

The Tenant of Lyonesse Hall

by lady_rhian

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 9

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Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR. She graciously lets us play with her toys, and I promise to put them back when I'm finished.

Author's Note: This is written for Ariadne, who asked for a rakish Snape and wistful Hermione by a seacoast village with a manor and a few other details you'll learn about along the way. Many thanks to the wonderful team behind this chapter: sshg316 for the countless hours spent helping me work up this story, tonksinger for her encouragement and keen eye, richardgloucester for cleaning up my language, and Machshefa for offering a deft psychological touch that sharpens prose of every kind. Any mistakes here are mine.

The title is shamelessly nicked from Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which I am currently reading but which bears no resemblance to the story that will unfold here.

It all started with an obituary... er, of sorts. The sort of notice in a newspaper that makes one sit up and ask, what the fuck have I been doing with my life?

That sort.

**

Snape Declared Dead

Severus Snape, former professor and headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was declared dead this morning, May 9, 2005 at 7 a.m. in accordance with Wizarding Decree #27 that a missing witch or wizard may be declared legally dead on the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh year after their disappearance. In the absence of "next of kin," the Ministry of Magic will repossess Snape's properties, including a house in Manchester and Lyonesse Hall in Cornwall.

An anonymous Ministry official's speculation that the properties will be searched for evidence of dark magic prompted Harry Potter to publicly express outrage in a hallway at St. Mungo's (Mrs. Ginny Potter is pregnant with their second child turn to page 6 for Rita Skeeter's article on hermaphroditic tendencies in the Potter line). Mr. Potter

loudly reminded those present that Snape was cleared of all charges less than a year after the war's end. Snape was personally defended by Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, who suspended his authority for the duration of the trial in order to devote himself to the case. Numerous witches and wizards stepped forward to assist in the defense of Severus Snape, among them Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick, Arthur Weasley, Narcissa Malfoy, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, and, of course, Harry Potter. Snape's failure to reappear after his trial solidified public opinion that, in spite of his missing body, he had indeed been murdered by V... on May 2, 1998 mere hours before the conclusion of the Final Battle.

**

Hermione Granger laid the *Prophet* down on the table. Seven years. Had it been that long?

The sunshine that splayed across the table stood in stark contrast to where her mind dwelt. She and Harry had been the last to see him. To see him alive. She had been wracked with guilt, had even...

The man was dead, and his property was for sale. The matter was settled.

Shaking her head, she adjusted her sunglasses and checked her watch. Blaise was seven minutes late. She sighed. Just as they had made a tradition of having a Wednesday Happy Hour at Fortescue's, Blaise had made a tradition of being late.

She took a spoonful of her ice cream...vanilla with a splash of Irish cream...and closed her eyes, relishing the sweet flavor and the warmth of the sun on her face, when she heard him approach.

"Started without me, eh, girl?"

She opened her eyes and saw Blaise leaning against a chair, arms folded over his chest. "I always start without you." She pushed his ice cream across the table as he sat down, and he slid four Sickles over in return. "Now shut up and let me enjoy this."

Blaise grinned and took a mouthful of his double-scoop chocolate sundae. "What would I do without you?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Hermione said, drumming her fingernails on the table, and Blaise snorted.

"Yes, Mum," he said as he swallowed. "So," he continued, not giving her time to respond, "did you see the article in the *Prophet*?"

"About Snape?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. What did you think?"

She paused. "There's not much to say."

"I just..." Blaise started. "I don't want to pry, but you..."

"I was the last person to see him alive, I helped Kingsley organize his defense, I cried on the stand during my testimony?" Hermione stared at the table. "Like I said, there's not much to say."

"They're selling the properties, you know," Blaise said, arching an eyebrow.

"What are you suggesting?"

He took a mouthful of ice cream.

"*Blaise.*"

He made a show of swallowing, attracting the attention of several female passersby.

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "That's disgusting."

"Imagine how bad it would be if we'd slept together."

"Thank Merlin I turned you down, then," Hermione said, grinning for the first time.

He winked. "The offer stands."

"I think there comes a point in a friendship where it's too late to sleep together," Hermione said.

He waved a hand. "I would know if such a rule existed. It doesn't."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Are you suggesting that I buy one of Snape's properties?"

"I thought I'd distracted you," he said.

She smiled. "That's hard to do."

His expression sobered. "That is precisely what I'm suggesting. Lyonesse Hall is in shambles and needs... proper restoration."

"What on earth makes you think that I could restore a wizarding manor? Or even be interested in doing so?"

"Why, your connection to the previous owner, of course."

Hermione looked away. "Don't bring up memories I'd rather forget."

"I think a project would do you good," Blaise said, running a hand through his hair.

"When would I have time to renovate this manor?" Hermione asked. "In case you haven't noticed, I work overtime all the time."

"I've noticed," Blaise said quietly. "You work twice as hard as everyone else for little pay and virtually no appreciation." He paused. "They take you for granted."

Hermione waved a hand. "I just have to prove myself is all."

"You've spent six years being shunted from department to department. You have 'proved' yourself ten times over. Petty jealousy and too much red tape have effectively halted your progress. You know it and I know it. Your talents would be better used elsewhere."

"Like, in renovating the manor of my dead Potions professor?" Hermione took a mouthful of ice cream. "No thanks."

"You said that with your mouth full."

"I know."

"Why do you want to work for the Ministry, Hermione?" Blaise asked, licking his ice cream off the spoon.

"I want to make a difference."

"And are you making one? Are you happy?"

"Happiness has nothing to do with it," she said.

"Do you care about your job?"

She sighed. "I want to care."

"See," he said, twirling his spoon in the sundae as he looked her straight in the eye. "That...there should be a spark in your eye, a humorous tone, anything. They're sucking you dry while you wait for them to pat you on the back and move you forward."

"I tried not waiting. It didn't work."

Blaise nodded. "Which is why you need to leave."

"And renovate one of Snape's homes."

"If you see fit."

Hermione slumped in her seat. "Can we talk about something else? Please?"

"You hate your work."

"Blaise..."

"Tell me the last supervisor who actually appreciated your work."

She thought a moment. "Brenda Cole."

"And how long ago did you work for her?" Blaise asked.

"Three years ago," Hermione said, taking an extra-large scoop of ice cream in her spoon.

"You need a project. You need something to do. You need to get active again." Blaise paused. "You need to care."

"Since when are you my therapist, Blaise? You have watched this happen for years, and you haven't said a word," Hermione interjected, eyes blazing. "If you care so much about me, why stay silent?"

"Something about today," Blaise said. "I could remind you of how I've tried to bring the subject up, but you shot me down. But there's something about today. Something about *you* today."

Hermione shook her head. "There is nothing different about today."

"If you say so," Blaise said, and he let the subject drop.

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Hermione was seething. Another meeting with another insipid colleague. Honestly, where did the Ministry find these people? She knew that after Voldemort's *coup d'etat* at the Ministry, people had been reluctant to come back to work, but really...it'd been seven years. Couldn't her supervisors try to find competent people to fill these positions?

She was running on empty these days, and the conversation with Blaise yesterday had done nothing to quell her impatience. *You've spent six years being shunted from department to department.* He was right, and that stung. She'd developed a reputation as a troublemaker, which was apparently code for "effective at her job." Well, someone had to get things done, and the berks she worked for made it obvious that the bureaucratic chain of command and all other things invented to feed their egos superseded any attempt at constructive reform. Yes, Kingsley had run a tight ship immediately after the war. But he'd begun to let the reins out years ago... would that her supervisors would do the same.

She shook her head. She was late to a meeting with her present supervisor, the rotund and thoroughly ridiculous Mr. Brown. Hermione nodded to his secretary as she was waved through the receiving area and into his office.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Mr. Brown said. "Do take a seat."

Hermione sat in one of the spare chairs opposite his desk. She folded her hands, schooled her expression, and tried to ignore the feeling that she had done something to upset him. Again.

Mr. Brown took a few moments to sort the papers around him, leaving her a bit unsettled. When he pursed his lips, she girded herself for the inevitable.

"I have a report on my desk informing me that the Castiglioni case has been referred."

"The Italian Ministry has jurisdiction, sir," Hermione said, carefully controlling her tone while her insides burned. This was not happening. Not again.

"The Italian Ministry may have jurisdiction, but there were two other people who had to sign off on this order..."

"Only one signature is necessary for the referral, and those two others you mention are currently on their honeymoon in a Fidelius'd location."

At this, Mr. Brown's face became splotchy with red. Hermione wondered whether she'd pushed him too far, but it was the truth...Mr. Brown's daughter had been itching to get out from under her father's thumb, and everyone knew that the honeymoon location had been placed under the Fidelius Charm in order to prevent Mr. Brown from checking up on her. Everyone except Mr. Brown, or so it seemed.

"There is a chain of command, Miss Granger," he said in a saccharine tone. "One that your... your *war hero* status does not allow you to ignore."

If she had a galleon for every time a supervisor said that, she would be a very rich woman. Well, richer than she already was.

"Sir," Hermione started, rubbing her forehead, "I am perfectly competent at my job...no, I excel at my job," she finished, remembering Blaise's words. "I am the smartest witch on your staff with the most successful track record, the highest N.E.W.T. scores..."

"And the most troublesome record, which leads me to question every accomplishment on your resume. I know your reputation, Miss Granger," he said, standing.

"Sir, given that only one signature is necessary for the referral, I broke no rules here."

He pointed a finger at her. "You wreak havoc..."

"I solve problems, you mean?"

"You act without permission..."

"I do not need you to sign off on everything I do..."

"Out of my office, Granger! You're on desk duty for the rest of the week, and don't even think about fighting it!"

Hermione closed her eyes.

Enough.

She rose. "I will be tendering my resignation to you by the end of the day, Mr. Brown."

He looked as if he had been struck dumb.

"Now, Miss Granger, see reason here..." he said as he followed her out of his office and into the general bullpen.

"No!" she exclaimed, turning on her heel, pointing her finger at him, ignoring how the entire office had gone quiet. "I am sick of being berated for actually getting things done! I am sick of being called a troublemaker when I *excel* at what I do! I am sick of being told that I am here only because I fought in the war! I am sick of having people assume that I am here because of Harry, and I am sick to death of being held back from advancement when you damn well know I deserve it! And most of all..." she took a deep breath "...I am sick of my supervisors ignoring Shacklebolt's example. We are no longer in an immediate post-war state, and it won't kill anyone to use a little creativity to get the job done. What do you care more about, Mr. Brown...serving the magical community or fueling your own ego?"

The room was silent, save the staplers, which had kept on stapling. Refusing to look at anyone, Hermione marched into her office, packed her things in seconds, and walked out without a second thought.

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A few hours later, Blaise sent her a bouquet of flowers and a Muggle greeting card with a half-naked man on the front.

Fantastic exit, darling. Wish I could have seen it...I've asked Judy to Pensieve it for me. Rumor has it Mr. Brown collapsed after you left. Sweet Merlin, you're delightful.

Love,

Blaise

**

Hermione sat on her sofa drinking a cup of tea. She had opened her liquor cabinet but decided against it; she needed to think properly.

She had quit her job.

She had quit her job.

Merlin, what was wrong with her?

The problem was that nothing *was* wrong and that perhaps something about all this was in fact quite right. It was indicative of her state of mind that she was not worried. Truth be told, she was a bit numb, and she felt a modicum of relief. A modicum.

Bloody hell. She shook her head. Blaise was right. She wasn't reacting like...like herself...at all. She didn't need to worry, *per se*, as she had enough galleons in the bank to live a life of leisure for at least a century, but she should have been riled up and upset at it, at the injustice of it all.

She was tired. So tired.

She looked around the flat, well furnished but sparsely decorated. At the moment, the only décor of note was the bouquet of flowers from Blaise. It'd taken her forever to find a vase. She inched her foot towards the bouquet, and flicked her toe against a flower. Daisies. She had developed a strong distaste for daisies recently...well, in the last hour. They were so bloody *happy*.

Damn Blaise.

The daisies looked positively vulgar set against the neutral walls, all unfriendly, cool tones that she hadn't bothered to fix in the last six years. In fact, she hadn't done anything to the flat itself. The few items she cared about were in her bedroom, within Summoning distance at all times, which probably suggested things she'd rather not think about.

She'd quit her job, but this was not home. This was not where she wanted to spend her days. But then, there wasn't really anywhere in wizarding London where she'd want to spend time. Blaise had a constant stream of visitors, Ron was traveling with the Cannons and when he wasn't, well, there were visitors, and Harry and Ginny were pregnant...again. James was a dear, but goodness, he was a toddler, and that aside, there was no room for privacy in that house. And the problem was, even though those options seemed so unsuitable, they also seemed like the closest to "home" she'd ever get.

The only solution she could think of would be to go away. Only for a little while... just long enough to get herself sorted out...

Hand trembling, she leaned forward and drew a file from her bag. In a moment of weakness, she'd asked a friend to get a copy of the advertisement of Lyonesse Hall.

She looked at the picture and read the description:



Lyonesse Hall was built in 1573 by Severin Prince. Although conforming to the typical E-shaped plan of the Elizabethan era, the external appearance of Lyonesse has a marked Dutch influence, undoubtedly the legacy of Prince's wife, Annalien.

Behind the Dutch-style gabled facade are ornate fireplaces, elaborate plaster ceilings, and a collection of English furniture of the highest quality. It possesses a renowned Portrait Hall, and the library once housed some of the finest collections in wizarding Britain. Of note is the magnificent Great Chamber with its splendid barrel ceiling and the bay to the left of the entrance, which is occupied by a two-storey window that lights the Great Hall (many of the 576 panes are still the original 16th century glass).

While the front lawn is manicured but spare, the Elizabethan-style gardens behind the home are unusual in content and layout, and there is an orchard planted with old varieties of fruit. The gardens and orchard sprawl across the back lawn, jutting up against the rocky crags that border the Atlantic Ocean.

Lyonesse Hall is a modest manor, but its lifeblood has always been the myth of Lyonesse, a country said to exist mere miles off the coast of Land's End, Cornwall. The manor's proximity to Land's End has aided the Prince family's claim to be descended from King Mark of Cornwall, the uncle of Tristan. Given that no proof of ancestry ever surfaced, and that the last living member of the Prince family died without an heir, any connection the Prince family may have had to Lyonesse has been lost.

If interested, contact the Department of Magical Properties & Estates.

She had a note half-written before she realized what she was doing.

Did she really want to do this?

Damn Blaise.

**

The next afternoon, Hermione was packing...even if she wasn't buying a manor, she had to go somewhere...when she received an owl from Kingsley.

The Leaky Cauldron, 7 o'clock. I'll be brief.

She crinkled her brow. Was this about the hall or her... scene... with Mr. Brown? She hadn't kept up with Kingsley much over the last few years, and given his investment in Snape's affairs, it was more likely to be about the hall, but... She checked her watch. A few hours more. She'd keep packing.

**

Hermione walked into the Leaky Cauldron at seven on the nose and saw Kingsley at the bar, chatting with Tom.

"Minister," she said, smiling at the reproachful look he gave her. "It's been too long."

"Hermione," Kingsley said, patting the barstool next to him. "I heard you put in a bid for Lyonesse Hall."

"Right down to business, then," she said, feeling somewhat relieved.

He nodded and signaled Tom for drinks. "Is this something you've been thinking about, or..."

"More of a whim, really," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "I cannot recall the last time I heard you do something on a whim. Well, until this week."

A smile touched her lips. "It's time."

Kingsley's look was kind but serious. "Do you know what you'll do with the house? It needs a lot of work."

"I have nothing but time," she said. "And I have the money, so you needn't worry."

"Will anyone be assisting you with the renovation?"

"Y'know, I'm inclined to do this by myself...take off for a while, just... be by myself, for a while." She stared at the dark sheen of the bar and ran her hand along the surface.

"You know there's a house-elf that comes with the property."

She winced. "Must you say it like that?"

"So long as you are a tenant, it is not within your legal purview to free him."

"What's his name?" Hermione asked, and Kingsley smirked at her, as if sensing her intent.

"Pip," he replied. "I sent someone from the department to speak with him and inspect the property this afternoon. He's rather...off...this elf. Considers himself an orphan, and I suppose that in a way, he is. A house-elf in a home without Master...or Mistress."

Hermione nodded. "I understand."

Kingsley looked her straight in the eye. "You may have difficulty negotiating a contract with Mr. Goetz tomorrow. It's why I wanted to see you. To give you fair warning."

Hermione crinkled her brow. "What sort of difficulty?"

"I can't quite put my finger on it," Kingsley said in a low tone. "At first I thought he coveted the property for himself but couldn't match your bid, but... his interest in the house is almost unnatural. Wizarding manors," he said, shaking his head, "they can incite dangerous fervor in people."

"Not you?" Hermione asked, grinning.

"Wizarding manors all claim some connection to grandeur, to myth or legend...I've no idea why people put stock in the claims. Honestly, your interest surprised me."

"Why?"

"You didn't seem the type," Kingsley said. "Hermione, what do you intend to *do* with the manor?"

"Renovate it. Beyond that, I don't know," she said softly.

"You haven't given it much thought, or..." he trailed off.

"I honestly don't know," she said.

Kingsley's shoulders slumped in what looked like relief. "Not to be indiscreet, but someone suggested that given your interest in... justice... that you might use the manor as a museum or a memorial for Snape."

"He'd hate that," Hermione said flatly.

Kingsley's expression softened. "Yes, he would."

"To Snape," Hermione said, lifting her shot of Firewhisky.

"Severus," Kingsley said quietly, and they threw back their drinks.

**

Hermione was late to her meeting with the Head of Magical Properties and Estates, in no small part due to being told the wrong meeting time twice. Seeing as how Mr. Goetz's secretary was Mr. Brown's mistress, she should have seen it coming.

She entered Mr. Goetz's positively gaudy office with some trepidation. Her meeting with Kingsley had put her off her appetite.

"Do sit, Miss Granger," he said, gesturing toward one of the plush Victorian chairs in front of his desk.

She sat, crossed her legs, and said nothing.

"Your interest in Lyonesse Hall is... surprising," Mr. Goetz said, adjusting the gold spectacles on his nose.

"What interest does the Ministry have in my interest?" Hermione asked, trying to keep her tone measured.

"None..." he started.

Liar.

"Mr. Goetz," she interrupted. "I have the money, or do you believe that the goblins of Gringotts have deliberately misled you as to my ability to pay for the property?" She arched an eyebrow.

"No..."

"Then I see no reason for this meeting," she said, standing. "I have the money. Do send the contract when it is ready."

The man looked desperate, searching, struggling, and when his eyes lit up, Hermione inwardly cringed, knowing he'd invented some reason or other to keep her there.

"We've reason to believe that this house may react badly."

"React badly?" she asked, surprised in spite of herself.

"Do you know anything of the Prince family?" Mr. Goetz started, rounding his desk with a supercilious grin. "They were one of the grandest, proudest, most vehemently anti-Muggle families in England." He paused. "We will *let* it to you for three months, after which we will conduct an assessment of the house in order to determine whether it is willing to accept your presence."

Hermione blanched. "Are you suggesting that the house is sentient?"

"You are not overly familiar with wizarding manors, are you, Miss Granger?" Mr. Goetz asked in a syrupy tone, and it took everything in Hermione's willpower to stay silent. "Magical manors are not sentient, but they are certainly sensitive to their owners, yes. What's more, they are capable of discerning the owner's magical signature, including blood origin. Which is why Lyonesse Hall will remain in Ministry hands...for now," he finished, as if that was some sort of consolation.

She stayed silent for a moment, thinking as to how she could best combat such a ridiculous invention. "Here are my terms," she started slowly. "The contract will be approved by Minister Shacklebolt. I am sure you are familiar with his... personal interest in the last member of the Prince family," she added, berating herself for her lack of subtlety, but delighting in how Mr. Goetz slowly sat in his chair. "At the end of this three month term, I will determine whether the house is suitable for my needs. I will agree to this three-month probationary period, obviously offered out of such deep concern for my well-being," she added, noting his panicked expression. "For which I thank you, Mr. Goetz. I will inform Minister Shacklebolt of the terms of the lease and of how ownership will transfer to me immediately upon the conclusion of the three-month trial...we wouldn't want the Ministry to control who can own what real estate, would we? Rather reminiscent of the war..." She trailed off, drumming her fingers against the desk, and then rose from her chair, watching as Mr. Goetz shrank into his. "I'll be in touch." She stuck out her hand and met his eyes, daring him to not take it.

Mr. Goetz's lips were drawn in a thin line. "As long as you are a tenant, any items of value will revert to the Ministry," he stated. "That is the last of my terms."

The truth outs.

She grinned. "Absolutely." And she grasped his hand and shook it without a second thought.

**

It wasn't until she stood at the gates of Lyonesse Hall and felt the wards drop that she began to have second thoughts. Suitcase in one hand, wand in the other, she walked up the front lawn slowly, suddenly intimidated and a bit worried that perhaps she had made a terrible mistake.

Buying an old wizarding manor to fix up when she had no interest in renovation, architecture, or the relics of pure-blood families...save their legacy of prejudice...seemed a rather preposterous idea, all things told. But by God, it was different, and oh, did she need different. It was also removed from the greater populace of wizarding Britain,

offering seclusion from all but the most persistent visitors.

She was a bit startled as she passed the lion statues that framed the path as it wound down the lawn, surprised to find...well, lions, of all things...at the home of a family so well known for their fealty to Slytherin.

She hadn't visited the property in advance...she'd looked at pictures, but was essentially letting it sight unseen. She couldn't quite explain that, but nothing about this decision made sense.

An examination of her motives had proved futile. Impulse, desire, boredom, longing. They all ran together, hinting at something else. She didn't know what she was longing for, but she didn't think it was something grand like love or purpose. It was the tangible *it* that gave every day a structure, a hum, some thread that led her through each hour, a thread that promised some sort of peaceful benediction at day's end. Hermione wasn't hoping to find a pot of gold at the other end; right now, the rainbow...thread...path...whatever...would suffice.

And the manor, with its many projects and opportunities for discovery, would suffice quite nicely. At the very least, it offered sanctuary from the hassles at the Ministry, reprieve from questions.

She'd visited Harry the other day to let him know she was moving away for some time. His one question had been "Why?"

She found that she didn't have an answer. Because she was sick of trying to right wrongs, of having doors slammed in her face. Because wizarding London didn't feel like home anymore. Because London itself didn't feel like home. Because, truth be told, she was feeling rather homeless. As if somewhere along the way, she had lost her anchor. Or perhaps her anchor had lost her, and she was just now waking up to the realization that what had sufficed in the past left her painfully bereft in the present.

But Hermione hadn't known how to say all that to Harry, so she had simply said, "Because." And perhaps it was that lack of eloquence...for once...that had prompted Harry to say, "All right. Now get out of here and *do* something."

Sometimes best friends knew exactly what to say.

She neared the end of the path, stopping to admire the beautiful bay window and the glassy panels that shone in the sunlight. Smiling, she opened the surprisingly small door and stepped inside.

Hermione scarcely had time to register details of what she was seeing...the portraits framing both sides of the entrance hall, surprise at how small the hall was, and the presence of some indescribable scent that hinted of vanilla and musk...before the telltale *crack* of Apparition drew her attention to the shadows at the end of the hall.

A small figure walked toward her, and she gulped, knowing full well who it was. In short order, the house-elf of Lyonesse Hall stood before her, clothed in a pillowcase, hands on his hips, nearly-invisible lips drawn in a thin line.

"You is being the Miss who is letting Lyonesse Hall?" The voice was high, but the tone was almost gruff.

"Yes, I am Hermione. A pleasure to meet you, Pip," Hermione said, extending her hand. She wasn't surprised when he didn't take it, but that didn't stop sadness from settling in the pit of her stomach.

"Why is Miss letting Lyonesse Hall?" Pip asked, arms folded across his chest.

Her eyes widened. "I wanted..." How best to describe it? "...I wanted a change, Pip. I... I left my job at the Ministry of Magic, in London. I wanted to... get away... for a while. And the former master of this house..."

At this, Pip let out a strangled noise.

"Pip? Are you all right?"

Pip looked up at her with a look that could only be called righteous indignation. "*Mister* Severus is leaving us with no reason. *Mister* Severus is not wanting us. *Mister* Severus is leaving Pip an orphan!"

"Pip," Hermione started, tears springing to her eyes in spite of herself, "Professor Snape...he was my professor, see...he is dead."

Pip put his head in his hands and wailed.

"Pip...Pip, please don't cry," Hermione said, kneeling down on the ground so she was face-level with him. She dared not try to touch him. "I'm here, see, and I want to buy the hall."

At that, Pip looked at her strangely. "But the Ministry wizard is saying Miss is only letting the hall."

Hermione nodded. "I wanted to buy it, but the Ministry is... forcing... me to let it for three months. They seem to think that the house will react badly to me, seeing as how my parents are Muggles." Better to be honest sooner rather than later.

Pip laughed, a squeal that rang throughout the hall, standing in sharp contrast to the harsh sound of his tears. "The house is only treating Muggle-borns badly if the master or mistress is *wanting* the house to act badly. If Miss is the only person being in charge of the house..." Pip held up his hands.

"You mean, the house will not react adversely to my presence?" Hermione asked.

Pip shook his head. "No. But..." he started, a gleam coming into his eye. "Why is Miss wanting to let the house?"

Hermione was confused. "I... I want to let the house. It's something different... it's a project... it's..." She stumbled, trying to figure out how to express what had clearly failed to be expressed before.

"Is Miss wanting the ledgers? Because Pip is not knowing where the ledgers is."

"What ledgers?" Hermione asked, dumbfounded.

Suddenly, Pip's eyes looked hopeful. "Is Miss not knowing about the ledgers?"

"Pip, I've no idea what you're talking about. What are..."

Pip jumped up and down and reached for her hand, taking it and abruptly jerking her forward so that she almost fell to the floor. "Please, let me stand up," she said, chuckling as she got to her feet.

"Pip is taking Miss Hermione on a tour of the house. We is going now," he said. "Pip is being so lonely, Pip is excited to tell Miss about the house!"

Hermione could scarcely contain her grin.

**

By the time Hermione sat down to dinner, which Pip had insisted on preparing, seeing as how it was her first night, she had seen the whole house, and was positively in awe. It was a modest manor, all things considered, but even in shambles, it was stunning. Clearly, Severin and Annalien Prince...and their descendents...had believed that the devil was in the details. The plaster ceilings with scenes straight out of a History of Magic textbook, the barrel ceiling which was ornate without being ostentatious (which would also need to be restored), the stunning bay of windows in the Great Hall, the library...oh, the library... they hadn't spent nearly enough time perusing it, but suffice it to say, the room was charmed to extend an extra storey, and there had been four fireplaces in that room alone...

Pip had prepared the kitchen and master bedroom for her arrival, but had awaited her instruction for the other rooms. They hadn't yet toured the grounds, as night had fallen by the time the tour was finished, but Pip assured her that she could explore the grounds easily. There were only gardens, he said, and an orchard, and empty stables. It was very difficult to be alone without a master or mistress to serve, he said. He'd relied upon the portraits to keep him company. Hermione had walked down the Portrait Hall, which was home to a dozen of the largest portraits she had ever seen, but they had been asleep, or feigning sleep. No matter. She would have time to become acquainted with them later.

Pip had chattered on about the history of the home, sprinkling in tidbits about previous owners, but had remained tightlipped on the subject of *Mister* Severus, his mother, and his grandfather, from whom he had inherited the house. She'd been able to suss out that much.

It surprised her, how being in the hall made her think of him, more than she ever had in the last few years. She had thought of him almost to the point of obsession in the first few years after the war, particularly when she had prepared his defense with Kingsley. But for a long time, her thoughts on the subject of Severus Snape had lain dormant.

Perhaps it was because it was so difficult to imagine him here that she... well, imagined him here. Pictured him walking through a doorway, imagined his robes billowing around a corner. His voice, even in its lowest tones, would have reverberated through the two-storey high Great Hall, and the thought of it was enough to send a shudder down her spine.

She shook him from her thoughts during dinner, and she proceeded to do so for the rest of the evening, even as she climbed into bed, though she paused for a moment to reflect that the master bedroom was in dire need of new sheets.

She was here for herself, not out of a sense of guilt or obligation. She supposed that her thoughts about Snape would subside over the next few days, that she was thinking of him to avoid the overwhelming fear and anxiety and anticipation and excitement that had dueled for prominence in her throughout the course of the day.

She tucked the sheets up about her neck and turned onto her side, quickly falling into the deepest sleep she'd had in years.

**

Her first morning in her new home. She stretched her arms above her head, and as she did so, she turned to see a cup of coffee appear on her bedside table. *Pip*, she thought, shaking her head. She'd told him she preferred to brew her own pot in the morning. But she sat up and took the cup in her hands, accepting it for the gesture it was. The heat permeated the ceramic and warmed her hands, and she took a small sip, silently Summoning her slippers and robe. The floor was cold and she'd awoken in the middle of the night several times to cover herself; the house was drafty and the weather charms obviously needed to be reinforced. That was one of the first things she would do this morning.

She shrugged her arms into the silky white robe and slipped her feet into the warm slippers. Coffee in hand, she set out of the room, determined to investigate how the grounds looked at sunrise. She practically skipped down the stairs before turning down the hall to find the entrance to the back lawn.

The house cast its dark shadow over this west end of the house. The grounds were still wet with dew, the glimmer on the grass the only sign of life. The back gardens had been beautiful once, elaborate...even pompous...in their grandeur. But what once had been lush was now overrun and dead, dry and brittle leaves snapping under Hermione's charmed slippers as she examined the state of things. The sides of the garden were terraced; it would look lovely once she was finished. But she was determined to ignore the garden as she walked toward the rocky crags. It was beautiful, how the trees bent over the crags, as if peering to see the Atlantic slapping up against the rocks below. Hermione climbed the steps to the wall that bordered the crags, and she stood, overlooking the Atlantic, looking up to the sky above and admiring how the ribbons of sunrise spiraled, almost touching the edge of the sea.

Suddenly desirous of seeing sunrise in its full splendor from the front lawn, Hermione quickly climbed down the wall and, not bothering with the windy paths, tramped across the remnants of the Elizabethan-style square flowerbeds, careful not to spill her coffee as she walked into the manor, back down the hall, and to the front entrance, shoving the doors open to see the sunrise greeting her. The front lawn was practically naked compared to the back; there was nary a flower to distract from the heady colors, save the lion statues on either side of the front gate nearly half a kilometer down the lawn.

She walked down the slim path that extended from entrance to gate, the oranges and reds and pinks and purples bursting forth across the horizon, their colors vibrant even in the heavy morning mist. She sipped her coffee for a glorious second before choking on her second sip, sputtering the coffee all the way down the front of her white robe. She felt it drip down into her cleavage, but her eyes were fixed on the sight before her. Shrouded in the mist, there stood a ghost riding an ethereally white horse.

The ghost looked like Snape.

Author's Note: Lyonesse Hall is, in fact, Trerice, a manor in Cornwall. The underlined portions of the description of the manor are quotes from the following websites: <http://www.cornwall-calling.co.uk/national-trust/tretrice.htm> & <http://www.theheritagetrail.co.uk/manor%20houses/tretrice.htm>. Architecture buffs will forgive me if I take liberties with the manor and grounds to suit my own purposes. ~grin~

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 9

In which we meet Hermione's ghost.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. She graciously lets us play with her toys, and I promise to put them back when I'm finished.

Author's Note: There is a gracious, generous team behind this chapter: Subversa, cheerleader and alpha reader; tonksinger, the resident equine expert who horse-picked the chapter; Septentrion, who took the time to brainstorm breed names with me; Shug (sshg316), beta reader and all-around encourager; Machshefa, psych!beta extraordinaire; and richardgloucester, whose critical eye strengthened this chapter in more ways than I can count.

He hadn't meant to be seen.

He'd been far enough away that there was a glimmer of hope she hadn't seen him, but her posture...standing there frozen, coffee cup slack against her thigh with no mind for the liquid spilling down her front...told him all he needed to know.

It had started out a perfectly normal morning. He had risen before dawn and subjected his body to the usual exercises: fifty push-ups, fifty pull-ups, and a forearm plank for as long as he could stand it. He had attended to hygiene with spare ablutions; short hair was easy to maintain. It was Saturday, so there was no need to check in on the shop this early.

He'd been out for his customary morning ride on Perdita, one in which he was sure to pass by the gates of Lyonesse, when he'd seen her. Hermione Granger...that hair could belong to no one else...standing in the middle of the lawn in an indecent white robe, staring at him as if she'd seen a ghost. He'd pressed his heels to Perdita, signaling an urge to gallop that he hadn't felt in years. A need to escape.

There had been no scream, no name, not even a whisper...just shock...but one thing was certain: she'd recognized him.

Shit.

**

Perdita slowed to a walk as they followed the path that wound around the crags just outside Land's End. He looked down at his hands, holding the reins, letting his breathing slow. He struggled to regain his composure while berating himself that he was so out of practice; his heart was racing. Perdita turned her head, looking at him, and he bent forward to rest against her neck, stroking her. "Perdy, what am I going to do?" he murmured. She nickered and he laughed. "You wish. It'd mean more visitors, wouldn't it?" Her ears pricked forward, and he sat back up, lazily running his fingers through her silver-white mane. "I know," he said quietly, not knowing quite what it was he knew.

**

He walked by Perdita's side as they reached the edge of the woods and her pasture came into view. He took off her saddle and bridle, opened the gate, and walked in, refreshing her water as she trotted off to graze. That was the trick of keeping up appearances in the village; it wouldn't do to have a magical self-caring barn in plain sight. Besides, he preferred to care for her himself.

"I'll be back later," he said, closing the gate as Perdita nickered at him. Taking a deep breath, he realized how tired he was. He tore his shirt off as he walked up to the house; he'd exercised her more vigorously than he had in years, and in so doing had exhausted himself.



He strode through the front door, sprinting up the stairs to his bedroom, where he chucked the shirt into a hamper and tore off his jeans. He walked into the master bathroom...his one extravagance...and stepped into the stone and glass shower, turning on all showerheads with one flick of his hand.

He'd been so careful, he thought, as the water sluiced down his body. He'd known the Ministry would come sniffing around, and they had, but he hadn't counted on their finding a tenant so soon.

She was only letting the property; that, he could tell from his inspection of the wards, which were devoid of her magical signature, thus suggesting that the Ministry had shut her out of the property's security. Stupid, stupid girl.

He'd no idea why she was only letting the property when the Ministry intended to sell it. Lyonesse required repair, and no mere tenant was about to take on restoration of that kind. Then again, it would be like the Ministry to take advantage of the girl's work ethic and let her restore the property whilst remaining a tenant, thus having no legal ownership over her work and no ability to reap the rewards that would be sure to come after her lease expired.

He shook his head. The terms of Granger's lease mattered little to him. All that mattered was that she'd seen him, and Merlin only knew how much time he had before she went spouting off to Potter or Weasley.

Not that they'd ever be able to find the Dower House, but ...

But.

He took some shampoo in his hand and massaged his scalp slowly, the weight of what he had to do settling over him like a lead weight.

He'd have to Oblivate her.

**

An hour later, he stood in front of the fireplace in the sitting room, arms folded across his chest, eyes closed, almost in meditation. He had closed all portals and connections between his home and Lyonesse years ago. The day after Dumbledore returned him to Voldemort, in fact. The day after Cedric Diggory died.

It had seemed so easy then. Close the portals. Sever the magical link between Lyonesse and its Dower House. Sell the Dower House to himself under an assumed name, all through Muggle authorities, thus bypassing the Ministry altogether. That was part of the beauty: in spite of his family's beliefs, their proximity to Muggle villages and seclusion from other wizarding families meant that Lyonesse had dual paperwork. All he'd had to do was file a report with the Ministry saying that the Dower House and the land around it had been sold to a Muggle, that it had passed inspection and was thus ready for the magic-to-Muggle transition, and the paperwork had been buried. Thank you, Dumbledore.

Severus had no fear of the Ministry discovering the Dower House. It had gone under a unique variant of the Fidelius Charm; he was certain that no Ministry wizards would be showing up on his doorstep.

He sighed. Lyonesse Hall held no value for him, sentimental or otherwise. His mother had hated the place, and he knew the only reason his grandfather had welcomed him was because, half-blood or no, he was the last of the line, and blood was blood.

But. He hadn't been completely honest with Dumbledore when he had gone through the house on the Ministry's behalf, inspecting the fireplaces and ensuring that no connections between Lyonesse and the Dower House remained. The thing was, the houses were still linked...would always be linked...through blood. His blood. Somehow,

and Severus didn't know how, Prince masters of old had bound their blood to the house so that it would always recognize members of the Prince family. A precaution against Polyjuice and disguise, it was something only the oldest and most paranoid families had done. Malfoy Manor was the only other manor Severus knew of that also carried such protections.

It was why, even though Severus had severed connections with Lyonesse, the manor would still bloody *well* know him. Although he had no idea what sort of signals the manor would offer; each house was unique, and he'd spent scarcely any time in it as Master. He wasn't worried about the Ministry noticing them, but Granger ...

Well, she was a Muggle-born whose only previous experience in a wizarding manor consisted of torture and, oh yes, torture. He doubted that she'd noticed how the fires crackled when Lucius or Draco walked into a room.

He rubbed his fingers almost reflexively against the smooth vial in his hand. He'd brewed this particular draught long ago, hoping he'd never need it. The draught would temporarily mask recognition of his blood and hopefully prevent the manor from recognizing his presence, and in so doing, also prevent Pip from realizing that the house had recognized a master. Pip was not going to be happy if he realized Severus was in the house.

The grandfather clock in the hall began to chime, and Severus berated himself for having waited so long.

His wand arced in the air, carefully tracing a pattern, and he murmured an incantation that didn't sound entirely human, and the stones of the fireplace before him moved, molding themselves into a doorway.

He Disillusioned himself, downed the draught, and opened the door.

**

On the other side of the door was the library of Lyonesse. He looked about the room and, satisfied that it was empty, turned his thoughts to the situation at hand. Granger was a smart witch, and he supposed he should be grateful for how she had contributed to his defense, but she was intrusive, coming into too many areas of his life...and his death, for that matter. At the moment, she threatened the life he had so carefully cultivated, and that would not do.

He cast a myriad of charms before leaving the library to slowly walk down the hall. He heard chatter and stopped, closing his eyes to listen more carefully. The kitchen. Hermione and Pip were in the kitchen. Wondering how long the potion would hold before he was noticed, he crept down the hall and cast an amplification charm so he could hear what they were saying.

"I is telling Miss Hermione, there is not being a ghost at Lyonesse Hall."

"I know what I saw, Pip. A ghost on a ghost horse."

"Pip is not being sure, Miss Hermione."

"It was a ghost, Pip, and it looked like Snape," Hermione continued, but her tone lacked conviction.

Interesting.

He thought for a moment, considering the brief exchange he'd heard before they turned their conversation to how Pip shouldn't prepare coffee for Granger in the morning.

A ghost. She said she'd seen a ghost on a ghost horse. Bloody hell, hadn't the girl learned anything at Hogwarts? She knew what a ghost looked like! What was she playing at?

But. He paused, vaguely listening to the mundane talk now coming from the kitchen and considered the circumstances. Fact: she had seen him at a distance. Fact: it had been years since she had seen ghosts with any regularity, and her experience was entirely limited to those at Hogwarts, who were not exactly a representative group. Fact: she had just woken up and obviously possessed at least a glimmer of doubt about what she'd seen. The mist had been heavy, and he had been riding Perdita, which was perhaps the most pertinent fact of all. Depending on the light, Perdita did indeed look like a ghost. That was the nature of her breed...she was of *le fantôme d'Arabie*, after all...and she inevitably lent some of her nature to her rider.

Now his thoughts coalesced quickly as he weighed the pros and cons. Granger thought she'd seen a ghost, and a ghost that *only looked* like him. She hadn't asserted that it was him.

It would be so easy. Severus smirked, and listening to be sure that Pip and Hermione hadn't returned to their discussion, he turned on his heel and walked back down the hall.

It was an idea.

**

He stroked the leather strap that bound the book as he sat down in his armchair by the fire, a glass of whisky within reach, questioning the value of the idea for what seemed like the thousandth time.

He had debated with himself all day whether or not this was a good idea, and he was slowly coming to the point where it mattered not one whit whether it was a good idea or a bad idea or even an unwise, reckless idea...at the end of the day, this was a pursuit that would give him pleasure and do her no harm, and that was that. He'd thought, what did it mean if something like this would give him pleasure? He had the shop, and he had Perdita.

And he was lonely.

He took a swig of whisky, but that did nothing to dispel the thought. Relishing the warmth that seeped through him, he closed his eyes, letting the thought that work and books were not enough to sustain him slip away. He'd thought they would be. But.

But. This idea, it ... excited him. There was simply no other word for it. It would provide a welcome bit of occupation, an excuse to check up on her and see what she chose to do with the manor. And surely his proximity would be a benefit, as he'd be able to sense any alterations in the wards. Not that there was trouble looming, but it discomforted him greatly to know that she had been shut out of the manor's security. It had been part of what shocked him about seeing her there: he'd sensed the Ministry's wards and had assumed the manor remained empty. Seeing her there alone and so blatantly unprotected had roused something in him that would not rest.

He'd spent seven years looking after her and old habits were hard to break. Besides, looking after her gave a nice gravity to this otherwise frivolous pursuit.

Satisfied that he had settled the matter, he reached for the book that he had set aside. The good news was that he was intimately familiar with his source material. He'd found the book during one of his last visits to his grandfather, the summer after Potter's first year when he and Dumbledore had realized that plans must be put into action. It had soothed him during that time, this book, this reminder that perhaps he was not alone in his experience, that there were those who understood.

He turned to the first page, settled into the chair, and opened his mind, ready to absorb the story all over again.

**

Around one in the morning, satisfied in his review of the source material and relatively certain that Granger would be asleep, he stepped through the passage into the Lyonesse library. This time, he hadn't bothered with the draught.

In a moment, Pip was standing in front of him, nearly shaking with fury.

"What is *you* doing here?" Pip asked, his fists balled at his sides.

"Hello, Pip," Severus said, endeavoring to maintain a cordial tone. "I've come to request your assistance."

Pip folded his arms across his chest. "You is not being my master!"

"The manor seems to think so," Severus said, noting how the other fireplaces in the library were practically leaping out of their encasements.

"You is giving us up! And I is knowing you is still being alive and you is not being here and..."

He held up a hand. "You are bound to the house, and the house is bound to me."

Pip was enraged. "You is being a BAD master! And do not think the house is not knowing it!"

"Pip," Severus said, looking the house-elf square in the eye. "Do not raise your voice to me."

Pip glared back at him.

"As I said, I require your assistance. Do I have your word that you will help me?" Severus asked. "You have been loyal to this family and you served me well all these years, just as I asked," he continued, his voice low. "I would be indebted to you if you would assist me in this new venture."

Pip grimaced. "How is Pip being needed?"

**

He cast a number of charms to silence the Portrait Hall before rousing them from their slumber to explain his plan. While most of them merely nodded, he was met with particularly vitriolic resistance from his great-great-something Aunt Charlotte, which, in hindsight, should not have surprised him.

"You are not *him*," she hissed, flinging her blonde curls over her shoulder and turning so that her back was to Severus.

"I am the last living Prince," Severus said, and Charlotte ran and crouched in another portrait. He strode across the hall to the landscape in which she was hiding. "You will not say a word to Miss Granger about my identity," he said.

Charlotte nodded but looked doubtful, and Severus touched the landscape, uttering several unintelligible syllables. When he didn't perceive a difference, he drew a pocketknife from his pocket, nicked himself on his thumb, and pressed his blood to the portrait.

When he turned, satisfied that he had achieved the result he sought, he found Pip staring at him, his hands on his bony hips.

"Mister Severus is not supposed to be silencing portraits," Pip said.

"We can't let Miss Granger know our secret, can we, Pip?" Severus asked, silently healing his thumb.

Pip sputtered. "But the portraits..."

"Will respond to my blood if not my mastery of the home and will still be able to talk with you and Miss Granger...just not about me." He tilted his head. "I believe you were looking for something."

Throwing a hurt look over his shoulder, Pip scampered up the stairs.

Severus returned his attention to the portrait only to find her feigning sleep. He chuckled. "Sleep well, Auntie Charlotte," he said, enjoying how the form of address made her bristle. He cast a glance to the staircase. The portraits had been silenced, and he had no reason to believe that there were any other portraits in the house that would compromise him. Pip was busy using his special ways of Summoning to seek out all papers that would assist Severus in this endeavor. He looked up at the door near the top of the staircase. It wouldn't hurt to check on her. Just to see.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor, arriving at the master bedroom in a moment. He stood in the doorway, not daring to go any closer, and he watched as she turned from front to side, and the covers slipped. He had only intended to check in on her, but seeing her sprawled out half-naked on his grandfather's bed had halted any thoughts of protection.

In spite of the fact that the manor was drafty, she wore nothing but knickers and an oversized t-shirt. The t-shirt was rucked up to just below her breasts, revealing her soft belly, and her tiny black briefs rode up her cheeks, so that his gaze went undisturbed from foot all the way up her curvy legs and round arse.

He swallowed and ignored the heat rising in him. She looked lovely. And entirely too unprotected. Goddamn the Ministry for failing to properly ward the house and for forbidding her from doing so.

He shook his head. Reckless, he was being reckless. What if she were to awaken while he was standing in the doorway, staring at her like some lecherous pervert?

He fled the doorway and walked down the stairs as quickly as possible, finding Pip in the kitchen. "Pip," he said sharply. The house-elf jumped and turned with a grimace. "Yes, *Mister* Severus," Pip said, glaring at Severus.

"Watch over Granger," Severus said, the words coming out of his mouth before he even thought. "She is a woman alone."

But Pip was nodding, clearly already of the same mind.

"Very well," Severus said. "You found the second volume?"

Pip handed him the leather-bound book. Severus ran a reverent finger across the cover.

"And there are no portraits or physical likenesses of him anywhere in the house?"

"No," Pip said. "Pip is not finding any pictures or portraits of him."

"And this is the only other book? He left behind no personal writings?"

"Oh, he left many letters," Pip said. "But they is being held in the box that has no key."

"And where is this box?" Severus asked.

"It is being buried on the northern border of the estate. There is many boxes like that, many Prince masters who buried letters in the ground and cast enchantments to prevent their ever being read but by the person the letter is being for," Pip said, as if he had heard that phrase a thousand times.

Severus paused. "That would be an intoxicating challenge for the lady currently residing in this house," he said. "Can you cloak the letters?"

"The letters is already being cloaked, but Pip can cloak them again, if Mister Severus lets Pip use his own magic."

"Of course you may, Pip. The privacy of former masters is paramount, is it not?" Severus asked, casually glancing around the room.

Pip gulped. "Pip is understanding you perfectly, *Master* Severus."

A smile quirked at the edge of his lips. "Good. The next time we see each other, be sure to address me in the manner we discussed," Severus instructed, ignoring Pip's accusing look. "Good night, Pip." And he slipped through the fireplace.

**

Severus tried to avoid visiting Land's End in the summer, but in this case, it couldn't be helped. Though the town was a bloody tourist trap, there was a shop that had precisely what he needed, and its proprietor was one of his few acquaintances. He shielded his eyes from the morning sun as he ducked into the shop, thankful that the streets were still relatively empty.

The bell on the door rang as he walked in, and the brunette behind the counter looked up from her paperwork, her eyes brightening immediately. "Lionel! It's a bit early for Halloween, isn't it?" She grinned, and he forced a smirk onto his face, ignoring the punch in his gut that word inevitably inspired.

"Halloween has come early this year, Clara."

She flashed him a smile so warm it could melt sugar. "Well, what are you looking for? Don't make me drag it out of you."

"Something from the early 1790s. French Revolution. As authentic as you can make it; nothing frivolous," he said.

She arched an eyebrow that said *well, obviously*, and grabbed a stack of papers, flipping through them, obviously seeking out where items for that period would be located.

"Looks like the few items I have are in the back. Come on," she said, gesturing at the door that led to the storage room in back.

He couldn't resist. "Inviting me to the back room already?"

She flushed. "Lionel Smith, you would do well to remember that I'm a married woman, and that my husband ~~is~~ *your* competition."

Ignoring the fact that it was hardly a competition if he outstripped her husband every quarter, he merely said, "It's my duty as an old bachelor to keep the married women on their toes."

She snorted and practically shoved him through the door to the storage room, where he was delighted to find precisely what he was looking for.

**

As he buttoned up his shirt, his fingers grazed the scars, small and faded but still definitely present. He'd have to remember to keep those covered.

His rescue had been a curious thing. One moment he had been bleeding out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, letting go of memories he had once held dear, and the next he had been lying in his bed at the Dower House, Fawkes weeping into his neck and Perdita standing by his bedside, looking rather like a mother hen fretting after her chick.

He had reached a hand out and stroked her muzzle and scolded her for being in the house, and she had whinnied and nuzzled him gleefully.

Really, she was too smart for her own good.

Given that the two animals next to him possessed magical powers of transportation, and that both species were notorious for their loyalty to their masters, he had not questioned the method of rescue, even though he had spent several days wallowing in the misery of being alive before Perdita literally dragged him out of bed by his trouser leg. Fawkes obtained copies of the *Prophet* for him, and given the persistent outcry to find his body and interviews with various Order members proclaiming him a hero...bollocks...he came to be of the opinion that Fawkes and Perdita had exercised perfect discretion in the rescue. They had saved his life, for some reason, but they had at least recognized his desire for solitude.

Solitude that was, it appeared, swiftly coming to an end, he thought, ignoring the small fact that this situation was born of his own loneliness and, truth be told, his own desire.

**

As he strode into the library, he couldn't help but notice how the fireplaces crackled high to greet him. He looked down at his clothing and at his hands to make sure the effects were still in place. He'd have to keep improving the potion so that the illusion would hold for a longer period of time, but an hour was more than enough for this first meeting. He was especially pleased that his minor tweak had allowed the potion to incorporate his clothing in the illusion. After all, it wouldn't do to have a ghost walking around with corporeal clothing.

A ragged sound came from a corner of the library, and his heart started a bit.

It sounded like a woman crying.

Walking softly, he wove through the aisles until he could see her through one of the shelves. Granger was huddled up in a chair, crying, head in her hands, and though she was speaking, he could barely make out the words.

Bloody hell. She wasn't supposed to be *crying*.

He straightened his posture and turned around the corner, coming into full view of the chair.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," he said.

She screamed and practically fell out of her chair, before her eyes widened in recognition. "Who...who are you?"

He smirked. "Edmund Prince. At your service."

Author's Note: The former Dower House of Lyonesse is in fact Upton House, a holiday cottage in Bude (which is also in Cornwall). Again, I will be taking liberties with the interior, but should you desire to see what the cottage "really" looks like, visit http://www.tripadvisor.com/VacationRentalReview-g190804-d1650313-Upton_House-Bude_Cornwall_England.html. Many thanks to Shug for finding the house for me!

Speaking of which, Shug is the first beta to have a cameo. Can you guess which character she is?

Perdita's breed, *le fantôme d'Arabie*, translates as "The Ghost Arabian." I'm envisioning her as part of a magical, phantom-esque sub-breed of Arabian horses. And just to prove that I am endeavoring to keep some things true to life, Arabians are one of only two breeds that can be white. See? I'm sticking to fact!

So far, we have seen a wistful Hermione, a manor near a coastal village, an orphan, and a horse, thus having introduced most of the terms of Ari's prompt. Up next: rakish Snape. ~grin~

And now, a bit of a game: ten points to the reviewer who guesses the work from which two of the new names in this chapter are drawn and why the names may have been chosen (hint: consider the literary period that inspired this story). Even if you don't play the (rather difficult) game, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the story thus far.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 9

In which there is a meeting.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. No profit is being made.

A/N: Ari asked for a rakish Snape, and what Ari wants, Ari gets. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a rake is "A fashionable or stylish man of dissolute or promiscuous habits," and "rakish" may also mean "raffish, jaunting, dashy." My Snape is not a rake in the true, Austenian sense of the word (see: Wickham), but nor is he the stuff of more typical fanon personas, if there is such a thing. I'll refrain from offering an essay on how every fanfic features an OOC Snape, as we all offer a mere interpretation of JKR's creation, but as this Snape is perhaps not the sort that you're used to, the terms of Ari's prompt bear repeating.

I apologize for how terribly late this update is. I have several major life Life Changes® coming up, not the least of which is marriage, so your patience is enormously appreciated.

And last but not least, many thanks to the wonderful team behind this chapter: Shug (sshg316), Subversa, tonksinger, machshefa, and richardgloucester.

He was here. The ghost whom Pip insisted didn't exist, the ghost who looked so like him, the ghost who had no name...well, apparently he had a name. Edmund Prince.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said, willing her voice not to shake, hands frozen at her sides, too self-conscious to wipe at the tears she knew were drying on her cheeks. "What are you doing here?"

He arched an eyebrow, and sweet Merlin, she had to look away, to look at anything but him, but the tears came in spite of herself.

"I might ask the same of you," he said, and she shut her eyes. Gods. She...she couldn't look at him. Curiosity warred with cowardice. He looked, he ~~sounded~~ ...

"Though the last thing I wish to do is inquire about your private life, it seems you are in distress, Madam."

She inhaled sharply and stared at the fire, which seemed to be crackling even more than it had before, if such a thing was possible. She turned slowly back to face him and focused her attention on the small details: the silver trousers, the embroidery on his otherwise simple waistcoat and frock, the hair pulled back in a queue. Anything to avoid his eyes.

"You look like the man who owned this house ... before," she said quietly. "The resemblance is rather disconcerting."

"I am his ancestor, Miss Granger," he said, and something in her broke.

"Don't say that," she said, rising from her chair and staring at him angrily. ~~He~~ called me that and ... and ... you sound just like him and you look just like him and you aren't him because I watched him die, and when I went back for his body, it was gone," she said, trembling. She took a deep breath. "Please never call me Miss Granger again."

She met his eyes, finally, and though they were the eyes of a ghost, there was something fierce in them, something that almost looked like the crackling fire.

"You hated him so much?" Edmund asked, inspecting his fingernails as he leaned casually against a bookcase.

Her lip trembled. "I respected him. I respect him still. I regret his sacrifice, the price he had to pay. I regret that I didn't go back for his body sooner ..." She trailed off, closing her eyes. "Forgive my behavior. You just ... you look and sound ... gods, I am sorry. We got off on the wrong foot," she said.

"Well, if I am not to address you properly, what am I to call you?" he asked.

"Hermione," she said slowly. "Just Hermione. And you? Do you want to be called Mr. Prince?"

He waved a hand. "I've had a few centuries to overcome the need for pomp and circumstance."

"And you was never liking it in the first place," Pip said, walking into the room. "You was sounding sad, Miss Hermione."

Hermione managed a smile. "I'll be all right, Pip. Edmund here caught me off guard, that's all."

"Was he making you sad?"

She crinkled her brow. "No..."

Pip nodded and quickly left the room.

"Odd, that one," Edmund said.

But Pip's presence had reminded her. "Why did Pip say there wasn't a ghost in the house? He obviously knows you."

"I am rarely here," Edmund said. "I am ... bound, as it were, to another property."

Her eyes lit in curiosity, and he grinned. "I won't tell you which property. But to answer your earlier question as to what I'm doing here: I saw you the other morning and was curious about the new tenant." He paused. "Would you like to take a seat, Mi ... Hermione?"

She sat back in her chair, feeling silly for having forgotten that ghosts didn't really sit, her insides still in upheaval. "I moved in a few days ago. I'm leasing Lyonesse for three months, after which I plan to purchase it."

"Then why the lease?" he asked.

"The Ministry of Magic seems to think that the house will react badly to me, seeing as I'm Muggle-born," she said, inwardly hoping that this wasn't a problem for Edmund.

He snorted with mirth, and she couldn't help but smile. "The Ministry hasn't changed. They still know nothing," he said.

"I should like to hear your observations of the Ministry's history sometime," she said.

"Presuming, of course, that I visit again," he said, something between a smirk and a smile on his face, and she found that she liked that expression. He didn't look as much like her professor.

"I hope you do," she said. "It'd be nice to have someone to talk to."

"Are you resorting to a ghost and a house-elf for company? Is there no one here with you, no regular visitors?" he asked, and even though she knew the question shouldn't bother her, it plucked at her heartstrings a little.

"One can be alone without being lonely," she said, staring at the floor, debating what to say next. Deciding that the truth was best, she looked him in the eye. "When I work out what's drawing me to this place, I'll let you know."

He nodded slowly. "So you are drawn to the manor and are in need of solitude or peace or what have you, yet you were in distress before I approached you."

"Isn't that a rather impertinent observation?" she asked.

"Your initial treatment of me was most impertinent. Fair's fair."

"Have you no manners?" Hermione asked, and his grin widened.

"Manners are a dreadful nuisance when one is a ghost."

She didn't know whether he was being serious or humorous or both. "You really want to know why I was crying? You're a complete stranger, and more to the point, you're male, and you still want to know?"

He shrugged. "I've nothing better to do with my time."

Perhaps it was the desire to talk with him, or perhaps the need for connection was too great, but for some reason, Hermione chose to overlook the slight inherent in his words. Taking a deep breath, she started, "I didn't realize how truly daunting the task of renovating a magical manor was. The Ministry didn't tell me, and the books I've been reading make it sound as though it should be as easy as a swish and flick." She laughed, but the sound was hollow. "I've been questioning every decision I've made in the last few hours."

"Do you wish to leave?" he asked softly.

She looked him in the eye and saw compassion rather than condescension; surprising, that. "No," she said. "I don't. But I don't know how to continue, either. Pip can only do so much, and the books I have are of no help in this matter."

"There are some tomes in this library that could be of assistance," he said, and she looked up eagerly. "Renovating a magical manor is a complex process. It taps into the magic from which the manor itself was wrought; it is not merely a cosmetic swish and flick but a process of redirecting magic itself. Learning to work with a particular manor's brand of magic is difficult, even for the most accomplished of wizards. It is not work to be taken lightly."

"So I am finding out," she said, looking up at him. "Is it impossible? Is this manor too ... damaged?"

"Nothing is beyond repair," he said, holding her gaze.

She bit her lip.

"But I must be going," he said. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Hermione. I'll be by to check on your progress."

He turned to go, and she called out "Wait!" as she stood, surprised by his sudden exit. "What makes you so sure I'll continue with the restoration?"

He paused and turned back to look at her, hands in the pockets of his breeches, and she suddenly realized how striking he must have been when alive. "I recognize a Gryffindor when I see one," he said, and turning, he disappeared from sight.

**

She didn't know how long she'd stayed in that chair after he ... after the ghost left. Even though it was early afternoon, she felt like taking a nap. She was bloody exhausted from her failed attempts at restoration earlier in the day, from even thinking about the restorations, and, perhaps most of all, from the shock of seeing a ghost who resembled Severus Snape far too much for her own liking. But he hadn't been like her professor, not entirely. He'd smiled. Laughed, even. She was sure Severus Snape had smiled and laughed in his life, but probably not with someone he was just meeting, and certainly not with his students.

It was pointless to speculate. There was much she would never know about Severus Snape. Edmund Prince, on the other hand, was a fascinating introduction into life at Lyonesse. At the very least, he used proper grammar. She winced at the judgment; she already cared for Pip, but Pip was not one for good conversation.

There were so many questions she hadn't asked Edmund. His clothing suggested eighteenth or nineteenth century; she'd have to find a genealogy book before curiosity ate away at her innards. Her excitement was rolling over her in waves, which only exacerbated her exhaustion, but the excitement demanded satiation, so she supposed that she should set about finding any family documents that mentioned him ... and she should probably search for those books about the restoration of magical manors while she was at it.

She was on her feet before she knew it. Thinking on what she most desired, she took out her wand. Following its direction, she wove her way through the numerous shelves; the library was far denser than it first appeared, and she had a fleeting thought that a reduction charm had been placed on the room.

The book would have been impossible to miss. She grinned when she saw it. It was an enormous tome, leather bound with gold filigree woven through the binding. Striking, tasteful, and outrageously expensive. She tried to open the book and frowned in consternation when she couldn't. The pages...so old as to look like papyrus...were seemingly stuck together, refusing to admit her entry.

"Pip!" she called. "I need your help!"

Pip appeared at her side in an instant. "What is Miss wanting?"

"I can't open this book."

Pip's eyes widened when he saw it. "That is being the Prince family genealogy, Miss Hermione. If it is not wanting to be seen, you is not being able to see it. I is being sorry, Miss."

"Is there any other book or place in the house that contains a record of the Prince line?" Hermione asked, disappointed but undeterred.

Pip thought, and a smirk spread across his features before he looked up at Hermione with a grin. "There is being one place that is being forgotten by the family for a very long time."

"Where?"

Pip grabbed Hermione's hand, and she felt the tug of Side-Along overwhelm her.

When she opened her eyes, she stood in what looked to be a musty attic.

"This is being the room over the stables," Pip said. "The stables was being burned down years ago, but the magic of the tapestry was saving it."

"Tapestry?" Hermione asked, watching her step as she followed Pip across the dusty, debris-ridden room. Suddenly, she slid. "Bollocks!" she exclaimed, catching herself. "Pip," she started, exasperated, "you could have told me we were on a downward slope."

But Pip didn't respond. "Over here, Miss Hermione!"

She shook her head and dusted herself off before slowly walking to where Pip stood. *Lumos*," she muttered, and she gasped when she saw what was on the wall.

It was a tapestry, like the one at Grimmauld Place but older. Her eyes immediately trailed to the end of the tapestry; the last members recorded on the tree were in the mid nineteenth century. Her eyes trailed up two generations before settling on a black mark.

"A second child is blacked out here," Hermione said, squatting in front of the tapestry. "Oldest child, John, born 1763. Married to Charlotte, and then their children are here," she said, her finger tracing the line down. "But this second child is blacked out. And the generation before only has three children, two of whom died young, and the third lived to be eighty, and the ghost I saw definitely wasn't eighty..." She trailed off. "Pip, was this Edmund's spot on the family tree?"

Pip stared at the spot and nodded. She inhaled. "Well, older brother born in 1763. That tells me something."

"This is telling you more," Pip said. He put a finger on the spot and the blackness immediately receded, revealing the entry.

"Oh my goodness," Hermione said. "I didn't know..."

"Elf magic," Pip said, smiling.

"Edmund Reginald Prince, birth year 1765, death year 1793," Hermione read. She did the maths in her head. "Twenty-eight. He died when he was twenty-eight. No wife, no children, either. Or..." She rested her chin on her hand. "Did he have a wife and children? Why was he blasted off the tree?"

Pip said nothing.

"Can you not say?" Hermione asked sadly. "Is that another elf magic thing, the not being able to disclose family secrets?"

Pip nodded, and she supposed that would have to suffice.

"Is you being ready to Apparate back to the main house?" Pip asked, rather abruptly.

Her stomach rumbled, and she rose, supposing that she should probably eat something. "As long as I can come back here soon."

"Of course," Pip said, reaching for her hand. "And Miss Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"The portraits is knowing much family history, and they is not being bound like house-elves."

She grinned at him. "Thank you, Pip."

**

After a quiet dinner, Hermione approached the portrait hall with some trepidation. "Hello," she said. "I know you all haven't really spoken to me yet, and I know I'm just a tenant, but I do hope to own this property one day..." she noted that some of the portraits bristled "...and I wanted to ask you about the ghost of Edmund Prince."

She was met with the expected silence and decided to forge ahead. If she wasn't intimidated by her superiors at the Ministry, what were a few dead pure-bloods?

"I know that he was born in 1765 and died in 1793. He was the younger of two sons and did something to get himself blasted off the family tree."

"If you want to know more, why don't you ask him yourself?" the portrait to her right quipped.

Hermione immediately approached the woman with curly blonde hair. "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Charlotte Frances Prince," the lady answered. "Edmund was my brother-in-law."

Hermione could scarcely contain her grin. "What can you tell me?"

"Unfortunately, quite little," Charlotte responded, pouting. "But if you really want to know more, ask him about Hyacinth Gray."

"Hyacinth Gray," Hermione repeated. "Is that a place? Or a name?"

"Can the two not be one and the same?" Charlotte responded, and she slipped out of her portrait before Hermione could respond. Hermione called out to the portrait, but the hall was silent once again, Charlotte hidden in some other ancestor's frame.

"Hyacinth Gray," Hermione said quietly. "I'll remember that."

A/N: In JKR's world, ghosts are semi-transparent, pearly white beings whom she termed "distillations" of their real life personas. I am taking liberties with her assertions in an interview that they are not thinking entities; to my mind, ghosts possess all knowledge and abilities their real life personas had and are capable of thinking critically. Moreover, some ghosts (e.g. Moaning Myrtle) can tap into the physical realm. While Snape, of course, is not a ghost, these details are ones Hermione would keep in mind as she interprets him.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 9

In which Hermione shops and Snape hides.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR.

A/N: I have the most wonderful beta team in the whole wide world. I came to them with a tight time frame, and they gave great feedback, answered eleventy billion questions, and graciously put up with my wibbling and nattering, all within 48 hours, in spite of their busy schedules. machshefa, richardgloucester, sshg316, Subversa, and tonksinger rock my world. Any errors here are my own.

Severus tugged at the cravat to loosen it and fell into the large leather chair opposite his fireplace. He Summoned a glass and a bottle of whisky; Gerard and Clara had selected a truly singular malt for his last birthday, the sort one should reserve for celebratory occasions, and damn if this wasn't just such an occasion.

His heart was still racing, and he supposed that it was natural to be out of practice at this sort of thing. At least his body recognized that this adrenaline was of the pleasurable sort, otherwise he'd have had his head in the toilet the minute he got back.

The illusion had been successful, and he toasted his own success. He'd continue to tinker with the potion so that he could masquerade as Edmund for longer periods of time, of course, but...he couldn't help the smirk that spread across his face. Merlin, he was good.

He was relieved, in a way. Relieved that she had fallen for the illusion, but then, he'd known she would. Gryffindors could always be counted on where sentiment was concerned. A small part of him was pissed off at the Ministry for being content to let her blunder around with no preexisting knowledge of or skill with magical restoration. She was Hermione Granger, but she was also a Muggle born, and frankly, blood mattered in these sorts of affairs, not because of skill, but because of background. She had no idea what she was dealing with, and no book would have been able to stress to her the gravity of undertaking renovation of a magical manor.

On the other hand, the Ministry's general incompetence at everything gave him a wonderful reason to be around more often. He could give her the proper reading material, advise her course of action...he could practically do the renovation himself without ever leaving a trace of his magical signature. The thought practically made him giddy.

And in the meantime, he could redirect his energy towards figuring out a way to better secure the property. He was relatively certain that he knew what the Ministry wanted with it, and while Miss Granger...Hermione, he reminded himself, Hermione...might accept their asinine rules about protocol, he had no such compulsion.

He sipped his whisky, closed his eyes, and sank further into the chair, more satisfied than he'd been in years.

**

And if, in the dead of night when he was unable to sleep, he took some of his blood-masking draught and slipped across the barrier between homes and allowed himself to find the books she would need, and if he then placed them on her bedside table, and if perhaps he tucked an errant curl behind her ear...

Well. The world could just go to hell.

When Hermione awoke, she immediately noted the stack of books on her bedside table. Pip must have brought the ones that Edmund ordered.

No use imagining how these manors worked. She had the books, so she would read. After breakfast, and...she shuddered as a windy draft swept through her room.

After she reinforced the weather charms.

**

"Miss Hermione is being brilliant at weather charms! Pip has never felt so warm in the manor," Pip said as he set Hermione's breakfast plate in front of her.

"It needed the reinforcement, Pip," Hermione said, slathering butter on her toast. "Might I ask the extent of what you are allowed to do to ... keep up with the place?"

At this, Pip started beating his head against the wall, and Hermione knocked her chair over in an effort to get to him. She took his arms firmly in her hands but didn't manage to avert his head, which came smashing into hers as though he was still standing at the wall.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, falling back on her rear. She rubbed her head as Pip let out a wail.

"Pip is sorry! Pip is not meaning to hurt Miss, and Pip is promising..." At this, he let out another wail.

"Pip, look at me," Hermione said firmly, still wincing from the pain of the head butt. "And stop crying."

He immediately did so.

"Look, I know that I'm not Mistress, but I really, really don't want you to hurt yourself like that. And I really, really don't want you to feel badly about the state of the house. I should have phrased it more carefully. I was just wanting to inquire as to what sorts of renovations and upkeep you are able to help me with. I'm assuming that the Prince family put some kind of bind on you that would prevent you from doing extensive work on the place?"

Pip nodded.

"Odd that such an enchantment would hold. Wouldn't the enchantment end once Professor Snape ..." Hermione trailed off. House elves took great pride in their work, she'd learned (gradually, over many years), and it was obvious from the state of the house that Pip had been restrained from doing such work.

"Pip is being bound to the house by Prince family blood, Miss. Pip cannot be being freed from the enchantment unless a member of the Prince family is doing it."

She nodded slowly, digesting the information. "But why on earth would Professor Snape not have freed you to keep up with the place since he so obviously didn't?" She immediately cringed at the words. She knew how...busy, for lack of a better word...he'd been and imagined that the manor hadn't ranked too highly on his priority list. But

still. To let such a lovely manor fall into such disrepair?

It was the closest she'd come to criticizing him.

"He was being busy, Miss. He was not caring about Pip," Pip sputtered, a wayward tear falling down his cheek. Hermione knew better than to wipe it away, but she patted his arm reassuringly.

"It's all right, Pip. Now ... wait, the Ministry technically holds the house. Can they free you from the enchantment that restricts your work?"

"Only the Prince family can be freeing Pip, Miss."

"But the last member is dead," Hermione said, exasperated.

"Pip is not being clever, Miss Hermione. Pip is not being able to work a way out of the enchantment."

"Well, I'll just have to find something, then," Hermione said, ignoring the fact that she was a tenant and not the owner. Damn the pure-bloods, she thought. Damn them and their prejudice, damn them and their control issues, damn them, damn them, damn them. The thought occurred to her that Snape had been a half-blood, and she thought, well, damn the half-bloods, too.

Pip declared that he was going to clean the Portrait Hall, and so Hermione went back to her seat to finish breakfast and organize her thoughts. She had every intention of spending the day working on the kitchen and searching the manor for any reference to Hyacinth Grey (Charlotte was still hiding from her), but such plans were shot to hell when Blaise stumbled out of the fireplace, coughing and beating his chest.

"Merlin, do you plan on cleaning that fireplace anytime soon?"

"Blaise!" Hermione exclaimed, at first delighted before recalling one of the components of her lease. "Wait...how did you get in here? I had the Floos blocked!"

"Spent the night with"...cough..."a lovely higher-up from the Department of Transportation who"...cough..."offered to set up a temporary Floo connection for me."

She rolled her eyes. "Typical."

"Did I mention his name is John?"

Oh. Well, that was different. She arched an eyebrow, and he laughed.

"Come here, old girl," he said, wrapping her up in his arms and lifting her off her feet.

"Good to see you, too, Blaise, though next time you should probably send an owl. I had plans today."

"To what? Spend time locked up in an old manor driving yourself batshit crazy with all the restoration that's so obviously needed? Dear Merlin, this place is a fright." Blaise immediately started opening and shutting cupboards and cabinets, inspecting the state of the kitchen. Hermione ate up the last bit of toast as he did so.

"So why are you visiting?" she asked.

"Do I need a reason to see my dear friend?" he asked.

"Well, no, but..."

"I take it you've had no visitors since arriving."

"I made it perfectly clear to my best friends...including you...that I wanted to be left alone for a while."

"And Potter and Weasley accepted their dismissal?" Blaise rolled his eyes. "Gryffindors."

"They respect my boundaries."

"You are at a critical point in your life, Hermione," Blaise said, now crawling on his hands and knees as he looked under tables and in floor-level cabinets. "You need someone to *violate* those boundaries."

"You're doing a mighty fine job of it at the moment."

He grinned as he leapt to his feet. "It's official. We're going shopping."

"You came here to take me shopping? Blaise, what are you doing?" she asked as he dragged her up from her seat.

"Do you intend to live in filth for the next three months? We need to shop. Though Land's End is bound to be insane on a Saturday, hmm, there must be a village nearby." He scratched his head.

"Pip mentioned a small village..."

"Perfect!" Blaise said, and Hermione immediately regretted speaking up.

"I hadn't planned on outfitting the manor with new ... everything," she said, waving her hands around the kitchen. "I can reinforce most of the material here until I've the money and inclination to shop. I mean, given the state of the manor itself, I'm just not that interested in buying new silver."

Blaise looked at her crossly. Hermione had known him long enough to know when to fight back and when to just give him what he wanted in order to get it out of his system.

"But I suppose if we have to go shopping, well ..." She thought a moment. "I need some potions ingredients. And yarn."

Blaise blanched. "The pots and pans are almost worn through. Half the plates are broken, the silver is rusted, and you honestly intend shop for potions ingredients and *yarn*?"

She shifted and placed her hands on her hips. "I need potions for restoration and have decided to take up knitting again. It's calming."

"You knit?"

"I knit."

He grinned. "Since when were you domestic?"

She bristled. "I used to knit with my gran. And Molly."

Blaise shook his head. "Whoever thought that the mistress of a pure-blood manor would knit?"

"I'm not the mistress, as you well know."

He smirked. "Well, don't be surprised if you find new cast iron in your cupboards next week."

"If you say so."

"I'm making you breakfast tomorrow."

"I don't recall asking you to stay over."

"Well, some man needs to watch over you while you sleep."

Now he was crossing a line. "Are you saying that I need protection?"

"You cast a mean hex, but...*fuck*, Hermione!"

She crossed her arms across her chest, inordinately satisfied with herself as Blaise doubled over. "You were saying?" she asked, infusing her voice with as much maternal warmth as possible.

"Oh, *fuck*."

She watched as he stumbled over to a chair. "Are you always this articulate when hexed?" she asked.

He gritted his teeth. "Shut up, woman."

"See, now we've a reason to go to town for potions ingredients. I need to make a paste to soothe that sting."

"It'll wear off." He was looking at her almost admiringly.

"My stinging jinxes have improved over the last few years, Blaise. You could be that way for days."

He shut his eyes. "Oh, sod it, we'll go to that village for potions ingredients. But I'm buying you new cookware before the weekend is out!"

**

Hermione healed the jinx before they left, of course, and was most gratified at Blaise's reaction to the village, which was appreciative silence. She felt similarly. Coleworth was quaint, clean, and sparsely populated. It was a scant mile from the manor, and she was thrilled to have found such a quiet, decidedly Muggle village that would suit her needs for the next three months. There was a grocer and a baker, and she was delighted to find that the herbal shop Pip had described was situated right next to a yarn shop. When she pointed the happy coincidence out to Blaise, he shrugged and pointed to the pub across the street.

"You know where to find me," he said, acting as though he was ready to take off.

"Blaise!" She tugged him back over to her.

"I'll take you for a drink after, how's about that? Now, which shop first?"

She thought a moment. "The herbalist."

"For those ingredients for the paste that will fully heal my stinging jinx?" He arched an eyebrow.

She smacked his arm. "I healed your arm before we left. Don't make me feel guilty."

"I'm actually quite proud of you. It was a rather Slytherin tactic."

"See, *that* makes me feel terrible."

"I know. You love me anyway."

She sighed and noted the sign above the door. Smith & Co. was printed in silver letters on a worn, terribly scratched black door. "Yes, Merlin help me, I do," she muttered as Blaise opened the door for her with a small bow.

"You can't jinx me in public," he murmured as she walked by.

She turned on her heel. "Watch me."

Blaise put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, I can tell that my comment got to you. I'm sorry, all right? It's just a big manor and the Ministry wards aren't that strong, and yes, I am suffering from that insipid male instinct to protect a woman one cares about. Can't you reinforce the wards?" he asked bleakly.

She shook her head. "I tried. There's some asinine rule about tenants not being allowed into the security in case they are able to keep the Ministry out, or some nonsense like that. But I should be okay. Besides, Pip is there, and he likes me a lot, and do you know how powerful house elves are?"

He nodded. "I know, I just ... you're isolated."

"What is it with men being worried about a woman who's isolated?" She groaned and turned to properly take in the shop.

Blaise came up from behind and put his arms around her. "I will always worry about you, Hermione." He pecked her on the cheek. "I love you, goose."

"As much as you can be attached to anyone," she said with a grin, shrugging out of his embrace.

He put a hand to his heart in mock horror. "That hurt!"

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and walked to a table, appreciating the shop's elegant simplicity. She'd been in too many apothecaries that were haphazardly thrown together, wizard as well as Muggle. In such situations, the owner knew where everything was, but damn if a customer could find anything. At least in wizarding shops you were able to Summon what you needed, unless the owner was paranoid and blocked customers from doing such, which made any visit painfully slow.

But this: this was a Muggle shop with plenty of atmosphere...the long wooden tables set up in rows, ingredients in antique-looking bowls and jars, the low lighting, the cracked glass in the windows. But it was organized and clean, with all ingredients and prices clearly labeled and small bags, jars, sampling sticks, and Sharpie pens for marking. Hermione walked slowly along one of the tables, inspecting the quality of the ingredients. She dipped a sampling stick in one particularly lush bowl of cherry juice, sniffed, and flicked her tongue at it. She closed her eyes. Tasted like heaven.

"Hermione?"

She opened her eyes and started when she saw Blaise standing right next to her.

He grinned. "It's been fifteen minutes, and I can tell you're in your element. I'm going to the pub...come get me when you're ready to go back."

Hermione nodded her assent as she bent over a bowl to smell the mint leaves. She was delighted to find fluxweed next to them. She put a few leaves in a bag and marked the price before moving on to the next table.

The ingredients were all Muggle...spices, herbs, so on and so forth, with a few unique items like bits of bone...but as she reached the end of the table, her eyes widened and her heart started to race. Inhaling sharply, she went back to where she'd started and retraced her steps around the table. She walked to the table in the center of the shop and circled it, noting how ingredients had been arranged.

It was a guess, and she couldn't *feel* anything, even as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, allowing her magic to search the shop for any energy whatsoever. Nothing. She opened her eyes and breathed again, somewhat disappointed.

It was just...it was such an odd coincidence. A few of the more unusual ingredients...leeches, for example...had been placed near items such as fluxweed. Sure, some ingredients defied classification, and a shop owner starved for time might just set one bowl next to the other without thinking twice.

But both leeches and fluxweed were ingredients in Polyjuice.

Unable to get the idea out of her head, she circled every table, looked on every shelf, and found similar occurrences elsewhere. The ingredients were all organized logically, and there wasn't a discernable pattern, and certainly such accidental placements wouldn't be recognized by most wizards and witches, but then, most wizards and witches were not potions geeks.

The particularly unique ingredients could have been placed randomly, she supposed. But there were six junctures where unusual ingredients had been placed near at least one ingredient that formed either all or part of a potion.

Hermione had waved the shopgirl away with a noncommittal wave after Blaise had left, but now she approached the black-haired girl, intent on asking one question.

"Is the owner here?"

The girl's eyes darted to a door that probably led to the back room. "Not at the moment."

"What's his name?" Hermione asked.

"Lionel Smith," the girl replied, looking a bit confused as to the sudden interest.

Hermione nodded slowly. She didn't recognize the name. She glanced out over the layout again. It had only happened six times, and there were hundreds of ingredients. Could be a coincidence.

Hermione didn't put much stock in coincidence. She pursed her lips. "Is there a time when he'll be back in?"

"Couldn't say, ma'am," the girl said, staring at the counter, fidgeting with the edge of her apron.

"Is he a particular man, your boss?" Hermione asked, smiling.

The girl shrugged. "Depends on the day."

It was clear that she wasn't going to learn much about Lionel Smith from this girl, who was looking more skittish by the moment. "Well, I'll take these, then," Hermione said. She paid and walked out of the shop quickly, eager to tell Blaise of her observations and maybe...just maybe...have him come and take a look for himself. Depending on his state of sobriety, of course.

And it wasn't even noon.

He had known the instant she walked in that he had to walk out. He did so, quickly, after instructing Caroline not to tell the brown-haired girl anything about him. Not that he was too worried...he'd given Susan's niece a job because of her skill with the product rather than the customers, and he was sure that the inquisitive Miss Granger would scare the daylight out of his reticent assistant.

He walked into the woods behind the shop. It was too risky to Apparate; Apparition tended to send a burst of magical energy, and even Neville bloody Longbottom would sense something like *that*.

He shouldn't speak too ill of the boy. Longbottom had beheaded that damn snake, after all. He snorted; that was something.

Finally under the cover of the forest, Severus leaned against an oak tree, and ran his hands through his hair.

Bloody hell. He was hiding. From Hermione. No, no, Miss Granger...but how could he think of her that way and then call her Hermione with any familiarity and ease? He couldn't afford to upset her as he had yesterday; who would have known that his use of her proper name would send her into such hysterics?

There were not enough obscenities in the world for a time like this.

She was in his shop. With Zabini. He wondered at her words yesterday...she'd seemed lonely, had said she wasn't expecting visitors. But had she said those things, or had he asked and mistaken silence for assent? Had he somehow interpreted her answer through his own...he shook his head. That did not bear thinking.

He dearly hoped that she wouldn't return to the shop, that for some reason she'd find it disappointing, but he knew that such wishes were in vain. She had been fond of potions even if she'd lacked the instinct, and she'd been determined to make up for that lack with exceptional zeal. If her determination with the manor's restoration was indicative, such zeal to succeed at the seemingly impossible still infected her.

Half an hour passed before he saw Caroline beckon him back. If she thought her boss's behavior odd, she said nothing and kept her face blank. He appreciated that.

He paused at the back door. "Did she ask for me?" he asked.

"She asked for the owner, yes."

"Did she have a reason?"

"No, sir, but she'd been searching the shop quite thoroughly...almost like she was looking for something."

He swore under his breath, and Caroline asked, "Sir?"

He took a deep breath. She'd noticed something. What could she have noticed? He'd been so careful...

"Caroline, this may seem like an odd request, but you are never to say anything to that girl...woman...about me, my appearance, anything."

Caroline nodded. "She seems rather persistent."

"She's a bloodhound," Severus said shortly. "I will be working in the back room and laboratory for the next three months. Tell other customers...not her!...that I am ill. Or...no, tell her that I'm ill, if she asks. It'd be suspicious if..." he trailed off at Caroline's wide-eyed look, though to her credit she remained silent.

He really needed to consider giving Caroline a raise.

"Should I tell Jack?" she asked, her tone flat.

"I'll tell him," Severus said. His other employee was the opposite of Caroline in personality: enthusiastic, disarmingly charming, a positive flirt. Not that Miss...Hermione...was pretty, per se, but Jack wasn't exactly discriminating. Severus winced at the judgment, and an image of her sleeping half-naked in his grandfather's bed, hair spilled out on the pillow, knickers riding up her arse, came to mind. He felt a flush of heat reach his face, and he waved a hand to dismiss Caroline.

He leaned against the brick wall, the sun beating down on his face. No, he'd have to tell Jack, and knowing Jack, his curiosity would be piqued. He'd want to know everything he could about Hermione and her possible connection to Lionel Smith. For some reason, Severus had failed to strike the fear of God into Jack. He considered this a personal failure. He'd have to bloody confound the boy or...or something. He'd figure out something. Maybe he'd send Jack on vacation for the next few months.

He walked back into his shop feeling like a condemned man.

**

That evening, for the first time in years, Severus watched security footage of his shop. He had concocted an elixir and applied it to surfaces in the shop; it wasn't strong enough to register on someone's magical radar but subtly alerted him as to any wayward activity. Within the first six months, theft had essentially ceased, and rumors of Lionel Smith's sixth sense had been greatly exaggerated. There hadn't ever been a need to watch security footage; the only reason he employed a high-tech system was in case an incident requiring the police ever occurred.

He watched as Hermione and Zabini entered the shop, and he smirked. They seemed to be having a spat. But then Zabini came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her and whispered something in her ear, and even his expression of feigned hurt couldn't stop Severus's hand from clenching the remote. What, precisely, were they to each other? She'd said she was...well, he'd assumed she was unattached. But Zabini's charm knew no bounds, and the way he'd embraced her from behind ... so intimate. But what kind of lover was he if he allowed her to sleep alone at night in a drafty old manor "protected" by the Ministry? He took a deep breath and consciously relaxed his facial muscles. Merlin, he was tense. Why was he tense?

He focused his thoughts and watched her so intently he almost missed the moment when Zabini left the shop.

He needed to see what she had seen.

When she paused by the fluxweed and leeches, he knew, and he allowed himself some amount of self-recrimination. She'd paused six times, and each time he'd winced at himself. How could he have been so careless?

He'd tell Caroline to rearrange the shop tomorrow and to keep rotating certain items for the next few weeks. The next time Hermione stopped in, things would be different, and she would assume that such placements had been a coincidence.

He hoped.

But Merlin, he thought as he rewound the tape to watch her peruse the shop...dear Merlin, she was brilliant.

**

Hours later, after a glass of Ogdens, he held the blood-masking draught in his hands, debating whether or not to Disillusion himself and slip across the barrier once more. An image of Blaise and Hermione *in medias res* arose, and he clenched the draught in his hand.

No.

Not tonight, at least.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 9

In which there is cookware, a confrontation, and yarn.

Disclaimer: The only dividend this pays is personal satisfaction.

Author's Note: RL things have been a bit hectic, but I'm thrilled to be back. I love this story, and I hope that you stick along for the ride.

Many thanks to my alphas, machshefa and Subversa, and betas, richardgloucester and sshg316. You ladies rock my socks, float my boat, and all that jazz.

When Hermione walked into the kitchen for breakfast, Pip was frying eggs in a red frying pan.

"Is that...?" Hermione's eyes widened as she took in the elegant design and the telltale cherry enamel. "Le Creuset."

"It is being heavier than what Pip is used to, but it is being very nice," Pip said.

"When did it arrive?"

"It was waiting in the Floo this morning. There is being a note here, Miss," Pip said.

Hermione saw the parchment on the countertop and read it:

Fine cookware for a fine friend.

The red suits you.

Love, Blaise

She put the note down and, with a wave of her wand, opened every cabinet in the kitchen. She saw the red cast iron in several cabinets: cookware, bakeware, a few pitchers and serving pieces...sweet Merlin. Blaise had outdone himself. She bit her lip; she could have afforded every piece, and though she knew that it had hardly dented Blaise's wallet to outfit the kitchen, she felt as though *she* should have been the one to do it. And Blaise was right...Lyonesse needed refurbishing in more ways than one. So why had she not had the desire?

"Is this all being from the man who was visiting yesterday?" Pip asked.

"Yes," Hermione said, walking around the kitchen to close the cabinets one by one. "Blaise is a good friend."

Pip crinkled his brow. "Is Miss being betrothed to this Mister Blaise?"

Hermione laughed, taken aback by the suggestion. "No...he's just a friend."

"But..." Pip looked very confused. "Wizards only give gifts like this to their witches."

"Blaise doesn't have a witch," Hermione explained. Or a wizard, for that matter.

"Does he want you to be his witch?"

Dear Merlin. She needed more caffeine if he was going to ask these kinds of questions. "I...I just got up, Pip. I'm going to make coffee," she said.

"I is being sorry for asking too many questions, Miss!" Pip cried, and Hermione reached him before he could smack his head against the stove.

"You are *not* to beat yourself, Pip. Do you understand?" Hermione asked. "Please continue with breakfast, if you'd be so kind."

"The eggs! Pip is burning them!" Pip wailed, and Hermione sat down at the kitchen table and put her head in her hands. Living with a house elf was harder than she thought it'd be.

**

Hermione sent Pip on an errand so as to ensure that breakfast would be a quiet affair. Her eggs and toast were cooked to perfection, the coffee was deliciously bold, and she was alone with her thoughts at last.

Their trip into town had been interrupted, and Blaise had fallen over himself apologizing for being called in to work. He probably thought that the cookware was an apology; he'd always been an extravagant gift-giver. It wasn't that he'd given her a complete set of Le Creuset, per se, that bothered her: it was that she hadn't wanted to give the *manor* such a gift. She had learned from her reading that the manor was a magical being; it had taken in its builders' magical energy during the construction, and the family had sealed it with enchantments before the last brick had been laid. It was not quite sentient, but it could react to goings-on in the home...she supposed she would soon find out the toll that years of neglect had taken. Lyonesse had fallen into utter disrepair, and to what end? To be taken up by a wealthy Muggle-born witch-cum-War Hero who needed a new hobby?

Pathetic.

She hadn't even been here a week, and it was unfair to expect to have bonded with the manor already, but she felt like there was something chafing, some kind of friction that wouldn't allow her to get close. The portraits, the libraries, the house-elf who made breakfast for you ... it was like she'd stepped into a historical property, one of those old English castles that she'd toured as a little girl with her decidedly middle-class parents; she'd felt, for a moment, like she was a part of Tudor England, like she was there. This was how she felt in Lyonesse, but it was a bit eerie, too, like she'd stepped into an old abandoned, enchanted castle, living someone else's fairy tale. She snorted; who, then, would be the Beast? The house-elf or the ghost?

She'd come here because she needed something different, but living here felt messy and incomplete...temporary. The halls were still tinged with grey, cobwebs still hung from the ceiling, and she left the manor dark most of the time...why expend magical energy to maintain the empty places?

Was she treading lightly because it had been Professor Snape's house? It hardly felt like a home, and Hermione doubted he'd ever spent much time here. What was she trying to do here? Renovate it so...so what? So she could call this home? Set up a study in the library, hear the sound of her children's footsteps racing down the halls, inhabit her own portrait one day?

That was part of it, she realized. As dark and dank as Lyonesse was, it reeked of traditions and of the family that had cherished and created them. The Princes may have been purebloods, and they may have been Slytherins, but there were children's bedrooms, a stable for horses, an old, creaky rocking horse in the attic. Last night, she'd found sachets in the lowest drawer of the armoire in the Master Bedroom. The sachets had smelled of ginger and cinnamon, and Hermione thought that the woman who'd used them must have loved Christmas, winter, all that crackling firewood and spice.

Had Professor Snape ever got to know his family home like this? It was uncomfortable, getting so personal, getting so close. It felt like she was invading some sacred, private space to which she didn't belong.

Thinking about the sachets' owner had kept her up, and so she'd gone down to the library in the middle of the night, had pulled that beautiful leather-bound book that wouldn't open for her from the shelf. She'd set it down next to her in front of the fire and talked to it...Circe, she must have sounded ridiculous, but she hadn't known what else to do. How was she supposed to bring the manor into modernity without understanding its past and the people who'd created it? She supposed she could have gone to the Portrait Hall, but the book felt more intimate, as though the words would be more *true*, not some portrait's over-glorified or critical opinion of themselves or others. No matter that she couldn't read any of the words in the book, but she had a feeling that the book listened.

She finished her breakfast. Regardless of whether she understood Lyonesse, she was going to renovate it. Determination had to count for something.

**

Hermione was sitting in a wing-backed leather chair by the fire reading her books on renovation when she heard someone cough. She looked up and almost dropped her book. "Edmund! You startled me. Um, how long have you been standing there?"

He laughed but stayed as he was: arms folded across his chest, seemingly leaning against the fireplace. "A few minutes. How are you, Hermione?"

She was going to have to get over his resemblance to Professor Snape sooner or later. His expression was kind, and she focused on that: the kindness, the warmth she'd never felt in Potions class. "Just reading a few books on renovation...I think these are the ones you had Pip collect for me. They've been most useful."

He looked pleased. "What is the most valuable lesson you've learned so far?"

"That the manor is almost a sentient being, a living thing, thrumming with magic, cognizant of its care, or lack of." She bit her lip and debated whether to ask her next question. "Edmund, do you know if Professor Snape was here much?"

He stilled. "He was here infrequently."

"I just..." She shook her head. "This place is so... how could you not care for it? I know he had other priorities and obligations, but to let it just crumble..."

"It was crumbling before his grandfather died," Edmund interrupted.

"Then damn them both," Hermione muttered, surprising herself.

"That's a quick judgment to make, Miss Granger."

She looked at him crossly. "I asked you not to call me that."

"And I'd ask you not to be overly critical of that which you do not know. You were not here when either of them was alive."

She wanted to say *I watched him die, do you think that counts?* but instead she set her book down and dragged her knees to her chest, giving herself time to think. When she spoke, she was calm. "I don't know the history of the place, but there's tradition...family...around every corner. I've found perfume sachets and a rocking horse and toys. There was a *family* here. A family I'm not a part of."

"Given the state this family fell into, you should be happy for that," Edmund said, his tone dry.

"So I don't get to criticize them but you do?"

"They're my family. Seems fair."

She was so tired. She didn't know what to say.

"Hermione," Edmund said, his voice soft, almost gentle. "You're doing a good thing here. You're right; this is a beautiful home...one that shouldn't have fallen to its present state." His voice sounded strained.

"Can you help me?" she asked, looking up at him, feeling like a schoolgirl.

Edmund pointed at his chest. "Ghost."

She chuckled in spite of herself. "I mean, the supporting me...talking, helping, suggesting books?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I don't see why not. Although according to the portraits, you have support."

Her brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"There was a man here."

"Oh, Blaise." She waved a hand. "He's just a friend."

Edmund arched an eyebrow.

"No, not you, too...Pip already interrogated me with that old fashioned rubbish about how if a man buys you cookware then you're betrothed. No. Nowadays, men and women can be friends *without* sex getting in the way, and thank goodness, because it complicates things an awful lot...oh my God," she said, starting to blush fiercely, "I hope I haven't offended..."

"Me and my pre-Victorian sensibilities?" Edmund looked as though he was doing his damndest not to laugh. "I've been around a long time, Hermione. Sexual mores have changed, and you shouldn't have to censor yourself around me."

She could still feel her cheeks burning. "Okay," she said, and then she remembered another question she had. "Well, since you asked me about Blaise ... can I ask about Hyacinth Grey?"

His lips became thinner, if possible. "You've been talking with Charlotte."

She felt as though she'd made a terrible error, but he'd asked her about Blaise, and that rankled a bit...just a bit. "Well?"

He closed his eyes. "Hyacinth was ... important to me. Forgive me, but I am not comfortable answering. Charlotte put you up to the question because she knew it would make me uncomfortable ... she never did like me much," he mused.

"But it's been..." Hermione started, thinking out loud, and Edmund suddenly looked annoyed.

"A long time?" He snorted. "If you lost the person you loved, how long would it take you to recover? And think about the ghosts who occupied your school...surely you know of the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron? They've been ghosts for over a thousand years." He looked her in the eye. "Tell me, Hermione, have you ever loved deeply?"

Her heart was beating fast. This conversation wasn't going the way she'd thought it would.

He stared at her, unflinching. "I asked if you have ever loved deeply."

"No," she whispered, looking at the fire.

"I thought not."

"I didn't mean to offend," she said, eyes downcast. "I was just curious."

"Curiosity is a trait of yours, isn't it?" he asked with a small chuckle. "I'd best be going, but I wanted to talk briefly with you as you start the renovations, and it wouldn't do to punish you just because you're too much of a Gryffindor," he said. "The first and most important rule: the minute you feel tired, stop. The manor absorbs your magical energy as you rebuild it; when you tire, eat and rest. Wizards have seriously injured themselves trying to rush a renovation. Your magic must remain vibrant and plentiful. I'd also recommend bringing in professionals to do the electricity and plumbing...don't forget to charge the Ministry for their services."

She noted the information and reminded herself that he was not a servant to be bidden and kept around at her request, though she dearly wished to talk with him more. "Thank you, Edmund. I hope to see you again soon."

"Even after all this?" he asked, his lips quirking into what looked to be a smile. "You will, Hermione. You will." And he walked away.

**

By mid-day, she was ready to throw her books against the wall. Not that she'd ever dishonour books in that manner, and not that she disliked researching magical renovation, but she was ready to stop studying and start *doing*. But she was nervous and... and... She wanted Edmund to be there for the first time.

Her tried and true solution in such frustrated times was to knit. She'd promised Ginny a baby blanket, but more urgently, she needed get out of the manor, and she'd noticed that the yarn shop in Coleworth was open on Sundays. Devoting the rest of the day to tactile de-stressing seemed like a good plan. She let Pip know where she was going and she took off down the path behind the manor, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders to warm herself against the crisp breeze. Didn't England realize that it was May?

Coleworth was surprisingly bustling for a Sunday afternoon, and Hermione was pleased to find that the Yarn Emporium was indeed open. She opened the door and a bell rang, announcing her arrival, but she could scarcely hear it over the buzz of noise; there were quite a few women in the shop, lingering around the till, talking and laughing. All the better to let her shop in peace, she thought, taking in her surroundings. Two walls were covered from top to bottom with yarn, all kinds of color and fibre, from wool and cotton to mohair and alpaca. A smile spread across her face, and she set about her business.

"Can I help you?"

Hermione snapped out of her reverie and noticed that the woman was standing next to her. She was tall, and her long, chocolate-brown hair was streaked with silver. "I was just browsing," Hermione said, smiling. "You've got a lovely selection."

"Thank you. Are you visiting the area?" the woman asked. "I'm Susan, by the way."

"Hermione." The two women shook hands. "And I'm new here; I'm renting the manor for a little while."

Susan raised her eyebrows. "That's a forbidding place. Quite a bit of local legend around it."

"It's a bit bigger than I expected," Hermione said. That was putting it mildly.

"It's certainly a lot to take on. Are you there by yourself?"

"Yeah. I like it, though. It's secluded, quiet," Hermione said, staring at the bright colors.

Susan nodded. "Lots of people come down here for the quiet, fleeing the horrors of professional life in the city...myself included," she said. "Are you finding what you're looking for?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm not sure."

"I meant the yarn," Susan said with a kind smile. "How long have you been at the manor?"

"A week, maybe?"

Susan laughed. "Overachiever, are we?"

Hermione nodded, feeling rather like a schoolgirl.

"The peace and quiet doesn't come right away, and it can't be forced. It's frustrating, that way. I found that knitting helps, and it seems you've hit upon a similar solution," Susan said, smiling. She tucked a hair behind her ear. "I'll let you keep browsing. Let me know if you have any questions."

Hermione hoped knitting would help...it was a methodical, tactile process that produced a tangible, finished product. One that would be used by friends she loved. She thought of James, who clung to the blue blanket she'd made several years ago; he called it "Blue" as though it were a stuffed animal. She bit her lip as she sorted through yarn, thinking about her friends, deciding what material would be softest for the new baby, what colors would be best. Harry and Ginny had decided not to tell anyone what they were having this time, so Hermione decided on sunshine yellow and a soft orange...no doubt their children would all be Gryffindors. But at the last minute, she reached for a sage green, not knowing how she'd use it, but feeling that it was necessary.

Having made her selections, she went to pay. She was very pleased with the quality of yarn and told Susan as much, but then she saw Caroline walk by the window, and her mind took another course entirely. What would Susan know about the shop next door, about the absent owner who arranged his ingredients just so...?

And then Susan gave her the perfect opening: "How did you find out about the shop?"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "I went to the herbalist yesterday..."

"Oh, did you meet Lionel?" Susan asked, obviously curious.

"No," Hermione started. "But I'd like to."

"Into herbal remedies, are you? He attracts a lot of business...well, we both do. Our shops are a bit unusual for a place as small as Coleworth, and so we draw quite a lot of custom from surrounding towns. A few tourists, but not many." Susan handed her the bag of goods.

"Is he around much? I'd like to chat with him," Hermione said.

"Well, he's a reticent sort," Susan said, drumming her fingernails against the counter. "We don't chat much, save a hello and how are you, and we've been neighbours now for quite a few years. He's an honest and fair businessman, and his instincts are just uncanny. But he's not much for talking. I'm sorry; I don't mean to discourage you."

Hermione was hardly discouraged. "What do you mean by uncanny instincts?"

Susan looked thoughtful. "Just that he seems to know when people need things. He's helpful; he'll let people buy on credit when they're having a hard time, and he's hired people who needed the work, including my niece. I think he feels more than he lets on."

Good to know. "I'll keep that in mind. It was lovely to meet you, Susan."

"You, as well. If you do see Lionel, tell him I say hello," Susan said, a bemused smile on her face as Hermione left the shop.

**

"That's a pretty one. I haven't seen 'er hereabouts," the bartender said, watching the brunette through the glass. "You get a look at 'er, Lionel?"

Snape turned his head from where he sat at the bar and watched Hermione walk out of the Yarn Emporium. Surprising; potentially annoying. He liked having his Sunday afternoons in the pub, but then, he didn't figure her for a pub kind of girl.

He tossed back the rest of his beer. "Too young for me, Jim."

"I'm just sayin', you don't see arses like that every day," Jim said, refilling his glass.

"Mm," Snape murmured noncommittally, his eyes on her as she started down the path that led to Lyonesse.

Indeed.

A/N: Someone has a cameo, and it's not a beta. Ten points to the reviewer who guesses Susan's identity and why she's here. *grin

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 9

In which there is a piano and a realisation.

Disclaimer: What you recognize is JKR's.

A/N: Your patience knows no bounds, dear readers, for which I am exceedingly grateful. This last year has proved to be rather brutal, work-wise, and I do not foresee that letting up in the spring. I will endeavor to update as often as possible, and know that in spite of the lag between updates, I have never failed to finish a story and have no intention of starting now. My goal (dare I call it a resolution?) is to finish *The Tenant of Lyonesse Hall* by August of this year.

Many thanks to Subversa for alpha reading and to richardgloucester and sshg316 for beta reading, even in the midst of the holidays.



He rode hard, worked himself and Perdita up into a heavy sweat by the time they reached Land's End. Usually they didn't go out this far on a morning ride, especially on a Monday, but he needed some distance. So they trotted along the crag, getting too close to the edge for safety but feeling confident in their abilities all the same. The water was so calm this early in the morning, gently lapping over rocks, the barest hint of whitecaps coming only when the water climbed the rocky crags and then fell back to the ocean below. He dismounted and sat on a particularly grassy patch of land, and Perdita stood next to him, the sun's rays pounding down on them as clouds shifted. He stroked her leg; she whinnied.

"Oh, Perdy," he murmured, stripping off his sweat-soaked undershirt and charming it dry, "what am I doing?"

**

He arrived at work late. Caroline greeted him politely; Jack arched an eyebrow but remained silent, for once. Severus went to his office and closed the door, perusing yesterday's figures, making sales goals for the day, and performing a discreet magical inventory (it was so much quicker). Caroline had already stocked the floor, and they were a few minutes away from opening.

Severus tried to concentrate on his paperwork, but his mind kept drifting back to Hermione...to their conversation, to her impertinence. He'd hoped to avoid the issue of Hyacinth Grey. His dear Aunt Charlotte wasn't playing nice...but then, neither was he. The portraits had been bored out of their minds for the last twenty years; it shouldn't surprise him that they were trying to weasel their way out of his rules. And Charlotte was particularly clever. If he recalled correctly, she'd given his grandfather hell in his day.

Best to make sure all his facts were straight about Li...Hyacinth before continuing.

He set his papers down and put his head in his hands. He was tired, so tired. When he had first read Edmund and Hyacinth's story as a young man, his hands had shook and he'd broke out in a cold sweat. A spy executed for his betrayal, in love with a Muggle woman who convinces herself he's a traitor?

Not quite the story, but still. It was close. Too close. Which perhaps accounted for his lashing out at Hermione, after her question. He heard Hyacinth, but he thought Lily. It had been unfair of him to put Hermione in such a corner, but the girl had pluck.

He reminded himself that it wasn't necessarily his company she sought, but rather expertise about magical renovations, about Lyonesse itself...it would have been immature of her to alienate him by requesting that he remove himself from her presence after asking her if she'd ever loved.

It might behoove him to not give her chances to make such requests...

He shook his head, realising that he'd still accomplished some work while lost in thought.

Frightening, how mundane, how simple these tasks had become. If only he had potions to brew instead of paperwork to fill out.

That was the problem: the business had initially done so well that he'd needed the help. He'd hired one or two incompetent souls before finding Caroline; she'd just finished secondary school and was pregnant. She had a quick mind and soaked up information like a sponge; now, four years later, she ran the shop like clockwork.

Then, several years ago, a demand had risen for medicinal remedies. Severus had initially been stumped; his healing knowledge was limited to potions, and he wasn't about to flout the statute of secrecy in such a flagrant fashion. Around the same time, Jack had returned to town. Severus had caught snippets of gossip in line at the grocer (Oxford graduate, sick mother) and he'd heard murmurs at the pub about a no-good father, a carpenter over in Land's End who had no qualms about laying hands on his ex-wife, illness or no.

When Jack showed up for a job interview perfectly suited and groomed save the black eye, Severus knew. He'd inquired, and Jack had shot him a charming smile, said he'd got in the way of a door.

Indeed. A bright young man come home to care for his sick mother and also to defend her from an abusive father? Severus could put up with the lad's infuriating Albus-like twinkling, and if the carpenter got a broken leg every time Jack came into work with bruises, well, so be it. It wasn't as if Severus was a saint, though; Jack wanted to go to medical school and study homeopathic medicine. The remedies he fixed up were the best in the county, and Severus knew it.

But two competent assistants meant that there was little grunt work left for him, just the banality of running a small business in a small village.

It was all so bloody *boring*. Which is why even though Hermione and her nicely curved arse bothered him, he had no intention of leaving well enough alone.

He snorted. No. No intention at all.

In fact, seeing as how there was hardly enough paperwork to justify him spending another hour here, let alone the whole day, he should go visit Hermione, maybe help her with renovations.

Be neighbourly, and all that.

Right.

He gathered his things, locked his office, and strode through the backroom.

"What's got a bee in your bonnet? A lady friend?" Jack asked with a wry smile.

"Keep those questions coming and you'll be off to see the grocer about a job," Severus said, shrugging on his jacket.

Jack gulped. "Duly noted, sir."

"That's more like it," Severus muttered. "Good day, Miss Caroline."

"You as well, sir," Caroline called.

He left the shop in haste; some would call it excitement. He had a project to attend to.

**

He laced his boots, tied the cravat, fixed his hair, downed the draught, and crossed the boundary.

He found her in the Great Hall. She sat bathed in sunlight, the light forming a mocking halo around the fuzz of her curls. She was sitting in front of the multi-story window, but her eyes were not focused on that magnificence.

She was staring at the grand piano. His heart skipped a beat.

"Good morning, Hermione," he said as he approached her.

"Is it still morning?" She looked up at him, and he saw that there were dried tears on her cheeks. What could be bothering her at this hour?

"Forgive me the indelicacy, but are you well?" he asked, grasping for period-appropriate language as his mind reeled. She was crying. In front of his piano.

"The piano," she said, her voice barely audible. "It's still in tune."

It went unspoken: in comparison with everything else in the house. So she wasn't a total loss at deduction; she realised what that meant. How fitting, after her scathing criticism of him yesterday.

"Did he play?" she asked, running her fingers across the ivory keys.

Severus walked to the window and stared out at the front lawn, careful to avoid casting an obvious shadow. He'd come here this morning for amusement and had stumbled into something else entirely.

His mind traveled back to the last time he'd played in this room ... the morning after Dumbledore's death. Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor. The third movement...the *Marche Funébre*. Whether he'd played for Dumbledore or himself, he hadn't known.

Then there was Moonlight Sonata, the morning after Cedric Diggory died.

Mornings. Always mornings, never nights. Mornings filled with grief and death and inevitability. It was one thing to know the dark of the night and quite another to still know it at sunrise.

The piano was the one thing in this house he cared for, so of course, Dumbledore had insisted he leave it. Others knew of his affection for it...anyone who had attended one of his grandfather's parties and found him in the Great Hall, tucked away in a corner playing some classical piece no one cared about. Even Voldemort knew of his ability.

"Yes," he said at last. "He played."

"I can't find sheet music," she said. "Did he play from memory?"

"He wasn't a prodigy," Severus said, his tone a bit sharp. No need for her to romanticise his meager ability. "And he could have been better. He practiced, but he only wanted to learn his favourites, was never too keen on a broad classical education."

"Which pieces?" she asked, and he told her. Of course she knew Moonlight Sonata; her mother had probably been one of those women who held headphones to her belly when pregnant, playing Mozart and Beethoven in the hopes that her child would be a genius.

"I'm not familiar with the rest. Can you...can you play, Edmund?" she asked, and he saw the flash of disappointment when she remembered that he was a ghost.

Well. What good was an illusion if he couldn't improvise a little pureblood lore for his own benefit?

"If you can find the sheet music, I could try. I can access some physicality in the manor; we'll see if it is up to letting me play." Not that the man *would* influence a ghost's access to the physical realm, but she didn't need to know that.

She started searching the room, manic in her determination, and he discreetly waved his hand, tipping over a box of his grandfather's old sheet music in the corner she was searching.

"It seems the manor wants to help us!" she said, excited, and he smirked. She found a few pieces of music and brought it to the piano. She read the selections aloud for him. "Chopin's *Marche Funébre*?"

He opened his mouth to say yes but immediately clamped it shut, hoping she hadn't noticed his error. Edmund might *know* the pieces Severus played, but he would only be able to *play* those written before 1790...think, man, what pieces did he know that were Baroque or early Classical? His grandfather had force-fed him Mozart, Bach, Haydn, trying educate him "properly," but he'd preferred to focus his energies on a few sufficiently dark selections from Beethoven and Chopin. Emphasis on *few*.

"Do you play?" he asked, stalling for time, racking his brain to come up with something that would be in that box.

"Just Chopsticks." She grinned. "I fooled around on my gran's piano every once in a while."

He'd like to fool around on the piano, hear the *thunk* of high and low keys as her feet twitched and kicked...

Inspiration struck. "Is Bach's French Suite No. 1 in D minor in that pile?" he asked.

She flipped through a few pages, and then she smiled. "Yes."

Thank Merlin.

He sat down at the bench and did his best to not exhale in relief. He'd never learned all five movements, let alone mastered them, but he could play the Sarabande passingly, and Hermione wasn't exactly an expert judge.

"Do I need to turn the sheets?" she asked as she placed them in front of him.

"There's a charm that will do that." He told it to her, and she performed it. It was best if she stood, lest he risk touching her during his performance.

He did his best to impersonate an inability to touch the keys. "Damn it, manor, a little help, please," he growled, and he must have been convincing because when he finally played a few notes, Hermione clapped her hands in delight. He stifled an urge to laugh.

Within a few bars, the tenor of the room sobered. His fingers were stiff and so the tempo was a bit off, but she didn't seem to mind. Soon, he almost forgot she was there.

Towards the end of the piece, he heard her sniffing, and he stopped and turned to face her.

"Hermione," he said softly. "What's wrong?" What was this emotion, this concern?

She moved away from the shadows that shrouded the piano and stepped into the great window's light. "You play with feeling," she said slowly. "It ... moves me deeply."

He recalled his words to her yesterday, about whether she'd loved deeply, and he felt a sting. No, she may not have loved deeply, but she had mourned deeply. A tragedy, for a young woman to know so little of *eros* yet to carry a lifetime's worth of grief.

He cleared his throat. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

She cleared her throat. "If you'll excuse me, Edmund, I'm just going to go up to my room to freshen up a bit. You can join me in a bit, if you like...I was hoping to begin renovations on it this afternoon and would appreciate your help."

He nodded once, and she fled the room. As nerve-wracking as it was to see her upset, her flight spared him the problem of having to play another piece.

Merlin only knew what he would have done if she'd asked for Mozart.

Sure that she was gone, he ran his fingers over every key, slowly, lingering, stroking, like a lover. He closed his eyes. Surely, he could play a few notes of the *Marche Funébre* unheard?

She'd unwittingly hit upon his favourite, and he hadn't played in years. His fingers ached to press the keys, to see if they could fly as deftly as they once had; he'd devoted much time to perfecting that piece.

Perhaps such a perfect performance was best left to the imagination.

"Master?"

Severus almost jumped. "Pip," he said, looking down at the house-elf, who looked positively miniscule compared to the piano. "What is it?"

Pip looked at him crossly. "Miss Hermione is being in her room crying. You should not be upsetting her."

Severus sighed. "No, I shouldn't be," he muttered. He raked his hands through his hair. "I'll go and see her."

"Hmph." Pip crossed his arms and Disapparated, presumably to the kitchen.

Severus rose from the piano bench and walked across the room, staring at the floor, purposefully ignoring the boxes that tipped over as he walked past them.

Apparently, the manor wanted to annoy him today.

He walked down the hall and up the stairs, eyes ever on the door to the Master Bedroom to ensure that Hermione wasn't peering out, seeing him walk rather than float. It was one thing for a ghost to walk in the library and quite another for him to walk up stairs.

The door was half-open, and he peered inside. How to announce himself? He couldn't open the door, and he couldn't go through it ... just then, he saw Hermione walk from the bedroom into the bathroom, directly in his line of sight...

Only in denims and a red bra.

He gulped. He moved so that he could only see a sliver, but oh, what he could see in that sliver: her at the bathroom mirror, fussing with her hair. Her back was smooth, her waist tapered, and there was a softness in her reflection...he could see her breasts gently pushing at the bra's edge, the curve of her belly ...

She turned, and he practically flew out of the doorway, his back to the wall, breathing slowly.

She was beautiful. She cared for him.

And he wanted her.

Merlin help him.

A/N: You can find the piano piece Severus plays for Hermione [here](#).

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 9

In which there are fights, feelings, and portraits.

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

A/N: Many thanks to machshefa and Subversa for alpha reading and to richardgloucester and sshg316 for beta reading.

Hermione bounded up the stairs, walked into the master bedroom, lay down on the bed, and took a deep breath. Merlin, why was she sweating so much? She stripped her shirt off and welcomed the blast of cool air against her skin. She closed her eyes, felt the plush bedspread beneath her, smelled the smells that cling to the corners of old homes no matter how hard you scrub (or charm). Tears leaked out of her eyes, and she told herself to get a grip.

Edmund is not Professor Snape. Edmund is not Professor Snape. Edmund is not...

She swallowed hard, wiped at her eyes, willed herself to remember what she'd seen. One moment, she'd been watching a ghost somehow play the piano; the next, she saw *him*...heard his story in the music, saw his eyes, so alive in spite of the ghostly mist, saw the Shack, saw herself watching him.

One moment, the war was over; the next, it was alive...*He* was alive.

She inhaled deeply, then breathed out. Breathed in, then out. In, out. In. Out.

What was she doing? Living in his home, sleeping in his bed.

"Professor Snape is dead, Hermione."

Ordering around his house elf, sitting at his piano.

"But...he can't be! A snakebite, kill a potions master?"

Minerva's eyes were so gentle. "I am sorry that you witnessed it, my dear. Truly, I am."

Conversing with the ghost of one of his ancestors, seeking out his advice, trusting him...a ghost!...just because he looked like her old professor.

"But his body...it wasn't there!"

"Who knows why Hogwarts has chosen to conceal his body? But I have been assured by Fawkes that his body has been taken, and I've no reason to doubt it."

When she talked with Edmund, she could pretend that there was no war, that Snape hadn't died, that he was sitting here, talking with her, finally respecting her abilities...the one teacher she'd been so desperate to please, approving at last.

"Let him lie in peace."

Enough.

She sat up on the bed and put her head in her hands.

Severus Snape was dead, one of too many young wizards and witches whose blood had soaked into the earth and somehow revitalised a society on the verge of collapse. For that, he...they...deserved honour, not some pathetic fantasy idealising a dark knight who could somehow fit back into the society that had rejected him.

Fantasies about him playing at the piano... about him playing *forher*...

She rose from the bed and walked to the bath. Cold water on her face, arms, and torso felt refreshing...gods, she was ~~shot~~. She had to focus. The bedroom had to get done today; she'd been reading and she thought she was ready, and if she didn't have the balls to start now, well, when would she get started?

She stilled a moment, realising that she'd asked Edmund to come up.

"Edmund?" she called out tentatively.

"I'm here. May I come in?" was the reply.

She Summoned her shirt and tugged it on before waving a hand to open the door. "You could have just floated through, you know." Her fist clenched and unclenched at her side. *Merlin, Hermione, try and sound more like an idiot.*

It was all she could do to not laugh at the look on his face, though. He looked positively scandalised.

"The way I was brought up, a gentleman never enters a lady's bedchamber uninvited," he said, his glance particularly stern.

"Well, consider yourself invited," Hermione said automatically, and she looked at the wall, deliberately not thinking about the way her heart had skipped a beat.

When she looked back at Edmund, it seemed as though he had been fidgeting with his cravat, although his hand moved too quickly for her to be sure. He was uncomfortable, though, that was certain.

"We had... *rules*... about who was allowed into such chambers. Rules with consequences. They are not easily bred out of a person, no matter how many years dead."

Her brow crinkled. "Did Pureblood manors have enchantments forbidding men from entering young ladies' chambers?"

Edmund looked mildly exasperated. "Have I not been saying so?"

"I...I'm..."

"Don't worry yourself, Hermione," he said, his tone now patient. "There were typically two enchantments...one, that a man could not enter a woman's chamber without her permission. Second, that he could not enter without her father's."

Hermione's eyes widened. Edmund nodded. "You grasp the wisdom, yes? Such enchantments were, interestingly enough, performed by mothers. The father's consent forbade young women from admitting their beaux, but the woman's consent forbade the entrance of men who typically had access to all areas of the manor...servants, even family members. Especially family members."

"That's quite forward thinking, for Purebloods."

Edmund snorted. "If you think incest produces undesirable results in Muggle children, you should see what happens when the family is magical."

Hermione thought of Merope Gaunt and shuddered. "Did all Purebloods...?"

"No. But the Prince family, for its many faults, has never tolerated that particular perversity in Masters of the manor."

"Comforting."

"You should take a look at the dungeons and talk to the ghosts of servant girls before painting a rosy picture of this family. Its regard for its own daughters is not indicative of its regard for others' daughters. Or sons."

Hermione swallowed hard. "I..." She paused. "Dungeons?"

He bared his teeth in a rather feral grin. "Frightened?"

"Interested, actually." She pretended not to notice that Edmund's jaw almost hit the floor, and reminded herself that eighteenth century ladies no doubt had not discussed such things with men. "You mentioned ghosts?"

"They've moved on, but there was one who haunted the kitchens when I was a youth. My... father tried to prevent her from talking with me. He was afraid it would poison my family pride."

"Did it?"

"I'm sorry to say it didn't. I didn't have much regard for women at the time."

"And now?"

"I do. But we've strayed from the subject. You asked me up for another reason than to discuss my family's perversities, I believe."

"Yes," she said, relieved for the change of topic. "I would like you to help coach me through the first renovation."

Edmund quirked an eyebrow. "I do not recall any mention of coaching."

She gave a small smile. "Moral support, then."

He appeared to lean against the bedpost. "Tell me the first step."

"I listen for the slight vibration that indicates the..." she searched for the word "...thrums of the manor's energy. It's like hearing a rushing river. Then I cast a spell to amplify the sound so I can better lock in to the manor's energy."

"Close your eyes and do so."

She closed her eyes. She'd been practising this; it was almost like meditation. Once she locked in to the centre, she locked in and cast the spell so that the sound of the manor's energy was audible.

"Very good," Edmund said. "It's listening. Now focus on the room you want to change."

"I've already centered my energy on the master bedroom and adjoining bath, with particular emphasis on the rooms' structure, insulation, windows, and portal."

She heard him murmur "Excellent," and her body shuddered at the word as she lifted her wand. She had come to prefer wandless magic, but a wand was needed to focus the amount of power she was directing. The harmonising of her magical energy with the manor's, the power needed to direct her will within the manor's will, required a synergy unlike any she'd ever managed on her own.

She felt her wand begin to vibrate as she fully tapped into the manor's... source, for lack of a better word, and she held on for dear life as the manor's energy flowed in the general direction of her will. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she felt like she was on a roller coaster.

The vibration lessened gradually, easing her down, and when the flow of energy ceased, it released her so suddenly that she crashed to the floor, her eyes finally opening.

"Don't get up right away. Take your time. Breathe."

She closed her eyes and relaxed into the floor, completely spent. How long she lay there, she didn't know.

"Miss will be needing tea and toast." She opened her eyes and saw Pip with a tray, suddenly realising that she was on the bed. She sat up against the headboard, exhausted.

"Miss needed to be comfortable," Pip said, snapping his fingers so that the covers crawled around her body, wrapping her in a cocoon. He set the tray on her lap. Grateful, she reached for toast and gulped down tea without a care for the heat.

"How was it?" Edmund asked. She looked up sharply, having nearly forgotten that he was there. He stood near the doorway, eyes watching her intently.

"I...I was holding on for dear life. I'm amazed I kept the magic in this room. It wanted to spread, and I barely had the energy to contain it, let alone dictate the designs, the ways it improved the room."

"Time for that later," Edmund said softly, and Hermione finally looked around the room to see what she'd accomplished. The floors had been stone; they were now a burnished mahogany. The two windows were new, and one had been transformed into a bay window. The room was rich with color...crimson and green so dark as to almost be black, silver and gold threads weaving through the room seamlessly. She could see into the bathroom...the claw-foot porcelain tub had been refurbished, and the floors were marble. Indeed, in the two rooms, only four-poster bed remained unchanged.

Hermione turned to Edmund. "This all costs money. This isn't... this can't be transfiguration..."

"The manor is obviously ecstatic to have something to do. I'd say it's showing off for you. And don't worry about money; the manor has stores of magical investment...hundreds of years, in fact...which easily translate into such renovations. It's more akin to an alchemical process than transfiguration. The marble sink won't just disappear one day. Not to worry."

"It looks so... rich. Do all renovations look like this?"

"No. Perhaps the manor is grateful to be appreciated after so many years of neglect," Edmund said, staring at a window.

"But..."

"Hermione. You've given the manor as much as it's given you here. You've put new lifeblood into its stores; you've invested some of your own energy in this place. That is powerful...I'm not sure you realise how much the manor values those who take the time to do this." He paused, arching an eyebrow. "Surely this isn't a game to you?"

She was incensed more quickly than she would have thought possible. "If you weren't a ghost, I'd slap you. Just because I don't fully comprehend all the Pureblood stuff doesn't mean I don't value this."

Edmund chuckled. "She has pluck."

"And you have some nerve. You're *dead*, Edmund. Dead. You have no right to ask after my motives here." She instantly regretted her words, but then, he didn't look as though they had even landed.

"True enough, Miss Granger," he said casually, and he walked out of the room.

She leaned against the headboard with a thunk, trying to make sense of what had just happened, but found that she was too tired to think, too tired to feel, too tired to do anything but lie down and rest.

**

Edmund did not visit the next day.

Or the next.

Or the next.

So she did what she knew how to do: work. The parlor was renovated, magical plumbers and electricians were called, and by the time a fortnight had passed, every bathroom had been finished and the halls and many rooms found their lighting much improved. Hermione exhausted herself...too busy to spend time with her own thoughts, too spent to even dream.

Hermione was in the Portrait Hall, almost finished with a relatively simple floor renovation, when a voice startled her out of her focus.

"You fancy him, don't you?"

Surprised, she lost focus for an instant, and was thrown out of the manor's river, as she'd come to call it, so harshly that she fell to the floor. Breathing heavily, she looked at the portrait responsible.

"You could have picked a better time to chat me up, Charlotte."

Charlotte grinned, obviously pleased with herself. "I know."

"You know that none of you have spoken to me since..."

"Since I told you about Hyacinth Grey, yes. We're none too fond of Mud..."

"*Charlotte*," several voices admonished.

Hermione wasn't certain who had spoken on her behalf. "Thank you," she said, completely bewildered. She looked at the smug blonde. "Why are you deigning to talk to me?"

"Angry?"

"The renovations take a lot out of a person. I was almost finished," Hermione said through gritted teeth.

"It's not as if you can do things to me. You're not Mistress," Charlotte said, prancing about her portrait, fixing the position of the tea tray.

Hermione gave a menacing grin. "But there are knives in the kitchen."

A gasp resounded in the hall. "You wouldn't!" Charlotte said.

"Oh, I would," Hermione replied, walking up to the portrait so that she was almost nose-to-nose with Edmund's great-whatever-aunt. "I am a Mudblood, after all. What possible value could Pureblood portraits have for me?" She leaned in even closer. "Try me."

Charlotte's lip quivered.

"Now. Tell me why you interrupted my work."

Charlotte folded her arms across her chest. "Well, he hasn't been by in a while. And you were working like a woman possessed."

"Which only means that I was focused."

"You *miss* him," Charlotte said. "You are either working or moping. Pip is quite beside himself; he doesn't know what to do with you."

Hermione glared. "I do not mope!"

"Why do you miss him?" Charlotte asked, tilting her head.

"I...I don't...I..." Hermione sputtered, but then tears started trailing down her cheeks. She wiped them furiously. "I don't miss him."

Charlotte gave her a look that suggested otherwise.

Hermione put her hands on her hips and looked down at the floor, letting her frizzy curls cover her face while the tears flowed.

"I miss him, all right?" she said, not looking at any of them. "I miss his company. He knew a lot about this place and I'm having to... ~~to~~ guess at some things, and I don't like guessing. I want to know, but he's not here to tell me, and he could make me laugh, and he kept me company during the day, and when I was with him, I didn't feel so alone and, my God, he's a ghost, something is desperately wrong with me."

"Oh, child," a voice said. She sounded older, wiser, and more compassionate than Charlotte. Hermione looked around, and then heard, "Here at the end of the hall."

She walked to the end, to the grand portrait shrouded in shadow. The woman in the portrait had always been so silent that Hermione had been irrationally intimidated by her, but now she looked down at Hermione with eyes so kind it seemed impossible there had ever been a menacing bone in her body. She was seated in a throne-like chair and was dressed in a rose-colored gown that spread almost the entire width of the frame. Jewels dripped from her neck, her bodice, her wrists, and a simple gold diadem contrasted with her flowing white hair.

"Is there a particular reason you are drawn to Edmund?" the woman asked.

"I..."

"Answer me true, child," the woman said, smiling.

"He... This is so embarrassing." Hermione fidgeted with her shirt, looking at the floor.

"Many young people have confided in me over the years. I promise you, I've heard stranger."

Hermione chuckled in spite of herself. "He reminds me of Professor Snape." She couldn't look at the portrait. "Professor Snape was..."

"I know. What reminds you of him?"

She sighed. "His...everything," she said, feeling some relief at being able to admit the resemblance. "He looks identical to Professor Snape, and his personality... some mannerisms he has... I mean, obviously Edmund is much nicer than Professor Snape, but I have to think, if not for the war... I don't know, I'm sorry, I'm babbling."

The woman looked at her kindly. "Have faith, child."

Hermione looked up just as she saw the portrait close her eyes. "Wait! What's your name?"

She opened her eyes. "Anna." She smiled and then resumed her restful posture.

Have faith. Hermione had no idea what that meant.

Severus stared at his fireplace and moped. He hadn't been to the manor in a fortnight. Good riddance, he had thought that day in the Master Bedroom. He had only meant to inquire as to the seriousness of her commitment, and she'd flown off the handle at him. He'd been surprised at her impertinence, at the reminder that he was dead, that Hermione fucking Granger would stoop to such insults. The fact that he was alive was irrelevant; it was the principle of the thing. Women, honestly.

He swirled the whisky in his glass, watching the firelight that was caught in the glass. He would not go visit her again. He absolutely would not. Loneliness was far preferable to having to deal with an insolent girl. Then again, she had an effect on his disposition that he didn't understand. Without her...without visits to the manor, he corrected himself...he'd fallen into a state of particularly surly behavior. Jack had said as much at work today, and Severus had threatened to fire him on the spot. Really mustn't go about threatening the security of Jack's job too often; enough failure to follow through would ruin any chance he had of striking the fear of God into the man.

A part of his mind reminded him that paucity of time at Lyonesse had never particularly affected him one way or the other, and that perhaps it was the current tenant that was so affecting him (and causing such a depletion in his supply of booze), but really, that was all irrelevant.

This is what Severus told himself.

He poured himself another glass.

**

At two in the morning, he stumbled through his fireplace into the library at Lyonesse. He hadn't dressed the part nor bothered with the blood-masking draught, and the fires in the library practically roared their approval. He Disillusioned himself and made his way up the stairs to the Master Bedroom, where he stood in the doorway, intoxicated by whisky and recklessness and desire for the woman lying underneath the sheets.

Severus stood there watching her for Merlin knows how long, and he was nearly dozing off against the doorway she called, "Who's there?" He opened his eyes to find her sitting up in bed, camisole askew, eyes darting about the room. He stood still in spite of being startled; those years in the bondage of his masters counted for something, he thought.

"Pip?" Hermione called, looking about the room. She bit her lip and then said, "Edmund?" Her eyes looked so hopeful, so damn hopeful. After another moment, she lay back down and covered herself, and the look of disappointment on her face nearly split his heart in two.

He left in haste, half regretting his drunken excursion and half rejoicing in what he had seen. At least, he could rejoice now...Merlin only knew what his sober self would think in the morning.

A/N: Extra thanks go to the lovely Subversa for letting me install her in a portrait.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 9

In which there is a reunion and a reckoning.

Disclaimer: The only dividend this pays is personal satisfaction.

A/N: The enthusiasm richardgloucester and sshg316 have for this story encourages me to be a better writer. Many thanks to those ladies for working on this chapter.

Severus awoke with a bitch of a hangover and spent the morning justifying his conviction that he should, in fact, visit the manor. He thought about it as he downed the hangover draught, as he cooked his breakfast, as he showered. It was his family home, after all, and he wasn't about to be kept away by some wallowing girl. Obviously she missed him, and without him to supervise he was sure that her attempts at renovation had been limited. Perhaps she would apologise.

It was settled then. He would go to seek her apology and supervise a major renovation. After all, he had to be certain that she wasn't making a mess of the manor.

**

The minute he stepped into the library, Pip appeared in front of him, enraged. Severus reckoned that he'd never seen Pip turn such a shade of red.

"You are angry with me," Severus said, keeping his voice calm.

"Pip is not being happy, Master Severus. Pip is not being happy *at all*," Pip said, folding his arms across his chest. "Master is making Miss Hermione very sad. She is not eating, and she is working too much."

"Has she been doing major renovations?" Severus asked, stunned.

"She is trying. And she is being so sad! Sad all the time. She is missing you, and you is not caring enough to come see her!"

"I...Pip..."

Pip pointed his finger at Severus. "Is you playing *agame* with Miss? Miss is caring for you, and I is going to hurt you if you hurt Miss." Pip glared at him, and Severus knew his face must be ashen. He leaned against the fireplace.

"I didn't realise..."

"Is obvious you was not realising."

"She cares for me?" he asked before he could stop himself. How pathetic was this, looking to a house-elf to help him in this... relationship? He inhaled sharply, prepared to move past his question, when Pip spoke.

"She is caring too much. She is not knowing you is real, but she *is* knowing how much Edmund is like Professor Snape, and she is wanting you. She is being very sad that you is a ghost."

"You can't be serious," Severus said, eyes wide. His heart started beating more quickly. Was it possible that she saw past the façade, that she ~~saw~~ saw him, even if she chose to believe the illusion?

"Pip is saying too much. Pip is betraying the one mistress who is caring for him!" Pip started banging his head against the fireplace, and Severus stooped down to stop him.

"Stop. Stop, Pip. Do not beat yourself. You said nothing wrong." Severus swallowed hard. "I'm going to go and see her. Where is she?"

"The master bedroom," Pip said, crestfallen, and Severus' heart clenched a little to leave him there. But he needed Hermione. Needed to see Hermione, he corrected himself.

Hermione was sitting on her bed, pen and notebook in hand, making a long list of the to-do projects for the manor. She'd been here exactly three weeks, and it was time to take stock of her progress. Admittedly, making such a list was rather discouraging; in comparison the to-do list, the "accomplished" list looked positively miniscule. The plumber and electrician had done their work, and Hermione had devoted the week to fixing the flooring and crumbling ceilings in various hallways and rooms...and cleaning, and cleaning out. Honestly, the majority of rooms in the manor hadn't been touched in years. She kept finding things that unnerved her...engraved stationery in a desk drawer, a deck of magical playing cards in a child's bed, a box full of perfume vials. She wondered why the home hadn't been more thoroughly cleaned out, but thinking about Professor Snape and his grandfather before him... she imagined they hadn't had the inclination or energy to weed out children's things. So the task fell to her.

She was going through the list of to-do items for the east wing when she heard his voice.

"May I come in?"

Her head jerked up. Edmund. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to allow him entrance. Two weeks, he'd left her here alone, without a word, all because of her impulsive reaction to an impertinent statement.

She could have sworn she heard the sound of a head hitting the door, but that was impossible.

"Hermione, please let me in."

The pleading in his voice twined its way around her like a vine, choking her resistance, making her heart feel so tight it was about to burst. "You may come in," she said, waving the door open, hoping her voice didn't betray how quickly her heart was beating.

He walked in, and the look on his face just about killed her.

"You look terrible," she said frankly.

He shrugged. "Pip was just telling me..." he started, and she bit her lip.

"What was Pip telling you? He's been unnecessarily concerned about me," she said, suddenly feeling defensive. He was a ghost. She shouldn't feel this way about a *ghost*. It was unnatural. He reminded her of Professor Snape, that's all. Remembering that *that* man was also dead made her feel worse.

"He cares for you, Hermione. Don't dismiss a man because of that," Edmund said, his hands open in supplication, and she pursed her lips.

"He's a house-elf, not a man." Hermione hugged her knees to her chest. "You left without saying anything, but you have no obligation here. None to me, none to this house. You didn't have to return. I've accomplished much in your absence...I assure you, your *coaching* is not necessary."

"Have you been working?" he asked, and it sounded like his voice was cracking, but that was a figment of her imagination. She was hearing what she wanted to hear. She couldn't, she just couldn't.

"See for yourself. Go and look around," she said.

He turned slightly but then looked back at her. "I missed you, Hermione. I am sorry for my behavior. It was juvenile, and I beg your forgiveness." Then he walked out the door, whether to inspect the manor or go to wherever he'd been for two weeks, she didn't know.

She put her head in her hands and cried. He was back, but he was a ghost. He was a vapour of his former self. Could ghosts even develop new emotions? Could they feel? She was trying to start a new life, and here she was, in Professor Snape's home, infatuated with a ghost, of all things. Ghosts were people who hadn't moved on, people mired in the past. How appropriate.

Pathetic, Hermione, she told herself. *Just pathetic.*

**

She went downstairs half an hour later and was surprised to find him in the kitchen, examining the appliances. She stood, shocked, in the doorway until he looked up at her. If he was surprised to see her, he didn't let on.

"You've done a great deal," he said, casually looking around the kitchen. "You had a plumber and electrician come?"

"I...yes. You're still here," she said, shaking her head.

"You told me to look around, so as to appreciate the amount of work you've done, I presume. You've done quite a bit. But Pip said you haven't had much appetite."

"I get caught up in my work," she said. "It's not that I don't want to eat, I just... forget to."

He chuckled. "That sounds familiar. Pip must be around here somewhere. Have you eaten today?"

She shook her head immediately, and Pip popped into the kitchen as if Summoned.

"If you could cook Miss Hermione her lunch, Pip," Edmund said, and Pip set about doing so without a word.

"It's not your job to take care of me."

"Until you start demonstrating that you can take care of yourself, someone has to look out for you," he said.

"See..." she pointed her finger at him "...that is the kind of condescending bullshit I do not want to put up with from you. I don't give a damn how you treated women in your time, but I am a single woman and an almost-homeowner, and I don't need a *ghost* looking out for my welfare. I was doing just fine before you came along."

"And what, pray tell, were you doing?" Edmund asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"Figuring out my life," she said, sitting down at the table, the chair grating harshly across the floor.

"And how is that going for you?" he asked.

She sighed. "Like shit."

He chuckled. "Look who has a mouth today."

"Look who decided to show up today," she shot back.

"I apologised," he said, his eyes seeming to bore into her. "I cannot express to you how sorry I am, how much I missed you."

Tears filled her eyes, and she looked away, not wanting him to see.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

She turned back to him with a rueful smile. "Ghosts and humans aren't supposed to care for each other."

His eyebrows shot up. "That's news to me. I grew up surrounded by ghosts in this place. They were some of my best childhood friends."

"Not... I mean... never mind." She paused. "I was thinking of doing part of the library today."

"I think you should rest today. Not that you need to heed my advice," he amended quickly, "but it's apparent to me that you've attempted to take on a lot, and all those supposedly small jobs can weary a person. Given your diet, you need rest."

"What would you propose I do with my day off? Spend it with you?" she asked, quirked an eyebrow, and he chuckled.

"I...I think we're both a little off kilter today."

"Do ghosts even have feelings?" she asked before she could stop herself.

He was silent for a moment. "This one does," he said, looking straight at her. "Perhaps a trip to the coast or into town would do the trick."

She looked out the window at the back garden, which she'd been slowly tending back to life. "We'll see."

He pursed his lips. "I should go. I'll call on you tomorrow."

"Okay." She stared at the plate Pip brought to her for her meal, and didn't watch him as he went.

"Edmund is not being good for Miss," Pip said. "I was being quiet while you two was talking, but now I is saying my piece. He is being no good. He is ghost and you is not."

She sighed. "I know, Pip. I know."

**

Going into town turned out to be a good idea, though she wasn't about to thank Edmund for it. She picked up some yarn at Susan's yarn shop, and, on impulse, went into the herbalist's shop to see if the ever-elusive Lionel Smith was there. She was turned away by Caroline, who probably thought she was crazy, and she walked out of the shop so quickly that she ran into someone on the sidewalk, dropping her bags.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, immediately kneeling down to collect her things.

"Oh, it's all right," the other woman said, and when they looked at each other, Hermione fell back on her arse, heart beating rapidly.

The woman looked exactly like Bellatrix Lestrange, but Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen a genuine smile on Bellatrix Lestrange's face.

"You must be Hermione Granger. I'm Andromeda Tonks," the woman said, extending her hand, and it took Hermione a moment to pull her thoughts together before she shook hands with the older woman. When they finally stood, Hermione could see that she was the same build as Bellatrix, only curvier and healthy-looking. Her hair was black as night, as curly as Hermione's, and went half-way down her back. She was strikingly beautiful...what Bella might have looked like, had she lived a saner life, Hermione thought. She realised that she was staring, and she looked away, feeling awkward and entirely out of her depth.

"Would you like to get tea, Hermione?" Andromeda asked, looking Hermione right in the eye. Her eyes were kind, but they looked so much like Bellatrix's, and Hermione had spent far too long one afternoon looking straight into *that* woman's eyes, and her nerves flared so badly her hand trembled.

"I wouldn't want to presume, or to disrupt your afternoon, or..."

"Nonsense," Andromeda said. "I wouldn't presume to disrupt yours, either, of course...do you have plans?"

"No, I just...we petitioned your testimony for the trials...you never seemed too keen to meet with me..." Hermione said, cursing her nerves and her reckless words.

"The Minister excused my absence from court," Andromeda said, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I'm inviting you to tea as a friend. There aren't many of our kind here."

Hermione blanched. "I'm so sorry...I didn't meant to offend..."

"You just don't know why I'd want to talk to you?" Andromeda asked, a bemused smile on her face.

"In short, yes," Hermione said, letting out the breath she'd been holding.

"Well, I would like to chat, and I'm in dire need of tea, and there happens to be a lovely café just down the street," Andromeda said. "You're welcome to join me."

"I...yes, of course," Hermione said, feeling silly.

The two women ducked into a café and were quickly seated next to one of the big, floor-to-ceiling windows, steaming cups of tea sitting in front of them.

"Do you live here?" Hermione asked, feeling entirely awkward as she fidgeted with her rings.

"Oh, this is delicious," Andromeda said as she set her teacup down. "And to answer your question, I have a home near Penzance. I just come to Coleworth to do some shopping...the yarn shop and the herbalist are the best in the region, and travel is easy enough." She winked, and Hermione laughed.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed both shops, as well. I keep trying to stop in to catch the owner, but he's never there." Hermione sipped her coffee. "Have you ever met him? Lionel Smith?"

Andromeda nodded, staring out the window. "I've known Lionel a long time...vaguely, though. He's a bit prickly. Likes to keep people at arm's length."

"Does Teddy know him?"

"You're curious aren't you?" Andromeda said, and she waved a hand when Hermione began to protest. "No, Teddy doesn't. We're not friends."

"Is Teddy with you today?" Hermione asked, a bit hopeful. She hadn't seen Teddy in years.

Andromeda shook her head. "He's visiting a friend of mine. It's good for him to get away from this old woman for a while, spend time with people who can keep up with him," she said wryly.

"How old is he now?" Hermione asked, warming her hands with her cup.

"Seven. They grow so fast," Andromeda said softly.

"Can I ask a question?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"I remember your reputation for being... inquisitive. But I did ask you to tea, so I suppose I've invited it, haven't I?" Her warm smile belied her words.

"You haven't attended any of the ceremonies," Hermione said. "I know they're controversial and that everyone has their reasons, but... you've been missed."

"I've always kept to myself, away from wizarding society at large. Ted and I were never too social, and without him, I find it far easier to continue keeping to myself," Andromeda said.

Hermione wasn't quite sure what to say. "Would you consider attending the next one?"

Andromeda chuckled and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. "Forgive me the impropriety, Hermione. I don't hear much, but what I do hear suggests that you have also withdrawn from wizarding society at large. After all, I found you here in Coleworth, of all places, a town without any magical inhabitants. Indeed, the Prince manor is the only magical presence in all of Cornwall, save my home, of course. Which is to say, I wonder at why *you* would wonder at my withdrawal."

"Call it morbid curiosity," Hermione said. "There's no good reason for asking... your family was always just so mythic, so unreal. None of us knew you."

"That was by design," Andromeda said, her tone pointed.

"So I've gathered."

"The... Light, as they call themselves... are far less accepting than they appear. Muggle-borns are brought into the fold without question, but those who were members of the most traditional, oppressive Pureblood families... let's just say that we are less welcomed. Especially when we transgress family lines for love rather than ideology," Andromeda said, her voice full of feeling.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said quietly, and she had a feeling that Andromeda knew precisely what she meant.

"I appreciate that, Hermione. I do. My daughter was very fond of you...of all of you." Andromeda sipped her tea. "Are you still in touch with your friends, in spite of the seclusion?"

Hermione nodded. "Harry and Ron are family and always will be, no matter what changes. Same goes for Blaise. Other than that, I'm in touch with Minerva, to a small extent."

"I recall that you worked extensively with the Minister on Severus' trial. That took gumption."

"Did you know him?" Hermione asked, leaning forward with a renewed intensity.

"At school," Andromeda said. "Afterwards, less so. But I was very sorry for him."

"He was a hero," Hermione said, her voice hollow from saying it so many times.

"But a hero without love, and that is a sadder fate. All that ideology left him alone."

Hermione shook her head and stared at the table for a few moments. "The war has left many people alone. And the survivors, the young survivors, at least, got caught up in marrying and procreating, and I don't even think they stopped to think about what they'd want if there was no war, if our people hadn't been so ravaged."

"An astute observation. The birth rates have spiked over the last few years," Andromeda said. "I take it you're not planning to contribute to that phenomenon?"

Hermione shook her head. "Pip, the house-elf at Lyonesse, seems to think I'm seeing Blaise, since he sends gifts on occasion, but no, I'm not planning to have a family any time soon."

Andromeda grinned. "Blaise's mother seems to think you're his best shot at a respectable marriage."

Hermione laughed so hard she snorted. "Oh sweet Merlin, I am sorry for her. Blaise and I would never...no, never."

"She will be sorry to hear it. But," Andromeda said, "how goes the restoration?"

"How do you..." Hermione started, and then she remembered. Harry. "It goes well," she said, smiling.

"You must be so pleased, having your first home," Andromeda said.

"Well, I'm renting it. I was ready to buy three weeks ago, but...bureaucracy." Hermione waved a hand. "So, I'm renting and renovating the manor."

Andromeda gave a small snort. "I hope you have an iron-clad agreement with the Ministry. That's *workthey* should be doing, if they're the owners."

Hermione nodded. "They've agreed to sell it to me after a three month trial period. They want any items of value to revert to them...not that there ~~are~~ are any items of value. Ones they'd want, I mean. The manor is beautiful, full of so many treasures, but nothing they'd raid for, you know? I don't think they're in such dire straits that they'd come for the dining room silver."

Andromeda sighed. "I've learned that the Ministry has very peculiar ideas about value, and justice, and property boundaries. Remember, they're not looking out for you, and there are some who will swindle you any way you can. That's unsolicited advice, I know, but keep a wary eye."

"Constant vigilance?" Hermione asked, arching an eyebrow, and Andromeda chuckled.

"Indeed." Andromeda sipped her tea. "Has anything surprised you about the manor? I imagine being up close and personal with so old a piece of wizarding history must be thrilling for you."

"I find new things every day, though I'm most struck by the everyday...finding sachets or perfume oils from an old mistress, children's toys still being in their rooms and such. It's a reminder that a family was there, you know? A place so grand can often feel distant, removed, and those details, they bring it home for me." Hermione paused. "And then, there's the ghost. That was a surprise."

"A ghost?" Andromeda asked, eyebrows arching in surprise. "I wasn't aware that Lyonesse had a ghost."

"I'm beginning to think it's one of the best kept secrets. Pip refuses to say a word about it."

Andromeda chuckled. "Pip was always an odd duck."

"You know Pip?" Hermione asked.

Andromeda nodded. "Knew him briefly, during my Hogwarts years. I was at Hogwarts with Severus, you know, and his grandfather held a party for him one year that all Slytherins attended."

"You were in Slytherin?" Hermione gaped.

"Prejudice, prejudice," Andromeda tsked, and Hermione immediately felt chagrin. "The grandfather hoped that Narcissa might wed Severus. But though the Princes rivaled the Malfoys in wealth, back then, Severus just couldn't compete with Lucius' looks or charm."

"Did he want to?" Hermione asked quietly, staring at the table.

Andromeda looked thoughtful. "I don't think he would have minded. Narcissa was very lovely and aloof in a way that was attractive rather than alienating."

"Surprising."

Andromeda shrugged. "There were several years between us and Narcissa, enough so that when we went off to school, Narcissa was practically an only child. Cissa has more attributes of an only child than a baby of the family. And...this is meant as a compliment, Hermione...you remind me of her, in some ways."

Hermione gulped. "Me?"

"Reserved, driven, desperate to be taken seriously, loyal to a fault, and...perhaps a bit ruthless," Andromeda mused, pouring hot water into her teacup. "As I said, I meant it as a compliment. And I am only judging by your reputation, of course, and what Harry tells me."

Hermione had no idea how to take that. "I would never marry a..."

"She loved him," Andromeda said, holding a hand up. "But enough of my sisters. Tell me more about this ghost."

Hermione shook her head as the butterflies in her stomach fluttered their wings. "Edmund is... a gentleman. And overly concerned for my welfare, though that's possibly because he's from the late eighteenth century. He looks... sweet Merlin, he looks like Professor Snape. It's frightening. But he comes by to visit and chat and coach me

through some renovations. He recommends books for me to read, and we talk about his family history and music and books and silly things. He's very kind." Hermione stared out the window, watching a couple pass by on the sidewalk, holding hands. So solid, so *corporeal*.

"You enjoy his company?" Andromeda asked.

"Yes. I...I care for him."

Andromeda looked thoughtful. "I must have forgotten about him. A shame, as he sounds lovely."

"It's silly, I know, to feel so... fond... of a ghost, but he's...he's a good man. Was a good man. Is any of this making sense?" Hermione asked, staring into her teacup.

"I imagine that it must be strange, moving to a place where you've no truly human company for companionship," Andromeda said. "I'm sorry to run out on you so quickly, but I really must collect Teddy from my friend's."

"Of course. Perhaps you could come round to Lyonesse sometime," Hermione said before thinking.

Andromeda smiled. "That would be lovely. Enjoy your afternoon, Hermione." She rose, slinging her handbag onto her shoulder in one smooth motion, and she walked out of the café.

Hermione sat at the table a while longer, sipping her tea long after it went cold, watching the couples and families walking by, telling herself that at any moment now, she was going to get a grip and stop acting like a lovesick teenager.

Andromeda walked up the gravel path to the house, and Teddy came bounding out the front door.

"Guess what I did, Gran? I beat Lionel at draughts! I beat him! I finally beat him!"

Andromeda mussed his shock-blue hair. "Good job, Teddy. You want to run around out here for a bit?"

"Yes!" Teddy said, excited, and he ran off into the field as Andromeda silently cast a perimeter spell.

She looked at the house and steeled herself as she walked up the steps and into the house. "Severus?"

"In the kitchen," his voice called out.

Andromeda walked to the kitchen, where she found him standing over his kitchen table, clearing away the draughts board. She folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the doorway.

He grinned. "You look scary, Meda. What's got into your knickers?"

She examined her fingernails. "Care to tell me why you're masquerading as the ghost of Lyonesse Hall?"

A/N: For American readers, draughts = checkers.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 9

In which there is lemonade and Ogden's.

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

A/N: Many thanks to Subversa for alpha reading and to richardgloucester and sshg316 for beta reading.

Severus froze, the draughts board still in his hand. "Pardon?"

Andromeda walked into the kitchen and set her handbag on the counter, ignoring his state of shock. "I ran into Hermione outside your shop, literally. The girl moves like she's fleeing Dementors. And she looked at me like I was one." She opened the fridge, pulled out a pitcher of lemonade, and poured herself a glass.

Severus came to his senses and finished clearing away the draughts board, sliding it into its particular place in the cabinet. "You know Bellatrix tortured her...at length," he said.

Andromeda raised her eyebrows. "That would explain it."

He turned around, clasping his hands together in front of him. "What do you want to say, Meda? Out with it."

She sat down at his kitchen table, crossed her legs, and looked him straight in the eye.

"What in the name of Merlin are you doing?"

"I need something stronger than lemonade for this conversation," he muttered, silently Summoning his Ogden's and two glasses.

"What on earth makes you think I'd drink Ogden's in front of my grandson?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Teddy." He flicked his hand, and the Ogden's and glasses turned around in mid-air and went back to their place. He'd nearly forgotten that Teddy was outside playing. How could he forget about a child left in his care?

"We'll have this conversation after dinner," Andromeda said, getting up from the table.

"Then why did you ask that question?" he asked, still staring at the table as he heard her open and close cabinets, no doubt intending to cook for him. In spite of his aptitude in the kitchen, she never seemed to think he cooked well enough for himself.

"Because I don't think it's a question you've carefully considered. Think on it," she said.

As if on cue, Teddy bounded in, shirt streaked with dirt, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Why is Gran cooking, Lionel?" he asked, walking over to stand next to Severus at the table.

"Because your gran is a stubborn woman," Severus said, pulling out a chair for the boy.

"Gran says you don't take care of yourself," Teddy said, reaching for the lemonade Andromeda had left on the table.

"Well, your gran isn't a psychologist or a Legilimens, so we'll just have to thank her for her opinion and leave it at that," Severus said, carefully avoiding Andromeda's gaze.

"Gran says you need more friends."

"Your gran says a lot of things about me, Teddy. Best not to talk about it," Severus said, Summoning a deck of cards. "Have you ever played knock-out whist?"

**

They watched a film after dinner, and Teddy was asleep by the end of it. Severus moved him to a bedroom upstairs and stopped by the kitchen, picking up the bottle of Ogden's and two glasses before going into the sitting-room where Andromeda was no doubt preparing a line of questioning. She was ridiculously patient; her interrogative skills were highly underrated, in Severus' opinion. He'd always thought Dumbledore's mistrust of her was a mistake, but then, Andromeda would never have worked for him anyway. She was a Black, so she was a born skeptic, and she had a habit of knowing things others didn't want her to know.

Like this, for example. Severus walked into his sitting-room, cursing his suggestion that Hermione visit the village. He'd suggested it in the heat of the moment because he had to get home and de-ghosted for Teddy's visit, but he'd forgotten about the part where seeing Teddy meant that Andromeda was in Coleworth.

Bugger.

He poured their glasses and sat down on the other side of the sofa, staring at the coffee table.

"Well?" she asked, curling her knees up on the sofa. "Anything you'd like to get off your chest?"

"You're the one with the sixth sense, Meda, you tell me," he muttered into his glass before taking a big gulp from it.

"Cornelius bloody Fudge could walk into this room and tell that something was wrong with you."

"That's insulting."

"Severus," Andromeda put her hand to her temple, clearly exasperated. Well, good, he thought. If he couldn't avoid her question, well, neither could she. "What are you thinking?" she asked, the intensity radiating off her. "I don't know the particulars of whatever costume or charade you've constructed, but what I do know is that you can't keep it up forever. One day, she'll wise up and see straight through it. I mean, do you *realise* how condescending this whole act is, relying on the fact that she wasn't raised in a wizarding family to pull off the illusion? You could never pull this over a Greengrass girl, or even a Weasley."

"The point is I am pulling it off," Severus said.

"But for how long? You're too eager and too vulnerable. You're going to get caught."

"Are you honestly calling me vulnerable, Meda?"

"Are you honestly putting me in a position where I have to point it out, Severus?" she asked, hands raised in disbelief. "You spend years planning a cover for yourself, you survive the war, you go into hiding, you build a business and a life for yourself. We accidentally run into each other, and you do everything but make me swear an Unbreakable Vow to not reveal you. My grandson doesn't know your *name* because you're so bloody paranoid. And you decide to risk it all in an attempt to sport with Hermione Granger, of all people. Are you mad?" Andromeda asked.

Severus took a few moments to think. "I think I was bored."

"Sweet Merlin, that's worse." Andromeda sipped her whiskey. "How do you do it? Explain it to me."

So he did. By the time he was done, he thought Andromeda was half-pissed, she'd had so much to drink.

"So let me get this straight," Andromeda started, "You're a forty-four-year-old wizard playing an ancestor in his mid-twenties." She paused. "Is this a mid-life crisis?"

"Forty-four is hardly mid-life for wizards."

She arched an eyebrow.

"People aged more quickly back then, even wizards. Crazy ideas about what constituted good nutrition and so on. Besides, I look to be in my mid-thirties. Everyone thinks so," he said with a smirk. "If you didn't know how old I was, where would you place me?"

She sighed. "Mid thirties to late forties."

He nodded. "So it's not so unreasonable that a twenty-eight-year-old male in the late eighteenth century could look to be in his mid-thirties in contemporary times?"

"You're playing with fire," Andromeda said, pouring herself another glass, and he admired the way the firelight reflected in her glossy black hair.

"It's a good thing I'm a wizard, then. I won't get burned," Severus said.

"This seems rather like a Fiendfyre, and I doubt that even you could control that for very long."

"I have enough distance," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"Do you?" she asked. "I think that you rather enjoy playing the chivalric ghost to her damsel in distress. And you know about tangled webs..."

"Watch your words, witch," he said, and she looked him straight in the eye.

"I think you got more than you bargained for."

He snorted and looked at the coffee table.

"Didn't you?" she asked, leaning forward on her forearms. "It was a game, a trick, a bit of Slytherin sport, as well as a challenge to see how well you could role play after all

these years. A bit bored, were you?" she asked. "And you do realise that you've created a useful disguise for yourself, just in case?"

He nodded.

"The game has no end, which is problematic, but I'd imagine you could have stopped, satisfied and amused, weeks ago. And yet you make yourself into a ghost every day so you can what? Talk to her? Continue a game you've so thoroughly won?"

He didn't answer.

Andromeda leaned back into the couch, holding her glass on her knee. "She's falling in love with Edmund, you know."

Severus looked at her, his gaze serious now. "She didn't tell you that."

Andromeda examined her fingernails. "She admitted enough for me to get a good read on her. If you can take advantage of her Muggle-born ignorance, so can I."

"She doesn't know you're an empath," Severus muttered, staring into his fireplace.

"But you do. So you can trust me when I say that she's falling hard," Andromeda said.

Severus gritted his teeth. "He's not me."

"He *is* you."

"I have his journals..."

"Unless that is all you quote at her every day, then Severus is Edmund and Edmund is Severus. Who is also Lionel, whom she is also curious about."

"Don't go encouraging her," Severus said.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

He looked her straight in the eye. "Vow you won't tell her."

"You'd better not be serious," Andromeda said, eyes narrow.

"You know I'm not."

"Actually, I don't. You know that Occlumency blocks my ability to sense anything. It's part of why you let me come around so often," she said casually, as if this were just a conversation about the weather.

"Of course I'm not asking you to take a Vow. Damn it, what do you take me for?" he asked, running both hands through his hair.

"What do you take *me* for? I am your friend, Severus," she said, suddenly impassioned. "Why on earth would I ever tell her something you don't want me to, no matter how misguided your motives?"

His shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry."

"You're a good man. But this has ceased to be mere sport for you, and Severus..." she looked him in the eye "...it was never sport for her." She paused. "I'm going to get Teddy and head home. Are the wards open?"

"Always for you," he said, staring at the fireplace.

Andromeda put a hand on his shoulder. "You know what you need to do." And she left him on the couch, alone with his thoughts.

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After their departure, he took the bottle of Ogden's in one hand and his glass in the other and marched up the stairs. Their conversation...interrogation...had kindled the embers of his self-doubt back into a flame, and his anger was quickly becoming fury. He hadn't figured out with whom he was furious, precisely, but he intended to get drunk. Thoroughly, terribly, short-term memory-loss inducing drunk.

On glass one, he cursed himself for being so careless as to suggest Hermione's trip into town, then he cursed Meda for being so intrusive, and then he cursed Clara and Gerard for "introducing" them in the first place.

On glass three, he cursed the boredom that had led him to adopt such a ridiculous disguise, and he cursed that he'd chosen *Coleworth* as his hideaway, and then, just for good measure, he cursed Perdita and Fawkes for saving him, because he hadn't *deserved* to be saved, damn it.

After the fourth glass, he cursed his loneliness.

After the fifth glass, he cursed his desire.

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It dawned on Severus while eating breakfast that having to take a hangover potion two mornings in a row at the age of forty-four with no major crises pending probably indicated that something was wrong or, at the very least, that something was not entirely right.

Sadly, the Ogden's had not wiped away his conversation with Andromeda, and he wasn't desperate enough to attempt a self-Obliviate, though the thought had crossed his mind. He put his head in his hands. What was he doing? Meda was right, so right, and that conversation had been like alcohol on an open wound, cleaning away all the muck but stinging with pain all the same.

He didn't know if he believed what she'd said about Hermione's emotions...he couldn't afford to think about that. He had built a life for himself here. It was a small life, but it was his, and he'd be damned if he'd endanger it over a witch who would no doubt insist on dragging him back into the public, exposing him, laying waste to what he'd worked so hard for: anonymity. Solitude. Besides, he *wasn't* Edmund; it was one thing to feel for a gentleman ghost and quite another to handle him and all his... history.

It wasn't fair to her. She'd feel like a fool if she ever found out he was real...he knew she'd be angry. So angry.

It'd been fun. He had yet another useful disguise, as Meda pointed out. Hermione could go on believing that Edmund was really a ghost.

He'd visit her today. One last visit, to say goodbye. Not that she would know it was goodbye.

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It was like getting dressed for a funeral. He tried not to think about what he would say. Another day, like any day, only not. What would she think, with him leaving her life

so abruptly? Or was it self-aggrandising to assume that he had become central to it? He didn't know.

Severus stepped across the boundary once more, raising a hand to attempt to get the library fires to quiet down. He took it all in; this would probably be the last time he ever stepped foot in Lyonesse Hall. Hermione would be the owner in a few months...she was too stubborn to let the Ministry bully her...and she'd be able to enact her own wards, and he had no doubt that they would be strong. He'd be able to break them, of course, but it would take minutes to do so, and hopefully that would be enough time to remind himself that entering her life again would be deeply, deeply wrong.

He walked down the hall, appreciating the work she had done: the improved lighting, the refurbished rugs, the paintings. It was funny, really. The manor hadn't appealed to him since he was a boy, but in the last few weeks, it had once again took on that enchanting quality, where it seemed as though something new was around every corner. She made it new again.

He stopped suddenly...there were voices coming from the Great Hall. One was Hermione, but he didn't recognize the man's. It sounded like an argument. Surely it wasn't Blaise? He Disillusioned himself and ensured that he was out of sight, though he could see them through the wide entrance. His eyes narrowed at the sight of the man. Not Blaise. A tall man with slicked back hair, an obviously Transfigured suit, and an enormous briefcase stuffed to the brim with papers. Clearly a Ministry official.

Hermione's arms were crossed. "I have found nothing of value, Mr. Goetz. It has only been three weeks. Furthermore, I don't recall consenting to 'check-in's'."

Mr. Goetz smiled. "You have made progress, Ms. Granger. The renovations you've done are... impressive."

"I will be buying it in two months, and I see no reason not to invest now."

"That may be, but you owe us..."

"I know, I know...any items of value. I've told you: there are none. Not unless you want to remove the marble sinks, or the books, or the portraits or artwork," Hermione said, gesturing around the room.

"Are you telling me you've found nothing else?" Mr. Goetz asked, leaning in closer.

Hermione took a step back. "You get *any* closer to me and I will send my Patronus for the Minister faster than you can hex me."

"Is that a threat?" Mr. Goetz seemed gleeful about that, and it looked like Hermione was stifling the urge to hex him.

"A threat would be telling you I'd have you on your arse before you could raise your wand," she said, her hair starting to stand on end with the energy radiating off her.

Mr. Goetz snorted. "I will be by to check in next week."

"And I'll be sure the Minister is here," Hermione said.

"Very well. Good day, Ms. Granger," Mr. Goetz said, and he Disapparated.

Severus watched as Hermione sat down on the piano bench and lightly fingered the keys, clearly in her own world. Hoping she wouldn't sense his presence, he made his way back to the library as quickly as he could, heart racing. He couldn't reveal himself, nor could he stay away. Not after what he'd just heard.

The Ministry was after the ledgers.