions. Besides, it's in compliance with the song *I warn you not to awaken or stir up love until it wants to arise!*"

"What are you talking about?" She picked up her wand, her bag, snatched a handful of Floo powder. "Never mind, it's late. You'll explain me afterwards." She went up to him and kissed him lightly on his lips, getting a whiff of his aftershave. "Bye!"

Severus' "Good luck!" followed her as she disappeared into the fireplace.

Hurry up hurry up hurry up.

Without a proper shower, without the pearl beads she intended to wear, with her hair still tangled from sleep and sex, Hermione landed in the crowded hall of the Ministry. She pounced out of the fireplace and rushed through the Atrium, elbowing her way through workers and visitors up to the queue in front of the lifts. She waited to get on tapping her foot impatiently and suffered the rise with her heart slamming in her chest. Just one floor, up from level eight to level seven, and the lift never seemed to reach it. The National Library shared a floor with the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Typical irony. When the lift arrived, Hermione galloped up to the corridor that hosted the entrance to the library.

Two rows of seats were aligned along the walls of the corridor, and there were maybe thirty-five, forty people sitting on them. A tall man in long turquoise robes stood against the large doors of the library, making notes on a clipboard.

It was six minutes past nine when Hermione reached him.

"I apologise!" she panted. "I'm mortified!"

"Hermione Granger, I presume," said the wizard, lifting his head from the clipboard. "We haven't started processing yet. Please, take a seat and wait until we call your name." He eyed her, clearly disapproving her Muggle attire.

"Oh. Thanks." Giving a sigh of relief, Hermione took a seat. A sweat drop trickled down her back.

She looked around. Of all the people waiting, she knew but few faces. There was a young man who once worked with her in Mr. Hullarder's shop. She acknowledged him with a nod, but didn't go to greet him. He was a nice guy, as far as she remembered, but they were rivals at that moment.

A couple more people arrived, apologising, and the wizard in turquoise finished checking his clipboard. He cleared his throat and announced, "All the candidates are here now. We will now start to call you inside, in alphabetical order. A commission presided by Mrs. Vand will judge your titles and suitability for the library's requirements. Once your interview is over, you are not to divulge its details to the other candidates. A Silencing charm will apply, if that were the case. You are to carry only your wand inside. The commission has already been provided with your submission forms. Good luck." He paused to control his list. "We will start with Aberer, Julianne."

"I'm here," said a woman, young still but with greying hair, standing up and trotting to the door. It closed behind her while the wizard remained on the threshold, watching the candidates.

There were thirty-seven people waiting and eight places available on Mrs. Vand's staff. So she had a twenty-one point six percent probability of being selected. The candidates' ages ranged from youngsters who apparently had just left Hogwarts to mature wizards and witches who evidently wanted to bring their expertise to the library. Hermione tried to recompose her hair, fixing it with a hairgrip. In her bag, she found a cereal bar and began munching it. *No proper shower, no proper robes, and no proper breakfast. Wonderful.*

Mrs. Aberer's interview lasted half an hour. *So, if I'm more or less halfway through the list - let's say there are twelve-fifteen people up to G, and if every interview last half an hour, I'll have to wait some six hours before my turn. But possibly not all the interviews will last the same.*

The second candidate (Ackerley, Steward; a Ravenclaw, if she remembered correctly) was out in fifteen minutes.

Still, I'll have to wait at least four hours. It's better if I revise my knowledge.

Hermione knew that the National Wizarding Library had been founded in 1694, two years after the passing of the International Code of Secrecy. The first items to be kept there were documents from the International Confederations of Wizards. The library had quickly expanded through donations and legacies. The first important collection consisted of the volumes donated by Lord Stoddard Whitters.

Nowadays, the library owned (according to the most recent survey):

five hundred forty-seven thousand six hundred and eighty-eight volumes;

four thousand nine hundred and fifty-one manuscripts;

six thousand seven hundred and seventy-three incunabula;

seven thousand four hundred and twenty-seven early prints;

two thousand eight hundred and nineteen maps;

eighteen thousand prints and drawings;

forty-one thousand and thirty-six periodicals;

and a copy of all N.E.W.T.s sustained at Hogwarts since the foundation of the library.

About thirteen percent of the volumes were classified as highly dangerous, and another forty percent as moderately dangerous. Among them, the remaining copy of *Toadstool Tales* by Beatrix Bloxam, banned because they had caused nausea and vomiting to their readers; and many other books Hagrid would give to a six-year old.

The most prized possessions of the library included the handwritten notes of Adalbert Waffling, the journal of Dorcas Wellbeloved, and a complete collection of every single edition known of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (illustrated and non-illustrated).

But those were rudiments everybody knew.

She knew the names of maybe two hundred types of paper, their properties, how they differed by touch. She could tell, and perform, the best method to patch a cut for every different kind of paper, depending on their age, their conditions, and the magic that had been cast upon them. She knew some fifty how-to-bind techniques.

But the other candidates knew them, as well.

She knew in advance the plot of *Creeping Like a Lizard*, even if she doubted that Magdalene bore any resemblance to her. Severus had made that up to impress her, as if he needed. Anyway.

She knew that the Minster Library in York hosted the Wicked Bible, in which a typo had omitted the 'not' in the seventh commandment, which now read, "Thou shalt commit adultery".

She knew that the deepest line in the spine of Severus' worn-out paperback of *Richard III* stood not in correspondence with the wooing of Lady Anne in Act I, but closer to the end, in Act V, when Richard is haunted by the ghosts of those he had killed. In fact, the book almost flipped open itself at the page printed with Richard's monologue.

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,

And every tale condemns me for a villain:

Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;

Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree;

All several sins, all us'd in each degree,

Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!'

She knew that he lied when he said that he had killed Dumbledore for vengeance that he was trying to give a reason when there was none. He had done it because Draco's life was at stake and Harry's had been traded. She suspected that Severus' phobia of heights had nothing to do with jumping out of a window, and everything to do with the Astronomy Tower. She knew that one day, if they would talk again about that in earnest, she'd tell him that what Dumbledore asked of him was one of the most cruel prices of the war they had won, and that she cringed every time she thought about it. She would tell him that even if he didn't sport a scar on his neck, and few on his body (the worse were the souvenirs left by Fluffy on his right leg), she knew there were scars that cut deeper than flesh, and marks that stained further than skin. She had scars as well, both inside and on the surface: the scar across her chest caused by Dolohov's curse, for which Severus had provided potions; a pale line above her left knee, made at thirteen while playing at the Burrow with Ron; the scratch under her jaw cut by Bellatrix' knife.

She knew, or supposed, that despite his statements Severus believed losing magic was an appropriate punishment, a punishment he bore with his head held high because he thought he deserved it. She imagined that the return to Muggleness acted as a sort of reconciliation with his father and other people, in payment for a debt he had incurred thirty years before and had dearly paid for, ever since.

And those were not things anybody knew.

She was maybe the only one to know that his first obsessive thoughts he had told her had regarded children, right after the first war. He had wondered what was the sense of having children around, then, when there was no future sold, crushed, killed and that finding himself at Hogwarts, surrounded by youngsters, had been a nightmare. Any solace in avoidance cut off, he had been assailed by the pox without being able to scratch. The *sense* of children failed him shouldn't all of them, he, Dumbledore, the rest of the Order, the world's wizarding population, be dead by then? Was it actually *right* for people to have children? *Should* people have children, when the universe was evidently going to end soon? And after the end of the world what would happen? Where was the *sense*? The meaning of surviving? The meaning, in general?

She knew that he wrote because in tales there is a sense that goes missing in real life, that she restored books in order to quell the necessity of fixing something, at least. That making sense out of the past was almost imperative for them, and that turning to a distant past made the present look more connected with the ever-flowing history. The purpose of generations, she had offered, was to remember the past, and memory was a prerogative of his kin. The task of humankind could be to witness the time passing on the earth and to preserve it. Therefore, he wrote, and she bound pages together.

She hoped that one day, when he finished his series, Severus would write about his role in the war, about his own story and memories. She'd bet that such a book would leave a mark on the wizarding world forever. She hoped that, when age would smooth any lasting resentment he might have, he would record again his own improvements to potions, and whatever other kind of magic, he had invented. His own copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* had been burned in the Room of Requirements that night.

She knew that it should be more complicated and was actually easier. He didn't have to live up to a set of criteria. He didn't inspire her poetry, just the exciting tingle of being a sparring partner in their wordplays. She didn't expect him to behave a certain way. Regardless of occasional misunderstandings, she appreciated anything that would randomly happen featuring the both of them. She longed for his company. She was at home with him.

I remember hating you, and then learning that you had been helping us all along, and blaming myself for my misjudging. I remember hating you for staying in my mind, dying, and the shame of being there without helping. I remember how I tried to ban yours, and the other images, from my thoughts; how I succeeded, somehow, and how the image sneaked back after that evening in the library. I know how everything was settled, once I let the images go away and let you in.

So much, she knew, and it wasn't *that* much. Hermione could see causes and effects, actions and consequences, but she really didn't know *why* everything had happened that way.

As for the past, she didn't know why Voldemort had hurled down on them all and distorted all their lives forever, why so many people had to die, why men couldn't do without war.

As for the present, she was puzzled by what had happened that morning.

He had clung to one of her idiocies as if it was a rule.

She had overslept on a day in which she had an examination.

She had forgotten to set the alarm.

It seemed that she wanted to boycott the selection as much as he did.

Not that he had tried to boycott her selection, of course. He had renounced to the US Open final (which had been delayed to Monday due to rain) to accompanying her to London and had agreed to stay at the Leaky Cauldron, to boot. And no, he wouldn't fake it all just to drag her back to the Emily Brontë and lock her in there, please. Some of the other candidates, the ones who had had time in the morning, were flipping through a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Now and then, they would shoot glances at her. Was it only because she was Hermione Granger, and she had made quite the headline a few years before? Or because there was already some article about she and Severus strolling in Diagon Alley? She refused to investigate. The *Daily Prophet* could go to the dogs and she wouldn't care less.

You remembered such a stupid thing I said and thought it was worth obeying. What can I do with you? Oh, Severus.

I didn't want to arouse from you, because you were sleeping at my side.

You let me into your home. Hannah thought we needed a larger house, but I suppose we have already made plenty of room for each other.

She didn't know which song he was referring to. *I handed him Ella Sings the Gershwin Songbook and Sarah Vaughan At Mister Kelly's (bet he prefers Billie Holiday) but I don't remember that line. Must ask him later. He listens to music I've never heard of.*

As for the future, she didn't know how long the blissful bubble would last. Little, she feared, when she allowed herself to brood about it. They weren't supposed to stay together very long, the witch and the Muggle, the former Death Eater and the Mudblood, the binder and the writer who scribbled on books, the guilty and the redeemed, the obsessive with the obsessive. They would eventually irritate one another, sooner or later, and split up after a fight. They wouldn't be good for each other in the long run: they would provide unsolicited assurances for their intrusive thoughts, she would take shelter in his words and between his arms, and that wasn't the right method of dealing with obsessions. One day he would notice that she was not the ideal partner he had waited so long for, that she was tetchy, harsh, brusque, and indeed insufferable to live with, jokes aside. Besides, her hair was horrid, she lacked sex appeal and wasn't a bedroom queen. One day he would go back to Portugal to Teresa (who had to be of age, now, she had calculated), who was beautiful and sweet and loved his stories. And she would be too distressed even to send canaries after him. (Canaries to the Canaries. Ah! She had to tell him that one! But the Canaries were Spanish. Tut.)

She didn't know how the selection would go. The candidates streamed in and out the wooden doors of the library, alternatively relieved or alarmed, exhausted or excited. Letter D. Letter E. Letter F.

There were so many things she didn't know.

But, did it really matter?

She couldn't know *everything*. So many things were simply without an explanation, or without a definite meaning. Sometimes meanings overlapped and entwined, sometimes they went missing. Sometimes things happened without a motive, without a plan, without a purpose. They weren't always *that* bad, were they, the things that simply happened.

Look at the always meaningless reason of why she and Severus stood together.

In the end, possibly the only thing she was certain about was that the only Unforgivable action was to make other people suffer, and all she had to do was to avoid that. All the rest was more or less the same: doing one job or the other, teaching Potions or writing, becoming Junior Undersecretary to the Minister, or withdrawing into an archive, working for Muggles or for wizarding folk. As long as one's intentions were pure, every occupation was equally worthwhile. What had been his jibe, when he had her in tears a century before?

I see no difference.

Possibly, he didn't mean it to be a snide remark; maybe he was suggesting taking the bad with the good. To accept it and go on.

If the secret was acceptance, then she could stand whatever opinion Mrs. Vand and her commission would bestow on her and accept any result the selection would bring her. She could work either at the Emily Brontë or at the Ministry, as far as someone charged her to mend some text. Now, that she reflected about it, she bet she could even nail both jobs, if she committed herself to it. She could *accept* that both libraries begged for her craftsmanship on their knees. Ah ah.

Yes, better take it lightly. There is indeed no reason to fret, after all.

After all the rush in the morning, Hermione was almost preternaturally calm when her name was called, at five past one.

Del Potro won the 2009 US Open defeating Federer 3-6, 7-6 (5), 4-6, 7-6 (4), 6-2.

He told her where the line came from.

In winters, he wore grey nightshirts, as he did at Hogwarts. He looked a bit ridiculous, didn't he, but after all every woman has to cope with the ridiculousness of her man. She gave him tickets to go to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for his birthday, among other presents, and he stood up late to watch the Australian Open, complaining about the players. The windows had been provided with double-glazing, but that was only to take care of old Crookshanks' rheumatisms.

FINE

And first an hour of mournful musing

And then a gush of bitter tears

And then a dreary calm diffusing

Its deadly mist o'er joys and cares

And then a throb and then a lightening

And then a breathing from above

And then a star in heaven brightening

The star the glorious star of love

~ Emily Brontë, August 1837

A/N

Huge thanks to my alpha & beta team: Alfavia, growley464, Valady, stgulik, and RobisonRocket. I think I've never vexed anyone as much as Pink Raccoon while writing this, in order to get her impression: I'm humbly grateful for the ear she lent me. Thanks to my former therapist, SC, whose advice became a big part of this fic. Thanks to all readers & reviewers for their precious feedback.

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues: Richard III V, iii, 194-200.

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Please hang on for Snape's POV, *I've Always Thought You Were Stupid* which, hopefully, will be published soon as a separate one-shot.