

Ars memoriae, or The Art of Memory

by ofankoma

A decade after failing to rehabilitate her parents, Hermione returns home seeking assistance from an unlikely source. A tale of Pensieves and portraits, memory and the mind, forgiveness, hope, and love.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

A decade after failing to rehabilitate her parents, Hermione returns home seeking assistance from an unlikely source. A tale of Pensieves and portraits, memory and the mind, forgiveness, hope, and love.

Anti-Litigation Charm: If you recognize it, it belongs to the indomitable J. K. Rowling. I make nothing but my own amusement and keep nothing but the wish that things might have turned out a little differently in her world.

Author's Notes: This is a fairly long and COMPLETED story the draft is about 180,000 words. I'll be updating roughly once per week, editing as I go. This will retain its T rating, but there is a bit of profanity peppered throughout. This is canon through DH and disregards certain portions of the Epilogue-that-must-not-be-named... it tied things up with far too neat and tidy a bow, don't you think? We will, however, accept and/or acknowledge a good deal of what Ms. Rowling had sketched out for her characters there. Also, this first chapter is a bit more of a prologue than anything... so do stick around for Chapter 2 to see where this is heading. Now... away we go!

The first quarter moon illuminated the small stone buildings at the end of the tracks as the scarlet steam engine chugged to a halt at the station. Scores of students in heavy black robes piled out of the cars onto the platform and headed down towards a fleet of horseless carriages in orderly rows beside the still, dark lake, and their nattering on about the summer holidays gradually shifted topic to the school year ahead. Bellowing over the din, an enormous man with glittering black eyes emerged with a wild mane of shaggy hair and a beard roughly the size of a small shrubbery. Clutching a battered pink umbrella in one hand and oversized lantern in the other, he cried out, "Firs' years! Firs' years over here to the boats!" The smallest (and most jittery) of the students left the fray to queue up behind him as he led them down to the waters, silhouetted in the moonlight like a peculiar parade akin to a mother duck and her ducklings making their way to a pond.

"An' here's Teddy!" said the giant. "Teddy Lupin, yeh've grown up since I saw yeh las'! Yeh all right, then?"

The thin boy he was addressing beamed at the familiar burly man and squinted for a moment, lost in a moment of intense concentration. His mousy brown hair instantly grew several inches and transformed itself into a matching shaggy bush as his blue eyes narrowed and darkened to match the larger man's black ones.

A burst of laughter exploded from the large man. "Are yeh tellin' me ta shave the beard, Teddy, or can yeh not change everythin' jus' yet?"

"It looks like it must itch, Hagrid. And doesn't it weigh a lot?" he asked politely.

"Ah, it itches summat' awful in the summertime... not so bad now. An' I don't think it can weigh more'n you!" Hagrid turned to all the students to address them all. "No more'n four to a boat, now!"

Teddy climbed in next to a boy with short black hair and a girl with a green and silver Alice band. He greeted the students, watched all the other boats fill with students, and wondered how Hagrid could possibly cross the lake in one of the tiny boats without it immediately capsizing or slowly sinking as it sailed forward to the castle high upon the cliff on the other side. The boats propelled themselves across the lake, guided by some unseen force through a dark tunnel under the castle to a pebbly harbour on the other side. After they clamored out of their vessels, the duck parade now headed up to the castle door, and Hagrid raised his fist to rap on it loudly three times before it swung open.

If the man who led them to the castle was three sizes too big for a normal man, the one who would lead them through the castle corridors was three sizes too small. The wizened old man was tiny and spry, shorter than the most diminutive amongst them all, wearing robes made of navy brocade and a wide smile.

"Professor Flitwick, here're the first years," announced Hagrid.

"Thank you very, very much, Professor Hagrid! I shall see you inside at the feast," Flitwick squeaked out as a most unequivocal handshake took place.

Hagrid lumbered off in one direction to another set of wooden doors while Flitwick guided the students in another across the flagged stone floor of the Entrance Hall, peeking over his shoulder every few moments to encourage them to move along more quickly. When they arrived at an empty room next to the Great Hall, the man hopped up atop a small podium normally reserved for a bust or small statue and began his welcome.

"Welcome, welcome to Hogwarts!" Flitwick began. "I am certain that you are all famished and knackered following your lengthy journey here, but before you may join your fellow students at the start-of-term feast, you must be sorted into your houses. The Sorting Ceremony has been the first task put to each Hogwarts student since Rowena Ravenclaw, Helga Hufflepuff, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin founded this institution over a millennium ago. You will be placed in a house named for one of the founders, and your fellow housemates will be the people you eat with, room with, and study with much like a family here. Each of the houses has different strengths, and each has produced many fine witches and wizards through the years. I hope that each of you takes pride in your house and works to bring it even greater honour. Now, if you please, follow me! When we arrive at the front of the hall, wait for your name to be called to come forward."

As he trotted off past the four wooden tables that ran the length of the room, Teddy gazed up at the same quarter moon in the ceiling of the Great Hall. He had been hearing stories of Hogwarts as long as he could remember and had catalogued a list of the things he most wanted to see and the people (and portraits and poltergeists) he most wanted to meet. He stared at the empty golden plates on the tables as his stomach gave a quiet grumble. As the forty odd eleven-year-olds marched forward through the seated crowd to the front of the hall, conversations abruptly came under a lull and whispers began:

"Blimey, they're all so tiny..."

"There's my sister! Oy, Imogen... Imogen!"

"Ha! D'you remember our Sorting? I thought I would faint dead away!"

One student in particular received more than his fair bit of attention as he nervously realized that some of these strangers already knew who he was. He rid himself of Hagrid's mop and mug as the queue marched forward, putting on his usual visage and vivid violet tresses.

"Psst... I think that's his godson... or nephew, maybe?"

"Whose nephew?"

"You-know-whose."

"Oh! His nephew. Er... which one?"

"The one with purple hair... Er... black hair... red... blue..." Teddy could hear it all and rapidly shifted through a spectrum of different colours, hoping they would focus their attention on someone else, anyone else but him. A few hands went up to point him out.

"Ah, that one."

"He'll be Gryffindor, right?"

"Do you think we can meet him?"

"Why not? He's just a first year."

"No, not him. Him. Maybe he'll visit?"

"I heard he's a werewolf."

"Harry Potter's a werewolf?"

Teddy shrank down as small as he could, silently willing the students to forget about him and his family. Before any further speculation could take place, Hagrid placed a squat three-legged stool on the raised dais by the High Table. On top of the stool was perched an extraordinarily dirt-encrusted brown hat with a wide brim, a pointy top, and several off-colour patches. One good spin through a washer would do it in permanently, Teddy thought, and suddenly he knew what was going to happen next. The brim ripped open wide like a mouth and the hat began to dance (so to speak) as it sang:

Oh, there are finer hats than me,

Tams bolder, boaters brasher;

But a wiser cap you'll never see

At any haberdasher.

I will assist all to discern where

Each of you belongs.

I might not look like much and yet

I've sung a thousand songs!

A thousand songs, a thousand years

I've sorted students here,

Since Gryffindor bewitched me for

This task done every year.

If you are brave and daring and your

Nerve comes to the fore,

Fear not! good friend, it's likely you'll

Belong to Gryffindor.

If you are eager to discover

Every rule and law,

With ready mind and ready wit,

You'll be a Ravenclaw.

If you're a kind, but average fellow

Sitting on your duff,

You work hard, but you're not too bright,

You'll be in Hufflepuff.

However, if your only goal

Is saving your own skin,

With no regard to those around,

You'll go to Slytherin.

So slip me on and you will see

I'm never, EVER wrong,

I'll look between your ears to find

Where you truly belong!

Innumerable moments of stunned silence filled the hall when the hat completed its task. Some awkwardly polite and scattered applause staggered forth from the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, while gaping mouths registered shock at the Hufflepuff table and flashing eyes registered anger among the Slytherins. The hat bowed to each of the four tables as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred and became quite still once again, but the professors at the High Table were slowly rousing from their respective stupors. A rotund older man in well-appointed robes looked increasingly queasy as the song reached its final stanzas, while a rosy-cheeked witch (with dirt under her fingernails and a Flitterbloom clipping sticking out of her greying bun) sprinted around the High Table to snatch the Hat from its stool and give it a thorough shaking.

"Not too bright? Not too bright?" she shrieked at the Hat, desperately searching for nonexistent eyes that would never appear in order to glare it into submission. "I have sat idly by and listened to your songs for years, for years, and although you have never truly addressed the merits and values of the House of Hufflepuff, you have never insulted my house like you have today. I will not tolerate this!" She threw the hat back down and whipped around to face a tall woman with salt-and-pepper hair in emerald-green robes. Her voice came out as a hissed whisper. "Minerva, what is the meaning of this?"

"Pomona, please... I have no idea!" Minerva McGonagall hushed softly, attempting to quiet the fury of the woman standing before her. She then addressed the sea of be-robed students. "Dear students, I'm afraid I must apologise on behalf of our Sorting Hat, which I believe it is a bit under the weather today. Or it woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Whatever the case, this song is not wholly representative of the houses at Hogwarts. All four have a noble history and all are worthy of Hogwarts. Professor Sprout, Professor Slughorn, perhaps you would care to share a few words with the students about your houses while I see to the Sorting Hat?"

"Yes, I would," huffed Sprout. She stepped up, adjusted her robes, and began to speak, still visibly shaking with anger. "Why, members of Hufflepuff are renowned for our commitment to justice and our unwavering loyalty. Remember Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts' champion in the last Triwizard Tournament, who triumphed in that challenging contest through the use of his brains and his skills and who lost his life at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Remember Nymphadora Tonks, a valiant Auror who lost her life at the Battle of Hogwarts, and whose last years were served in the Order of the Phoenix to protect Harry Potter so that he could finally defeat You-Know-Who." She found Teddy's eyes in the crowd of first years. "Nymphadora was one of the finest young women I ever had the privilege of teaching. She was also a great deal of fun." Teddy blinked back tears and nodded, shifting his hair once again to a violent shade of pink.

Sprout looked back at Professor Slughorn, still seated behind the table. "Horace? Is there anything you'd like to add?"

He smiled at her pleasantly. "My dear woman, you're doing quite well enough for the both of us. Continue, would you please?"

Surprised that he would not stand and speak for his own house, Professor Sprout turned back to the students and began again, this time with a bit less fervor and zeal. "The students of Slytherin also have much to be proud of. I know there have been difficulties for Slytherin since the fall of You-Know-Who, but your house was founded, certainly, long before Salazar Slytherin began to... er, disagree with the other founders. And while he may have valued blood status, there have been pure-blood and half-blood students of Slytherin over the years who have shown tremendous intelligence, courage, and dedication in their callings. Remember Severus Snape, who laboured for years as a double agent to defeat You-Know-Who even though we didn't know it at the time. Why, our own Professor Slughorn duelled You-Know-Who in the Battle of Hogwarts! And in his pyjamas, no less!"

While Professor Sprout had been speaking to the student body, Headmistress McGonagall had slipped the Sorting Hat onto her own head and had begun her own investigation. There were no visible traces of any dark magic, no spells or hexes lingering on the hat in any way. Why, then, did it sing this malicious little ditty? After conferring with the staff at the High Table, she turned to the students once more.

"There appears to be nothing wrong with the Sorting Hat," she declared. "Nothing magically wrong, that is. The Sorting will proceed as planned."

Professor Flitwick unfurled a long roll of parchment and said, "Please come forward when I call your name... Alderton, Gemma!" A girl with curly blonde hair ran to the stool as the hall erupted in applause. After the disastrous song by the Sorting Hat, there seemed to be no other problems with the ceremony (continuing through "Bollingberry, Colin" before getting to "Le Feuvre, Nicole" and "Lupin, Theodore" and finally ending with "Wood, Stephen"). This year, there were a few more students sorted into Gryffindor and Ravenclaw than usual (six boys and seven girls went into Gryffindor, while eight boys and six girls went into Ravenclaw). And there were a few fewer students in Hufflepuff and Slytherin (four boys and five girls in Hufflepuff, five boys and four girls in Slytherin). While the Hogwarts castle began subtly shifting the stairways

in the dormitories and widening the rooms for the first year students, the Sorting Hat was swept off the stage by Hagrid and placed in the antechamber.

Headmistress McGonagall stepped forward and opened her arms wide in the manner she had seen Albus Dumbledore employ for so many years, smiling down on her students for the upcoming year.

"Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts!" she said. "Since our Sorting took a bit longer than usual, I have only two words for you all before we start our feast: Tuck in!"

Everyone hollered and cheered as the golden plates and dishes before them began to fill with roast lamb and roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and black pudding, heaping piles of mashed potatoes and turnips, loaves of crusty bread, bowls of steamed mussels, and stacks of Ginger Newts.

Teddy Lupin was clapped on the back by the prefects in his new house as he loaded his plate with a taste of everything. He introduced himself to the others sitting nearby between forkfuls of buttery potatoes. After he began displaying his gallery of noses to his fellow first years (first up was his mother's favourite – a pig snout, followed by a tiny button nose and then a large bulbous protuberance), he fielded questions about what it was like to be able to disguise yourself as anyone, whether or not he ever got stuck in a position that he couldn't get himself out of, and if it was possible to grow significantly taller than Hagrid or shrink down smaller than Flitwick. He never had to answer a single question about his parents... or his godfather.

While the students at all four house tables began chatting about common rooms, Quidditch tryouts, and first lessons, the professors at the table above were still discussing the unexpected events of the evening. Professor Sprout had calmed herself down considerably, but it was still quite easy to imagine pale puffs of smoke emitting from her ears.

"Minerva, has anyone been in your office lately?" she asked. "Are you positive that no one tampered with the Hat?"

The headmistress smiled at her sadly. "Pomona, I don't think it's likely... I truly don't believe the Hat has been tampered with, but one can never be too cautious with this sort of thing." She looked to her newest staff member for his expertise. "Bill, would you mind taking it for a thorough review?"

During his temporary one-year appointment as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor a few years earlier, Bill Weasley had successfully broken the curse left on the post left by Lord Voldemort. Thus free to accept the job on a regular basis, he accepted the job and also became the Head of Gryffindor in his second year teaching. If anyone had cursed the Sorting Hat, Professor Weasley was the best chance of discovering what was wrong. He nodded his agreement to his former Head of House. "Have it sent to my quarters and I'll examine it more closely." He then looked to Professor Sprout, still stewing about the slight to her beloved Hufflepuffs. "Pomona, what did you mean earlier when you said the Hat missed the mark on the virtues of Hufflepuff?"

The round little woman pulled herself up and squared her shoulders, letting out a quick breath before responding. "My dear boy, I have been Head of Hufflepuff since you were knee high to a Screechsnap or a Venomous Tentacula. I have heard dozens of Sorting Songs over the years, including those from my own seven years here. Have you ever listened to the depictions of any house but your own? Really listened?"

Bill gulped in response, shaking his head no, and she continued on. "I don't mean to attack you, dear, I just mean to point out that we all smile and nod and applaud the Hat without giving it a second thought, as though it's a novelty item rather than a powerful magical object. It's not benign! There are always a few of the same key words and phrases used, of course. Gryffindor is the home for the "brave at heart," for those who are "courageous" and "bold" and "daring"; Ravenclaw is the thinking wizard's house where knowledge and study are valued. Slytherins are always cited as being "cunning" or "shrewd," but the description is never very flattering and some years emphasizes blood in ways that don't actually fit the practices of the house. As for my students in Hufflepuff, we're often called "just" or "loyal," sometimes "hardworking." Now those are lovely traits that we do value, but some years the Hat likes to declare that we're also the house for people who weren't accepted anywhere else... the house of leftovers and secondhand witches and wizards who barely earned their Hogwarts letters in the first place." She looked him in the eyes now, holding his gaze. "Nothing I've heard in the past is a bad as what we all heard tonight, but it wasn't right then and it isn't right now."

Bill could only nod in agreement, taking another long swallow of pumpkin juice.

She turned to the man on her right. "Horace, I am beside myself to determine why this doesn't seem to bother you. I hope you have a good long chat planned with your house tonight to reassure them all of their value and their place here."

Horace Slughorn dramatically rolled his eyes and sighed. "Pomona, I have resigned myself to certain, er... expectations about my house. I do try to encourage the promising students in my care with incentives such as my Slug Club, but some students cannot be changed and family prejudices run deep. I am, if you recall, an instructor here only because Dumbledore pulled me out of a very comfortable retirement, and I am, if you care to tally them, in my thirteenth year post-retirement. I would dearly love to retire again while I am still able to enjoy it." He took out an elaborately-monogrammed, teal silk handkerchief to gently dab his brow. "I never thought that my former student, Gwenog Jones, would retire from the Holyhead Harpies before I would from my second tour of teaching!"

At this, he turned his gaze down the table to Headmistress McGonagall, waited until he locked eyes with the woman, and gave a solitary nod in acknowledgement of some sort of unspoken contract. She smiled weakly and announced to no one in particular, "Albus left me his Pensieve... perhaps it would be best if I went back through the years to listen to the other Sorting Songs..."

The sudden appearance of Peeves the Poltergeist hovering above the High Table with a large trifle forced McGonagall back to attention. She sharply directed him back to the kitchens with his pudding and walked forward again for her final series of announcements for the night as the afters appeared in place on all the tables: hodgepodge pie, treacle tarts, blackcurrant flummery and loads of biscuits all appeared on stands in front of the plates while iced pumpkin juice refilled the goblets.

"Attention, students! Now that you are all adequately nourished, I have a few additional start-of-term notes you would do well to observe. It is my duty to remind you that the Forbidden Forest is, in fact, forbidden. There are several magical creatures in the forest larger than an automobile and more powerful than any of you. Furthermore, your Head of House will have reserved time on the Quidditch pitch during the second week of classes for tryouts. Do contact your Quidditch captain if you are interested. If you have brought a new owl to Hogwarts this year but have not yet registered it, please take care of it sometime tomorrow. Until then, they are more than welcome in the owlery. And, finally, Mr. Filch has requested a reminder that the use of magic in the school corridors is explicitly off-limits."

At this, McGonagall nodded to the darkened corner where caretaker Argus Filch was standing in the shadows. He rasped out a watery cough loudly, and McGonagall spoke again. "He would also like me to inform you that he has spent the lion's share of his summer holiday deriving a new list of things for disobedient students to do during their detentions." At this, Filch bared a gleeful, off-kilter smile.

"And now," McGonagall continued, "the time has come for us all to head off to Slumberland. Your house prefects will lead you to your common rooms where your trunks await you."

As she clapped her hands together, the plates and goblets all emptied themselves, immaculately clean and entirely bereft of crumbs. Teddy Lupin rose with his housemates and followed the crowd along stone corridors filled with suits of armour, beneath pearlescent ghosts bobbing above, down marble staircases with steps he had to jump, and past several portraits trying to get his attention. The troop of students finally arrived at their destination and he looked up and grinned at what would soon be a very familiar painting.

Up next:

"That's just it, Harry... I need to find Severus Snape."

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

Hermione is reunited with the Weasleys, and we learn what she's been up to abroad.

Little had changed about the Burrow over the years save the number of wellington boots haphazardly jumbled about outside the front door and the weather. With a faint popping noise, Hermione Apparated nearby the River Otter and took stock of the familiar surroundings as she followed the commotion to the paddock behind the garden with a large leather satchel on her arm. Several red-haired figures were flying high just below the treetops, but as she passed through the sweet-smelling apple trees, a sweaty blur landed beside her and hurriedly pulled her into a hug.

"Put me down, Harry!" she gasped out, chuckling as she swatted her friend on the arm. "I'm an old lady today, and I don't need a dislocated shoulder before lunch."

"Yes, I quite forgot! Entering your golden years; I suppose I should have bought you a tatted shawl today... or would you prefer one of those large hats that Neville's Gran used to wear? A vulture atop yours, shall we? Or a blackbird?"

Hermione responded by merely punching him in the shoulder. "Git. You know you're right behind me on this march to the grave. Well, then, I'll need to chat with some people who can't possibly comprehend how old I am. Where are the boys and Lily?" she asked as the others finally noticed her arrival and waved furiously from the air.

"It's true..." Harry began, considering his children. "James might tell you you're five years old, but he also might tell you you're a million. For whatever reason, it's his new favourite number and he's got no conception of time... or space, for that matter. Even you, Hermione, would impressed by the number of healing spells I know now."

"And use on a regular basis? And here I thought James and Al were both little gentlemen."

"Little gentlemen with little brooms, little spans of attention, and little coordination. They're all in the house with Molly either napping or playing," he replied, finally answering her question. "Their mum's delighted to be rid of them for a few hours so that she can come out here and remind her brothers why she's the Weasley with the Quidditch fans." Ginny was already zooming over as her husband bragged about her athletic prowess, and she threw her arms around her friend when she reached the pair on the ground.

"Happy, Happy, *Happy* Birthday, Hermione! We'll all be inside in just a minute after this round to wash up for lunch. Mum's in the kitchen and she's been talking about your visit for days please go in for a chat before the others arrive." Ginny hopped back on her broom as Harry took off, then pointed to the worn duffle, asking incredulously,

"Are those *all* of your things?"

"It's all I need to get settled," Hermione replied, gently patting the leather as she further explained, "Undetectable Extension and Shrinking Charms, you know."

Ginny rejoined the others in their game above, leaving Hermione to retrace her steps down through the overgrown garden, beside the small pond filled with croaking frogs, and around the meandering chickens to the front door.

Molly flung wide the door just as Hermione set down her bag and raised her fist to knock. "Hermione, dear, I'm so pleased to see you! Happy Birthday and do let me find a spot of breakfast for you before we all start on lunch." She whisked the young woman into the house and into another embrace as Hermione sighed deeply and allowed her body to release the tension she hadn't realised she'd been holding.

Her arms still wrapped tightly around Mrs. Weasley's shoulders, she spoke quietly into the woman's greying hair. "Thanks for having me, Molly. It's good to be back."

"Back for good, if I understand correctly?"

"Yes. Back for good this time."

Molly held her out at arms' length, looked her in the eye, and nodded firmly. "Good."

She turned back to the range, and Hermione spotted the worn kitchen clock's lone arm pointed to 'Time to Make Tea.' "We've all missed you terribly, and you've grown much too thin since your last holiday." She resolutely stared at the batter bowl as she began stirring away, carefully keeping her voice low. "And how are Wendell and Monica Wilkins doing these days, my dear?"

Hermione smiled warmly. "Wendell and Monica are doing quite well, thank you very much. It's spring there now, so the garden is just starting to come into its own. Monica's expanded her pot plants this year, although the ladybirds are out in force. Of course, whenever anything dies she explains that she's left her green thumb in England and declares that she could've had it growing with just a bit more rain."

"What do they think of your move back home, dear?"

"They tell me they'll miss their favourite English neighbour. I forever won their affection for remembering to bring them jars of Marmite and packages of proper biscuits when I traveled back and forth. And Wen..." she broke off abruptly and took another deep breath, slowly closing her eyes. "Wendell told me I've become a very good friend to them both. He made me promise before I left that I wouldn't work too hard since he thinks I won't have anyone here to force me to relax."

Wiping her floury hands on her flowery apron, Molly turned to Hermione and patted her hand. "Well, dear, I shall hold you to that. Saturday lunch, every week, come whenever you're free. You know you're family here."

Hermione's acceptance into the Weasley clan had ostensibly been secured with the arrival of a monogrammed jumper during her school years, but she had never fully appreciated it until her first Christmas after the war, the first holiday her parents had asked her not to spend with them.

In the aftermath of the last battle, she and Harry and Ron had all moved into Grimmauld Place together, leaving alternately to attend funerals and memorial services, help with the cleanup of Hogwarts, and retreat into Muggle London to the cinema for a much needed laugh. They had been inseparable for the first month, taking meals at the same time and even sleeping in the same unused sitting room on transfigured camp beds, but eventually they had learned to spend time on their own without falling apart. Harry had disappeared with Ginny for stretches of time to no-one-knew-where, Ron had spent hours with George in the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes storeroom doing no-one-knew-what, and Hermione had analysed materials for her trip leaving for Australia no-one-knew-when. Following Harry's quiet eighteenth birthday party at the Burrow, the boys had left for Auror training and Hermione made her move. She had gathered a week's worth of clothes and arranged for a Portkey to Melbourne to retrieve her parents and bring them home safely.

Finding Wendell and Monica Wilkins had not been a challenge, but eliminating the new memories she had given them had proved a difficult problem. Although none of Hermione's professors at Hogwarts (or even her Muggle primary school teachers) ever could have impugned her for a lack of preparation, the wide gulf between preparation and practice left her unable to find a working solution. She hadn't Obliviated her parents. That would have been more within her grasp, but even that would

have included guesswork on her part. No, Obliviation wouldn't have worked to get them out of the country. They would have lost a bit of their lives, sure, but five minutes Obliviated? A day? A week? That would have accomplished nothing. The Drs. Granger would still have been residing at home, peaceably running their dental practice with those same persistent worries about their extraordinary daughter niggling about in the background. Instead, she had suppressed their memories of her and anything that would connect them to England their names, friends, and neighbors and she had planted new memories over the originals. It was just as though she had planted new tomato bushes over an old patch of cabbages after a thorough tilling. She had studied for several weeks before initially casting the Memory Charms on her parents, performing magic well beyond the expectations of a Hogwarts classroom, and had hoped that she would be able to return when the danger had passed. She had hoped that she would be able to till up the garden one final time to return the cabbages she had earlier destroyed. The trouble was that the new memories seemed to develop lives of their own, growing and changing beyond that which she could recognize or even clearly differentiate from some aspects of their original memories. When she had delved in slyly to recover their originals, she had quickly learned that the results of her hasty spell work were beyond her skill to repair. Her tomatoes were an invasive species that she could no longer control.

Although she hadn't expected to have any difficulties, she had quelled her worries and caught her prearranged Portkey home to England seven days later and had begun making arrangements for a longer relocation to solve this problem, knowing with certainty that she would commit her time and energy into seeing her parents healthy again and confident that she would find a solution in no time. She had allotted herself one month to set things in order. In that time, she had devoured all the books she could find on the Magic of Memories. After having scoured the collection at Grimmauld Place and the Hogwarts Library (with special permission from Professor McGonagall), Hermione had read everything she knew existed on the subject. She had learned everything from the theory behind creating and eliminating memories (there were arguments between two camps as to the effects on children and the elderly, but a stable consensus about nearly everything else) to the history of Obliviation (beginning with the first Ministry Obliviator active in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, a woman named Mnemone Radford with eleven children who created the spell to allow them to get along again after arguments). Her free time had been spent relaxing with Ginny at the Burrow, babysitting Teddy so that his grandmother, Andromeda, could get some sleep, and trying to cajole Harry and Ron into talking about their feelings with the war. She had also offered her testimony on behalf of Draco Malfoy during his trial before the Wizengamot and accompanied Neville to St. Mungo's to visit his parents, where she had learned that Professor Snape was recovering from the attack by Nagini in an induced coma in the farthest room of the closed ward. After saying her tearful goodbyes to those she knew and loved, she had packed up her things and caught another Portkey to Australia. This time, it was a Portkey *without* a prearranged return.

Five months of creative spell work later, Hermione hadn't made a dent in their mental battlements. Three years of accelerated Muggle university study, four years of medical school, one internship year, and several residencies in Neurology later, Hermione still hadn't progressed beyond their outer walls. In the meanwhile, she had moved into their neighbourhood and struck up a friendship with the couple, but when she had asked to spend her Christmas holidays with them that first year during a momentary loss of emotional restraint, they kindly encouraged her to spend it with people she knew back home. It was all quite well-intentioned they simply couldn't fathom why a young woman would choose to spend her holidays with a couple she barely knew when she had family and friends back in England.

That Christmas had found Hermione in inconsolable tears on Molly's doorstep. When she had returned to her own across the globe a few days later, she had discovered a small fruitcake bundled in ruby cellophane with a note attached from the Wilkinsons: 'Happy Christmas, Hermione!' Portioning it out sliver by sliver, she ate it alone at her kitchen table every morning with tea until it was gone. It had lasted through the third week of January. *Happy Christmas, indeed.*

Every Christmas and every birthday had been spent at the Burrow since.

Later that day, over two dozen people were squished around the mismatched tables placed end to end in the yard: Arthur and Molly Weasley, Andromeda Tonks, Bill and Fleur and their three blondes, Charlie, Percy and Audrey (with two in tow), George, Ron and Susan (and Rose and Hugo), Harry and Ginny (plus three), Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom. Already heavy laden with plates piled high with Molly's morning tasks, the shorter table groaned as an enormous cake with thirty candles was levitated over and set in front of Hermione (much to the delight of her godson, Al, sitting on her lap at the time). The merry crowd sang and chatted and laughed the afternoon away in idleness until Charlie asked Andromeda, Bill, and Harry after Teddy's first few weeks at Hogwarts.

"He likes his house, then? And classes?"

"Seems to love it," Harry said, digging into a large slice of chocolate layer cake. "Following in the family footsteps, of course, like so many have done before him. His first letter was filled with a blow by blow of the Welcoming Feast and a detailed description of the common room from the portraits to the cosy chairs. I'm just glad he didn't send the password by owl."

"I think he'll take well to Herbology and Potions," Andromeda added. "He likes to make things and see things change before his eyes."

"He's friendly with the boys he dorks with, although he says there aren't as many first years there as usual," Harry continued. "And I performed my duty by him and his teeth, warning him off Hagrid's baking when they have tea together."

The others had heard all the Ministry gossip and read all the articles in the *Daily Prophet* about the Sorting Hat kerfuffle and Professor Sprout's outburst, so they quickly filled Charlie and Hermione in on the details. Hermione was pulled out of reflections on her own Sorting by a lively debate between Bill and Neville.

"Here's the thing, though, Neville..." Bill was saying. "You aren't a Gryffindor. You're a Hufflepuff."

Neville sputtered out his surprise and began to protest when Bill cut him off. "No, hear me out. I'm not saying that you aren't brave, Neville. Don't ever think that. I watched you pull out Sword of Gryffindor from the Hat, I heard you openly defy Voldemort, I know you fought Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries as a fifth year..."

"...And you protected all of us during that terrible year at Hogwarts," Ginny interjected.

"...Yes, and when you sliced off Nagini's head in battle, I actually stopped fighting and cheered. Stupidly cheered, Neville, with a Death Eater's wand at my throat." Bill tempered his enthusiasm as he continued on. "What I'm saying is that at the core of it, you're a dedicated, hardworking fellow. Day in, day out. Put in the work that people don't always notice. Just and loyal, as the song always says." He gave Neville a meaningful glance. "You take care of your own. The incredible thing about you is that you take care of everyone else's, too."

"Why can't a Gryffindor be just and loyal, Bill?"

"Why can't a Hufflepuff be brave, Neville?"

"Why do you insist that my 'brave Hufflepuff' trumps my 'just Gryffindor'?"

Hermione joined the argument. "It seems safe to say that the members of each house assume that their strongest character trait trumps all others."

Bill and Neville both fell silent and turned to examine her as she continued.

"Most Gryffindors assume that bravery trumps everything else and believe that if someone else is brave enough no matter what else they may be they'll be sorted into Gryffindor. Ravenclaws assume that intelligence trumps all and believe that if someone is smart enough, they'll be sorted into Ravenclaw." She rolled her eyes, saying, "Trust me on that one. I had Ravenclaws questioning my house affiliation more times than I could count."

Bill sighed. "You're probably right, Hermione."

"Aren't I right about everything today? You may have bested me in sheer number of O.W.L.s, Professor Weasley, but I believe the Birthday Girl is always correct," she retorted blithely. She looked around at both men. "Do you think there has to be a choice? Can't one be both?"

Bill merely harrumphed. "Perhaps, Hermione... perhaps. Perhaps not." He thoughtfully considered the young man beside him. "Neville, I could be wrong about all of this. I think the Sorting Hat gets it wrong fairly frequently. But the reason I'm more likely to think you're a brave Hufflepuff is that you're lacking most of Gryffindor's less admirable

qualities, which somehow never make it into the song. It's because you're not a hot-headed Gryffindor like Ron or Charlie. You don't run on overconfidence like Percy or even intuition like Harry or George. You think things through, and you're more than willing to wait for concrete evidence when it's necessary. I'm not saying that either Ron or Harry are completely Gryffindor in their behaviour either, but I do think the Hat made a mistake with you."

At this, Neville spoke quite deliberately. "Actually... It didn't... it offered me Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. At the time, I had my grandmother's voice ringing in my ears, saying she was disappointed that I would never be as courageous as my parents. The Hat was encouraging me towards Hufflepuff... but I chose Gryffindor instead. *I* made the choice. If anyone made a mistake, it was *me*."

"Maybe the mistake was in giving an option," Bill offered quietly.

"The most important thing to remember is that it's not actually any better to be a Gryffindor than a Hufflepuff," Arthur added from the head of the table, which had fallen suspiciously quiet as the others snuck glances at the only Hufflepuff seated among them. Susan was clearly listening to every word as she defiantly smoothed down Hugo's mop of hair, but she was avoiding eye contact with all of her in-laws. "I dare say every house has its unfounded prejudices against every other. It just takes time to remember to see someone for who they are rather than for their house."

"I learned quickly enough, didn't I?" asked Ron before leaning over to kiss his wife. She rapidly turned the colour of her husband's hair and playfully batted away the friendly hand that was creeping up her leg under the table.

"That's certainly true, Arthur." Andromeda patted Ron on the back as she left to help Molly tidy up. "Although it becomes more and more obvious the farther removed you are from the house politics of your youth."

"Pomona was right to be upset," Arthur responded grimly. "I just hope Minerva takes it seriously and figures out what went wrong."

Ginny piped up again, this time with a mischievous look of feigned sobriety, "You know, Neville, you would have had a lot more time with Hannah early on if you had chosen Hufflepuff instead."

Neville's blush crept up past his ears as he suppressed a shy smile. "Oh, shut it, Mrs. Potter."

"Of course, she's quite brave as well," Ginny continued on, a bit more somberly. "I couldn't believe it when she returned during that last battle. And after her mother had been killed by Death Eaters..." She shook off the gravity of her words, determined to return to light-hearted matters. Her grin began to blossom wildly as she needled Neville, "And her smile is like sunshine, and she smells just like buttercups, and furry woodland creatures flock about when she starts to sing..."

That night after presents had been opened and dishes tidied away, Harry, Ginny and Hermione each carried one of the little ones in their arms when they took the Floo Network back to the Potters' cozy home. Hermione and Harry climbed up to the boys' room on the second floor, tucking Albus and James into their beds after swapping their grubby clothes out for pyjamas and removing their mud-caked trainers. Ginny set Lily down in the bassinet in the nursery, and Harry went down to start a kettle for tea. He was rummaging through the cupboards for biscuits when Ginny finally emerged.

"*Accio digestives!*" she called, and a half empty roll of biscuits flew into her open hand.

The three friends prepared milky cups of chamomile as they settled down at the small table.

"Hermione, I'm so thrilled you're moving home. Fleur and Susan are lovely, but I've missed having a sister on the same continent."

"Doesn't Audrey count?"

"She's... fine, I suppose, but she did marry Percy. I thought that having kids would loosen them up a bit, but it seems to have moved them along that spectrum in quite the opposite direction. What I really need is for George to finally marry Angelina. They've been together now for four years, and I have no idea what's taking so long... although she might be waiting until she retires from Quidditch to get married. Then perhaps we'll see them both around more often."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll be seeing quite a lot of me until I decide where to live," Hermione conceded. "I should be out of your guest room in a few short weeks, if all goes according to plan."

"Nonsense, Hermione." Ginny waved her hand as she reassured her friend. "You can stay as long as you need or would like. The boys are thrilled that their Aunt Hermione will be living with them for awhile, and Lily... well, she..." As if on cue, a faint whimpering began upstairs. Ginny stood up, tea in hand, and headed up. "I'll just go check on that."

Harry had been purposefully nibbling on a single biscuit throughout this exchange, but as his wife left the kitchen, he asked the one question that had been on his mind all day.

"Hermione... You know I love you and I'm happy you're here. I know you've... well, lost yourself a bit to all this work for your parents and your job as a Healer..."

"...Doctor, Harry."

"Right... doctor." He had the good sense to look a little sheepish at his forgetfulness. "Wow, and I was raised by Muggles. Old habits die terribly hard, don't they?"

"Yes, Harry, I believe they do."

"Right... so... I was just wondering... what prompted you to move back now?" His eyes were warily asking another set of questions entirely *Will you leave again in a few months? A year? Am I getting my hopes up too high about having one of my best friends back?*

Hermione squared her shoulders and looked into her friend's eyes. "Yes, Harry. I'm sure I'm back. Really, truly back. I promise. As for why I'm back now? Well, I've made a lot of progress with my research more than I would have expected. But I've hit a roadblock that I can't get past while I remain in Australia. I want my work to be above board, but the kinds of things I'm working on now... I couldn't take them any farther there."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I think I've told you that I'm using some Muggle technology to examine some health problems that St. Mungo's would be tackling here. It's fairly limited, as the principles about using electricity in a Magical environment still apply. I don't want to bore you with the details, but I'm basically using different kinds of scans to look inside people's brains to identify damage and figure out how to treat it. I've got a... Muggle way inside the mind. But in order for what I've studied to be really helpful for both Muggles and wizards, I need a Magical way inside as well."

"And?"

"I'm sure with your work you're aware of different laws and standards in other countries. In some ways, Australia is much more progressive than England. But in other ways, it's a much more conservative country..."

"So how does that impact what you're doing?"

"Here we have... how many Unforgiveables, Harry?"

"Three." He smiled impatiently. "You know this, Hermione."

"The Australian Ministry of Magic has declared five."

"The Cruciatus, the Imperius, the Killing Curse, and...?"

"Occlumency and Legilimency. They're considered too dangerous to use and the mind is too delicate a thing to breach. The assigned punishment is a lifetime sentence if you're caught as an Occlumens or a Legilimens."

"Now I see... so you've returned to learn how to become a Legilimens? That could take some time, Hermione. It may be legal here, but it's still a skill highly regulated by the Ministry. Regulated for good reason, I might add."

"And yet you never registered when you began studying Occlumency."

"Well, we were at war and I was under orders from Professor Dumbledore. There was never any reason to register me, anyway. I was rubbish. I probably would have been rubbish even if Dumbledore himself had taught me, but lessons from Snape..."

"...*Professor Snape*..."

"...*Professor Snape*, then. They were a disaster. Trust me when I say that I never possessed any skills that should have been registered. I assure you, he would agree."

Here it is, Hermione thought. *It's now or never, I suppose*. She had learned long ago to keep any talk of her parents or her medical work to a minimum around her friends. It wasn't that they didn't trust her, per se, but they never knew how to respond... and their hesitation registered palpably with her. She knew they worried, thought she'd put her life on hold and didn't know how to get it back on track. They thought she should have continued on with Ron, perhaps, and married him sometime after that very public kiss she'd bestowed upon him during the final battle. They thought she would be working in the Ministry to advance the cause of the less fortunate, perhaps, such as taking up the plight of the house-elves or work to eliminate the remaining anti-Muggle legislation that was tucked into centuries of accrued documents and laws. Of course, perhaps they didn't think any of that... perhaps that was something she was hiding from herself? *Would I have done things differently? Should I have?* At this point, it didn't matter. She was here now, and she was here with a purpose.

"That's just it, Harry... I need to find Severus Snape."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

De-briefing at number twelve, Grimmauld Place; meeting up with an old acquaintance.

"I guess I can see Legilimency as a Unforgivable, but Occlumency? Why would that be?" he asked.

"Oh, Harry." Hermione sighed. "Has your faith in the government somehow been restored? We never had much experience here with a Ministry that made rational choices. Why would Australia be any different?"

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Too true! Still, how would anyone know you were Occluding?"

"I think perhaps it's the principle involved, since Occlumency is the flip side of Legilimency." She paused and began sifting through the jam jars on the kitchen table. "Or maybe they're concerned about its use in a trial? I couldn't say. It's a bit of a non-issue for me anyway, since I only need Legilimency for what I'm working on."

"Didn't you already work through all those books on Occlumency and Legilimency a long time ago?" he asked.

"Nope. That was only other kinds of Mental Magic: Memory Charms, Obliviation, and the like. Those were easier to pick up because they were related to other charms work, but Legilimency is another story altogether. I don't really know how much of this I can pick up by just reading the theory. That's why I need a teacher."

"You would willingly seek him out and become his student again?"

"If he lets me."

"You do know you're mad, don't you?"

"He may not have been kind or fair, but there's no denying he's brilliant."

"Well, as long as you know you've gone 'round the twist."

Hermione merely rolled her eyes and stirred milk and honey into her tea.

"Honestly, Hermione, I dunno... I'm not sure how you would track him down, let alone get him to agree to meet with you. Even if you could get him to talk with you once, I don't imagine you could get him to agree to however many hours of work it would be." Harry inattentively sliced a banana, periodically passing pieces to Lily as he continued his conversation with Hermione the next morning over breakfast. "I still haven't been able to have a single conversation with him, although it's been quite a few years since I've tried."

Sunday mornings at Grimmauld Place were slow and easy. There were no demands placed on the day, but the schedule kept there was clearly determined by the regular habits of a couple with small children. Having a lie-in these days meant waking up to the prodding of two toddlers gripping wiggling dragon models in their mitts rather than ringing alarms telling you to get dressed for work, but breakfast was served at the same time every day. The only difference was that of attire: was anyone already in dress robes or were all five Potters still in slippers and pyjamas? This particular morning found Ginny perusing the *Daily Prophet* between morning tasks, the boys prodding their father's old miniature Hungarian Horntail to try to make their baby sister giggle, and the remaining pair resuming their conversation from the previous night over eggs and toast.

"I thought I'd have my chance after he was released from St. Mungo's, but he left so quickly after he regained consciousness. You were already in Australia then, so I suppose it was four or five months after the last battle. Maybe six... it all blurs together now." Harry looked up at his friend. "Did I really never tell you this?"

She shook her head, realising again just how much she had missed from her friends' lives because of the decisions she had made. She uncapped a jar and started spreading the orange marmalade she had selected on her toast as Harry continued on.

"I sent owl after owl, but they always came back with the letters I attached. I left messages at the closed ward in case he ever returned for treatment, although I still don't know if he ever went back after his release. I suppose I thought he'd be willing to talk with me after the memories he showed me, that maybe he'd even want to talk with me after all that had happened..." Harry's voice trailed off as he tried to remember his thoughts from so many years earlier.

"Right... because he always reacted so well after each time you viewed a memory he had hidden." Her eyes twinkled as she willed herself to keep a straight face. "Had only you caught up with him earlier, Harry, you probably would have been plaiting each other's hair and sharing secrets well into the night."

It was Harry's turn to roll his eyes, but his reaction was overshadowed by a spluttering of tea and riotous laughter from Ginny. She dropped the newspaper she had been holding on the table and went after her wand to clean up the mess she had made.

"Pl-pl-plaiting each other's hair!" she stammered out. James and Albus fell silent and stared up at their mother in confusion. Ginny spoke affectionately to her husband. "Do advise him on your conditioner, Harry. Your hair is just lovely to touch." She walked around behind her husband to run her fingers through his black hair, manically splayed as always, and tenderly kissed his temple.

Harry soldiered on in frustration past the chuckling women beside him. "I think I know better now than to invite Snape around for a slumber party! I just wanted..." He hesitated. "Well, I'm not sure what I would have said... asked... I wanted to apologise, perhaps? I hated him for such a long time, but in the end I was wrong about almost everything."

"Maybe also thank him?" Ginny tentatively offered.

"I dunno... something... and then when Albus Severus came along, I tried again. By that point I just wanted... well..." Harry was losing this battle as he tried to put into words the jumble of reactions they all felt after discovering the true alliance of Severus Snape. Despite Dumbledore's constant reassurance that Snape was on their side, despite the number of times Snape had protected them from danger, and despite the fact that Snape had let Harry go untouched as he ran from the Astronomy Tower that terrible night, Dumbledore's death had sealed his fate in their eyes. When they learned of his devotion to Harry's mum and his innocence in the death of their mentor a year later, their world upended itself.

Hermione cleared her throat. "As we're not going to atone for our own sins in this matter today, can we return to the original problem?"

"Final call," Ginny piped up. She wrapped up several cooled plum cakes and placed them in a small box with crayon drawings by James and Al, a handful of letters, and Muggle sweets from the vending machine at the hospital. She then pulled down one of the flaps and scribbled Teddy's name on the outside. "I'll send it off today. Does anyone have anything else to toss in?"

"Did the Aero bars make it in?" Hermione asked.

"Indeed."

"How many plum cakes?" Harry asked. "You know he shares with all the boys in his room."

"Five. One for each of them and two for Teddy. Will that suffice?"

"That sounds wonderful, Ginny," he replied. "I'm sure the young men of Hufflepuff thank you."

"I'm glad it passes muster." She tied off the box with string. "Now then... we were going to return to the original problem, weren't we, Hermione? Which was...?"

"Finding Snape," she stated. "Is there an address where I could reach him now? Where does he work? I could send a message there rather than his home and it would all be much less confrontational."

Harry stared into his tea for a long while, then looked up at the wall.

"Malfoy," he said.

"What?"

"Malfoy," Harry repeated. "Hermione, I know you've tried to keep up with what's happened here since you left, but you don't seem to realise that Snape is not a public figure. He doesn't attend ribbon cuttings or kiss babies to promote the projects of the Ministry or even teach at Hogwarts anymore. The last I heard, he sold his family house, and no one even knows where he lives. No one knows where he works either, although there have been one or two simple restorative potions he's developed for St. Mungo's, so that must be how he supports himself. The last anyone heard of him was when he had a nasty run-in with a reporter from the *Prophet* at Malfoy's son's christening a few years back."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Malfoy has a child? You're putting me on. Draco Malfoy. Who married him?"

Here Ginny began supplying information with a wicked grin and an affected air. "Why, the elegant and sophisticated Miss Greengrass. Pureblood, of course. And her family was neutral during the war."

"Oh, well I suppose that makes sense," Hermione responded disdainfully. "After all, she was just one of the many, many Slytherin girls we saw throwing themselves at him all seven years at school."

"No, not Daphne. Her younger sister, Astoria. She was in the year behind me. We've run into them a few times at those Ministry fundraisers and have learned to play nice. That is, Astoria and I can maintain a civil conversation while Harry and Malfoy avoid each other like a bad case of Dragon Pox. Their son, Scorpius..." Hermione scoffed, but Ginny just smiled. "I know, I know. The names Malfoys dream up are too much for any child to suffer through. Their son, Scorpius, is about the same age as Al. Just you wait someday, when he and Lily have run off together and eloped, we'll have to suffer through grandchildren with names like Cassiopeia and Ursa and Pavo."

Harry nearly choked at this. "Don't even joke about that, Gin!" he exclaimed, wordlessly Summoning a glass of water. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Forbidden love makes the heart grow fonder," she replied sportively. "Star-crossed lovers, you know. You had better watch yourself, Harry Capulet."

"Send Malfoy a letter," Harry suggested between gulps of water, pointedly ignoring his wife. "He still owes you for your testimony. Kept him out of Azkaban, didn't it? The Malfoys' only punishment was to make payments to the Ministry and Hogwarts as reparations. I still don't think you'll get anywhere with Snape, but it's the only chance you've got."

Taking Harry's advice, Hermione warily sent one of the Potter's owls with a brief missive to the boy she hadn't seen in over a decade. Requesting a meeting, she kept the message as simple as possible to avoid the risk of saying the wrong thing, offending him, and scaring him off. A few days later, a brusque response arrived at Grimmauld Place via Owl Post. The weighty, velvety scrap of parchment was held together with an elaborate emerald wax seal bearing the Malfoy crest, and the magnificent eagle owl carrying it deigned to allow her to remove the letter with all the condescension she imagined a Malfoy owl could muster.

Granger,

I take lunch on Mondays at Café des Amis. My standing reservation is at noon.

He had given her no address, no directions. He had given her no explicit invitation to join him, but that was evidently what she was supposed to do. She had found the only restaurant in London with that name in the vicinity of Covent Garden, an easy Apparition trip and short walk away from where she was staying with the Potters. Showing up early, she tried to anticipate his arrival and tried to convince herself she wasn't nervous. After giving his name to the maître d', she allowed the man to seat her at a small table along the far wall. Settling into her seat, she checked the time.

11:42. So many things were dependent upon this meeting running smoothly. She hadn't known a Draco Malfoy who could refrain from insulting her and her blood at every available opportunity, but surely he must have changed at least a little. He had switched sides before the end of the war, yes, but he had also been living in the world that war created for eleven years. It wasn't like she expected some warm and fuzzy reconciliation scene between the two of them. She just needed him to secure her access to Snape so that she could convince him to teach her. It was an impossible task and she knew it. She was depending on someone who had always despised her to win the favour of someone who had never liked her. *I'm doing this for my parents*, Hermione told herself silently, fidgeting with the silver band on her watch. *Doing this for my parents*.

11:47. The last time she had seen him was in his trial before the Wizengamot following the war. He had been seated beside his mother, who herself was next to his father. She couldn't remember what he had been wearing or exactly what about his behaviour had called it to her attention, but she remembered thinking that he looked more like a tired little boy than a young man down in the circular courtroom. Perhaps it was the dim lighting in the stone room or the way he slumped just slightly in his chair as she described his actions during her visit to Malfoy Manor during the war, how he clearly didn't have any more choice in being there than she did and yet how he tried not to give them away when questioned by dear Aunt Bellatrix. Or perhaps it was the way he avoided looking at her as she testified on his behalf.

She checked again.

11:54. He had chosen a Muggle restaurant. A Muggle restaurant with a name he must have understood in translation. Was it a peace offering, an olive branch? No, she told herself, *this is Malfoy's regular lunch spot. This wasn't directed at her.* This wasn't directed at her... which meant that Malfoy regularly ate at a Muggle restaurant. What would prompt a Malfoy to venture out of the wizarding world on a regular basis? A desire for anonymity? Or a certain level of disdain for the Leaky Cauldron? Maybe it was a simple preference for French cuisine and a pitiful lack of culinary diversity in Diagon Alley. Whatever the reason, the place had a tasteful and understated elegance. Hermione realized as the tables filled up around her that the reservation he had made was clearly necessary. It was well across town from the entrance to the Ministry, she realized. *Wouldn't Malfoy be working his way up in the government? It was significantly closer to another... no*, she thought. *That can't be.*

11:59. She wondered what he looked like now. Harry looked older, she supposed, but it had come on so gradually she didn't notice anything in particular. Ron and Ginny, too. Would Malfoy look suddenly older? Would she look older to him? She glanced down at the second hand on her watch winding its way back around to 10... 11... 12

12:00. As her gaze snapped up, the chair across from her moved backwards swiftly and tall blond man gripping it took his position across from her.

For several moments, neither spoke.

She surveyed him carefully, taking in his conservative charcoal suit. Muggle attire, surprisingly, and he looked at home in it. His shoulders were broader than she had remembered from their school days, his neck wider, his eyes more somber. He was always trying to appear aloof as a boy and a young man, but it was obvious that he was clothing himself in that detached indifference. It was obvious that he cared very much about the world he was told he ruled and the place he would have above the people in it. This Malfoy was different; the level of artifice was gone, hidden behind an impenetrable mask. As his eyes searched her face, no emotions registered on his.

"Granger."

"Malfoy."

He was what most women would consider handsome, she supposed. What most men would consider intimidating. The point of his chin had softened as he put on muscle mass, and he had mercifully chosen a less... er, eccentric hairstyle than his father. As she studied his features, she could just make out the faint scars above his left ear and across his cheekbones from the collapsing chandelier during her escape from his home in their seventh year.

Her curiosity got the better of her. "I couldn't help but notice that the entrance to St. Mungo's is less than a five-minute walk from here." There was a question in her voice as she made this observation.

"Yes, hello, Malfoy. How have you been these long years?" he began. "French cuisine, Malfoy? I do love a Bordelaise." "Malfoy, you look dashing out of my league, just as I always expected you would be..."

She paused, slightly startled by his words and unsure of just how to respond. Whatever hope she had for this lunch, she had clearly set her expectations too high. She should have known he couldn't even be civil. She opened her mouth, unsure herself of what was going to come out. Their waiter used their temporary silence to his advantage as he took their orders.

"You're a blunt one, you know that?" he asked, interrupting her empty gesture. "Anyone else would have begun this conversation differently, Granger."

"You'd like me to chat with you as though we're old chums who lunch together on a regular basis?" Unaware of the rising tenor of her voice, her ire was raised by his increasingly bemused expression. "Shall we begin with the warm temperatures this autumn or would you rather I asked to see the latest photograph of your progeny? You know, the last time we..."

"Granger."

She controlled her response this time, taking a few slow breaths as she folded her arms across her chest. *I'm doing this for my parents.*

"Granger, I didn't mean to upset you," he offered quietly as his mask fell. The corners of his mouth turned up as his cheeks flushed. "Most people lay down inane pleasantries before going in for the kill."

Draco Malfoy apologised to her.

Apologised to her with... well, not warmth exactly, but good humour. She was stunned. She had told herself going into their meeting that she had no expectations for what was going to happen, but that wasn't quite true, since she certainly never expected this. When he hadn't hexed her, insulted her appearance, or mocked her family within the first few moments, she had been pleased. When he had cracked a few jokes, she had been suspicious, but in the moment he softened and apologised, she knew she was the hypocrite. She hated knowing it, knowing she was wrong, knowing that for all her platitudes about overlooking the past and moving forward, she hadn't totally believed in them. Not for him. No, she had been expecting a few hexes at worst and an uncomfortable propriety at best, but this? This was beyond anything she could have hoped for.

"So you were expecting me to attack?" she asked slyly. "I could promise not to hurt you, but you may choose not to believe me. Unless you've improved quite a bit in hand-to-hand combat since third year."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Malfoy! I clocked you and you were..."

He held up a hand, smiling. "If this is ever to work, Granger, we will never speak of that incident again."

"All right, then," she conceded. "You compared my asking you about St. Mungo's to 'going in for the kill'? Why do you think your work there as 'the kill'? Or perhaps you don't work there. I was only making a guess based on proximity."

"Prelude to a kill,' then. I do work there, running one of the Potions labs. We maintain some of the hospital's supplies and pioneer new research." He narrowed his eyes. "I'll admit it, I was expecting you to pat yourself on the back for pointing me back along the noble path or some such nonsense, double checking to make sure that I'm helping others to make up for the past."

"Well then, would you like me to say that I'm glad to know my testimony served the greater good? I am glad to hear that you're doing well, Malfoy, although that wasn't why I proposed this meeting."

"What do you want, Granger?" His grey eyes bore into her again.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"To what end? You haven't wanted to talk to me in ten years, and you may have noticed that I never casually sent you an owl."

"It would have taken your owl a long while to reach me, Malfoy. I've been living..."

"I know where you've been, Granger," he said abruptly. He then paused and looked around at the man who had reappeared with their dishes. He waited until all of their needs had been attended to and thanked their server before turning back to Hermione. "You're a bloody war heroine. You're also a... a..." He stopped himself, took a deep breath, and tried again. "I just wanted a..." Another pause, another slow breath. He finally seemed to have given up on whatever it was he had been trying to say. "*I know where you've been,*" he muttered quietly to himself as he ran his fingertip along the rim of his water glass.

He raised his voice and his eyes to hers. "Now... why did you want to talk to me?"

She countered his question with one of her own. "Why did you agree to meet with me?"

"I think you know why."

"No, I don't."

"Granger, I don't think I'm in a position to refuse you anything. I'm in your debt after everything you did for my family."

"I was afraid of that." She sighed.

He paused. "I thought you said you didn't know why?"

"I suspected." She considered her words carefully. "I don't want you to do anything for me because you feel you have to. I certainly didn't do or say anything with the hope of securing some kind of compulsion from you or your family. If you're willing to start over with me, I'd like to know that you mean it. If you want to help me, I want you to help me freely. If you'd rather sit back and mock my teeth again, I'd rather you do that."

"You're giving me permission?" he asked incredulously.

She nodded, perfectly aware that this was a very bad idea.

"You do realise that it's significantly less fun now that you no longer resemble a beaver?"

"Is that a compliment, Draco Malfoy?" she asked cheekily, one eyebrow raised.

He put up one hand in protest and grinned. "I'm already taken, Granger. Control yourself."

He hesitated again. "Now are you going to finally answer me and let me in on why you wanted to talk to me?"

Now, she thought, I'm going to lose him. When he learns I've been a mercenary at heart. She briefly contemplated lying to him, telling him something that she thought he might like to hear. As she considered her words, she realized that she didn't have a clue what that would be. She didn't know what to say because she didn't know him. She had underestimated him, that she knew, but to what extent? She thought back over all they had gone through, over the ways they had cut each other down and competed with one another. And she saw someone who was willing to talk with her in spite of it all, even if it was prompted by an overblown sense of honour.

She decided to tell him the truth.

She gave him the condensed version about her parents, the failed memory modification, and her studies in Muggle medicine as they enjoyed their meal. She waited patiently as he laughed a bit at the notion that she regularly went into people's brains, and she continued on about her move back to England in order to learn Mental Magic. Topics such as Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, and the war were assiduously avoided.

When dozens of moving photographs of a tiny blond boy were produced by his proud father, Hermione seized her opportunity.

"Is it true that his godfather is Professor Snape? Wasn't he yours as well?"

He sized her up as he picked up the bill. "Subtle, Granger. I'm impressed you managed to hold out this long without asking for a way to get in touch with him."

She was ill-prepared to hide her shock. *How had he known?*

"Legilimency, Granger, Occlumency? Who else were you going to get to teach you? Potter?"

She blanched.

"I may owe you, Granger..."

She looked down, shaking her head emphatically. "No, Malfoy, you don't..."

"Yes, I do," he cut her off. "I may be able to ask him to meet with you. Just remember that while I owe you something, he owes you nothing."

She nodded, gathered her things, and stood up to leave. "You know, Malfoy, I do love a Bordelaise. You picked a fantastic restaurant."

They began walking out of the place together. "Well, I certainly couldn't rely upon your taste, now could I? We all witnessed that unfortunate snogging incident with Weasley."

She stopped and turned to face him, gobsmacked. "Well played, Malfoy. Touché. If only I had possessed my own Time-Turner or some common sense..."

"As for Severus..." he interrupted, and they continued over to the coat check. "I'll see what I can do."

Several weeks later, she had returned to a family dinner with the Potters after meeting with a realtor to look over several properties in central London. A familiar looking eagle owl appeared at the sitting room window. Hermione removed another sealed piece of parchment, allowing James the chance to give a treat to the beautiful creature as she read her letter.

Granger,

Sunday afternoon, 2 pm, October 25th. He agreed to a meeting on neutral ground: Malfoy Manor. Use the Floo.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 12

Hermione meets up with Severus.

She stared at the parchment in her hands, tracing the impression of the green seal with her index finger. It felt substantial, about twice the weight of any letter she received before. *Don't be daft, Hermione*, she thought. *It's the same as the last letter Malfoy sent you.* She turned it over, examining her last name scribbled across the parchment. It seemed very, very real as she mentally ran over what she hoped would be the coming events in rapid succession. She was going to talk to Severus Snape. She would convince him to teach her. Learn how to access her parents' minds. Free them from the labyrinth of lies in which she had trapped them and receive their thanks for protecting them during difficult times. Then their forgiveness for the liberties she had taken without their permission.

This became a secret ritual for Hermione, one she would enact over and over again each time she picked up the letter of invitation. A private ceremony that always ended in gratitude and clemency.

She had six days until the meeting. Six days she had been planning on using to establish her new life in Britain, but now she cancelled her appointments with her realtor and postponed her interviews at local Muggle hospitals. She had decided long ago that she would settle herself in central London; it was close to everything she would want in the city and put her near Harry and Ginny, who were the closest thing she had left to family. A flat downtown came at a pretty price even if she avoided posh neighbourhoods, newly remodeled buildings, or multiple bedrooms, and her savings would only stretch so far before she needed an income. She needed access to medical resources like she had before and an adequate income to pay for her pad, and she decided that all other points were negotiable. *Really, Hermione, why did you leave your post in Melbourne right after you started earning a decent salary?* When a suitable job in her field couldn't be found anyplace inside the Inner Ring Road, she looked farther afield. When one still couldn't be found, she decided to apply for emergency room shifts in a number of local hospitals in order to provide for herself.

Six days to weigh her options and engineer a strategy with the highest probability of success. What should she do and say? Should she acknowledge the past and dredge up their history or ignore it completely to keep things dispassionate? She considered the awkwardness of the position she was in. This venture would be greatly simplified if it were anyone but him. If only it were Professor McGonagall who was the accomplished Legilimens she needed. Or Professor Flitwick. Any other teacher would be easier to approach, regardless of how many years had passed. Most teacher-student relationships maintain that polite distance that is easy to step out of or renew at will, but Snape's role in the war and their treatment of him rendered that option impossible. Had it been Flitwick, she would have owed him a brief note of greeting, dropping in a few sentences on her life since Hogwarts alongside honest well wishes for his health and happiness. She would have signed it with a flourish and added a short post script asking for a bit of his time: perhaps she could take him for a lunch at the Three Broomsticks some free weekend and ask his advice concerning an obscure branch of magic? Yes, that would have worked if it had been Flitwick. Or McGonagall. Or Vector or anyone else besides him. Oh, there would have been the requisite questions about her choice to leave the wizarding world if it had been Professor McGonagall, but that would only have made her reach out more enthusiastically.

She was going to talk to Severus Snape. What could she possibly offer Snape to induce him to give her lessons? She began compiling lists of everything she knew of her sullen Potions master in an attempt to understand her target and plan her actions. She knew him as a reluctant mentor at Hogwarts, as a recalcitrant member of the Order of the Phoenix, as a repentant Death Eater. He was endlessly unconventional and unimaginably complicated, and she told herself that she knew better than to assume she could figure out why he had ever done anything. He was Harry's bully and one of his greatest protectors. Dumbledore's healer and his killer. He insulted Harry's mum and yet he loved her? He was powerful, definitely, possibly one of the most powerful wizards she had ever known. But was there anything about him she knew for certain?

He was not a bad man; he had fought on their side in the war as long as she had been alive, and he guarded Harry in spite of his hatred.

He was not a simple man; outside of Dumbledore himself, Hermione knew that she'd never met anyone with the depth and breadth of knowledge he possessed.

He was not a flexible man; no, she had seen enough of his exacting standards in Potions lessons all those years. His devotion to Lily seemed driven by obsession rather than generosity.

Six days to talk over things with Harry. He was with her when Malfoy's owl had delivered the letter, so she saw the bittersweet smile that flashed across his face when he realised Draco had come through for her. She knew he was happy for her, but it was difficult for him to watch her receive an opportunity he thought he'd never have. It had been hard enough when she debriefed him after her lunch with Draco, relating Draco's words of his assumed indebtedness. If Malfoy felt the need to pay off a debt for her testimony, shouldn't he be owed the same? Nevermind that neither wanted Malfoy to be running around with his tail between his legs it just seemed too out of character for Malfoy, no matter how badly their fifteen-year-old selves would have liked to see him doing things on their behalf. Still, it was obvious that Hermione had enjoyed her run-in with him, and that seemed to be more disconcerting to Harry than anything else. The meeting with Snape was the elephant in the room for five days. Really, it was the elephant in every room in Grimmauld Place, and it gained a few stones every passing hour until the day before Hermione's appointment. Ginny and the kids were visiting the Burrow for their regular Saturday lunch while Harry and Hermione stayed behind to mull over what was to come with a plate of Kreacher-prepared sandwiches and biscuits.

"No, of course I don't begrudge you the chance to speak with him," Harry said.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I know you wanted to talk to him," she said. "Is there anything you'd like me to ask? Anything at all?"

He shook his head and reached for a ham sandwich on rye bread. "Hermione, this is your chance, not mine. There was a time when I was desperate to speak with him. Ask him about my mother, and what he remembered about her, and why he loved her. Ask for some of his memories to use with a Pensieve. I thought a lot about what I would say, imagining whole conversations between us, you know? I imagined the questions I would ask, sure, but also the answers he would give: 'Harry, she was the most beautiful woman in the world so kind, so full of love,' and so on. But I don't know what he would really say about her! I don't think he would ever even answer me."

"'There was a time'... what about now?"

"Now I'm just angry I didn't ask more questions of Sirius and Remus." He reached for his glass of water and spoke quietly. "Why didn't I ask them? I had years with them both, and I wasted them."

"Harry, those weren't easy years. We were all preoccupied by Voldemort, you..."

"Why didn't they offer to tell me more stories about them?" he interrupted crossly. "Surely they should have known that I would have wanted to hear anything that they would say."

Hermione placed her hand on his and waited until he looked up at her. "They didn't know how little time they had with you, Harry, and they..."

"You're right, Hermione. I know you're right." He smiled wanly at her. "At the risk of sounding horribly morbid, I must insist that you promise me this..."

"What?"

"If, God forbid, Ginny and I were to die tomorrow, I need to know that you'll tell them everything you can possibly can about us."

Hermione didn't bother asking who "them" was referring to. "Harry," she pleaded.

"Promise me."

"Harry, you're being ridiculous. We're not at war and you're not going anywhere."

"Promise me."

"Fine. I solemnly swear," she began as she raised one hand as if pledging an oath, "to bore your children to tears with stories about you, Harry. They'll listen to me describe what colour toothbrush you used, what your favourite flavour of Bertie Bott's Beans was, and how you depended on me to pass every History of Magic exam you ever took. I'll inflate the role I played in getting you two together, of course, and they'll grow up eternally grateful I ever had the good sense to throw their mother at Michael Corner..."

"That's all I needed to hear." He finally offered her a broad grin, and she knew the subject was placed behind them. "Now then, how do you plan on convincing Snape to take you on? Will you be all right at Malfoy Manor?"

The last time she saw Severus Snape, he was lying unconscious in a hospital bed at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Although she knew logically that he must have been in the hospital after Voldemort used Nagini to attack him, she was still surprised when Neville led her to his room at the end of the Janus Thickey ward. He hadn't been placed on the second floor with other patients of creature encounters, but St. Mungo's had been so overwhelmed in the months following the resolution of the war that she didn't question it any further. She had tagged along with Neville when he asked her to accompany him on a visit to see his parents. After the years he had kept silent about their condition, she wasn't about to refuse him anything. The war had done Neville a tremendous amount of good, giving him an opportunity to show everyone once and for all what stuff he was made of. He was hailed as a hero for the first time in his life, and he finally opened up about his family when he wasn't living in fear of failing to live up to his folks. He led Hermione to Snape's room, where the two teenagers sat and spoke to their incapacitated former teacher, trying not to wallow in the guilt they both felt in having misjudged him so badly. The only thing more inviolably wrong than seeing him attached to odd, beeping contraptions was the lilac hospital robes he had been dressed in. Hermione altered their colour to black as she choked back unbidden sobs and apologies, finally taking her leave of him after less than ten minutes by his side.

The previous time she encountered him, she was witness to what she was sure had been his death in the Shrieking Shack. Truthfully, she hadn't actually seen him from the place she and Harry and Ron had been hiding, but she had heard it all: Voldemort's interrogation about the Elder Wand, the moment when Snape realised Voldemort intended to kill him to gain it, and everything that followed thereafter. When they emerged from behind the stacked crates in the tunnel, she finally saw his body limp on the ground and ran away. She should have spared more than a passing thought for him then, but they were still in the midst of the battle, chaos surrounded them on the grounds of Hogwarts, and she was simply overwhelmed by how close she had been to Voldemort.

Before that, it was the night of Dumbledore's death, when she and Luna met him as he tore out of his office to defend the castle from the invading Death Eaters. He was so concerned for Professor Flitwick's well-being and so insistent that she remain behind to revive the man. That was the last time she spoke with him, believing with certainty that he was on their side, a hasty conversation she replayed in self-doubt over and over again in the days and weeks following Dumbledore's death. It garnered revisiting again after Snape shared his memories with Harry at the final battle, and it confirmed what she already knew: Snape always protected them when he could, even when the circumstances made it difficult. At the time she thought he primarily wanted to ensure Flitwick's safety, but later remembrances of the event prompted her to recall signs of his relief when he saw her outside his doors. She suspected it gave him some assurance that at least she and Luna would both have to stay with their Charms professor and remain safe through the onslaught.

Before that... life was normal. (Or as normal as life ever was with The Boy Who Lived as your best mate.) He was her professor. He was her professor, and she saw him in class. She saw him in class and sometimes out of class when he was completing tasks for the Order. That was all.

When the 25th finally arrived, Hermione steeled herself with her plan of attack: she would ignore the past unless he brought it up, appealing to his expertise and integrity as a teacher. After a morning of playing a meandering game of hide-and-go-seek with James and Albus (who both, Hermione noted, often forgot the point of the game and leapt into view when anyone else traipsed by) and a hearty lunch with all five Potters, she gathered her jacket and headed to the fireplace. Reaching into the terra cotta pot atop the mantle for Floo powder, Hermione said her goodbyes to her friends and accepted their warm wishes for her success. When the green flames and rapid spinning finally stopped, she stepped out of an ornate marble fireplace in a large room bereft of furniture, spotting a series of hooks and hangers adorning the far wall and a pale, elegant couple to her right.

"Granger... Hello."

"Miss Granger."

"Hello," she offered politely. "Thank you so much for setting this up, Malfoy."

"Granger, meet my wife. Astoria... Hermione Granger."

Astoria was as tall and lithe and blonde as Narcissa Malfoy, but she emanated a warmth and hospitality Hermione had never seen from the older woman. "Miss Granger. I remember you from Hogwarts."

"Please call me Hermione."

She raised one hand to her sternum. "Astoria."

To say that Hermione was surprised by the woman Draco married would be an understatement. She had expected the same detached superiority she had always seen from his mother particularly when she saw the physical resemblance between the women but Astoria was all kindness and consideration. "I'm afraid I don't remember you particularly, Astoria, but I used to have shared lessons with your sister, Daphne."

"Well, there's no reason you should have known me, is there? I was two years behind you and in another house," Astoria answered, chuckling. "It was, on the other hand, quite impossible to go through studies at Hogwarts and not know who you were."

A crimson blush flushed up Hermione's neck. "Thank you for letting me intrude upon your hospitality today."

"Certainly." Astoria leaned in a bit closer to clasp Hermione's hand. "Good luck today. I hope everything goes well."

"You know...?"

"None of the details. I simply wanted to welcome you here and introduce myself."

Draco was starting look a bit uncomfortable as his wife and his old school nemesis acted friendly. "Ahem... Granger. Let's be off, shall we?"

Hermione nodded, passing over her jacket into Astoria's outstretched arms, and followed him out of the Floo room.

"First bit of advice," he perfunctorily stated. "Don't waste his time. Follow me. We don't want to be late."

Hermione checked her watch 1:58 and lengthened her stride to be able to keep up with him. She followed him down one torch-lit hallway, around a turn to the right, and through a large hall filled with what she assumed were family portraits based on their nearly uniform flaxen hair. *Blond hair is a co-recessive trait*, she thought. *Is there an unwritten Malfoy marriage law demanding the preservation of the family hair colour?* She returned her focus to the advice he offered as they made their way through the house.

"Second piece of advice no Potter talk."

"Yes, Malfoy, I could have guessed on that one," she responded with a gleam in her eyes. "You'll recall I avoided mentioning Harry when I met with you as well. I know better than to bait a Slytherin."

"Third piece of advice don't get too personal."

"You're giving me some tremendously obvious suggestions here," she chortled.

"Just making sure you know the basics."

He turned around to look at her, giving her an oddly reassuring smile.

"I'm sure you'll be fine with him."

He led on for several paces, then sharply stopped in front of a massive set of double doors.

"Here we are."

Beside the fireplace in the study stood another relic of her past. A pale, lanky man with jet black hair; a familiar stranger who simultaneously looked exactly and yet nothing at all like the man who taught her every week for six years. Though several inches taller than herself, he seemed somehow smaller than she remembered. She couldn't make out why; was she thinking back to when she met him as a first year? He would have seemed more imposing then. His face, while thin as always, had lost its gauntness and hollowness. His skin, while pallid as ever, had lost its sallow tinge. A few stray strands of grey hair shone in the sunlight, and small lines touched the corners of his eyes, but otherwise, there was no notice that he had aged much. The most shocking thing to Hermione was the loss of his customary robes and buttoned-up coat. Perhaps that was why he looked smaller the loss of thirty pounds of heavy black wool wrapped around him like a shroud. In their place were simple black trousers and a white linen shirt that nearly covered the four raised scars on his neck, the proof that he really was Severus Snape.

"Miss Granger."

The time she spent in his company as a child and teenager was always in the company of others, whether in a classroom full of students at Hogwarts or in a house full of Order members at Grimmauld Place. It was not until she was faced with the prospect of time alone with him that she fully appreciated the force of his presence. She had felt it briefly before when he was observing her in a Potions lesson or interrogating her in an empty hallway but his intensity was somehow more bearable and less noticeable when it was diffused among a crowd.

"Professor."

Draco coughed quietly.

"Right. I'm clearly not needed for introductions or anything else of that nature, so I'll take my leave of you," he said congenially, continuing his streak of slightly unnatural politeness. His voice was a bit higher than usual as he spoke, and she realised she had forgotten he was still in the room. "If you'd care for something to drink, please help yourselves to anything on the sideboard. There's a very fine Irish whiskey I acquired on my last visit to Dublin that I heartily recommend to you both. Something to eat, just call a house-elf." He caught himself and turned to her sharply. "Or don't, Granger... Merlin only knows the state of your philanthropy these days."

He returned to the doors to see himself out. "Astoria and I will be down the hall in the conservatory if you need anything."

With one brief glimpse at Hermione and a long, indecipherable glance at Snape, Draco swept out of the room and closed the double doors behind him.

They both stood there for a few moments, indulging in the strangeness of this meeting. He hadn't budged from the position she found him in, standing with his arms rigidly folded across his chest, and he made no move to sit or even look away, no move to initiate this conversation. *Well*, she thought, *I was the one asking to meet up. Perhaps he's waiting for me to begin?*

She finally found her voice. "Thank you for agreeing to this."

He nodded once. "Draco asked politely. In the best interest of all who regularly interact with him, I felt it my responsibility to utilise positive reinforcement."

She felt tempted to smile at what she thought might be a joke, but kept her face stolid and responded in kind. "And here I thought social conditioning was relegated to Pavlov's dogs."

"Systems of etiquette and courtesy employed by the masses would say otherwise."

Another prolonged silence followed his dry response. She hadn't expected them to carry on with ease, but she had hoped for a way to quickly move past this awkwardness as she had with Draco earlier. A taboo hung on nearly every topic she could think of, and she reminded herself again to avoid the past. She waited a few beats to give him space to say something anything, really, and when he didn't, she tried again.

"You look well, Professor."

"Do I?" he asked, raising one eyebrow quizzically.

There was no answer she could give that would satisfy either of them, and she was growing increasingly rankled over his reluctance to even try to make her feel human. 'Why, yes, sir, you should have ditched your antiquated wardrobe years ago' would not be a wise response to make before asking him for a favour. She was also fairly confident that a well-timed 'Yes, Professor, you finally look like you've eaten enough to keep your emaciated frame from collapsing in on itself' would not go over well with this haughty man. She needed to change the topic of conversation.

She plastered a falsely cheery smile on her face. "How has your research been coming along lately?"

"Have you been working in Potions recently," he asked with a smirk, "such that what I do is even remotely relevant to your sphere of experience, Miss Granger?"

Here again she was stopped. 'Well, no, Professor, but I do use Muggle technology to quantify the effects of various potions and curses on the brain' probably sounded like a soft answer to the man. Even worse, 'I largely left the wizarding world behind me twelve years ago, save for my highly unorthodox and rather illegal experiments' could potentially get her into trouble. She needed to change the topic of conversation to something he was willing to respond to, a question he wanted to answer. Since that was clearly beyond her current capacity, she decided to settle instead on a question that she wanted him to answer.

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?" she asked with a weak smile.

"Should I, Miss Granger?" he asked coolly. "You have already shown yourself a reluctant conversationalist, ignoring each question I have posed you. You blatantly refused to discuss my person and declined to address my inquiries as to your ability to understand my work."

"I assumed those were rhetorical questions designed to shut me down."

He sighed melodramatically, finally dropping his arms to his side.

"Shall we get on with this, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir," she agreed blankly, mentally going over her plan. *Don't mention the past, just appeal to his integrity as a teacher and ask. Just ask him for lessons.*

He walked forward slowly and deliberately, stopping a few feet in front of her and raising his wand.

"Sir..." she began, shifting her eyes around the room in growing unease.

"Miss Granger, this will work only if you look at me," he said contemptuously.

"What?" Her brown eyes snapped back to his black ones.

His eyes narrowed and he repeated himself. "Look at me."

Look at me. Had he chosen any other words, she could have collected herself and continued on with this charade. But no... "Look at me." She fought the images as they sprang to her mind: the smell of the dank, moist air in the tunnel underground, the feel of the spongy dirt beneath her feet, the sound of Voldemort pacing in front of them as he spoke to Snape. The sound of Snape asking to leave. The sound of him screaming in pain and the sound of him directing those three words at Harry before he lost consciousness: "Look... at... me."

Hermione had been slightly on edge since she arrived at the manor, but had proudly maintained her composure. The sheer immediacy of these recollections pushed her over whatever line she had drawn for herself, and her carefully constructed boundaries began collapsing around her as the flood of emotions overtaking her wore away her restraint.

She willed herself not to cry, closing her eyes and clenching her hands into fists at her side. "I am so sorry, sir."

He looked genuinely confused by her response. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, sir." Tears were gathering in her eyes, and still she forced them closed. "You didn't deserve that, no matter what you did."

"Miss Granger, are you all right?" he asked, truly perplexed. "Please look at me."

The tenuous hold she had on her emotions broke then and there. She rushed past him and just managed to sit down on a leather wingback chair in the corner of the room before beginning to sob.

"Really, Miss Granger. Did you..." he began, turning to face her.

"I didn't believe in you," she interrupted, gesturing aimlessly with her arms. "I should have."

"Miss Granger," he began gently, "there is no way you could have..."

"I should have," she broke in again. "I should have believed in you."

He paused, clearly having not expected this response. "Not many did."

"No, they didn't, did they? Only Dumbledore and Voldemort, I suppose." She felt the conversation spiraling out of her control, but she had no power to stop herself from speaking. "I should have."

"Why you, Miss Granger? Do you still believe your abilities superior to everyone else's?" he asked ambivalently.

She brushed past this question. "I was always defending you to Harry and Ron. Always."

"Really," he drawled, folding his arms again as he stared at her.

"From the very beginning!" she shouted defensively. "When they thought you were planning on stealing the Philosopher's Stone in first year! When they thought you were sabotaging Harry through Occlumency lessons! Always."

"Do you want my thanks, Miss Granger," he said coldly, "for those sacrifices you made on my behalf?"

"Of course not, sir, but..." she implored.

"And with such demonstrable faith in my innate goodness, Miss Granger, would you care to share why your trust in me was finally shaken?"

She was not going to answer that question. What had she intended for this conversation? She went over her mantra again: don't mention the past, appeal to his expertise. Well... there was no way for her to regain control of this exchange, and every passing sentence between the two of them highlighted how far she had allowed this to drift away from her original goal.

"Dumbledore believed in you!" she finally erupted. Then she added quietly, "I should have known."

His voice was as hushed as she had ever heard it, and yet she understood every venom-laced word he offered her. "So what you're saying," he spat quietly as he strode towards her, "is not that you regret believing me to be a murderous traitor after I spent years protecting you, but that you regret failing to believe the headmaster capable of managing the war?"

"What was I supposed to think?" she asked immediately. "You killed him!"

He started at her words, and a fury raged behind his eyes. He took a few more rapid steps towards her, then paused. He regained his composure somewhat and stalked over to the sideboard, pouring himself a glass of the whiskey Draco had mentioned earlier.

No, no, no, NO! she thought, as her eyes followed him walking swiftly to the window. She had regretted her words even as they were coming out of her mouth, but now, she couldn't explain herself. She knew that he hadn't murdered the headmaster, but he had killed him, regardless of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the event. And she had believed the worst.

"Sir, I... I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean that you..." Her voice faltered as tears continued to fall. "And then when Harry saw the memories you left him, and we learned how you had loved Lily, we..."

He whirled around to face her, eyes open wide. "Stop." His voice was now seething with barely contained anger as he spoke, weighing each word as his eyes pierced her own. "Just stop. Do not say her name."

She knew she should have stopped speaking then, but she continued on. "Sir, we..."

He turned back to stare out at the grounds.

"No."

His knuckles were white as he clenched the glass he was holding.

Hermione finally came to her senses and stopped herself from speaking, and she made her decision.

After all of this, she couldn't ask him to teach her.

She couldn't ask him for anything.

"Thank you for your time, Professor. I don't want to take any more of it. I'll go now and leave you some peace." She turned, flung open the doors, and flew out of the study.

When it finally dawned on her that she should tell Draco and Astoria that she was leaving, she was more than halfway back to the Floo room. She turned around and headed back toward the conservatory, retracing her steps along the wide hallway she had taken to get there. Now as she turned down another hall to her left, she began seeing portraits on the wall that she knew she had never seen before. A few stray suits of armour stood beside the mullioned windows and an enormous tapestry possibly depicting the War of the Roses hung above her, and she silently acknowledged that she was lost. Stopping to calm herself and settle her breathing, she turned back once more to find the passage to the conservatory.

Questions flew through her mind as she tried to find her way through the manor. How could she have been so foolish? How did she lose control of everything so badly? Could it possibly have gone any worse and what was she going to do now?

As she walked slowly back through the hallway, she noticed the figures in those portraits along her right side waking up. Most ignored her, taking the time to yawn and stretch a bit. Most peculiarly, five or six of the older ones weren't moving at all. Muggle portraiture in Malfoy Manor? Surely not. She thought this over as she continued along her path, she felt a dawning sense of recognition. *I know this room*, she thought, *but was I here this afternoon?* Lost in her thoughts, she was startled out of her inner sanctum by a sudden series of noises.

First was a resonant banging sound, metal clanging against the hardwood floor. Next came a high-pitched scream, and for the second time that day, Hermione remembered something she had desperately tried to forget.

Remembered the glint of a silver knife, the flash of a wand.

Remembered this very archway above her and this carpet beneath her feet.

Remembered that night eleven-and-a-half years earlier when a werewolf and a madwoman tried to break her.

Phantom sensations flooded her body in an instant: knives that weren't there pieced her hands, ropes she couldn't see burned along her wrists and ankles, and flames that didn't exist flickered at her torso. Twinges of pain plucked at her skin, her muscles ached, her joints... shocked, her head throbbed...

... and everything went dark.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

Hermione comes to in Malfoy Manor; Draco makes her an offer.

"Mummy? Mummy? Who's that wady?"

"An old friend of Daddy's, Little One, just here to talk to Uncle Severus. She's not feeling very well right now and she was..."

Voices were hazily swirling around Hermione as she began to recover consciousness, still aware of a gentle throbbing in her head and a dull ache in her limbs. The streaming light in the sunny room weighed on her eyelids, and the voices in the room were becoming clearer as she tried to piece together where she was and who was watching over her. Unwilling to open her eyes just yet, she struggled through her confusion as she began to understand the conversation in the room. Two voices, both seated before her: a toddler's breathy speech, endearingly marred by one of those speech impediments of childhood, and the reassuring words of his mother. *Astoria and Scorpius*, she reflected. *I'm in Malfoy's house. That is... I'm still in Malfoy's house.*

She instantly realised that her experience wasn't merely a dream, that she really had returned to this place she had blocked out for so long. And she was still there. And she shouted and what was probably worse sobbed at the man whose help she came to England to seek, inadvertently and handily insulting him in the process. The bulk of their exchange was a blur to her, a flurry of sardonic quips from him and defensive posturing from her. But what exactly had she said to him?

She ran through the conversation they had to ensure she wouldn't forget it, recalling his thinly veiled anger when she mentioned Lily Potter. No, that might have been the proverbial straw for this Slytherin camel's back, but he was already irritated before a single word on Harry's mum slipped out. Whatever she had said to upset him must have occurred early on. She had mentioned Dumbledore. Well, not just mentioned him but actually shouted accusations of killing him between wails and tears. What an utterly senseless lapse in judgment, to draw his attention to the congenial old wizard... yet... No, there was more there on the subject of her former headmaster, but that wasn't it either. *Oh*. It was her, wasn't it? It was simply having to speak with her that put him in a bad mood. Had she really told him that she should have been the one to believe in him during the war? Repeatedly? Ah, what self-righteous nonsense...

That was unfortunate. If not the whole reason, he was at least a large part of the reason she came back. She needed a place where she could learn and practice Mental Magic, but it would have been infinitely easier had her former professor agreed to share a smidgeon of his brilliance with her. It had been a long shot anyway, she knew that, and it hurt to know just how close she had come to getting what she needed before blowing it completely. Now she had to determine the next step as she moved forward alone. Her one consolation was knowing she could try to learn Legilimency on her own here in England without the looming threat of being hauled off to prison.

The resonant clomping of men's dress shoes signaled another person briskly entering the room. They stopped in front of where she was lying, and he spoke from standing height beside his wife and child. "Astoria?"

Hermione listened for a response, but none ever came. Some sounds of shifting bodies and a quiet feminine sigh indicated that the couple did not require words for basic communication, but she couldn't determine what they were saying to one another with her eyes closed.

"Our collection is empty," he stated flatly. "He's going for his supply."

"At least someone checks their cabinets." She lowered her voice, sounding worried. "She's still out cold, though. It's been nearly ten minutes."

"At least she isn't badly hurt. If she doesn't come around on her own soon, a simple Enervate will suffice."

Astoria's voice dropped to a whisper as she stood up to speak to her husband, clearly shielding their son from what she was saying. "I feel terrible. Is it because she was here? Wasn't it the drawing room where... where..." she began to ask, but her voice trailed off.

A heavy sigh from Draco, and his hushed response finally came moments later. "Yes." He spoke more gently to his wife than Hermione had ever heard him before. "Yes, it was."

"Wasn't there any other place for their lessons?"

Lessons? Hermione was startled by her use of the word. There were no lessons planned for the day. Astoria must have confused it with something else.

As she listened to the Malfoys sharing their concern over her situation, she began to feel increasingly guilty about eavesdropping. She decided to wait for them to change to a harmless topic of conversation to stage her awakening in an attempt to minimize the inevitable awkwardness that would follow. He had been doing her a favour, and her own weakness was now putting him an extremely uncomfortable position. If only she could have held herself together and made it out of the manor, she could have explained away her blowup with Snape and everything would have been just fine, thank you very much. Their newly formed acquaintance was a fragile thing, something they both tacitly acknowledged through the use of excessively polite language and the avoidance of any mention of their previous animosity or their encounters during the war. Nevertheless, it was something she fully intended to hold onto and something she wished to see develop. Once you stripped away the Malfoy pretension and the influence of his horrid father, Draco was a decent bloke. He was still a pompous arse at times, but also shockingly intuitive when reading people and an inventive verbal sparring partner, something she thoroughly enjoyed and didn't get to experience often enough.

"I should have insisted on some other place," Astoria continued, still whispering. "I should never have let you invite her here for this. Of course it would bring back bad memories."

"Her last letter came by Potter's owl, darling. *Potter's*. She just moved back, she must be staying with them, and I wasn't about to ask him to go to the Black residence. That would be completely unfair to him."

"Could you have perhaps..."

Another set of footsteps outside in the hallway cut off Astoria mid-sentence, steps much quieter and much faster than Draco's. "Here you go," said a rich baritone voice. She heard an odd tinkling of glass as whatever he had brought along him was set on the table off to the side.

Professor Snape.

Hermione silently gave thanks to whatever sense she had that had told her to continue playing dead. After the words they had exchanged, she was not ready to face the man.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever, but certainly *not now*.

"This is my last vial as well, so I'll brew up a double batch and bring you the excess for your own stock. Give this to her when she wakes up. She'll recover quickly and there will be no side effects. I've got to go." He sounded tired, clipping his words and rushing through his sentences. She surmised that he was probably just as exhausted as she was after what had happened between them.

"What in Merlin's name happened?" Draco asked, raising his voice.

"I'll explain later."

"But..."

"Draco, I really must go."

"But, if..."

"Draco, please." He spoke sharply, emphatic in his plea, exasperated by his godson's insistence and desperate to leave them all. She could almost hear him rolling his eyes. "I believe there may be a limited number of hours any one person can tolerate in that girl's presence in their lifetime. If I failed to reach my quota in her third year, I've quite certainly met it now." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, quietly closing the doors behind him on the way out.

Hermione silently berated herself for being such a fool during her encounter with the man. *An insufferable know-it-all*, she reminded herself.

"Daddy," the littlest voice piped up. "Daddy, I'm hungry."

"Just a minute, Scorpius, and we'll get something for you to munch on." She stole a glimpse through her eyelashes, watching Draco pick up his son and swing him up around his shoulders. His words were apologetic, laced with frustration and something she couldn't quite put her finger on as he turned to his wife. "Darling, I tried to completely avoid any place she'd seen here... before, and I never intended for her to ever go near the drawing room. Never. I don't know what else to say. She could have asked for another location if she thought this was going to happen."

"She must have been so frightened."

"Could you stay here, and I'll see to Scorpius? I'm not sure I'm the person she'll want to see when she finally wakes up. She doesn't know you, but at least your history together is clear."

"Of course, love."

"Please get me if anything's wrong." She heard him kiss his wife before carrying his son out of the room, and the door latched once more behind him.

"Hermione? Hermione?" Astoria called her quietly after a brief pause, and Hermione heard her mumble a faint *Enervate* just as she was beginning to stir. A rush of energy flashed through Hermione's body as she jolted upright. She had never been the recipient of that particular spell while alert, and it now unnervingly sharpened all five senses in a flash before relaxing enough to allow her heartbeat to return to normal.

"Astoria?"

"Oh, thank goodness! I'm so glad to see that you're all right, Hermione. How do you feel?"

"I feel... fine, I think. My head... what happened?"

"You fainted in the foyer... at the entrance to the drawing room. I think you may have hit your head when you fell." She gingerly brought one hand up to Hermione's temple, not quite touching her skin. "You had a bit of a bruise starting to form, but I applied a salve when I saw it and it looks like it has calmed down quite a bit already."

"Where are we?"

"The library. Draco thought it might be more soothing for you to wake up here than in any other room in the house, so he had Severus carry you here." Astoria was trying to keep the mood light, alternately smiling at Hermione and staring down at her hands in her lap. "He also mentioned that I should find our copy of *Hogwarts: A History* and give it to you as a pillow. I'm afraid that he often attempts humour when he's nervous. 'Attempts' being the operative word."

"Professor Snape carried me?" This was startling news. She wasn't sure the man had ever touched her in all the years she had known him.

"Yes. He found you collapsed in the foyer in the entrance to the drawing room and brought you to us." A few moments of silence passed as Astoria gathered her thoughts. "Hermione, I am so very, very sorry about all of this."

"Astoria..."

"When Draco said that you would be coming here," the woman continued, "I wondered if something would happen. He truly didn't mean for this to happen, Hermione, you must believe me."

"Oh, Astoria, I know that." Hermione reassured her in a low voice. "He's been quite generous with all of his time on this project of mine. I honestly didn't expect to get on with him at all, but you've both been very kind to me. This was my fault, not his and certainly not yours. I'm the one who should be sorry; I never meant to inconvenience you like this." She closed her eyes and tilted her head towards the floor, speaking quietly. "I should have known better. I shouldn't have let myself get so worked up. I should have controlled myself in my meeting with Professor Snape." She smiled up weakly at the blonde woman. "It was awful, but it was entirely my fault."

"I remember what a terror he could be in class if someone stepped out of line. He was always incredibly exacting and cautious. Did your first lesson really go that badly today?"

"My first... lesson?" She furrowed her brow and frowned. "This wasn't a lesson."

"Really? I'm sorry, I must have been mistaken." She looked around the library, eyes scanning the shelves for nothing in particular. And then glanced back at Hermione, shaking her head. "No, I'm certain that Draco told me you were having a lesson today. Why, he was so excited the night he convinced Severus to take you on as his pupil."

"Professor Snape agreed to teach me?"

Astoria mutely nodded.

"Really?"

"Yes?"

A quiet rumble morphed into subdued snarl as Hermione dropped her head to her hands and admonished herself in disbelief. "Oh, no, no, no! What have I done?" She had it all wrong.

She wasn't there to convince him to do anything. *He had already agreed.* He was beginning a Legilimency lesson with her. He was trying to teach her and she cried all over him and called him a killer.

Observing Astoria frozen to the spot, Hermione shook away her shock and reached out for a change of topic. "Astoria, I swear I heard a cry and then a bang... or... maybe a crash and then someone screaming. Is everything all right here? Is everyone all right?"

"About that, Hermione... I think you may have heard Scorpius playing. He's darling, but a bit energetic and unbelievably clumsy. I can repair anything. I mean, anything. If Lucius Malfoy knew how many priceless antiques in this house have been in thousands of pieces on these floors, he'd roll over in his grave. We were in the next room when a Ming vase took a tumble."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't know Lucius had... well..." Hermione's strained attempt to piece together words of consolation didn't make it far; she hadn't known that Lucius Malfoy had died, but she also remained unconvinced that he had ever felt the same remorse his wife and son had. He remained the man who had jeopardized her life and the lives of her friends for as long as she had known him.

She was also oddly proud that she managed not to flinch at the mention of a Ming vase in this house, let alone its apparent destruction less than a quarter hour earlier.

"You really have missed out on a lot since you left, haven't you? It was about one and a half years after the war, before Draco and I got reacquainted. We met up again at a New Year's Eve party in 2000 and were married exactly four years later."

Determined to return to a cheerier mood, Hermione began asking questions on a subject she knew would make the other woman smile. "How old is Scorpius?"

It worked. "Two and a half. He's a wonderful, wonderful little boy. A little imp, really, he's got such a wild sense of humour. He's been good for Draco."

"I can tell. He broke out the photograph collection within ten minutes of our lunch last month."

The pair of women chattered on in the Malfoy library while Hermione recovered her wits, continuing as a house-elf appeared with *apop!* to set all the necessities of cream tea before them. She tried to concentrate on the matter at hand, but niggling thoughts of remorse tugged at the back of her brain. No amount of clotted cream or strawberry jam could sooth away her regrets, and she tried not to dwell on what she had lost.

That evening Hermione was back at her temporary home of Grimmauld Place with the Potters. After dinner she found herself in a rousing session of castle construction with Al, periodically interrupted by a "dragon" that looked remarkably like the architect's older brother. The wooden blocks came tumbling down over and over again amidst a chorus of giggles, and the building process started all over again. Somewhere around castle number five or six, Harry swept up the boys to get them ready for bed, and Ginny went to put Lily down for the night.

"That bad, hmm?"

"We started off somewhere at the level of unbelievably awkward discourse, and it went downhill from there." Hermione summoned a teapot and cup to her side, nursing her wounded pride with her favourite Lady Grey in the kitchen with Harry. "Never attempt small talk with that man, Harry. Never."

"Really? Discussions of the weather won't get you anywhere?"

"Oh, it was worse than that. I told him he was looking well and then asked after his research."

"You told Snape he was looking well," Harry repeated with incredulity.

"Well, he does look much better than I remember him. I imagine a decade free from the tyranny of Voldemort will do that for a person."

Ginny appeared in the doorway. "Maybe he looks better because he doesn't have to teach at Hogwarts anymore. It's us Weasleys, you know. We run people right through. We were talking once a few years ago, and Charlie figured out that Snape was there for the entirety of the Weasley children years. His first year was Bill's first, his last was my last." She tilted her head as she jogged through the events of the past. "Well, no, his last was my sixth." She shrugged ambivalently. "Close enough, anyhow."

Harry laughed. "At least he had Bill and Charlie to break him in as a professor before Fred and George came through. Can you imagine any first year teacher surviving those two?"

"What happened next, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"I'm fairly convinced he thinks I need psychiatric help. I may have started crying."

"What? Why?" Harry inquired with concern. "What did he say to you?"

"It wasn't him, Harry. It was me. He was actually quite kind until I messed things up."

"Kind?" Harry asked.

"Well, as kind as he ever is." She stared into her now empty teacup. "I wasn't feeling good about things there, but I tried to brush it off. I know nothing can hurt me at Malfoy Manor anymore, and Draco has been wonderful about everything. But then... when I saw him there..." She paused.

"Who?" Ginny asked. "Draco?"

"No, Snape," she corrected. "I'm sorry, I'm explaining this all wrong." She poured herself a second cup and reached for the honey. "When I first saw Professor Snape there, I felt like I was sixteen all over again. Something in me snapped, and these petulant, petty thoughts of retaliation swept through me, as though they were all things I wanted to say to him when I was a fifth year and frustrated in his class. I knew as it was happening that it was irrational. That /was irrational. But I couldn't stop myself."

Her friends stared at her silently, allowing her the space to say what she need to say.

"And there he was, whole and well. And happy, I hope? As much as we've all survived together, I wish I could talk to him just as he is. Bringing in all my insecurities with him when I was his student, reminding myself of how unequivocal the power dynamics are in that relationship... remembering the guilt I felt when I learned the truth..." Hermione rattled off the concerns of her conscience and the burdens of her soul as she blinked back tears, willing herself not to cry. "He had been planning on helping me, did you know that?" She looked at them both, not really expecting an answer. "Of course he had been," she murmured quietly under her breath. "When did he ever choose not to help us, even when we belittled him and ignored him?"

No one answered.

Her voice raised ever so slightly in pitch as she glanced between her friends. "Er... listen, do either of you ever have flashbacks from that last year?"

"Flashbacks?" Harry asked.

"Not exactly flashbacks," Ginny offered, "but certain events or dates are hard." She paused, looking over at Harry. Giving him a firm smile and reaching across the table to grasp his hand, she added, "They get easier. They've all gotten easier with time."

A sudden realisation spread across Harry's face. "Malfoy Manor... Bellatrix..."

She nodded.

"Oh, *Hermione*." His eyes grew wide, and he reached forward to take her hand in his. "Are you okay?"

"It happened twice. The first time, Snape said something to me that made me think of that day in the Shrieking Shack. It was like we were back there again just a few metres away from Voldemort. The second time, I thought I heard a scream well, it was just Scorpius breaking something accidentally, but I didn't know it and again, it was like I was back in the war. I actually felt the Cruciatus, but I knew no one was there. Is something wrong with me?"

"I think," Ginny began, "it sounds rather like a Dementor, doesn't it?"

"A Dementor?" Hermione frowned.

"Making you relive the worst moments in your life?" the redhead continued.

"I suppose so. I've encountered Dementors before, Ginny, and my reaction was never that strong."

"Yes, but when was the last time?"

"Third year, maybe, on the Hogwarts Express?" Hermione racked her brains. "No... fifth year? I'm not sure exactly."

"Since the war?"

"No." A beat passed. "Oh."

"That time in our train compartment during your third year," Ginny began, "that was horrible for me. I felt indescribably pained and guilty and ashamed. Reliving everything with Riddle and the diary, afraid that I had hurt my friends. It was mostly a kind of mental pain, but it was physical, too."

Harry echoed his wife's sentiments. "It's always been mentally and physically unsettling for me, Hermione. From the very beginning."

She thought over her friends' words, strangely comforted to know they had these kinds of reactions before as well. One glaring difference remained. "That does sound similar, but Dementors are external things, and I seem to have generated this all on my own. It came from my own mind."

"True," Harry began, "but the catalyst was something outside yourself. You wouldn't have gone through any of it if you hadn't heard Scorpius or been in Malfoy Manor."

"I suppose you're right." She looked up at Ginny and let out a hearty sigh. "How did it get easier?"

"For me, it was being able to talk about it with family. Another big part of it was going back to places where things happened. I didn't have much of a choice in the matter, as my worst experiences were all at Hogwarts. I was punished by the Carrows there, although I never received the Cruciatus. That was where we lost Fred, of course." Ginny moved over to Harry, slipping an arm around his waist and letting him pull her close to his side. "I had to return for seventh year and see all of those places everyday. I know exactly where he fell and I know every room in the building where I saw his body before he was taken with the others for burial. I cried every time I walked by each of those spots for weeks. Every single time. And then one day... I didn't burst into tears when I walked through there. That doesn't mean it's gone. Sometimes I still cry about it. It's just that the power it had over me is finally broken."

A letter from Draco arrived by eagle owl early the next morning.

Granger, what happened? If today isn't too soon, you know where I take lunch on Mondays.

"You could have told me that he was there to teach me Legilimency."

"Why should I have had to? I didn't think you two could possibly have become that volatile before he'd even crawled around in your brain."

"It would have kept me from saying stupid, stupid things to him!"

It was a cool autumn day in London, and Hermione and Draco were bickering over boiled quail eggs and asparagus spears at his regular café in Covent Garden. She had received his owl less than four hours earlier, but she desperately wanted to hear what he had to say about the unfortunate series of events in his home.

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, really?"

"Well... no, probably not." She huffed indignantly. "Thinking through everything he did for the Order, how he went behind the lines with Voldemort to help our cause. Did anyone do more in the war? Besides Harry, that is? It's all tremendous. I wanted to thank him for..."

"You thanked him?" he interrupted.

She looked away sheepishly. "I didn't quite make it to there yet. I stopped somewhere between sanctimonious apologies, bursting into tears, and calling him a killer."

His jaw dropped in shock. "You didn't."

"I did."

"Why?"

"I didn't mean to! It all got out of hand so fast. I was trying to explain that I had gotten everything wrong in the war because of his cover..."

"And you told him he killed Dumbledore."

She dropped her elbows to the table and her forehead to her elbows, letting out an inelegant groan.

"Granger, I'm not sure you actually appreciate the magnitude of what Snape did in the war. You certainly don't know what he's done since."

"I beg to differ," she said defensively. "I don't know everything, but I know a great deal of what he did, Malfoy."

"Then ponder this: our sixth year, after Dumbledore forced Snape to save me and Avada him in the process, I was on the run with him for awhile. He was simultaneously protecting me, deceiving me into thinking he was the Dark Lord's right hand man, and convincing me to switch alliances to save my soul. Who else could pull that off? Then he had to run Hogwarts in such a manner as to both satisfy the Dark Lord and defend the lives of the students. Without drawing attention to himself. Who else could have done that?"

She knew the answer: no one could have done what he had done.

"When I realised where his true allegiances were, I went back over all the things he had done for me... astonishing. I didn't deserve any of it. I was such a prat. I really don't know what would have happened if he hadn't intervened." He placed his flatware aside and took a long drink of water. When he raised his eyes to hers, his voice caught in his throat. "Granger Hermione, I... I want to apologise to you for everything I've said and done to you over the years. And for what I didn't do, for that matter."

She knew he was thinking of himself, standing in the room while Bellatrix tortured her. When exactly she had forgiven him, she didn't know. She certainly never expected an apology from him, but he was looking at her nervously, and she had never seen a Malfoy that nervous before. "Draco, I forgave you a long time ago."

He let out a sigh of relief, all the while fidgeting with the edges of his linen napkin. "Thank you. I appreciate it more than you know and more than I'll ever say again."

She continued on. "I wasn't particularly kind to you, either. I'm sorry for every horrible remark I ever sent your way and for anything else I unfairly said or thought about you."

"You know, I don't really think they're comparable."

"Can you forgive me?"

"Of course."

She smiled. "Thank you." She thought over what he had said earlier as she cut her asparagus into ever smaller pieces. "What do you mean by 'what he's done since'?"

"When the war was over, we Malfoys had to do a number of things. Paying hundreds of thousands of Galleons to the Ministry was part of it, although not nearly enough of it went directly to the rebuilding of Hogwarts. The Ministry is an enormous leech on society, Granger, a big, juicy bloodsucker. Then there were the public performances of contrition, which for some of us were a bit more authentic than others. The Dark items in the family depository? Decisions had to be made about those. Which of the old acquaintances were to be ushered into the new era of Malfoy society? Decisions needed to be made there as well.

"It was all rather overwhelming. I hated being in the house. Hated it. I loved my mother, but I wanted to have nothing to do with my father." He paused, lowering his eyes to his water glass and avoiding any eye contact with her. "Soon I didn't have to.

"That was about the time Severus was starting to recover in St. Mungo's. I arranged for him to be moved to the manor to finish out his recovery, something that was a bit of a stretch financially when the Ministry froze our assets. The *Daily Prophet* had a few reporters poking around his room, and when I caught a photographer trying to get shots of him, I snapped and forcibly removed her from the premises. We had an empty wing in the manor at the time, and he deserved a lot more than what he was given. The least I could do was give him a place to heal out of the public eye.

"Mother was having a difficult time with it all, but she's a much stronger woman than she appears. Still, she had never known much of the household affairs before and was trying to figure out the mess of our accounts. Some were in Gringotts, and other assets were held and hidden in other forms all over the house and our other properties. I was helping her manage the estate and trying to prepare for that special N.E.W.T. testing the Ministry had prepared, less than a year after we were cleared, and Father was buried. It took weeks to sort out the will, but we did it the same month I sat my exams." He stopped himself in the middle of his story, evidently distracted by something else.

"Nine N.E.W.T.s, by the way. You?"

He really could flip moods in an instant. "Really, Malfoy? You want to compare size with me now?"

"Size, Granger? Really?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Arithmancy, Astronomy, and History of Magic." She hoped he wasn't keeping a tally as she rattled them off, but...

"Ha! Only eight."

"Rub it in, why don't you?"

"I'd be happy to."

"All Outstandings, though. You?"

"Damn you, Granger." He was smirking.

"Oh, you didn't get perfect marks? I hope you've learned to reconcile yourself with your own limitations, Malfoy."

"Seven O's. One shabby Exceeds Expectations in Herbology due to unfair proctoring, and a passing mark that needs not be named in Divination."

"Why even bother with Divination? What utter rubbish."

"It is rubbish, I'll concede that one. I never knew why at the time I suffered through it, but now I know: I kept on with Divination in order that I might gloat over Hermione Granger with my nine N.E.W.T.s."

"Fine, Malfoy, fine."

"Nine." A smug grin was plastered across his face.

"Now, what were you saying about the will and estate?"

"Right. So the house. Mother and I didn't want to live there." His tone grew serious once more as he returned to his story. "Every room was a horrid reminder of the year we were held captive in our own home. I watched a Hogwarts professor killed there, I was forced to... I couldn't figure out how not to..." He tried to keep his face calm as he slowed his speech and his heart rate. "I did a lot of things I never wanted to think of again, Granger. For weeks after we returned to the house, I would be sitting in one room and have this eerie feeling that the Dark Lord would walk in the door. I knew he was dead, but that didn't stop me from seeing him everywhere. I kept seeing his giant snake everywhere, too.

"What were we supposed to do? Sell the place?" He looked to Hermione, pausing in his jeremiad as if waiting for a response. She merely shook her head and shrugged her shoulders questioningly. "Who would buy it? No wizarding family in Britain would ever go near it, and only a few of them would be able to afford it anyway. Some other wizarding family from the continent? What kind of madman would be moving to England so soon after the war ended? As it was, we had to peddle an estate in Normandy and a summer home on the Dalmatian coast just to pay our share of reparations. What we could afford instead was a remodeling of much of the interior. You saw a few of the portrait galleries, which remained largely untouched. Nothing ever happened there and there's quite a bit of magic holding the family portraits to the family estate, of course. The Floo room was always empty and has remained that way. The dining room, redecorated. The dungeons, partially bricked over and partially converted into one of the finest wine cellars in England. All in all, over half of the manor's rooms have been overhauled."

He grinned again with a hint of levity in his voice. "I know what you're thinking here, Granger: 'How, Malfoy, did you ever accomplish all of this in such troubled times? I know you're brilliant, certainly, you did earn nine N.E.W.T.s to my mere eight, but this is a bit much even for a wizard as intelligent, skilled, and devilishly handsome as you.'"

"Wow," she said sarcastically. "You took the words right out of my mouth. With skills like those, you really should have pulled another Outstanding in Divination."

He wasn't about to acknowledge her retort. "The answer? *I didn't*." He spoke more quietly now, adopting the tone he used with Astoria yesterday at the manor. ~~He~~ *He* did. He's the best man I know. It took me a long time to see it because Merlin knows he doesn't seem to want anyone to notice, but he helped Mother and me get our lives together. He tutored me for exams while he was still unable to walk, later he guided Mother through all the legal mumbo-jumbo surrounding the estates and the will, six years ago he took me on as an apprentice in Potions work, and eventually he sponsored my application to work at St. Mungo's."

Hermione was stunned.

"When was the last time you talked to Longbottom?"

"Neville?" It felt like Draco was pulling unrelated topics out of the air.

He nodded.

"My birthday party last month. Why?"

"Did he mention his parents at all?"

"No. Should he have done?"

Draco ran one fingertip across the top of his water glass. "You really should ask him, Granger."

She nodded, surprised at the tenor of this conversation. Malfoy had hated Longbottom and tormented him for years when they were younger. Oh, he had hated her as well, but she thought he gave her some measure of respect, however begrudgingly. He shouldn't know something about her friend that she didn't.

"I'm telling you this because I'm inviting you to use the Malfoy library for your work."

"But, why..."

"He uses it, too, Granger. As much as I want to make things right with you and as little as I know of what actually happened between you two yesterday, I will not allow anyone to make Severus Snape feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in my house. Ever. He taught me nearly everything I know everything worth knowing, anyway, and he's the only other patron of the library."

Something finally dawned on Hermione. She gasped in surprise. "He taught you Legilimency, didn't he?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor." He grabbed the bill again, tossing cash into the slim black folder. "I didn't get too far, though."

"How?"

"How what, Granger?"

"How did he proceed?"

They both stood, gathering their things and walking to the door. He picked up his overcoat and umbrella from the coat check. "He started by using Legilimency against me so that I would learn to be aware of another presence in my mind. Then he had me study several antiquarian texts on the subject most are located in my library, and I've still got the list scribbled out somewhere and he taught me how to build false memories and block true ones."

"And eye contact is necessary for Legilimency..." she murmured, thinking of Professor Snape's cryptic words to her in the study.

"Yes, of course."

Well, she thought. That explains that.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

A bit of Halloween, lunch with Neville, and into the library.

Halloween came in a quiet flurry of homemade costumes, charmed decorations, and pumpkin pasties in the Potter household, and Hermione became the unsuspecting victim of George Weasley's creativity when she opened a large parcel he had mailed to Grimmauld Place. Upon untying the string that held it together, she was greeted by a small puff of blue smoke that settled on her cheek as a fluttering butterfly. She had just managed to immobilise it and make it look like face paint before heading in for her morning orientation at work, grateful that she could explain it away on the day and eager to pay George back in kind.

She found the family midway through lunch when she arrived at the Burrow later that day, squashed around several small tables in the kitchen and sitting room. Gatherings were much easier to maneuver in the summer weather when they could all sit outside, but the downpour and thunder kept everyone indoors. She grabbed a plate from the countertop and sidled up between George and Percy, pulling out her wand to animate the butterfly before reaching for a serviette.

"Pretty good magic, eh, Hermione?" George asked proudly.

"Pretty permanent magic, that's for certain. I couldn't get it off."

"Me neither," Percy confessed. He turned his head to the side, giving her a view of a tiny grey snail creeping across his eyebrow.

Peering down the table, she realised that all of the children and several of the adults present were sporting the latest product from George's booming business. Admittedly, the only person who looked remotely upset about this was Ron, who kept a weary eye on the black spider crawling across his daughter's nose.

"I only wish I could have figured out a way to cover it up before I went in *for my new job*." She glared him down good-naturedly as she stressed the final three words.

"Er... well..." he stammered as a mixture of congratulations were levied at her by the others.

"I'm just glad today actually *was* Halloween," she continued. "The secretaries at the hospital now believe that I am a doting aunt who was having a bit of fun. At least I could keep it from flapping its wings."

"Sorry. I had no idea." He gave her an apologetic smile. "I don't suppose that a complimentary trick wand would ease the blow?"

"Make that a package of Canary Creams, George, and I may forget all about retribution."

"Deal."

Led by Arthur, whose fascination with Muggle medicine began in earnest in her fifth year during his stay in St. Mungo's, the rest of the Weasleys launched into a round of questions about Hermione's job: Where was she working? What would she be doing? Was she going to sew up people by herself?

"I'll be starting Monday as a doctor at Ealing Hospital, a Muggle hospital on the outskirts of London. Primarily in the emergency room, which is not ideal. Thankfully, Muggle health care in London is atrociously underfunded and ill-managed, so there are always more patients than doctors, and I'll always have a post when I need one. I'll still be applying for jobs in neurology, but at least I'm taken care of financially for now." She explained her reasoning to them as much as to herself, reassuring everyone that she was making the right decision. "And, yes, stitches are both perfectly safe and rather effective when not treating magically induced wounds."

Later that evening, Ginny sat down with Hermione over a pot of tea in their regular spots at the kitchen table.

"Listen, Hermione, Harry and I were talking it over..." she said, pouring two cups of chamomile. "We think you should put off looking for your own place for awhile. Stay here with us for a few more months as you get used to being back and working full-time again before you face another big change in your life."

Hermione accepted the teacup slid her way and reached for the honey. "That's very kind of you both, but I don't want to impose."

"You could never be an imposition." Ginny returned from a cupboard with a tin of biscuits sent by Molly earlier in the week. "I'm sure it's been stressful enough with the move here and the job. Do you really want something else new on top of it all?"

Hermione set her cup down and stared up at her friend. "Oh, no. This isn't about *that*, is it?"

"No," Ginny responded a little too quickly.

Hermione grimaced.

"Well... not entirely." Ginny set her cup down as well, and began ticking off her reasons for Hermione to stay on her fingers while she presented her argument. "First, we love you and like having you here. There's plenty of space, and you know it. Second, we don't particularly like the thought of you in some big place by yourself without anyone else there. Third... yes, this is about *that*. You may not want to talk about it, but maybe you should. It'll be easier here with Harry and me. I can't help thinking that you missed out on your chance to... well, to mourn everything and everyone we lost before you left for Australia. And you missed your chance to start over again and..."

"Ginny, I..."

"No, I'm still going." Ginny cut her off. "Four, Harry and I had planned on using you shamelessly as a babysitter so we can finally have a hot date out on the town, and we really need to take you up on it. Five, we'll never be able to explain to Lily why her favourite orange kitty is gone. You do know that "kitty" was her third word thanks to Crookshanks, don't you? It beat out "Gran" despite Mum's best efforts, something which will haunt her until her dying day. Six, did you really want to start making house payments? Seven, we..."

"I get the picture, Ginny." She let out a deep sigh. "I'll hold off for now, all right?"

After surviving several years of notoriously inedible hospital food in the Muggle world, Hermione was delighted to find herself a few days later with a moderately tasty salad at St. Mungo's. Neville had shown her several of the hybrid plants he was working on in the back rooms and healing gardens on the third floor before they retreated for lunch to the visitor's tearoom on the fifth. She had been greeted by several workers throughout the hospital who recognised the war heroine beside one of their resident Herbologists.

"Hermione... Hermione Granger? A pleasure, yes, an absolute pleasure."

"Miss Granger?"

"Hermione Granger? Back in England, are you?"

Each time, she smiled warmly and responded with a few words or a handshake before moving on with Neville. "They did that with me, too, right after the war," he whispered, glancing around to make sure no one could overhear. "Thankfully, it ended after a few months. I don't know how much more of it I could have taken."

They chatted freely in the tearoom once the inquiries finally settled down, and Hermione asked him about everything from his future career ("I've spoken with Professor Sprout about taking over for her at Hogwarts one day...") to his love life ("... I go to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch quite often, and it's sort of wonderful to have Hannah to talk to...") to his feisty grandmother ("She's insisting that I push for a promotion, but..."). Neville finally managed to turn the tables on his inquisitive friend and ask Hermione about her newly acquired job.

"You'll have to come visit me at Ealing sometime to see how Muggle hospitals work," she insisted, happy to be able to share this with one of her wizarding friends.

"I'd love to. They can't be too different, can they?"

"They do look fairly similar: rooms filled with sick people needing help, Healers walking around everywhere, even reception areas stocked with old magazines."

"I've never understood that one," he snorted jovially. "St. Mungo's has several subscriptions, but I've yet to see anything current within the last two years. Where do they go? And why do they show up later once enough time has passed for them to be outdated?"

"One of life's great mysteries, Neville." Hermione checked her watch for the time. "Today's only my third day there, so let me get settled a bit, and then I can show you around." She still had about an hour before she had to return there for her next shift. "Doctors get much better uniforms than Healers, though. I'd go blind if I had to wear those ghastly lime-coloured robes they're stuck with."

"Have you actually cut people up, then?"

"Yes, I have. Very carefully, of course. It's really not so terrible. We start by practising on cadavers before we get to patients."

"Cadavers?"

"People... who were formerly alive."

A greenish tinge swept across her friend's face.

"A bit squeamish?"

"Just change the topic, please."

"But after everything you saw in battle?"

"I can take it all if I have to, Hermione. It's just that I'd rather not..."

"But you work in a hospital!"

"I work with plants in a hospital. The most I do now is consult with a Healer for a patient who's had a nasty run-in with a Devil's Snare or a Black Nightshade." He began pushing the remains of his soup around the bowl with his spoon as he avoided her gaze. "You know, perhaps it's best if I don't come visit you at work."

"Well, if you ever change your mind, let me know." She took the plunge. "How are your parents doing? Do you like being here with them?"

"Oh... They're fine as always." He continued stirring the overcooked carrots he had left uneaten, staring off at a far wall in the tearoom.

"Nothing... new?" From what Malfoy had told her, she thought Neville would have some exciting information to share.

"Er... what? Did someone say something? Why are you asking?" he asked suspiciously.

"A little blond bird may have told me..." she began before being interrupted by a visitor.

"Granger, Longbottom." He reached out a hand to Neville. "The murmurs were true, I see. Granger makes an appearance."

"Talk of the devil," she muttered quietly.

"Granger! I thought we'd moved passed that." He sounded amused, even pleased.

"Malfoy." Neville gave his hand a hearty shake. "How's your lab these days?"

"Wait, wait, wait. When did this happen?" she asked incredulously, stopping Malfoy from answering Neville.

"We work in the same building. Same floor, even. What are we supposed to do hex each other at every turn?" Draco chuckled.

"Besides, if he does anything at all to mess with me, I can destroy his supplies. A little too much water here, a little poison there..." Neville replied. "Actually, will y~~do~~ook at the time?" he asked far too loudly, nervously pointing to his watch. "I need to run. Really. There is a watering schedule, and I can't destroy all the scurvy-grass and sneezewort for everyone, now can I?" He said his goodbyes and gathered his things before retreating to his greenrooms.

It was, however, getting close to the time when she needed to leave. "Malfoy, I was going to owl you, but since you're here... when may I come over to peruse your library?"

He furrowed his brow and paused before speaking. "Will you be all ri..."

"Yes. I'll be *fine*," she said firmly.

"How about Saturday?"

"That's my usual day at the Weasleys'."

"Sunday?"

"Grand."

"2 p.m.?"

"See you then."

A fortnight had passed since she last appeared in this fireplace in a burst of swirling green flames. Now as she stepped out into the empty room, she was greeted by the entire Malfoy clan. Draco was holding himself in miniature, seemingly identical from the platinum hair to the pointy chin, and Astoria stepped forward to greet Hermione.

"Hermione. I'm glad to see you again."

"Thanks for having me, Astoria."

"This is Scorpius." She led Hermione across the room as Draco set his son down on the floor beside him. "Scorpius, this is Miss Hermione."

"Hello, Scorpius. It's a pleasure to meet you." She extended her hand to the toddler.

"Hewwo." He took her hand and shook it very seriously.

"Scorpius, where are we taking Miss Hermione today?" Astoria asked her son as he retreated behind her legs.

"The Wibwawy." He answered obediently, smiling shyly at Hermione from his hiding spot.

"I love libraries." Hermione held back, giving the little boy his space. She had learnt her lesson with James and Albus that pouncing on small children only terrifies them. Each time she'd appeared at Grimmauld Place after months away, it would take a day or so for them to remember who she was and not run away in fear as she scooped them up in her arms and smothered them with kisses. "They're filled with books, and books are filled with stories. Do you like to hear stories, Scorpius?"

A few silent nods answered her.

"Do your mummy and daddy read to you?"

A few more nods.

"What's your favourite bedtime story?"

Silence.

"I like *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* Do you know any of..."

"Babbitty Wabbitty!" he exclaimed, pumping a small fist in the air and scampering over to the doorway, encouraging his entourage to get a move on.

Draco masked a smile and gestured to his wife, allowing Astoria and Hermione to follow after his son as he headed through the house to their destination. The group traced a now familiar path along the torch-lit hallway, around a corner to the right, through the portrait room, down a flight of stairs and beyond the conservatory. *Really*, Hermione thought, *it's just like my childhood home, but just a bit bigger* Trade in the torches for electric sconces, the portrait hall for a wall of family photographs showcasing various stages of the growing beast that was her hair, and the conservatory for her mother's pot plants littered throughout the kitchen, and it was the same thing in spirit if not in scale.

When the doors to the library swung wide, Hermione's jaw went slack, and her eyes grew several sizes. She had been there only two weeks earlier, but her distraction had kept her from actually seeing the room. It was a bookworm's dream, open two stories with a balcony around the perimeter for access to the collection. Completely lined with wooden panelling and built-in shelves, the centrepiece of the library was a stone fireplace tall enough for her to stand in topped by an oil painting of a Scottish hunting scene. Her eyes skimmed over the brass telescopes and astrolabes in the far corner by the window to the massive globe atop a wooden floor stand along the wall nearest to the door.

"All right, Granger." Draco chuckled quietly at the strength of her reaction. "Where would you like to be set up?"

"Do you mean I can select a desk for myself?"

"It'll take you awhile to work through all this stuff. I would let you take them home with you if I could, but they've all been spelled to remain within the house. Several are actually spelled to remain within the room, and I can't even take them to my study."

She examined the room, taking in the three open tables in the centre and the smaller desks peripherally scattered about. Most were empty, so she walked over to a walnut writing-desk nearest the fireplace. "May I use this one?"

"Certainly." He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a folded up piece of parchment to hand over to her. "Here's the list. None of them above the line are restricted; just Summon those. All those below the line could be problematic, so just ask me when you get there, and I'll help you retrieve them."

"Restricted?"

"You didn't expect this place to be filled to the brim with bunny rabbits and daisies, did you, Granger?" He walked over to an alcove under the balcony, flagging her to follow him. "These are books that you should not attempt to open without me in the room. You have to know the quirks of each volume so you can avoid trouble."

Hermione gulped slowly, allowing her gaze to stray to a chaise where Astoria was animatedly reading stories aloud to their son. "What about Scorpius?"

"Spell-protected for the underaged. I couldn't get within a metre of them when I was young, either."

"May I look around at the rest of the collection?" She monitored her breathing, trying to suppress the giddy excitement that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Could I possibly stop you?" He laughed aloud, waiting for her to respond with a huff before leading her around the rest of the library. They followed the shelves around the room twice, once on the lower level and once on the balcony, and he pointed out each section of the collection, rattling off important volumes as he remembered them. "This section is all History of Magic, arranged chronologically within region of the world. Here's the collection on alchemy, arranged alphabetically by author. There's a lovely leather bound set of the complete works of Agrippa, if you're interested. All bestiaries and books on magical creatures are on these shelves, including the real Aberdeen Bestiary, if you'd like to see it. I know you weren't interested in creatures at Hogwarts, but it's a sight. Newt Scamander's works are there as well. Wizarding literature here, Squib and Muggle literature there." He paused to look down at her. "Don't say it, Granger, I know what you're thinking."

"No comment on the Muggle literature," she offered with a raised eyebrow. *Harry will never believe this.*

Following another grueling week in her new job in the emergency room, Hermione was relieved to have her weekend off. She had signed on to fifty working hours with the option of being on call one night each week. After realising that she couldn't take her on call shift from home with a pager (electronics and the very magical home she was dwelling in did not mix at all, something she had completely overlooked when living as a Muggle in Melbourne), she signed up for night shifts at the hospital and slept there on a lumpy cot in a tiny room. Another lunch at the Burrow on Saturday gave her time and space to relax outside in the unseasonably warm November weather before returning to her Legilimency project indoors on Sunday afternoon.

She had already discussed her somewhat unpredictable schedule with the Malfoys, who in turn arranged for her to be able to slip in and out of their home as she needed. She had initially tried to protest this generous offer, suggesting that she check into the library at prearranged times, but Draco waved her concerns away. "I could never trust you with the books if it weren't for the protective spellwork, Granger," he insisted mischievously. "Besides, the house-elves will keep you in line."

Following tea with Ginny on November 15th, Hermione gathered notebooks and biro in her satchel and left for Malfoy Manor. The Floo room was empty when she arrived, so she hung her coat on one of the hooks in the room and headed off through the winding hallways of the country house. Each time she traipsed through the maze of rooms, she spotted something new. This time she noticed that the gallery held more than just family portraits. Several large landscape paintings with peasants and shepherdesses were crowded onto one of the walls. The commotion of a fleeing flock of sheep, madly chased by a young woman dressed in taupe over a hilltop, caught her eye as she was exiting.

She was still wary wandering through the old mansion alone. Although she knew the route from the Floo room to the library by heart, she willed herself to block out memories of every other part of the house. Not knowing how she would react to visiting the drawing room or even Draco's study, she shut down her curiosity, refusing to open closed doors or even peer down empty hallways. It was easier not to deal with it, easier to think of Malfoy as almost a new acquaintance rather than the person she had known for so long.

When she arrived at her favourite room in the manor, she dropped her bag at her writing-desk and picked up the list of books he had left for her. The thought of Summoning books through an open space with delicate glass lamps was still rather disconcerting to Hermione, so she walked to the centre of the room before beginning the retrieval process. "*Accio Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmed*" she cried, and a burgundy volume floated gracefully from the balcony level into her hand at a speed much slower than any normal Summoning spell. Recognising this as another protective enchantment in the library, she headed back to her seat to get the rest, passing a dark wooden rolltop desk open and stacked high with books. Curiosity got the better of her as she took a peek at them: a few looked to be books on the magical properties of plants, several appeared to be on the human body, a Latin-English dictionary sat on the highest shelf, and a syllabary was opened flat on the seat of the chair.

She had barely reclaimed her seat when quiet footsteps marked the arrival of her library companion. Professor Snape slowed upon seeing her there, giving her a curt nod as he took his seat. She merely nodded in response, willing herself not to speak. The more difficult task proved to be willing herself to focus on the reading at hand, as her nerves gave her a hyperawareness of his presence in the room: where he paced with a volume in hand and where he spread out multiple books on an empty table. Eventually her work consumed her, and by the time she was ready to pack up her things, he had already closed up the rolltop desk and left without her notice.

Ignoring pickup Quidditch games in increasing chilly weather whilst anticipating Molly Weasley's cooking was rapidly becoming Hermione's favourite way of spending her free time, followed only by her satisfaction with the slow progress she was making through the volumes on her writing-desk. Her hospital schedule the week was the same as the previous, so she spent another Saturday in the company of the Weasleys playing with her adopted nieces and nephews. Another Sunday was spent in the company of Malfoy's books.

Professor Snape was pacing the room when she arrived this week, stepping, she assumed, subconsciously in time to the lively sounds of a Classical string quartet coming from a phonograph on a stand near the wall. His eyes remained on his book as she began thumbing through an old volume on her list, but she knew better than to assume that he hadn't noticed her entrance. After last week's hours of silence and this performance today, she concluded that they had somehow reached an agreement to ignore one another completely.

When the movement ended, he lowered his book and greeted her sharply. "Miss Granger."

She looked up, startled, but remained seated. "Professor."

"If you prefer to work in silence, I can turn this off. Confined as we are to the same workspace, I have no desire to hinder your progress."

"I have no complaints," she said calmly. "Of course, I might object if it were elevator music or some hip hop."

A look of bewilderment appeared on his face as his brow furrowed.

I've just mentioned hip hop to Severus Snape.

"Are you aware of your complete incomprehensibility?" he asked, snapping his book closed.

"I just meant that this is neither a quiet piece lulling me to sleep nor something riotous and loud. It focuses my mind more than anything else."

"Ah, yes... 'What passion cannot Music raise and quell?'"

"John Donne?"

"Dryden, Miss Granger. Dryden."

After that brief interchange, each resumed their studies, working in relative silence for the next few hours. The music continued on, accompanied by the soft shuffling of pages and the muffled padding of his pacing footsteps, but neither spoke another word. The phonograph cycled through quartet after quartet, always playing something new yet in the same style as the first piece she heard. When it finally clicked in her mind's ear that she had been listening to the same tune repeating itself, she looked up to discover that he had slipped out before her once again. She packed up her books of notes and spells to practice over the coming week, silenced the phonograph, and returned to Grimmauld Place.

The hospital shifted her schedule during the following week, so she didn't have time until Monday morning to return to Malfoy Manor. This time he was nowhere to be found. She casually strolled past his desk, only to find it closed with the chair tucked away. Drumming her fingers idly across the top, she surveyed the room and wondered again how on earth she ended up there, in the home of the boy who had hated her, learning how to make her parents remember they loved her. Shaking herself out of her

reveries, she returned to her desk only to find a pocket-sized volume with gilded pages set on her chair. A scrap jutted out from among its pages, and when she opened the book to the page it marked, she instantly recognized the angular script that had once filled the margins of her Potions essays.

Exercises 14-23 must be mastered. Review so that these spells can be performed wordlessly and wandlessly.

She tucked it into her pocket and returned to her work, unaware of the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

Hermione gets a job; dining with Narcissa.

The near-freezing rain and sleet of early December kept Hermione in a state of listlessness as she settled into routines of work, study, and home. Letters of rejection for her applications to Mount Vernon and Northwick Park Hospitals had both arrived outside on the street earlier that week, compounding her foul mood. She had forgotten about the danger of the post, having neatly printed her address as '12 Grimmauld Place, London' on the myriad forms she had filled out. Presumably, the postman had chalked it up to some sort of user error and placed it in the neighbour's box instead. The residents of number eleven next door had thankfully chosen to leave the mysterious mail to a nonexistent address on their front steps, abandoning the letters to the elements of a London winter rather than their rubbish bin.

With access denied to more meaningful work, Hermione grew increasingly frustrated in her job. As with so many things, she had thought she knew what she was getting herself in for when she began accepting ER stints, but the hours on her feet were fatiguing and the constant turnover of patients prevented her from seeing any real impact on their lives. She would continue working there as long as she needed to, but her determination to get out was renewed with every passing shift.

For each moment of annoyance there, she found a moment of satisfaction with the extracurricular studies now consuming the majority of her spare hours. Things were not unfolding as she had planned, that was sure. No, she wouldn't have expected that she would be following a syllabus of sorts composed for the benefit of Draco Malfoy. Nevertheless, she was thrilled to bits that things were progressing with her Legilimency readings as she mastered control over her own mind and learned to extend herself with wordless spells. She knew now that Professor Snape had intended to give her lessons all along, but her utter mortification over the things she had said to him kept her from asking him anything directly. When her time with the readings was through, she suspected that she might be able to ask Draco for help with practice. She supposed it was possible that he remembered what Snape had said to him in their lessons, or that he owned a Pensieve and would allow her to enter the lessons herself.

She also didn't know how much Draco had let slip about the rest of her situation. He was still a Slytherin, after all, even if he had become somewhat of a friend to her in the past several weeks. Accordingly, she knew she could expect a certain amount of discretion in his behaviour; he would never repeat anything she told him needlessly. On the other hand, if Snape hadn't readily agreed (and what had Astoria said...? 'He *finally* agreed to teach you?'), she imagined that Draco would have used any information she had given him to gain Snape's involvement.

The note he had left her was unexpected, to be sure, and extraordinarily helpful, so she wondered why it hadn't been included on the reading list he had initially drawn up for Draco. Perhaps he had discovered the source after he had initially made this list, or perhaps he remembered her as a student well enough to recognize the difference between her needs and Draco's. If he worked in the Malfoy library as frequently as she did, he could easily witness her progress through the stacks of books on her desk and would know how to steer her in the right direction. Whatever the reason, she was glad to have his assistance, however unacknowledged it was between them. He certainly appeared willing to help her despite her unfortunate outburst. Of course, he had also discovered her limp body after witnessing her panic in his presence, and she hoped that the note he left wasn't drafted up out of pity or that spirit of obligation that seemed to haunt Draco. Perhaps when the day came, after she had exhausted all other resources, she could ask him again for help.

Perhaps.

On the morning of December 6, Hermione woke up with the dull tug of an aimless wish from her childhood to be anything but English. When she learned in primary school that other children in the world woke up to find sweets and toys in their shoes on that day each year, she felt the righteous indignation that only a seven-year-old of dentists could muster over the loss of culturally mandated chocolates and mint humbugs. *Hermione, you're thirty now*, she repeated to herself before pulling the covers back and finding the energy to begin the day. *There's no earthly reason why you should hold on to that* it was, however, enough to remind her to prepare a Christmas hamper to send to Wendell and Monica Wilkins. She filled it with PG Tips and jars of Marmite for Monica, several packages of chocolate-covered digestives for Wendell, and a Christmas pudding for them to share. Anticipating the warmer weather in Australia and hoping nothing would melt upon the package's arrival, she tossed in some plain digestives as an afterthought and jotted down a brief word of greetings to the couple before setting it aside to mail on Monday.

After heading out into the city for a quiet lunch and an hour of window-shopping in Camden, she gathered her things for another study session at Malfoy Manor. For the first time in nearly a month's worth of visits to the estate, she heard someone else in the home. Rather than making another beeline to the library, she followed the muffled noises to the conservatory where she found Astoria sprawled out on a stone bench with a book in hand. *Ah*, Hermione thought, *I knew I liked her*. She subconsciously approved of Draco's choice and rapped on the doorframe to alert the young woman to her presence.

"Oh, hello, Hermione." Astoria quickly scrambled into a seated position and held up a large hardcover. *The Goblin Rebellions: A New Appraisal*. Much better than you would think, but the prose is still unbelievably dry."

"And here I thought I was the only person who read obscure histories," Hermione said, smiling. Her gaze swept the room, taking in the stone fountain and array of ferns and bromeliads scattered about. "This looks like a brilliant place to curl up with a book."

"I've learnt that the best place to curl up with a book is anyplace where Scorpius *isn't*." She marked her place and set the book beside her on the bench. "He likes to, shall we say, 'help' the process along."

"This I understand," Hermione sniggered. "When I'm reading with Albus, he sits perfectly still and eventually falls asleep in my lap, but James? Good luck if all the pages are intact when we're through. It's a good thing I can repair them." Suddenly realising that even if Astoria knew the Potters, she might not be familiar these two names, she explained further. "Er... I'm sorry. Albus and James are Harry and Ginny's little boys. I've been living with them in London."

"How do you like it?" she asked congenially. "London, that is? You didn't grow up in the city, did you?" She moved to the end of the long bench, making space for Hermione to sit down beside her.

Dropping her bag as she moved to the bench, Hermione sat down, reluctantly keeping Astoria from her task. "No, I didn't. I grew up in Winchester, not too far away from you here. We went in several times a year when I was younger, visiting all the museums and gardens. My father loved the theatre and loved to surprise us with tickets to a

play, so there was a great deal of Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde in my life long before I could ever fully understand what was going on. It's completely different to live there as an adult, though, and I'm afraid I haven't taken advantage of the city like I should." She shrugged. "And you? Where did you grow up?"

"Mostly Kent, but our mother also made sure we were in France every summer. Her mother took her there when she was young, so we had to do the same." She slumped back into a more comfortable position, her book forgotten by her side. "I'm glad to finally run into you again. Other than the shifting piles on your desk, there seems to be no evidence that you've even been here."

"A part of me still feels uncomfortable treating your home like my own private library," Hermione said apologetically. "I try not to bother anyone when I stop by."

"Nonsense," she responded firmly. "At least it's of some use to you. Besides, we're already used to it with Severus." She lowered her voice as she continued. "Truthfully, sometimes I still feel like a visitor here myself, but that's the nature of these old established houses. They've outlasted us all as a kind of testament to the strength and longevity of the families who built them, and each individual can only do so much to really make them their own. I know my mother felt the same way in our house. Perhaps Daphne does in hers, but she's not likely to articulate it."

"I understood a great deal was changed about this house in the last ten years," Hermione stated tentatively, thinking of Draco's words to her at their first meeting.

"Well... yes. What could be changed, anyway. I'm sure you noticed the protections placed on the library? Similar spells guard other family possessions in the house, like the portraits, the suits of armour, certain tapestries, and so forth. They are rather difficult to alter."

"I didn't know that was possible. That's common practice, is it?"

"Continuity and tradition, you know, are paramount in this world."

"The Wizarding world or the upper class?"

Astoria paused and looked at her thoughtfully. "Both, I suppose." Thinking this over, she added, "For better and for worse." She began to look around the room. "As to the recent renovations, well, some were finished by Mother Malfoy immediately following the war and some were finished by Draco and me after we were married, like this conservatory. I like to call it the Winter Garden, but I think that's a battle I'm losing. Actually, she's here now for the holiday season arrived yesterday from Paris and is getting reestablished in the north wing of the house for however long she decides to stay."

"Narcissa..."

"Yes, of course."

"Will she have a problem with my being here?" Despite everything that happened at the end of the war, Hermione remained wary of Narcissa Malfoy, having never really spoken with the woman. "I can go, if it would make things easier. You can owl me when it's best to return."

"Don't be silly, Hermione. She's rarely in the library, so I doubt that you would ever run into her there. Draco told her about you last night at dinner, and she reacted with perfect ambivalence."

"Are you certain that's a good sign?"

"I think so. She's rather preoccupied with being a grandmother while visiting, so no one else is really a concern."

"Ah... and that must be why you're in here reading now."

"Absolutely. He doesn't know quite what to make of her, so she insists on spending a lot of time with him."

"And you'll let me know if you ever change your mind about my being here?"

"Of course."

The two women fell into casual chatter for a while longer before Hermione pried herself up from her seat and headed out of Astoria's Winter Garden. Abandoning the blonde to goblins and strife once more, she heard raised voices as she approached the library at the end of the hallway. Stopping just outside the closed doors, she didn't have to strain at all to understand every word of the argument.

"... see and I am not *about* to enter some obsolete institution filled with sniveling, slobbering malingerers lurking outside death's door." Professor Snape's voice was dripping with disdain as he rebuffed his companion. "I do not need to be there for this stage. Handle it on your own."

"Disillusion yourself, then," Draco pleaded insistently.

"Disillusionment would indicate that I harbor a secret desire to go and that I only object to visiting openly because I don't want to be seen by anyone." Each word he spoke was enunciated with an unnatural clarity as he added wryly, "I assure you, no such desire exists."

"Perhaps there's a way you could Apparate directly into the test room."

A lengthy pause followed this statement, and Hermione's imagination began filling in the gap with a number of the professor's exasperated expressions from her student years. They were usually leveled at Neville then, or Harry, but now she saw them directed towards Draco in her mind's eye and felt a perverse sort of glee at the thought.

"All right, all right," Draco mumbled under his breath. "Scrap that idea."

"If that passes as an idea with you these days, I now have a much clearer understanding as to why we've cycled through so many incarnations of this particular potion." And then she heard a remarkable thing: a burst of hearty laughter from Professor Snape, followed by reassuring words of support. "Draco, you don't need me there to gather results. You have this all under control."

She had no time to process this when she heard approaching footsteps in the adjacent hallway and had to make a decision quickly. Would it be better to enter the library, breaking up whatever the two men were discussing, or risk getting caught by the person approaching? She opened the door and hustled over to her desk, trying to avoid their notice.

"Granger," "Miss Granger," they said simultaneously, abruptly ending their conversation.

"Oh, hello," Hermione said, trying to sound nonchalant as she pulled out her chair. "I'm sorry, am I interrupting something? I can return later."

"No, Granger." "Of course you are." They spoke at cross-purposes.

"Er... I'll just go, then, shall I?" She began pushing her chair back into place.

"No," they insisted in unison.

"Stay, Granger," Draco said firmly. "We were finished."

As Hermione settled into her chair and began pulling out stacks of notebooks, the doors were flung open dramatically for the entrance of Narcissa Malfoy.

"Draco, darling. Severus," she said to each in turn as she regally glided into the room. "And Miss Granger. I was told I would find you here."

"Mother."

"Narcissa."

"Mrs. Malfoy."

"You're all here. Good." She continued to make her way towards them with an unmistakable air of elegance and deliberation. "Miss Granger, I would like to invite you to a private dinner here at our home tonight."

"Dinner?"

"Severus, I expect you to join us as well."

"Is there anything I can say that would prevent you from demanding my presence?"

"No."

She turned to Hermione with an unreadable expression on her beautiful face. "Miss Granger, dinner here is served at eight o'clock. I trust that will give you enough time to dress properly?"

"Yes, certainly."

As gracefully as she swept into the library, Narcissa Malfoy swept out.

That certainly could have gone worse, Hermione surmised. It was clear that the woman had no problem with Hermione's frequent presence in the manor, but it was also clear that she hadn't escaped the firing squad yet either, and that event was not something she was looking forward to.

She faced Draco with her hands on her hips in defiance. "Malfoy, what just happened here?"

"You've just been steamrolled by Mother, Granger. Don't worry, I'm sure it won't be the first time. She possesses an uncanny ability to coerce anyone into doing whatever she wants them to do."

"Really? I don't seem to recall you being the picture of obedience as a child," she dug at him.

"Malfoy blood gives one the ability to resist."

"If that's the case, this may be the first and only time in my life I've ever wanted to be a Malfoy," Hermione responded dryly.

Draco merely grinned, and she could have sworn she saw Snape's eyes glittering with amusement as well.

As she thought over Narcissa Malfoy's instructions, a new concern popped into her mind. "And when she says to go home to dress properly, what does that mean?"

"I believe she intends for you to return to your place of residence in order to find a change of clothing," Snape replied with a smirk, "but I could be mistaken. Perhaps she's questioning your ability to align buttons."

Draco exited the room shaking with laughter at that comment, leaving the other two to their studies for the remainder of the afternoon.

Hermione returned to her seat, pulling out the list of sources to take inventory of how much she had left to do. Setting aside a few books she had recently finished, she plucked a small red volume off her stack and got to work. After a few minutes of silent reading, she looked up to address Snape. "Thank you, by the way. That was very helpful."

His eyes never left his work. "You'll faithfully doublecheck all your buttons in the future?"

What? Oh. "No, I meant to thank you for..."

"Miss Granger, I have no earthly idea what you're talking about."

Impossible man. Just as they had done for the past few weeks, the pair spent the afternoon immersed in study. She worked steadily through the texts, copying out incantations and sketching wand movements to take home for practice. When something looked particularly tricky, she would utilise an empty alcove to review the new spells while she still had possession of the books. It was harder to practise the spells at Harry's house, where she couldn't double check her work against the original text. Each time she thought she felt a pair of black eyes on her, she turned around to find him focused on his own work.

When the large grandfather clock struck seven, she scrounged together her things and headed for home to prepare for an evening with the Malfoy family. What she would have given for Ginny's advice at this moment! Unfortunately, the Potters were all still out somewhere, and she had no one to ask about what clothing would meet Mrs. Malfoy's standards. Throwing on a simple navy dress, she checked herself in the mirror, surprised to receive a low whistle rather than any words of grooming advice. In lieu of the guidance of a trusted friend, she settled for the approval of a fairly inarticulate inanimate object and headed back through the Floo.

The room, usually empty, was thankfully occupied. Astoria stepped forward to take Hermione's coat. "Draco mentioned that you might be a bit nervous. Do you have any questions?"

"I was told to dress properly." Hermione gestured to her choice. "Is this appropriate or are you good with Transfiguration?"

"This is very good, but if I may...?"

Hermione nodded, and with a few gentle flicks of her wand, Astoria gave the dress a slight tailoring. Standing back to admire her work, she offered kindly, "You look wonderful. Please don't worry I'm sure you'll be fine."

You'll be fine. *I've heard those words before*, she thought as her mind drifted back to Draco's words to her on the day she collapsed by the drawing-room *I've even heard them in this house, and they didn't do much for me then*. Surely Narcissa Malfoy wanted to do her duty and invite the girl who had befriended her son over for one meal. There would be stilted conversation from all present, her duty would be discharged, and she would be able to return to work in peace in the coming weeks; these were her only hopes as she sat down to dinner.

For the first few courses, Narcissa reigned over her table with refined diplomacy, guiding the table conversation through a series of safe and emotionally uninvolved topics. It was current affairs in the Wizarding world over the soup course, followed by travels abroad over the fish, and so forth and so on until Hermione finally sensed her time had come. She had deferentially held herself back as she listened to the others discuss and debate with perfect ease, throwing in a comment or two when politeness demanded it. Somewhere in the midst of the entrée, Narcissa focused her attention on her dinner guest.

"Miss Granger."

"Mrs. Malfoy."

"I understand you've been using our library for the past several weeks."

"Yes, Mal... er, Draco and Astoria have been very generous." She said, correcting herself in front of his mother. Her eyes flicked across the table to her former professor who was steadfastly avoiding her gaze. "Many people have been generous with me, sharing resources and... knowledge."

"And I understand you have recently returned to England."

"Yes, it's quite nice to be home. Australia was a wonderful place to live and learn, but I'm an Englishwoman through and through."

"Learn?"

"I attended university there, then medical school. I had finished a residency, which is rather like a professional apprenticeship, and was working on specialised internships in my hospital there."

"Muggle university?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I see."

Hermione had always prided herself on her ability to read people, but as the dinner conversation progressed, she was struck by the growing awareness that this ability was entirely dependent upon the people she was with. Understanding Harry and Ron was a cinch; when their outward actions and true intent were at odds with one another, it was usually because they didn't understand their own feelings on the matter. It was rare that they were trying to hide something from themselves and even rarer still when they were trying to hide something from her. It was more than just her friends, however; her encounters with her patients over the years were also marked with the sort of transparency that only comes from seeing people in an extraordinarily vulnerable state. With Narcissa Malfoy, she had no idea what to expect and little understanding of what she actually meant. 'Ah, I see.' *She sees what?*

"So you are in Healing like my Draco?"

"Yes, although I believe our work is fairly dissimilar. I worked with patients directly and only spent a portion of my time in research, while I believe Draco's work is almost entirely research-based." She looked up at Draco. "At least, that was my impression. Is that right, Draco?" Hermione asked.

"Essentially. I never work with patients."

"The administrators at St. Mungo's want to keep you from doing any damage, do they?" she asked cheekily, expecting a quick comeback from her verbal combatant.

Instead of the retort or dressing down she was waiting for, Draco fell silent and his face paled several shades as his jaw noticeably clenched up. In the meanwhile, Astoria and Narcissa exchanged uncertain glances and no one said a word. Hermione doubted that he would have been that sensitive about the issue unless something had happened that she didn't know about. *But what?*

"Well, that's a shame," she addressed him a bit too warmly, trying to recover from her misstep. "I'm sure it's the patients' loss, as you're enjoyable to talk to these days." She looked at the older woman and pointedly remarked, "I didn't know what to expect when I came home, but I was delighted to find out that we could share a meal companionably and impressed to hear of your son's commitment to St. Mungo's. You must be quite proud of him."

That seemed to sooth the matriarch's ruffled feathers, but she remained decidedly reserved for the remainder of the evening. Filling her place in the conversation, Draco took charge of matters. "Say, Hermione, what is the nature of your research?"

"The long answer or the short answer?"

"Let's begin with short and see if it's wise to move onward from there, shall we?"

"Certainly." How short was short? People often asked about her work out of a well-mannered compulsion, but precious few actually wanted an answer. She decided to play it safe. "I work with the brain."

"That's your *short* answer?" Snape sputtered out in disbelief, finally joining the conversation.

"Yes."

"*That...* from you."

"Sir?"

"Miss Granger, I suffered through six years of your verbosity and excess, and no amount of corrective encouragement ever seemed to direct you towards concision in your prose."

"I..."

Draco spoke up, heading off any perceived arguments before things became even more volatile. "How about the slightly longer answer, Hermione?"

"Yes. Well..." She looked around the table to see various states of attention from everyone present: Narcissa was listening with vague disengagement, and Snape looked positively bored as he stabbed his meat with the knife in his hand, while the young couple was doggedly invested in their encouragement, nodding with bright eyes as she spoke. "I'm a neurologist on the Muggle side of things, so I work with the brain and the nervous system: How is it organised? How does it function? What happens when it's damaged and how can it be repaired? If the brain is damaged, what does it look like in terms of other behavioural symptoms?"

"Muggle side... Does that mean there's a magical side to your work as well?" Astoria asked.

"Not officially. I ran a series of clinical trials on the effectiveness of Healing Potions and Charms, monitoring my results through Muggle means - different kinds of scans and the like. Then I would change one element and run the tests again to try to fine-tune the treatment."

"And your results?" Snape asked clinically.

"Some trials were more effective than others, but I generally learned how to better match a patient with the treatment they needed. I could answer all kinds of new questions, you see: Which part of the brain does this charm stimulate activity in - the hippocampus or the amygdala? How can I direct it to the part of the brain that needs more blood flow? If this potion encourages a certain type of regeneration, how can I modify it to solve a different problem?"

He didn't have anything to say in response, but appeared to give consideration to her words.

"That's the slightly longer answer. I can go longer still, if you'd like to hear about which charms and potions I used for trials or the theories behind how I chose variables for the experiments, but that's the gist of it. I didn't have the opportunity to do very much, mind you. I was, after all, working seventy or eighty hours each week for my full-time

job and had to devise different methods of getting access to the materials I needed. Or," she continued thoughtfully, "of getting witches and wizards to the materials I had."

Draco and Snape, whose reluctant interest was now piqued, silently exchanged a glance.

"What do you mean, Gr... Hermione?" the young man asked.

"I couldn't perform any trials in a Wizarding hospital because Muggle equipment runs on electricity. I'm sure you know how pointless that effort is, unless someone somewhere can discover why the two are incompatible and develop a way to allow the two to coexist. Instead, I brought Wizarding patients to my Muggle hospital to set my controls and then put them through all the paces of the treatments and their variants."

Trying to avoid a technical turn that would isolate herself and Astoria, Narcissa took over the lead once more. "And why Australia, of all places, Miss Granger? I understand wanting to flee the country after all that happened here, but wouldn't Paris or Amsterdam have sufficed?"

Malfoy must never have told her about this she realised slowly. He tried to spare Hermione from answering, almost growling out a warning under his breath. "Mother, I..."

"No, it's all right," Hermione said quietly. "Mrs. Malfoy, I went to Australia to be with my parents. They moved there over a decade ago."

"I see." She glanced reprovingly at her son, as if questioning his desire to stop her. Turning back to Hermione, she said, "That sounds lovely, my dear. Time with family is important."

"Yes, well..." Hermione was unsure exactly how to proceed. However foolish the belief, she felt that the mutual survival of very dark days built a firm, but tacit trust among those who would not have chosen it otherwise. She hoped they felt the same, and she spoke as plainly as she could. "It is difficult to spend time with family when they don't know who you are." Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione watched Draco placing his flatware down on his plate, his eyes fixed on the dish before him. All of the others Mrs. Malfoy, Astoria, and even Professor Snape were watching her intently as she explained herself. "My parents no longer think they have a daughter, you see, so I was merely a friendly neighbour to them. I modified their memories at a time when I barely knew how to access them because I thought their lives were at risk, and I sent them to Australia with the belief that they were childless. I couldn't change them back when I returned after the war. I wanted to stay close to them while I learned how to help them, but I wasn't just spending time with them. I was trying to repair the damage I caused. They still have no idea who they really are."

The professor's eyes flew open as he watched her, marked with the dawning realisation of why Draco had come to him weeks ago with the request to teach his former student. *Ah*, she thought as she noticed the bewilderment flash across his sharp features, *he never told Snape about this, either*.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

Fallout from dinner at the Manor, Hermione and Severus come to an agreement, and Christmas is celebrated at the Burrow.

Several minutes or possibly just a few seconds of uncomfortable silence filled the room as all five sat motionless in their seats, and Hermione began mentally running through the other possible things she could have said to satisfy Narcissa's questions. Then all at once, the dining room erupted into confusion as nearly each one of the guests began speaking simultaneously.

"Er... I didn't want to make you..." Hermione started to offer an apology, instantly regretting the bluntness she wielded in making her confession.

"Oh, Hermione," sighed an sympathetic Astoria, rising in her seat as if barely restraining herself from leaping across the table to enfold her into a hug. "Hermione, *Hermione*..."

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, if you..." Narcissa began, looking as flustered and shocked as Hermione had ever seen her.

"Merlin's rumpled bollocks, Granger! No one said you..." Draco threw up his hands.

"Draco!" His mother interrupted herself to squash his colourful cursing and unintentionally brought the verbal explosion to a screeching halt.

Only Snape had held his tongue, mutely taking in the scene before him as everyone fell into another long pause. Raising her eyes to the young woman across from her, Hermione silently pleaded for a distraction of any kind, praying that Astoria would take the hint. Leading off with a hesitant "Scorpius has finally learnt to spell his full name," the proud mother rambled on from one accomplishment to the next. With only the tinny sound of flatware against china to accompany her, she filled the remainder of the meal with the innocuous nothings that were so desperately needed.

When the time had come for her to take her leave, Hermione thanked Narcissa with all the grace she hoped would overcome her apparent breach of proper protocol earlier. As the older woman pressed her hand a bit longer than expected, reciting the things that people are supposed to say in these situations, Hermione could almost believe that she saw a bit of compassion directed at her. Apologising, perhaps, for pressing her on her parents earlier? Whatever the reason, it was an unexpected and welcome gesture.

Draco and Astoria walked with Hermione to the Floo room, allowing her to swing on her coat before saying a word. Astoria finally threw herself at Hermione, sniffing back a few tears and ignoring her husband as he rolled his eyes at the sight.

"You really know how to kill a conversation, Granger."

"Shut it, Malfoy."

"See you next week."

Hermione was as busy as ever at the hospital in the lead-up time before the holidays. Holiday parties were frequent and alcohol-laden, so she witnessed firsthand the products of good cheer, lowered inhibitions, and the general stupidity of Londoners at play. And although accepting it would have been a welcome boon during the season of extra expenses, she happily turned down the offer to work extended shifts at the emergency room, deciding that the 80-hour work week was an unnecessary instrument of torture rather than the generous gift her supervisor tried to convince her it was. Miserably behind in her shopping for the extended Weasley clan, she had even debated taking a week off from her trips to the library.

She changed her mind when she scrounged a bent, manky envelope off the snowy step of number eleven, Grimmauld Place. The return address, blurred and faded from melting and refreezing snow, was Australia.

She wanted things to have blown over completely before returning to Malfoy Manor, wanted things to have settled down and wanted them to forget what she had told them. If not for the postal reminder of the urgency of her project, she would have waited until the new year before going back. Why did she tell Mrs. Malfoy her personal business about her family, anyway? She didn't need to know. Hermione knew that she could have come up with another evasive answer, and Draco had even given her an option out! She could have taken him up on it, letting him deflect his mother's questions.

Harry knew. Ron knew. They had known it from the very beginning. The Weasleys knew. Neville, Luna... But no one else. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Professor McGonagall knew that something had happened, but Hermione hadn't elaborated and the woman hadn't pushed the matter. It hadn't seemed right to leave the continent without providing at least the semblance of an explanation to her mentor, no matter how many times she tried to convince herself that she would have been publicly forgiven for anything just because of her role in the war. She could have done anything, gone anywhere, or become anyone she wanted and just chalked it all up to being traumatized by the war. It had been so dazzlingly tempting, really, to be free from the expectations others had built up for her, and while Harry and Ron had no option but to stay in the wizarding world, her situation was different. So while McGonagall knew *something* really, everyone knew something, as it was hard to explain away her absence in light of her new-found fame with the *Daily Prophet* at work even she remained in the dark about Hermione's operations abroad.

In their initial meeting, Draco had learned a great deal of it. And now his mother, his wife, and his godfather were in on her dirty little secret as well. It wasn't their knowing that bothered her after all, she thought they already knew. A pang of guilt attended this thought as she realised that Draco had kept her trust and allowed her to break her news on her own terms. It wasn't that she feared any information leaking out; no, she trusted that these remarkably private people, who had fought their own battles with the slander of the press, would keep her confidence as well. If she had to name it, it had more to do with these inexplicably conflicting desires she felt both to hide and be discovered. A part of her wanted to tell the world of all the mistakes she had made, finally earning their scorn for the foolish pride that told her she was capable of performing such complicated magic in the first place. Another part wanted to retreat to where they would never find her or be able to hold her accountable for what she had done. More than anything, she simply wanted to be free from the burden of being torn in two, wanted to be able to face the world openly, without regret, as she once had.

She knew she was safe with the Weasleys, a family that knew her and loved her in spite of everything, and she knew she wanted to be safe in the world. But being known and being safe were often mutually exclusive things, and she didn't want to choose anymore. She hoped she wouldn't have to with the people she was just beginning to get to know at Malfoy Manor.

Brushing these thoughts aside as she thumbed through her notebooks to decide what to do next, she compared the notes she had taken over the previous few months with the account of that terrible day in the twelve-year-old, dog-eared journal she clung to like a lifeline. Every date, time, and spell was carefully notated; incantations were scribbled out, wand patterns were sketched in the margins, and physical responses were listed as they occurred. The web of false memories she had woven was all there, each original thought or experience she had stolen from Drs. John and Helen Granger and each one she had dreamed up to replace it for Wendell and Monica.

When she arrived at the familiar library on the following Sunday, she had a plan in place: pick up the volume she had been working on last and review the charms found inside it. She had found some success with the spells the previous week while bent over the open pages, but her work was rendered completely useless when she found herself unable to replicate anything in Grimmauld Place, and it was obvious to her that she needed this piece of the puzzle before she could move forward. Perhaps she had copied down the wand patterns wrong, or perhaps she was mispronouncing the incantation. Either way, the plan was to get in, get the information, and get out without anyone noticing her. She could return again in a few weeks' time when their attention would be elsewhere.

After quietly hurrying through the corridors from the Floo room to the library unnoticed, she swung open the doors to find Snape prowling the perimeter balcony with a book in hand. The phonograph in the alcove was piping out a different kind of tune this time. Although she had never listened to much of it, having never felt quite hip enough to pull it off, it sounded like jazz: a piano, accompanied by a muted trumpet and an upright bass. He was in the post-Hogwarts uniform she had come to expect: black trousers and a white shirt rolled up to his elbows. The glasses were a new addition, but perhaps she simply hadn't noticed them earlier, or perhaps he only needed them for tedious hours with fine print. She hadn't even made it to her desk when he greeted her with his usual enigmatic behaviour.

"Miss Granger."

"Professor."

"I understand that you'd like to learn Legilimency." He snapped his book closed and wound his way around the balcony to the spiral staircase, descending the steps with deliberation.

She hesitated out of her surprise at his directness, and found herself reluctantly responding, "I believe you've understood that for several weeks." The thought of Severus Snape of all people feeling sorry for her was more than she thought she could bear, but she suspected that it was the only reason he had for addressing her now.

He frowned, stopping haltingly on the final step. "If you knew what I was doing when I..."

"I didn't know it then." It was best to head that one off before he came to the wrong conclusion. For all the confusion over that first meeting, she needed him to know that she had no idea he had already begun their lesson and was performing Legilimency on her. "I thought I was there to convince you to teach me. I only learned later that you had already agreed." The least the very least she could salvage at this point was a smidgeon of her pride.

"How much later?"

"That very day, after... my fainting spell." She tried to stop fidgeting, pushing her hands into fists at her side. "Astoria told me."

He looked faintly annoyed. "If you've known for weeks that I agreed to teach you, why didn't you come to me and ask me for tutelage?"

"I don't want to cajole you into something you don't want to do."

"But you knew that I had offered."

"After a significant amount of badgering by your godson, if I'm not mistaken."

"Regardless, I offered."

"But you didn't want to."

"Again, I *offered*," he said insistently, agitation mounting with her protests, "and I offered before I knew the extenuating circumstances accompanying your request."

There it was open pity from one of the least outwardly charitable men she'd ever known, just what she had hoped to avoid. If even Snape felt sorry for her, she must be a pathetic creature indeed. As grateful as she was that he was still willing and had even freely offered to teach her, she also didn't want him to give up his time because Draco had wheedled him into doing so, and she certainly didn't want him to do it because he felt sorry for her.

"Sir, I have no desire to..."

"Granger, stop calling me 'Sir,'" he warned, clearly exasperated.

"Fine..." she replied stiffly. "'Professor,' then? 'Mister Snape'?"

He rolled his eyes but withheld his bark. She took it as tacit consent, if not approval, and stood her ground as she set the book down on his desk as he approached her.

"Professor," she repeated herself, pointedly changing his title, "I have no desire to ask something of you that you find even remotely unpleasant."

"Were you planning on haranguing me at every step of the process, verbally assaulting me and slowly eliminating my will to live?"

"No, but..." she began defensively.

"Or you assumed that teaching you would be beyond the scope of my tolerance?"

"No, of course not, Professor, that's absurd..."

"Because I did survive decades under the thumb of a Dark Lord," he assured her with a growing smirk, "and worked for Voldemort as well, so..."

"No, Professor."

"Then why do you assume I will find it unpleasant?"

Was he joking? She had driven him up the wall as a student from the very beginning, despite desperately working for his approval. Perhaps he could tolerate her now if they were working side by side in silence, but their record of actual interactions didn't bode well for the future.

"Then *what*, Miss Granger?" His patience was wearing thin as he waited for her to respond. "You've decided you can't endure my presence long enough to gain anything useful from me? Or you've realized you're not quite up to a challenge after playing dress up as a Muggle for so long? What is it?"

She paused, refusing to break eye contact and wanting to provide an answer that made sense. "I don't want you I don't want ~~anyone~~ to do something on my behalf because they feel a sense of obligation or... pity or the repayment of a debt. I've already lost that last fight with Draco, and I don't want anyone else dragged along."

"You think Draco is helping you out of a misguided sense of duty to you?" he asked reservedly, folding his arms across his chest.

"He said as much at first."

"Do you think he is the kind of person who would allow just anyone into his family home, repeatedly, out of mere obligation?"

"Well, I think we're actually becoming friends now. I hope we are, at least. Astoria, too."

"Then allow him to repay you, Miss Granger."

"I don't want him to feel that there's anything to be repaid. Enough time has passed now, don't you think?"

"It doesn't really matter."

"I beg to differ, Professor. I'd rather accept the gift from a friend than payment from a debtor. It most certainly *does* matter."

"It doesn't matter whether or not *you*, Miss Granger, believe there is a debt. It doesn't matter because *he* does, and he probably does for both yourself and Potter. Let him repay *you* on behalf of the both of you and allow him some measure of absolution. Unless, of course, you'd rather take some twisted Amazonian joy in emasculating him instead."

"My coming here and traipsing about in his library is an act of mercy?"

"Your acceptance of his offer of assistance releases him from this particular burden."

She considered this. "If he feels that way, then I'll gladly accept. When can I tell him that he's paid in full?"

He didn't answer her, but posed another question that was clearly bothering him. "Why do you assume that my offer would, like Draco's, be out of, as you say, 'a sense of obligation'?" He paused, allowing her time to formulate a response. When none came, he rephrased his question. "I understand that Draco owes you his life for your testimony in their trials afterward and for a particularly dramatic act of heroism on a broom during the Battle of Hogwarts, but what do you believe I owe you?"

"If I'm not mistaken, your offer was out of pity, not obligation." She waited for confirmation, which came in the form of one raised eyebrow. He allowed her to continue. "You owe me nothing, Professor. I know that. I've always known that. I am completely certain that any debt between us is in your favour many, many times over. You protected Harry and Ron and me from more evil than I can probably comprehend... and everything I know now of your actions in the war... well..." She trailed off, beginning to lose herself in her thoughts. "First year, with the Philosopher's Stone? The challenges at the end were so clearly directed at the three of us, I don't know how we missed it at the time. I suppose at the time we thought we had accomplished something really tremendous, but that was sheer hubris. We were just children. I'm still shocked that we were almost encouraged by Dumbledore to go and find the Stone." She paused, waiting to see if he would correct any of her assumptions. When he didn't, she remarked, "Flitwick picked the flying keys for Harry, of course, and McGonagall Transfigured the chess set for Ron. You designed the logic puzzle for me, didn't you?"

"No, Miss Granger," he replied with a remarkably straight face and a devious glint in his dark eyes, "it was for Mr. Weasley, whose logic, dedication, and insight at twelve were the stuff a teacher's dreams are made of."

She let out a burst of laughter. Ron at seventeen had come a long way from the boy she first met, but he was as oblivious as he had ever been as a first year. What seemed even more strange to her than her old professor cracking a joke was the fact that he actually seemed gratified by her response.

"Surely the coloured fire gave the intended recipient away?"

Coloured fire? There were the barriers placed at either end of the room, she recalled, but... "Oh, God! No... you *knew* that... that I...?"

"That you set me on fire at the Quidditch pitch with your bluebell flames? Yes, Miss Granger, I knew."

"And you let me live?" she exclaimed.

"As surprising as this may sound, Dumbledore didn't look too favourably on the murder or torture of students." A dark look flashed across his features and he turned away from her sharply.

That was a subject she was going to leave untouched. "Well, thank you."

He grimaced and responded gruffly. "Don't thank me for that."

Deciding that the tone in the room had grown too dark for her tastes, she boldly noted with a pert grin, "You know, the poetry you wrote was terrible."

"What?"

"*Terrible*," she repeated with emphasis. She hoped that she hadn't judged incorrectly as to how far she could push him, and she tried to pace herself based on the

conversations she'd overheard him having with Draco. "Really, an abomination to the English language. The cadence started off all right, but it immediately fell out of the rhythm you had established. The poetic feet changed far too frequently, and you couldn't help but feel a bit seasick as you read it aloud. You may also remember that you chose to rhyme the word 'size' with 'sides.' I mean, some people can pull off the irregular rhymes, but you're no Emily Dickinson."

"Difficult as it is to believe, it was not my intention to be the next Dickinson... or Shakespeare or Chaucer or anyone else," he drawled. "So I didn't miss the mark."

"And yet knowing you read Dryden makes your effort seem a bit lackluster."

"I hadn't read him then. The Muggle literature campaign is a recent endeavor," he explained as an aside, before animatedly returning to the heart of the argument. "Besides, the goal was keeping you three alive! I'd say I was fairly successful on that front, despite your valiant attempts to thwart my every move."

"True," she agreed. Dropping her cheek, she glanced down and added, "Your opening speech to us that first day in Potions class was much more inspiring. It was that moment, really, along with watching McGonagall transform from a cat, that opened my eyes to the possibilities of a magical life."

"Come, Miss Granger," he responded dryly, deflecting her away from her thoughts. "Do you feel the need to succumb to sentimental nostalgia at such a young age?"

"Fine. Back to my laundry list." She began going through them systematically, year by year. "Third year, you alerted us to the dangers of a werewolf at Hogwarts, even if it happened to be Remus."

"Yes, and what good that lesson accomplished. No one else could even put the pieces together, and in the end..." He shook his head, not allowing himself to finish the thought.

"Fifth year, you notified the rest of the Order to our foolish, foolish mission to the Ministry. Sixth year, you directed Luna and me to help Professor Flitwick so that we wouldn't get hurt that night on the tower, protecting us from Death Eaters. Didn't you? Seventh, when you..."

He was starting to look more and more uncomfortable as she spoke, shifting his eyes from one shelf to another and his weight from side to side before he finally stopped her. "Enough, Miss Granger! Enough."

The two stood there silently for a few moments. She matched his posture, crossing her arms across her chest, and stared at the wooden floor beyond her shoes. While she was grateful to have the opportunity to finally acknowledge the things he had done on her well, at least Harry's behalf, she didn't think that this Legilimency business was any more resolved now than it had been before.

"The wizarding world is far too preoccupied with debts." She spoke quietly, afraid that this belief came from the residual foreignness of this world to her, and not wanting him to dismiss it outright on those grounds.

He didn't. "There we may actually be in agreement." His gaze drifted to the snowy grounds through tall windows as he half-slumped, half-sat against the table they were standing next to. "But it can't be changed."

"Why not?" she asked incredulously.

"Are you really that naïve?"

"At the very least, I don't see how a life debt can be so binding. How can you even determine such a debt? Eliminating some very specific circumstances like stopping someone from drinking a deadly poison or shielding someone from a bullet to the heart, who knows how things we may say or do will affect something else down the line? I could say something to someone at the right time and not even realise that I had saved their life. In a case like that, would I be owed a debt? What about debts that can never be repaid?"

He stalked away from her towards his desk, shaking his head ever so slightly. "Miss Granger, what do you know of life debts?"

"Only what Dumbledore shared with us." Not that she was the intended recipient of this information. Everything she knew about life debts was filtered through what he had told Harry about his father, and Snape, and Wormtail. "Well, what Dumbledore shared with Harry."

"Then I doubt you know the whole of the matter. There are many different kinds of debts, and Dumbledore's information in this matter is unreliable at best."

"Of course, intention must be taken into consideration." She was voicing questions she'd had for years, speaking more to herself than to him at this point, but hoping he would jump in with an explanation if she said something too far off the mark. "What if someone intends to save a life, but doesn't? Or the reverse, where someone accidentally saves someone despite never having intended to do so? How could that possibly merit a life debt?"

He took his seat and flipped through a book open on his desk, displaying complete indifference to what she was saying.

"And at what point can you say that a debt is repaid? At some point, when does an act of kindness cease being a debt repaid and turn into a gift that you give freely? I don't think..."

"A gift?" he laughed cynically, finally interrupting her train of thought. "Your unsuspecting idealism was depressing enough while you were trying to liberate house-elves, but it could at least be explained by the folly of youth. I should certainly think you'd have seen enough of life to know better by now."

"Doesn't the Christmas season illustrate the human desire to want to share a little kindness with one another?"

"Yes, you really are that naïve," he muttered under his breath. Then speaking aloud, he raised his head from his book and asked her, "Your example is a good one. As you've probably completed your shopping for the year, let me ask you this: Who did you prepare gifts for? How many Galleons did you spend?"

She looked at him quizzically, knowing better than to answer when he'd just Socratically laid a trap for her to fall into. "What will my answer tell you?"

"Only this: unless you follow a completely different practise from the rest of the world, you're not taking part in an exercise in generosity like you assume, but merely in an equal exchange organised by society from time immemorial." His demeanor grew increasingly detached as he questioned her. "Let's just assume, shall we, that you bought presents for the people who are purchasing things for you, and you spent roughly the same amount they spend on you. Am I wrong?"

"What if I did? Why does buying gifts of similar value indicate that it's merely a socially-prescribed custom? I've learned over the years that people are generally uncomfortable receiving a gift if it costs much more than what they planned on giving me, so I've adjusted what I spend for their benefit. Although when you factor in the thoughtfulness of the gift, well, the whole venture goes out the window. Some people know exactly what you'd like or need," she said, thinking of Ginny, "while others try desperately and always get it wrong," she concluded, thinking of Ron. "Are you questioning the validity of my feelings for the people I..."

"You're throwing yourself off track now by personalizing it," he declared pragmatically. "Keep your emotions out of it."

She glared at him, growing more frustrated by the minute as he continued to remain calm. "Fine. Allow me to refocus," she retorted with fire in her eyes. "Also let me ask you why you believe reciprocity transforms a gift into an obligation? If I feel the inclination to give someone something, it's generally because I care about them. Isn't it likely that they feel the same way about me?"

He didn't reply, but his eyes followed her as she huffed off and threw herself into her chair.

"Doesn't the intention of the giver matter as well, just as with debts? Certainly, some people use their generosity to manipulate and control others, but not everyone does."

Malfoy donations to the Ministry made during her school years ran fleetingly through her mind. She whipped around in her seat to face him. "Have *you* never given anything freely? *Been given* something freely? Draco seems to believe you have! You can't possibly be so... hard and *sæynical* as to..."

"Miss Granger, we were speaking in hypotheticals," he stated, abruptly cutting her off. "Let me stop you before you say something you may regret, and let us return to the question at hand. Do you still want Legilimency lessons or don't you?"

Well... that was quite the non sequitur. She hadn't known where this ridiculous argument was leading, but she realised that as she grew more defensive, her comments had become increasingly invasive and unfair. She was relieved that his offer to teach her hadn't been rescinded somewhere in the course of the afternoon's events and berated herself again for always saying the wrong thing with him.

"I do," she responded cautiously. "More than almost anything, and you're one of the few people who know why. But now that I know nothing can be freely given, by you at least, I'm bound to be pretty hesitant to accept."

"You know no such thing about me." He was as unreadable as ever, and she wished she already possessed the skills he was offering so that she read the subtext that ran behind nearly everything he said. "I will concede that there are times when people both receive and give freely, but those occasions are grossly outnumbered by a system of exchange rather crudely disguising itself as generosity."

"Then which is this?"

"Consider it a gift."

"How can I believe that, all things considered?"

"Then I have a proposition for you. Let's make it an exchange, if you will." He laid his reading glasses atop a stack of books in his rolltop desk, pinching the bridge of his nose and releasing a silent sigh. "I've paid enough debts for a lifetime, many of which I never promised. A life in debt swallows you whole, Miss Granger, and it's a life I refuse to live anymore."

She looked at him tentatively. "What are we exchanging?"

On the morning of the 25th, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny made it to the Burrow with only three trips back and forth through the Floo, transporting small children, piles of wrapped gifts, and platters of baked goods in turn. They were greeted by the warm and friendly faces of Arthur and Molly and Charlie, and were excited to discover fields of perfectly fluffy, gleaming white snow behind the house. The little snow they received in the city turned grey and dingy after only a few days on the streets, so the only white snow the Potter kids saw on a regular basis was found in the patch of Grimmauld Park where Harry had built a snowman with them. He was convinced that it stayed bright because it was away from the traffic, but Hermione and Ginny took turns refreshing the Cleansing Charms on the figure without letting him know.

Molly had seen the writing on the wall when Fleur married Bill years earlier, knowing that her daughters-in-law would soon be dragging her sons and her grandchildren away from her nest into the care of the Other Grandmother. Ever the family general, she orchestrated a system to ensure that all her loved ones would be together for at least one day of the year: even years put Christmas at the Burrow, while odd years moved the celebration to Boxing Day. Being an odd year, this Christmas dinner allowed all present to squeeze around a single table on the first floor rather than being spread over the lower two levels of the house.

When all the dishes had been cleared up and the mashed potatoes had been cleaned off the wall (Lily's enthusiastic, if haphazard consumption at work), the family gathered around the Christmas tree in the sitting room. After a few rousing verses of "God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs" and "The Holly and the Screechsnap," Harry and Hermione led everyone in a few of their favorite Muggle carols and George kept everyone above the age of five plied with a potent eggnog of his own creation. When it was clear that the little ones were starting to get sleepy, presents were passed around for all to open and words of thanks promptly followed.

As Hermione watched the Weasleys laughing and smiling together in their matching jumpers, she retreated to a worn armchair in the corner of the room. She curled up in it, leaving her presents in their torn wrappings under the tree, and slyly pulled a dirty old envelope out of her pocket. After four days of carrying it with her to work and back home again, she finally gave herself permission to open it.

Dear Hermione,

Thank you so much for the Christmas hamper! It was such a delight to find a package left on the front door. You were always so thoughtful, dear. Of course, it doesn't quite feel like Christmas around here 34 degrees, if you can believe it! Wendell's tossed the HobNobs you sent into the freezer for safe keeping. If you happen to be free for tea or supper sometime in late April, do let us know. We've planned a long holiday then, and we'll be through London sometime around the 27-29th. We're both glad to hear you're getting settled at home again.

Happy Christmas to our English Girl!

Monica and Wendell

Late April! *Four months!* If she could learn enough in the next four months, she could try again, and this time, she might be able to change things. She wanted to celebrate, wanted to get up and dance around the room, but she also wanted to keep it her secret just hers for a little while longer. Wishing the family a Happy Christmas, she tucked the letter into her battered journal before contentedly heading upstairs to Percy's old room for bed. A Happy Christmas, indeed.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

Boxing day at the Burrow; Hermione and Severus make an exchange.

Suspecting that a decade Down Under had ruined her ability to spend more than an hour in the cold, Hermione left her snowy scarf in place as she thawed in the kitchen with a squat, steaming mug of drinking chocolate. From the table where she was seated, she could see Ginny and Ron running about like mad with a slew of little ones before Harry pounced on one of the children, snapping up either James or Rose before he, in turn, let them all plough him into a snowbank. It was rather difficult to tell one apart from another when they were nearly completely covered in puffy coats and Molly's knit goods, and Hermione was never going to keep up with the constant flux of shared kid's clothes in the Weasley clan. Singing along to the wireless set blaring from the next room, Susan and George stood behind her chair, assembling sandwiches

from the Christmas leftovers and unpacking all the homemade sweets that had yet to be gobbled up.

As she finally warmed up and hung her scarf on the hook by the door, she heard the Floo activate for the umpteenth time that morning. This time out stumbled Teddy and Andromeda from the flickering green flames, one of who came bearing a bushel of oranges and the other of who came barreling into a hug from his guide and mentor.

George promptly flipped him upside down, holding him up by his knees as he initiated the bizarre greeting ritual they'd shared since the boy was a toddler. *Sausage in a pan, sausage in a pan, turn 'em over, turn 'em over, The-o-dore.* Bobbing the eleven-year-old in time to the rhythm of the words, George quickly righted him when it was over. "Good gravy, Teddy! You've grown a foot and gained a stone since I saw you last. Keep it up and I won't be able to do that much longer. What are the house-elves feeding you these days?" As the odd pair roamed off to the sitting room to find the set of Gobstones, the boy's hair morphed into a bright Weasley red.

Family members and friends came and went over the course of the day, playing games indoors and out, eating and drinking and generally making merry. Without a wedding looming or a baby expected, Teddy's first term at school was the biggest news in the Burrow this Boxing Day, so he eventually fell prey to the questions of the crowd sometime in the early afternoon. After he finished defeating George soundly in Gobstones and Exploding Snap, Molly pried the game pieces and cards from her thirtysomething-year-old son's hands, leaving the younger boy to face the Hogwarts Inquisition.

"Which classes do you like the best?" asked Percy.

"Do you miss home?" (Susan.)

"Have you found that corner in the library with the velvet cushions yet?" (Hermione.)

"Have you been IN the library yet?" (George.)

"Can you survive without your own broom?" (Ron, eyes welling up with empathy.)

The questions continued for quite some time, with Teddy holding court over the people who loved him and had all happily gathered around him to avoid yet another return trip to the kitchen buffet. Most of the questions they were asking were a bit redundant, since his owl saw more air traffic than any other first-year student's as it relayed letters and packages to and from the folks now seated around him. It was different to say things in person, and they all knew it, so they happily listened as he described all of his firsts and favourites at Hogwarts. Most of the younger children were running back and forth between the kitchen and the outdoors, but Victoire was attentively listening to every word from her standing position beside the couch, learning what she could about the place that would soon be her home away from home and trying not to think about how smart and kind and thoughtful and wonderful Teddy was.

"Ow do you like ze professors?" Fleur asked the boy, sending a sly smile up at her husband.

"Professor Sprout's my favourite. She's the best," Teddy responded enthusiastically. A look of mortification crossed his face and he glanced up at Bill. "Er... but I like Professor Weasley, too. Of course I do."

"The best Defense teachers are all werewolf survivors," Ron said, ruffling Teddy's hair as it turned a bright shade of blue, the colour that signaled him at his happiest. "That's why I don't teach at Hogwarts. Never been bitten."

"Oh, of course," Percy said insistently. "That's why."

Bill chuckled at the thought of Ron instructing students. "It's okay, Teddy. And you know you can call me Bill outside class. Besides, Sprout was one of my favourites when I was a student, too."

"She was?"

He nodded.

"She throttled the Sorting Hat," Teddy excitedly explained to the crowd. "It was great. No one else's Head did anything like that."

"Old Kettleburn was a kick, though," Charlie chimed in.

"Who?" he asked in confusion. Teddy had never heard this name before.

"Hagrid replaced him for Care of Magical Creatures." Charlie grinned, reminiscing fondly. "I think we saw him lose at least one finger each year in some freak accident. That class was the best."

"Do you remember the time that Runespoor bit him on the arm?" Bill asked him with a mischievous grin as he slipped back into the mindset of a teenage boy. "Fifth year, maybe? Your fourth? It turned green from the elbow down and within a week, his fingernails fell..."

"Boys!" Molly shrieked, reaching down to the ground to clamp her hands down firmly over Rose's little ears as she played with her purple Pygmy Puff on the rug.

Percy coughed from the corner of the room. "It's a shame you won't have Professor McGonagall for Transfiguration. Her advanced classes were the highlight of my Hogwarts experience. Always stimulating and quite utilitarian."

"Well... I like her as headmistress all right," Teddy responded, not wanting to ask what 'utilitarian' meant. "Even though I'm not still not sure what all a headmistress does..."

"Advanced Potions was the same," Percy continued. "Professor Slughorn is a respected teacher, but he'll never really challenge you the way Professor Snape did us. By the time we made it to N.E.W.T.s classes, lessons were extraordinarily complicated and quite practical a number of healing potions were on the syllabus. I don't think they get that with Slughorn anymore."

"However," Ron said in mock seriousness, "if you're not a genius like our Hermione and you still need a Potions N.E.W.T. to be an Auror, you should thank your lucky stars that Snape left when he did."

"He wasn't that bad, Ron," Bill reprimanded him jovially. "He loosened up in class a lot from that first year."

"Ha!" Ron exclaimed, pointing a finger at him across the room. "He may have loosened up over your seven years, but he tightened right back up again over mine."

"Can you blame the man?" Bill asked in reply. "Even with everything going on then, I doubt it compared to my first year. There was no speaking allowed, even if you were working in pairs. If you so much as spilled an ingredient, you sat out and watched someone else complete their potion for the remainder of the lesson. You earned your way back into the class by replicating whatever you had missed in detention, and you didn't get back in until you got it right."

"I'm pretty sure I would have failed out of Hogwarts if he had kept that up," Charlie stated grimly.

"Well, he was a first-year teacher then, and they're always nervous. Now that I've done it, I get it." Bill replied. "He was also, what, four or five years older than some of his students in his upper-year classes, and he'd just been cleared of some pretty serious charges."

"It was less than that. He was only twenty-one years old," Molly interjected. She shook her head. "That poor, poor boy. Teaching over students three years behind him in school..."

"Yes, well..." Bill began again. "I was nervous enough as it is about mistakes I made in class still am, with some lessons but I don't have a record or a Board of Directors that was pressured into hiring me against their judgment." He paused and looked to his youngest brother. "Can you imagine what they would have done to him if a student was injured in one of his classes back then? I can understand a little paranoia."

"Still, I liked old Sluggy when we had him," Ron said with a smile on his face. "It was like he was putting on a show for us in every lesson, and we never used spider parts for ingredients that year. Trust me, I tracked it. Slughorn returning to teach is one of the reasons Harry and I could both become Aurors, Teddy."

He looked up at his godfather, unable to believe it.

"It's true, Teddy. I was never the best student at Potions, but I'm still thankful we had him teaching us that year. I learned a lot that year." He looked around to Ron and Hermione, silently acknowledging their shared knowledge of the many things he now left unspoken: how it was the Half-Blood Prince who had taught him to concoct a proper brew, and how his instructions won Harry his vial of liquid luck. It was that Felix Felicis that had both kept them all safe on the night Dumbledore died and had secured the proof in Slughorn's memories of how Voldemort had distorted his soul in the vain pursuit of immortality. "I bet you'll be a much better brewer than I was."

Teddy spoke up again, happy that they were talking again about someone he knew. "I like Potions. Professor Slughorn asks me to tea in his office with some of the other students."

"Are you in the Slug Club, Teddy?" Ginny asked.

"The What Club?" he spurted out, doubting his ears.

"McGonagall disbands the club officially every year," Bill explained to the others. "Although unofficial meetings must still be taking place?" he asked the boy, who simply shrugged, not really knowing what they were talking about.

"Did you enjoy yourself at tea?" Ginny inquired politely.

"Well... he gave us sugared pineapples and teacakes. They were great. And he didn't quiz us about our lessons. That was nice." He dropped his head and stared at his darned socks. "But he asked an awful lot of questions about Harry."

"You know, Ted, I can tell you how to get crystallized pineapple whenever you want. You don't even have to listen to Slughorn yammering on about everyone important he knows." George came up behind the boy and slung an arm around his shoulders. "Have you ever seen a still life of a bowl of fruit in the basement of Hogwarts?"

"Sure! That's right outside our common room!"

"Well, if you tickle the pear..." He led the boy away, sharing hard-earned advice and sheltering him from further questions.

"Should I be concerned about that?" Andromeda asked the others, looking after her precious grandson in the care of a Weasley twin.

Molly merely patted her arm. "Now, now. I'm sure they'll be fine together."

"Besides that," Harry interjected, "all the secret passages out of the castle that George knew about were changed in the rebuilding process."

"I see," Andromeda replied, visibly relieved.

"It'll probably be tips on how to nick food from the kitchens, how to visit Hagrid without getting in trouble, and what to do in the Forbidden Forest with his pals."

Making sure Teddy was out of hearing distance (in fact, he and George had grabbed coats and brooms and headed outside), she took Harry by the hand. "I want to thank you and Ginny," she began, then looked up to include everyone, "and all of you for how much support you've shown Teddy during his time away from home. Your letters mean a lot to him, and it's been harder than he anticipated, I think. He doesn't want to show weakness, but I think he doubts himself because of his house. Some of the other students have said things, if I can guess from the way he talks about school, and I want him to be proud of who he is."

"What has been said?" Bill asked quietly. "Nothing's been done, has it?"

"I don't know. He won't talk about it. But, no, I don't think it's anything outrightly cruel. Children can be quite brutal in the smallest of ways."

"Will you send him to talk to me if he says anything else? Before anything gets worse?"

Andromeda nodded her acquiescence. "I think the thing he finds hardest is his smaller class size. He has fewer housemates in his year than any other house at Hogwarts, so there are fewer people to stick together. This is the smallest class of Hufflepuffs on record."

"A smaller class of Slytherins, too," Bill added.

"Bill, what did McGonagall do about everything?" Hermione asked. "She wouldn't stand for this, would she?"

"All the faculty have had a crack at it, but no one can find anything wrong," he replied. "Everyone's hoping it was a fluke."

"They can't keep the Hat anymore, can they?"

"What are they to do? They still have to Sort the students."

"Why?" Fleur asked her husband, frowning. "Why eez eet necessary? We did not 'ave zese same four 'ouses at Beauxbatons."

"From a practical standpoint, the building is set up for it. Four living areas for four houses with the two towers and two underground dormitories. Lessons are also split up by house, so they would have to restructure lessons for everyone." He curled an arm around his wife's slim waist. "And these are eleven-year-olds we're talking about. They're a long way from home and need the stability of some sort of family structure."

"Oui, mon petit chou, I agree zat zey should be like families," she stated placidly. "But why divide like zis, by your character or your behaviour? Zey should pick something else. Putting people 'oo are like each uzzer togezzer? Eet eez not ze best way."

"It's a thousand-year-old tradition," Charlie reminded her. "It won't change without a fight. Or without a very good reason."

"Zose poor Poufsouffles and Slyzzerins..." She tut-tutted and shook her head.

"I think you mean Hufflepuffs," Percy corrected her.

"Ooever 'Ufflepuffs," she repeated with a wave of her pale hand. "I theenk I would be a Slyzzerin or maybe a Ravenclaw, but not a Gryffindor."

"Nonsense," Ron responded. "You're a Weasley. Weasleys are Gryffindors."

Ginny walked over and smacked her brother on the back of the head on behalf of her sister-in-law.

"Well, I mean, Weasleys can be Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs, too," he amended quickly. "It's just that no Weasley has ever been a Slytherin."

"I would be ze first, zen." Fleur smiled serenely. "Remember, I stayed at 'Ogwarts for a year. I know what people are like in each 'ouse. Gryffindors and 'Ufflepuffs are so emotional, but I 'ave refined ways and refined taste. I am ze contained and rational one."

"That makes you Slytherin?" Ron asked with wide eyes. "I thought that made you French."

Spending both Christmas and Boxing Day away from her job at the hospital had been quite the luxury. It was, however, one that had come at quite a high cost. She had bargained away her work days for the next two weeks, exchanging those two days off for the next twelve on and even agreeing to take on five overnight shifts at Ealing. She had come perilously close to the legally allowed limit of weekly hours, and one of those overnight shifts fell on New Year's Eve, the most dreaded holiday in the medical world. In those two weeks, she barely saw the people she was living with, and was only at home to catch up on sleep. *Must find new job*, she reminded herself each night as she dropped into her bed and drifted off into sleep. *And soon*. She filled the spare time she didn't have with answering owls from various friends and acquaintances. They were from Ron ("Yes, it's been too long; pick a day and I'll come by to visit you and the family for dinner"), from Snape ("Our exchange is set for my first free day; does noon work for you?"), from Luna ("I didn't know Snorkacks lived in Denmark, but best of luck on the hunt"), and from Neville ("Come to lunch with Ron and me later this month and we'll talk about how you can make your move with Hannah").

She was even more frustrated at her busy schedule now that she had a goal to be working for. Knowing that her parents would be in England in just a few months meant that she had to focus on learning as much as possible before their arrival. It had been about a year since their last Magical examination, although they'd never know it. It was a simple check-up these days, now that she knew the signs of what to look for and how to monitor their health. She would take them on at the same time, quickly sliding the pair into a state of limited consciousness before performing the same handful of Memory Charms to test their reactions. This battery of tests had formed the core of the exam since she was in college, but additional Muggle imaging was added to the regimen when she could safely have the scans arranged in her internship after medical school. MRIs and PET scans were tacked on to the exam then, after she had determined that CTs were unreliable for her parents' problems. She'd have to arrange something at Ealing to make sure she could still get the neuroimaging done there, but she had time to figure it out.

If she were ready, she would be able to try to reverse the Memory Charms. It could all be over in less than four months.

It was the use of Muggle scans on her parents that first set her thinking about using her medical background to improve various potions and charms. When she had first seen Muggle medicine at St. Mungo's during her fifth year, she was dumbfounded by the lack of understanding she encountered among the Healers there. The one Healer interested in Muggle medicine – complementary medicine, he had called it – had suggested common stitches to counteract a Magical venom, something even she at sixteen could have guessed was a long shot. Retroactively, she figured she had held higher expectations for them because they were doctors, but that was clearly a mistake. A world in which an enthusiastic and otherwise intelligent wizard like Arthur Weasley could still get befuddled by electric plugs was not a world where antibiotics, antiseptic, or anaesthetics could make sense.

She headed off to the Malfoys' before the battery of hospital smells had faded from her olfactory memory, less than fourteen hours after her last shift had ended. Carrying years of on-again, off-again research projects in her leather satchel, she arrived at the library at the agreed-upon time to find Snape sitting at one of the centre tables in front of the fireplace rather than the roll-top desk he usually used. She wound her way through the maze of tables and desks to the opposite side of his table, taking in the hoard of books and parchment rolls arranged beside him. He was casually reading a small volume as he leaned back in his chair, and he failed to look up when she stopped opposite him.

"Well." She set the bag down with a heavy thud onto the table. "How would you like to proceed?"

"I don't particularly think it matters."

"All right, then." She unhooked the brass latch to open up her brown bag and dug around for the first tall stack of notebooks. Dropping them with a flourish, she proclaimed anticlimactically, "Here they are – charms work." She pulled out the remainder, a shorter stack, and unloaded them onto the table as well. "And potions work."

He examined the taller stack, reaching over to trace the embossed name – Dr. Hermione Granger – on the pebbled leather.

"You can call me Doctor Granger, if you'd like. My patients and colleagues all do."

"I can," he said, looking up at her, "but I won't."

"Doctor Granger?" she asked with a cheeky smile. "You wouldn't like to try it out?"

His eyes returned to the notebook cover and he snorted back a laugh. "That won't be happening."

No, she thought, *I suppose not. It was worth a shot*. She had rather hoped that they would be able to get on collegially as Professor Snape and Doctor Granger, or perhaps just as Snape and Granger. Hermione and Severus was probably out of the question. Anything but the dreadful combination of Miss Granger and Professor Snape, which had never worked out smoothly for the two of them. So much for trying.

"Well, it's probably all for the best." She finally settled in the chair before her. "People say it and I still look around for one of my parents to respond. It's still a bit surreal for me, even after years of it."

He rifled through the stack, lifting up notebook by notebook as if counting them, but he didn't reply.

"Could you at least drop the 'Miss,' then?"

"And you, in turn, will call me... what exactly did you have in mind?"

"What would you prefer?"

"I don't particularly think this matters either, Miss Granger."

"Really, I would appreciate it if you would call me anything but Miss Granger. The last time I was regularly called that was almost half a lifetime ago."

His focus moved to the other stack as he took stock of the notebooks there, but again, he failed to reply to what she had just said. She supposed that she hadn't actually posed a question for him to respond to, but she would have assumed that he would be more forthcoming than this, seeing as he was the one who had proposed this exchange in the first place.

"You know, your name suits you." Severus Snape. The alliteration was a bit much, but it was as melodramatic as the figure he cut and the part he played throughout her formative years.

"If you proceed to unload some drivel about the severity of my demeanor, or any physical attribute, so help me, Granger," he began as she curiously wondered what his idea of painful consequences was outside the classroom, "I'll be forced to do something terrible in retaliation."

"Er... I just meant that you seem to be the type of person to have a Latin forename."

"How is anyone the type to possess a Latin name?" he asked. His attention had drifted from the notebooks and was now completely focussed on her, and he stared at her challengingly. He leaned back in his chair, slinging his right arm across the empty one beside him and tracing circles on the table before him with his other hand. "The very idea is absurd."

"Oh, don't begrudge me this, Severus. Medical terminology has just barely kept my Latin afloat. You don't even want to know the state of my Old Norse. Five years of Ancient Runes and what do I have to show for it these days?"

"You didn't find an audience of eleventh-century Vikings to castigate in twenty-first century Australia?"

"Shockingly, no. But if I had, and they had asked me to transcribe Norse Charms into Younger Futhark for the sake of posterity, they would have been completely out of luck."

"Poor souls."

She was thrown slightly off-kilter as she caught the smirk that had crept onto his face. Catching herself up to speed again, she continued in the same vein. "And had they come with a series of runestones for me to read? It would take me hours."

"Good thing Viking society was largely illiterate, then."

She peered across the table at him quizzically.

"Odds are high that if one that tracked you down across the centuries, he wouldn't be bearing anything for you to read."

"Right." Suddenly finding herself a bit uncomfortable, she removed the top notebook from the charms stack, opening it to the first page. "Shall we begin?"

The explanation of the notebooks took the better part of an hour as Hermione explained her system to the man across from her. Organised as she ever had been, her system was identical in each of the books. Each book was dedicated to a single potion or charm, and it was filled with three things: introduction, experiments, and conclusions. Her introductions had been gathered from wizarding spellbooks and medical treatises, consisting of the basic charm, the theory behind it, then the list of all known variations on the charm according to incantation and wand pattern. (Or the basic potion, followed by the theory, and the variations based on ingredients and preparation techniques.) Next came the experiments, one for each variation. Using anywhere from three to twenty patients for each experiment, Hermione had documented the patient's symptoms before and after treatment. She had also included scans of the patients' brains before, during, and after each treatment. All in all, it was a massive amount of data, so the last few pages of each notebook were dedicated to her written synopses. There she wrote up why Potion A worked best for Patient X, or how Charm B healed Patient Y. She wrote up how Potion C worked in all its variations: Potion C does this, Potion C.1 does that, Potion C.2, et cetera, et cetera.

As she pored over her notebooks, she felt a strange sense of relief overtaking her. She might not have been able to help her parents, but she was going to make damn well sure that her years of training were going to help someone. If she couldn't take comfort in seeing her parents well or hearing them retell stories from her childhood, she could be satisfied knowing that somebody got their happy ending. Hermione had written up all her results for the Healers at St. Wigbert's Hospital, the Australian equivalent of St. Mungo's. She had prepared charts for the Healers there to guide them into finding the proper treatment. If the patient has such-and-such symptoms, try such-and-such potion. If it works, job well done; if it doesn't, check the results and try the next treatment. It wasn't a cure-all, but it helped Healers find solutions for many witches and wizards who had been suffering for years.

When it was clear that Snape could follow her system and had learned to decipher all her shorthand jottings and abbreviations, they stopped to take a break. She was fairly worn out by the whole process, as she'd essentially explained her life's work over the past decade in less than sixty minutes. It was actually fairly depressing, when she thought of it, to realise that her time in Melbourne could be reduced into a satchel's worth of reports. She hadn't sought the friendship of her fellows in university because of her heavy course load and her part-time jobs to pay for her shabby little flat. Her mates in medical school were superficial at best, and by the time she hit her internship, the only relationship she worked to build was with her neighbours, the Wilkinsons. Twelve years in a country had yielded her the companionship of her own parents.

Tea things arrived via house-elf as soon as Snape called her. ("Are you sure this is acceptable, Granger? I'd hate to force you into anything morally compromising.") Taking up a delicately carved chair at the table in the corner, she helped herself to a cup of Lady Grey and a buttery scone. ("Shove off, Severus. This is delicious.") Somewhere in the course of the afternoon, the polite reserve he had (mostly) employed for her since her meltdown months earlier was replaced by a sarcastic eye and a sharp tongue. She liked the change.

"Incidentally, you very nearly threatened me earlier."

"Did I? With what?"

"I didn't make any ludicrous statements about the severity of your... anything. I would, however, dearly like to know what you would do in retaliation. You can no longer take away points or put me in detention, you know."

"You're an easy one to decipher, Granger. I don't need to take away points from you."

She frowned, rather annoyed that he made such a claim with her.

"Actually, I never needed to take away points." He appeared vaguely pleased that he was, even now, getting her goat.

"That didn't seem to stop you when I was eleven."

"All I really needed to do is withhold approval. You worked ten times harder without recognition than you ever did with it."

There he was actually right, she realised. While she had loved Arithmancy and Herbology at Hogwarts, she had never logged the hours for Professors Vector or Sprout that she had logged for him. "How does that even remotely apply to us today? That worked when I was seventeen, yes... Actually, that may have saved my life at seventeen, since my Defense O.W.L. left a little something to be desired and your class directed my preparation before the War. Thank you for that. It still doesn't matter, since it won't work today."

"Won't it?"

She laughed heartily. "I've long since given up hope that you would ever approve of anything I did, Severus. You can no longer tempt me to work for something that I know I will never get."

His brow furrowed and for a moment, she thought she saw a certain unguarded expression pass before he returned his teacup and saucer to the table. She must have been wrong, though, for his next question was laced with the dry humour she was coming to expect. "You're denying me my retaliation?"

Her eyes narrowed in response, and she nodded firmly.

"How disappointing. Any comments on the severity of my person or any other ludicrously obvious statements on your part will result in... Merlin, Granger, I don't particularly care. Since you seem so up and bothered about names, I'll simply resort to calling you something dreadful like Reginald or Archibald."

After she returned her teacup to the table, they both returned to the table to begin the next part of the exchange: Legilimency lessons. They began by discussing the reading list Draco had prepared for her; this took the better part of two hours as they went volume by volume through the list. With each, he questioned her on the salient points of each book and had her demonstrate the charms contained within. When she needed a small correction to her posture, her wand stroke, or her incantation, he demanded that she rework the charm until it was correct. Satisfied that she had mastered the materials in the books she had already finished, they created a revised reading plan for her to complete the rest of the books on the list.

She was exhausted by the time they had finished this; after all, she had been living primarily as a Muggle for the previous decade and was unaccustomed to performing magic at such a high level for such long periods of time. Add that to the two weeks she'd just spent practically living in a Muggle hospital and there was no way she was

physically able to continue. He called a house-elf for some chocolate, and they both began to sort through the pile on the table before them. *Glorious medicinal chocolate*, she thought as she gratefully broke off another hunk. *Funny how many Muggles are subconsciously aware of its benefits without even being told* Working around her changing work schedule, they had set another date ten days away to continue this exchange. Next time, he warned her that he would be using Legilimency against her to encourage her awareness of someone entering her own mind.

Suddenly, a loud cry of "Unco Sevewus! Unco Sevewus! Happy Bewfday! Happy Bewfday!" came from a blond bullet that tore into the room and pelted the man. As quickly as Scorpius had climbed atop his lap, Snape pulled out the chair next to him and moved the toddler over to the seat beside him. It was his birthday? Why did he agree to a meeting on this day, of all days?

"Hello, Scorpius."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"I, young Scorpius, am learning to decipher the scribblings of a madwoman, in the unlikely hope that something useful may come from them."

The boy sat there, quietly blinking and completely oblivious to Hermione's presence across the table. For her part, Hermione was as eager to watch this interaction as she was to show him that she wouldn't be so easily riled up by the words he was tossing about. It was truly astonishing Severus Snape, the strict taskmaster of the dungeons, chatting amiably with a three-year-old? None of her former schoolmates would believe it. It was painfully obvious that neither party fully understood the other, but they were chums nevertheless, and each listened intently to every word the other said.

After a brief pause, he spoke up. "Mummy made a castle wif me."

"Did you remember to construct proper buttresses? A castle is useless if improperly buttressed."

Scorpius held his gaze, but said nothing.

"How about crenellation? A moat?" He paused for a response that was not forthcoming. After a beat or two, Snape spoke again with a measure of sarcasm sure to be incomprehensible by the poor boy. "Did you and your mother intend to hold onto your territory at all or were you planning on giving it up in the first siege?"

Again, no immediate response. Hermione waited with a smile and watched to see who would break first and say something new.

"We got a cake!"

She finally burst into gales of laughter, startling the lad. He now looked up at her on the verge of tears.

"Hi, Scorpius," she offered, attempting to soothe his anxiety.

He crawled back onto Snape's lap and shyly hid his face against his chest just as his mother entered through the open doors.

"Severus, is Scorpius in..." she broke off as she saw Hermione. "Oh, Hermione. I didn't think you'd still be here. My, but you two have put in a long day."

"Hi, Astoria. If you're looking for someone else, someone much shorter than me, he's right there." She pointed across the table to the woman's son.

Astoria walked forward where the three were seated as Severus began sorting through the notebooks on the table, organising them chronologically as he carefully moved around the little boy still firmly wrapped around his torso.

"Scorpius, darling, do you remember Miss Hermione?"

He eventually lifted his head just enough to peer at her over his shoulder. He looked back at his mother and nodded.

"Have you already said hello?"

He buried his head again, leaving his words muffled in the fabric of Snape's shirt. "Hewwo."

Hermione decided to try to win him over. "Scorpius, I remember last time you told me you like reading about Babbitty Rabbitty."

He stiffened up, then nodded, still facing away from her.

"Do you know the story of Peter Rabbit?"

He pulled his head away from Snape's chest and shook his head 'no'.

"He's a very curious little bunny who wears a blue jacket and loves to eat vegetables."

He slowly turned around to face her.

"I have picture books that I can bring to share with you next time I come by."

He began to appraise her silently.

"Would you like that?"

"I wike wadishes."

"Peter Rabbit does, too. He loves them."

"I don't wike wettuce."

"Then I suppose Peter can eat yours."

He then leapt off Snape's lap and ran away to stand behind his mum. She gently led him around to stand beside her. "I would guess that's a 'Yes, Miss Hermione, I'd love to read about Peter Rabbit.' Is that right, Scorpius?"

"Wight."

Hermione was fairly pleased with this measure of success. "Consider it done. I'll pack them in my bag to bring them along, and we can read together."

He nodded wildly and began humming a song to himself while she put away her things, and his godfather moved her notebooks to his desk for later perusal. Then he tugged on Astoria's hand and whispered loudly, "I'm hungwy, Mummy. We can go now?"

"Yes, dear," she said patiently. "Let's wait a moment for Uncle Severus so that we can all go to dinner together."

All headed out of the library together: Hermione with her satchel slung across her arm, Astoria beside her, carrying a small volume she had picked up from the wall of Muggle literature, and Snape, who had picked up a giggling Scorpius around his middle and tucked him under his arm like a baguette. Ever the polite hostess, Astoria invited Hermione to stay for dinner, but knowing that this was a special dinner for Severus' birthday, she declined.

"No, I really can't tonight. Thank you, all the same."

"You're sure?" Astoria asked. "It's no trouble. We'd love to have you, wouldn't we, Scorpius?"

A high-pitched ring of giggles came from the boy, whose frantic wriggling led to his being swung up to a seated position on Snape's shoulders.

"Some other time? Besides, I would never dream of crashing a family birthday party."

Snape audibly groaned beside her. "It is most definitely not a party." He then looked at Astoria. "It had better not be a party."

Astoria said reassuringly, "It's not a party." She then looped one arm through Hermione's as they all ambled down the hallway. "Severus would never stand for it. He humours us by letting us have a cake for him, but that's about the extent of it. We all know better by now than to try anything."

"How many candles, Professor?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but fifty. Fifty candles, Miss Granger."

She scowled at him.

"Fine, 'Granger.'"

"Thank you." She adjusted her now empty satchel to her other arm. "Birthdays that end in a zero seem much more significant than others, don't they?"

"More significant than, say, prime numbers or perfect squares?" he asked dryly in reply. "Because last year was a perfect square year for me, and I experienced no such significance."

"This year was a zero year for me. I turned thirty."

"Was it terrible?" Astoria asked. "I'll be there soon enough myself, and I'm not sure how I feel about it yet."

"No difference, really." She greatly preferred seeing Snape with the Malfoys, as he was much more likely to be forthcoming in their company. Quickly calculating the numbers and determining that nothing terribly traumatic had been happening in the wizarding world at the time, she asked, "What was your thirtieth like?"

Looking back and forth between the two young women, he said, "I spent the evening in detention."

Astoria looked horrified. "That's terrible! You didn't even get the evening off to relax?"

"Not when Messers Weasley and Weasley are in your first-year class. I only recall the occasion because Albus somehow thought it appropriate to send a house-elf to the dungeon with three slabs of cake, each with ten candles."

"Then we have something in common," Hermione stated perfunctorily. "We both spent our thirtieth birthdays with George Weasley."

"You didn't have him scrubbing out the insides of cauldrons for yours, did you?"

"Didn't the cake undermine the principle of punishment?" Hermione asked, thinking back to Snape's earlier statement and wondering if Dumbledore knew he had undercut one of his professors.

"Yes, well, that was Albus at his finest." He smirked. "How ironic that you're saying something like that now, after having been on the other side for most of your own childhood."

"Yes, well... we were granted leniencies that we shouldn't have, but would you blame me as a child for accepting them? I truly loved authority for most of that phase of life, so people like Albus were infallible then. It took me a while into adulthood to realise the ways the adults in my life were not who I thought they were."

An awkward silence ensued as he considered her statement. Before he had a chance to respond, Astoria spoke up as they neared an intersection of hallways. "And here we part ways. Hermione, will you stay for dinner next time you're here? It would be nice to have the company."

"I'd love to. I'll owl when I know I'll be here next in order to give you advanced warning."

"Lovely."

Before the trio turned down the long portrait gallery, Hermione turned to Severus. "You know, I would have given those notebooks to you had you asked. You didn't need to finagle an exchange. If you have any kind of trial in mind, I'd like to volunteer my time. That is, if there's any way I can do anything useful."

"And I would have given you Legilimency lessons with nothing in return. In fact, I did offer them to you. As a gift, if you recall."

Astoria walked a few steps away and stared aimlessly at the far wall in attempt to approximate privacy.

"So you did."

"And you turned me down."

"I'll have learned my lesson by next time."

"Indeed, Archibald?"

And with that, he whisked around and walked away.

Chapter Ten

Out at the Leaky Cauldron with Ron and Neville; something's brewing with Severus and Draco.

"There comes a point when we don't want you to act like gentlemen."

"What?"

"You haven't kissed her yet, Neville?"

"Er... well, you see, Hermione..."

"But you and Hannah have been together for over a year now."

"Well..."

"You have been dating for over a year now, haven't you?"

"What exactly do you mean by 'dating'?"

"You go out together, just the two of you, and she knows what your intentions are."

"Intentions?"

"She knows you *want* to snog her face off," Ron contributed helpfully, "even though you haven't done it yet."

"Ron!" Neville whispered in exclamation. "Keep it down, will you?"

The three friends were splitting a basket of chips around a wobbly corner table in the Leaky Cauldron, waiting for their somethings more substantial to be delivered. The table itself was strategically chosen: close enough for Neville to exchange demure smiles with the rosy-cheeked blonde helping Tom behind the counter, but far enough away so that she couldn't overhear what they were saying about her. This was Hermione's first time back in Diagon Alley since her return four months earlier, and she was delighted to see the place much as she remembered it.

Like much of Diagon Alley, it looked the same today as it ever did. The apothecary had been untouched, as had the cauldron shop and Magical Menagerie and a handful of others. Flourish & Blotts had sustained only minor damage, unlike most of the rest of the buildings along the street. Almost all of the vandalized establishments rebuilt to their old specifications after the war, with a few notable exceptions. Amid the tastefully remade storefronts of Ollivander's shop and Eeylops Owl Emporium, the garishly modernised silver façade of Madam Pimpernelle's Beautifying Potions was an quite an eyesore, and Florean Fortescue had branched out into the world of spinning neon signs in the reconstruction of his ice cream parlor. Wizarding taste ran the gamut from tasteful to tasteless, from worn parchment and hand-cut goose quills to an infamous glittery purple suit.

"It's not a matter of my not being interested."

"Listen, Neville, I'm just saying..."

A loud coughing fit interrupted the trio. When they looked around to find its source, they saw an older witch in dark grey robes with two just-shy-of-Hogwarts-aged girls beside her. Hermione quickly scanned her friends for some sign that they knew the people standing in front of her, but it was clear they didn't recognise any of them, either.

"Can we help you?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"Can you help me? Oh, you're too much!" the woman proclaimed effusively. A ball of nervous energy, her excitement was barely contained as she flitted about their table.

Hermione glanced in utter confusion at her friends.

"I know who you three are, of course." She pushed the reluctant children forward. "Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Nigel Longbottom, please meet my granddaughters, Harriet and Opal. Harriet, Opal, these are the three who helped *the* Harry Potter defeat You-Know-Who." Neville winced as she rattled off his name.

"Voldemort," Ron supplied.

"Tom Riddle," Hermione amended.

The older woman, completely beside herself, began digging around in her vibrant tangerine handbag.

"Er... Harriet, Opal, it's very nice to meet you." Neville spoke kindly to the girls, who were obviously embarrassed by their grandmother, and offered a hand for each to shake. "My name is Neville."

"I'm Hermione." She waved across the table at the girls.

"Ron." He did likewise.

"Can we get your signatures?" the woman asked, producing a scrap of parchment. "For the girls, of course."

Hermione was rather bewildered. *Why would anyone want them?* It had been years now since the war, all of them were working in quiet jobs out of the public eye, and none of them were Harry. If what she had read in the *Daily Prophet* over the years counted for anything, public interest had largely died down after the first few years. Besides, it's not as though their appearances had remained the same. She watched as Ron and Neville took this in stride.

"Hermione, do you have a quill or something?" Ron asked.

"Er..." She rummaged through her handbag and pulled out a biro. "Will this do?"

Neville nodded. "Who do we make it out to?"

The giddy smile instantly fell from the face of the witch in purple. "To Harriet and Opal and me, of course," she said in a huff, staring at Neville as though he had just insulted her prize-winning dahlias.

"Yes," Neville replied patiently, "I now know Opal and Harriet, but you never shared your name with us."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, beaming from ear to ear, faith restored in humanity once more. "Silly me! Victoria." She proudly held a hand to her breast. "I'm Victoria. Vic-to-ri-a," she added, looking over Neville's shoulder at what he was writing. "With a 'c'."

After he finished writing a short note and attaching his signature, he passed it over to Ron and Hermione to do the same. Victoria led the girls back to their table out of hearing range, celebrity signature scrap in tow, and Hermione asked the boys about the encounter.

"Does that happen often?"

"Er... less often these days," Ron said. "It still crops up occasionally."

"I used to tell people that they probably didn't want my name," Neville replied, "but that seemed to offend them more than anything. Now I just do it."

"Besides, Neville, you know something good just came out of that," Ron said with a twinkle in his eye.

"What?"

"Hannah just watched you speak calmly with a crazy woman and shake the hands of two adorable little girls." He smiled as Neville flushed red. Neville was so easy to embarrass, even after everything he had done. Hermione bit her tongue, watching Ron counsel their friend, ready to leap in if he said anything that gave her pause. "She watched the whole time, and her eyes were focussed on you, my friend."

He whipped around in his seat to see where she had wandered off to, but she was bringing something around to another table.

"Give it up, Neville." Ron leaned over and grasped him by the shoulder. "She likes you. You need to go for it."

"She's a very good friend, and I don't want to spoil that."

"You want more than that, don't you?"

"I suppose I... er... that is, I think I want..."

Ron began his cross-examination. "You have lunch here five times a week just so you can see her?"

"Yes."

"You think she's the most beautiful girl in the world and you want to know what she'll look like beside you in bed at ninety?"

"Yes!"

"You want her fruitful loins to bear your children?"

"Merlin, YES!" He pounded the heavy wooden table with his fist, and several patrons turned around in their seats to see what had caused the commotion.

"Ronald!" Hermione exclaimed, swatting his arm. "Do you have to put it like that?"

He ignored her, grinning from ear to ear. "Neville! Man up! Ask her out on a proper date! Do it now!"

He nodded firmly, downed his drink in one, and marched off to corner the amiable Miss Abbott.

"I can't believe that worked," Hermione said in surprise. "Well done, Ron."

"A bloke's got to help his friends out, doesn't he?"

"It's about time something like this finally happened. I thought they were already together, from the way everyone talks about it."

"Yep, well..." He sopped up a bit of vinegar with the last of the shared chips, staring resolutely at the short dessert menu on the tabletop. "It's not always that helpful when everyone's talking about, is it? Didn't we learn that one?"

Oh, Ron. They had never really talked through what had happened between them after she had gone. It had all happened so fast. After years of wondering when he would finally appreciate and understand her, he picked the most inopportune time to show that he had finally got it. Showing support of the house-elf liberation movement was unlikely to be considered a big romantic gesture by anyone other than Hermione Granger, but she had lost it. How could she not have? She kissed him in the heat of the moment, and he looked at her differently for the first time.

As much as she thought she had wanted that for all those years, it felt misplaced when it finally happened. Off. In the aftermath of the war, that kiss had been swept under the rug, and whatever feelings they shared had been pushed to the side. During her first Christmas back at the Burrow, she had thought Ron still might have feelings for her and suspected Molly was still trying to direct the pair of them together, but a number of sob sessions at the foot of the Christmas tree had done wonders in deterring him. Deterring them. A few more repetitions of 'I love you like a brother' and 'You and Harry mean the world to me' had solidified things for the pair of them. She wasn't ready for anyone, and they both knew it.

When he and Susan got engaged, she celebrated her friend's happiness freely, ignoring the long glimpses a very concerned Ginny and fatherly Arthur sent her way. She ignored the way Susan tried to avoid her as well, taking her out for drinks in Muggle London to reassure her of her support for the couple and her desire to get to know the newest addition to the Weasleys' extended family. When they finally tied the knot a year later, she toasted their future together and even willingly danced with the overly handsy Ernie MacMillan at Susan's prompting. (Ginny took note early on, mercifully directing Harry to cut in.) Ron and Susan left for their honeymoon, Ginny and Harry left for their home, and Hermione left for her empty house a world away.

"I'm glad that everything has worked out the way it has. You and Susan make sense together. You fit." Hermione paused, silently wondering when the last time was she felt she truly fit in anywhere. Dismissing her own thoughts, she addressed her friend again. "I'd say she worships the ground you walk on, but I've always thought that talk of worship in conjunction with love smacks of a fairly unhealthy codependency, and I think better of both of you than that."

He didn't look up, but took the menu of puddings in hand.

"Let's just say that she adores you. It's rather sweet to watch, Ron, and I'm glad there's someone who loves you like that."

"I adore her." He began tapping the laminated card idly on the table, opening his mouth as if to say something and closing it again as if thinking better of it. Peering at her out of the corner of his eye, he finally asked his question cautiously. "Did you ever wonder what would have happened between us if you wouldn't have left?"

"Sometimes."

His fingers moved over the choices on the list. "Me, too."

"I think we would have figured out eventually, Ron."

"Hmm?" *He didn't have a sweet tooth.*

"It's better it worked out the way it did. We would've figured out that we were all wrong for each other in time, but not after we had done more damage."

"I know. I do. Sometimes I wish we had had a big explosion and falling out just to make the break a bit cleaner," Ron said, looking up at her as he set the dessert menu back down with a tentative smile on his face.

"Wouldn't that have diminished all the little explosions we had as friends?" she asked, thinking of flurries of angry canaries and Howlers.

"Had?" He repeated her word as a question in disbelief, asking if she honestly thought their tendency to bicker and yell at one another was wholly in the past.

"Have," she agreed, present tense. It wasn't a Weasley family gathering, after all, without an insensitive remark from Ron, an impassioned protest from Hermione, and homemade pie from Molly.

"I can't believe I never noticed Susan when we were still in school," he stated baldly, shaking his head slightly. "I'm sort of glad I didn't, though. I'm glad she first got to know me after the war."

"It's funny, isn't it?" Hermione smiled serenely as she watched Neville chatting up Hannah at the other end of the room. "Times change, and we change, and we can see things now we couldn't before."

"Speaking of," he said warily, "Hermione, isn't it a bit strange to be hanging around Malfoy all the time?"

"No, actually, he's been... helpful." Given the circumstances, 'helpful' seemed like the safest word to use. She didn't think she could tell Ron yet how much she enjoyed chumming around with Draco. It had unnerved Harry at the time, and he still clammed up whenever she related news from her visits to the manor. He was much more understanding than Ron, and if even he was uncomfortable, she highly doubted Ron would deal with it well. "And it's not like I see him every time I go to the Manor."

"Just Astoria, then?"

"Often Astoria. She's fantastic, by the way. I think I would have liked her in school if we hadn't been so busy with everything else." Hannah and Neville were heading back towards them, plates in hand. "Sometimes nobody. He's got it set up so that I can let myself in and work by myself."

"You're kidding."

"Yep, well, believe it or not, but he's a pretty generous fellow. There's a lot about the Malfoys I would never have guessed."

Neville set his own plate down as took his seat, and Hannah passed off dishes to Ron and Hermione. They exchanged the greetings and chatted with Hannah for a few minutes before she walked off to another customer.

"Neville, you dog, you," Ron said with a grin, elbowing his friend in the ribs.

He sighed melodramatically and let his arms fall to his sides and his forehead fall to the table, muffling his voice.

"I couldn't do it."

"What? Why?"

"What if she doesn't want me to think of her like that?" he asked, still planted facedown beside his steaming roast beef. "We could never go back to being friends."

Ron grumbled something likely obscene under his breath in exasperation, then decided to ignore it all and let Neville stew in his own frustration. Then he turned back to Hermione. "Surprising things about the Malfoys, you said." Ron remembered something she had said in a conversation, the surest sign of any she'd seen that he had grown up. "Like what?"

"Muggle artifacts!" Hermione exclaimed in a whisper. She looked around the Leaky Cauldron to make sure no one was listening. "There's a section of the library exclusively dedicated to Squib and Muggle literature. There are even Muggle portraits in the portrait hall."

"Why are you whispering?" Ron asked in a low voice.

"Oh," she responded in a conversational tone. "No reason, I suppose. It just seems so odd, I suppose. In my less than mature moments, I like to think the Muggle portraits are of Muggle Malfoys, secreted away in the annals of history."

"Maybe they are?" he asked. "But why would they have all that Muggle stuff?"

"I don't know. I should ask." Draco would probably tell her these days, something that never would have happened ten years ago. Ron shot her a look of disbelief, only confirming the wisdom in keeping mum about her growing friendship with the Slytherin. "I see Professor Snape a fair bit, as well. Actually, him more than Malfoy."

"I don't know if Snape's a good or a bad trade-off for Malfoy," Ron stated bluntly.

Neville headed that one off, finally peeling himself up off the table. "He's not a bad bloke these day, Ron."

"Snape? Or Malfoy?"

"Both, I think." Neville liberally seasoned his meal, frequent experience assuring him it would need it without tasting a bite. "Listen, Snape's done quite a bit for St. Mungo's, even if he doesn't officially work there. And you forget that I work with Malfoy. We're not the best of mates, but we talk, and it works. And he's rather good at his job."

Neville defended both Snape and Malfoy. To Ron, of all people. Hermione knew how he and Malfoy had been forced to act companionable at St. Mungo's for sheer survival, and she knew firsthand how far Draco had come from their school days, but hearing Neville defend Snape was a bit surprising. Sure, he had mourned the man when they all thought he had died, and sure, he had visited the man in the hospital during his recovery, but those were encounters with a Snape who couldn't talk back. Her heart warmed up with pride at his words of support for the two people who terrified and terrorised him the most during those years. It also shrunk a bit in shame, knowing that she also could have said something on their behalf. *All in good time, Hermione.*

"Okay, Neville, I tried to ask you this that day at the hospital, and I got the feeling you didn't want to talk about it. If you really don't, tell me to mind my own business and shove off. But... well, I'm asking because Malfoy mentioned something... about your folks. Is there... anything? Happening? With them?"

"Yeah, well... there's another experiment. I'm trying not to have high expectations."

"An experiment? That's wonderful!"

He shook his head. "Hermione, how many experimental trials have you worked on that cure everyone?"

"Virtually none, but you almost always learn something important that leads to better results."

"Right. They usually don't cure people," he said, confirming only the first part of what she had said.

"Experiments at St. Mungo's don't always go so well, do they?" Ron asked. "Wasn't there that trial a few years..."

"I am very careful," Neville interrupted firmly and almost coldly, "very careful to allow only tests that I believe can't do any harm."

Hermione was at a loss for what she had missed, and made a mental note to ask Ron about it the next time they were together.

Neville let out a quick puff of air and folded his arms across his chest, leaning back in his seat. "Look, I don't want to sound ungrateful or... that I'm losing faith or anything. I just want to be realistic." He waited for some kind of response from Hermione. Not wanting to cut him off or lead him away from what he was trying to say, she merely nodded and narrowed her eyes, wordlessly encouraging him to continue. "This is the sixth trial now to try to help my parents' recovery. All but one has been a complete failure, and the one that produced any results at all only yielded minor ones."

"There's been a change in your parents' status?" she asked hesitantly. "Neville, that's incredible! What was... What is it?" she corrected herself. "When did it happen?"

"My dad can walk," he responded flatly.

"Since when?" she asked tentatively. She thought he would have been ecstatic at this improvement.

"About five years ago."

It truly was amazing. Neville's parents may have been patients for the same reason and in the same ward, but the curse that sent them there had affected them quite differently. When she had first seen them in St. Mungo's, Neville's mother was still physically strong, dancing about the room. The nerve damage experienced by his father had been far greater, affecting his body as well as his mind, and Frank Longbottom was confined to the same bed he'd been in for fourteen years.

"Five years ago!" She leaned across the table in excitement and flung her arms around his shoulders in a quick embrace. All restraint was thrown off. "Your dad can walk! Walk?" She sighed contentedly. "Oh, Neville, that's beyond anything I could ever want for for you." She was unsettled by his uncharacteristic glowering at her enthusiasm, and explained further, grabbing his arm with both hands. "Don't you see? It means that regeneration is possible! After all those years! A sign like that? That means you have reason to hope."

"Sure," he muttered softly. "Hope. I thought that there would have been a bit more progress by now, you know?"

She wrapped her hand around his arm and laid her head against his shoulder, straining to hear his quiet words.

"I've always wanted to hear one of them call me by my name. Just once. 'Neville.' Or look at me and know I'm their son. I thought..." He abruptly stopped speaking, and Hermione could feel him shaking against her side before he adjusted to wipe his eyes.

Neville began the quiet retreat into himself, so Ron took up the task of distracting everyone from more serious topics with a round of increasingly obscene jokes he'd picked up from George. They were ready to leave about the time that Neville's bashfulness began to lose the battle with the blood vessels in his cheeks, so Hermione did them both a favour, shut Ron up, and pulled out her wallet to pay. As she starting counting out her Galleons, Hannah rushed over and told her to put her purse away.

Someone else had already picked up their tab.

Working with Draco in the lab. Likely free at 2:30 or 3:00. My apologies.

SS

Hermione picked up the scrap of paper from her writing-desk and read it a few times. She had an apology from Snape, and she had it in writing. That might be even more satisfying than hearing the words of apology from Draco weeks earlier. *If an apology makes me giddy, she thought, is there anything I do that elicits the same response?* She would have to give it some thought.

Deciding that it would be a waste of time to return to Grimmauld Place for a mere half hour or hour, she set her things down and gave herself permission to indulge in her surroundings. The focus she had employed in this room for months had held because she wouldn't allow herself to wander around the room reading shelves. She knew that if she began to browse the collection, she might never stop, so she had relied upon the Slow Summoning Charm for each volume she had piled up on her desk. Well, that or she relied on Snape to procure books for her; she noticed that most of the required readings from the Malfoy restricted section were delivered to her desk with cautionary notes of instruction attached.

Now, knowing that she had a limited amount of time before Snape returned for their meeting, she climbed a spiral staircase to the balcony level to begin her search. Following the perimeter of the room from the central fireplace, she kept an internal tally of how many books she had seen before at Hogwarts and how many were new to her. She was startled to realise that a third category cropped up during her walk books she was already familiar with that she had not read at Hogwarts. Books she knew from elsewhere, from the Muggle world. Looking around her and seeing those from the third category in abundance, she knew she was in the Muggle and Squib literature section. Chaucer and Donne and Dryden eventually gave way to Shakespeare and Spencer, Muggle names she knew and loved, but there were several she didn't recognise at all. She assumed those must have belonged to Squib authors.

Checking her watch 2:36 and realising that she could very well have no time left before Snape would return for their lesson, she walked over to the alchemy section to find an old comfort read she had regularly turned to at Hogwarts. She began tracing the spines alphabetically to get to the author of her book when, unexpectedly, she ran her finger over another third category book. Outside the Muggle section. She pulled out *The Sceptical Chymist* by Robert Boyle, albeit a much more elaborately illustrated volume than the cheap paperback she knew, and thought back to the first time she read it in university. An important transition from the study of alchemy to modern chemistry, it was featured in a survey course on the history of science required for all those in the medical track she had chosen. And here it was in Malfoy Manor. Odd.

She pulled it out and perused its pages. A first edition, printed in red and black ink, bound in leather. Boyle was a Muggle, wasn't he? Although if the Statute of Secrecy was passed in 1692, this work predated it by a few decades. The wizarding world had only been in hiding for a little over three centuries, a fact that still shocked Hermione. How could Muggles not know? How could she not have known, when she herself was a witch?

For all the trite clichés about forgotten history being doomed to repeat itself, it seemed impossible that the world could have forgotten something as powerful and pervasive as magic, and yet her own experience had taught her how easy it was to bury the truth. The truth, whatever that was. It seemed to divide along several fault lines. There was what had happened and what people thought had happened. Then there was what people wrote about what had happened, and what people told their children about what had happened, and what people ended up remembering about what had happened. Centuries ago, everyone knew about the magic in the world. Try to describe it to a Londoner today, and you'd get thrown in a padded cell for observation.

Once upon a time, she had been a girl. Then one day, she became a witch, her parents became Muggles, and she could make things fly.

3:11. It wasn't like him to be late, and he had told her that he would likely be free by 3:00. She assumed that whatever they were brewing was complicated, and that there was no natural stopping point for them. Thinking she could possibly be of some help, at least with menial tasks, if not anything more intricate, she called for one of the house-elves to deliver her to the lab. A short walk down a hallway and three flights of stairs deposited her in the anteroom, where she washed up in a setup quite similar to the operating rooms she was used to. After getting the house-elf's assurance that the room was not specially sterilized, she quietly slipped inside to offer her assistance.

Tables of different substances filled the room: wood, glass, steel, and stone. Along the far wall, cauldrons were arranged horizontally by material in descending size; a row of gold cauldrons were on the very top, underneath which was a row of silver cauldrons, then copper and brass and elements she couldn't identify by sight. The wall closest to her was an open shelving system for common potions ingredients, and it was as strictly ordered as everything else in the room. The two men she was seeking were at the centre table, a heavy slab of marble, surrounded by a few cauldrons, piles of ingredients, and instruments for stirring, chopping, slicing, and the like.

It was a case study in opposites: Malfoy was light, Snape was dark. Malfoy quite tall, Snape of rather average height. Short blond hair in a Muggle cut, longish black tied

back at the nape of his neck. Quite obviously handsome, not... ugly per se, but not particularly attractive. Much about them was identical: their white buttoned shirts rolled up to their sleeves and pale complexions part and parcel of being British, she supposed and their arrangement of ingredients on the table they shared, but it highlighted the contrasts between them rather than diminishing them. Draco's brow was furrowed in concentration as he exerted a great deal of energy in his potion making while Severus' calm demeanor exuded confidence, extraordinarily efficient in his movements. Force and finesse. A dramatic show and the subdued display of a very tangible power.

It was quite beautiful, Hermione reflected, to watch them working. She would never tell Harry or Ron, but she finally came to tolerate Quidditch matches sometime in her fourth year after watching professional Quidditch players at the World Cup moving about on the pitch. It was like poetry, really, or at least ballet. There was some tremendous grace in the human body as it worked, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. Watching Draco and Severus side by side as they prepared the same ingredients was as enlightening as it was intriguing, and she briefly wondered if anyone ever observed her like that when she was in surgery or mowing her grass or even preparing a sandwich. Had anyone ever looked at her and enjoyed simply watching her move? Draco finally spoke up after allowing her a few minutes of voyeurism, startling her out of her reverie as her eyes followed the almost imperceptible flexing of Severus' index finger guiding his blade through a neatly ordered pile of shrivelfigs.

"Yes, Granger?" Draco had three cauldrons before him, two of which were small glass pots simmering on low flickering flames, untouched. The final cauldron was a large pot into which he was stirring powdered something-or-other and a diced grey gelatinous substance that she couldn't place.

"I'll leave if you'd prefer, but I wonder if I couldn't watch you work?"

Snape remained focussed on the task before him, chopping plant matter into uniform pieces with his right hand while rhythmically stirring a madly boiling purple liquid with his left. It looked vaguely like one of the pain potions she had tested, whose results were laying in the notebooks on Severus' roll-top desk, but whatever he was chopping was new to her. "You didn't come to chastise me for tardiness?" he inquired ambivalently.

"Of course not. I quite enjoyed myself in the library after reading your message, but then I saw the time and thought I might offer my assistance, meager though it is."

"Can you still do anything, Granger?" Draco asked.

"I'll have you know that Muggles pay me big money to slice open their brains with sharp objects, fish around inside, and stitch them back together again."

"Can you still do anything, Granger?" he asked again with a smirk, neatly dismissing her Muggle medical training.

"Smart-arse."

Draco merely laughed, and Severus almost cracked a smile.

"Well, we can't have you ruining things just because your cauldron's tucked away somewhere covered in dust, now can we?"

She glared daggers at him. "I'm still a precision-oriented human being, Malfoy, and I was trained by Severus for five years, so even if I'm a touch rusty, I can perform menial tasks in the lab." Hermione hadn't even realised how much she missed working on something magical with others until she was faced with the chance to dissect flobberworms for whatever this happened to be. It had been a decade of occasional brewing and occasional charms work alone, and now she found she wanted to do something, even though she knew that her skills weren't up to theirs. She smiled beatifically at the pair. "Look at it as an opportunity to rid yourself of the tedious jobs you hate."

Draco glanced at Severus to gauge his reaction he was obviously directing this session, even if he was less vocal than the younger man beside him.

Frustratingly less vocal. Hermione was finally coming to terms with this aspect of her burgeoning relationship with these Slytherins; Draco was outgoing and overbearing as always, but Severus Snape could still be terribly, terribly reserved with her. He had no choice but to speak with her when they were one on one, but with more than one person around, he vacillated between a stoic restraint and an almost-friendly chattiness, as in her last conversation with him and Astoria. She couldn't blame the man, but she never knew who she was going to get and greatly preferred Option B.

When he was willing to talk to her, he had a sense of humour buried under all that sarcasm, and he challenged her intellectually in a way that she hadn't experienced in the wizarding world before. Primary school had been an exercise in displacement; her parents had prepared her so well that her teachers threatened to place her with students three years older than herself. Oh, she'd found some impressive competition amongst her fellow medical students as they battled it out for placement, but the only real competition she'd had at Hogwarts surfaced in her sixth year in Potions class with Harry. She'd always known Draco was clever, but he was distracted by his own sense of entitlement in the early years and by the pressures his family was facing at the end. And Harry had only given her a run for her Galleons because of the Half-Blood Prince's old textbook, so her only true competition at Hogwarts had actually been Severus himself.

Sometimes it seemed like he was just ignoring her, which was a strong possibility. Other times it seemed like he was holding back around her, preferring to watch and listen and try to figure her out. It was probably just her own curiosity projected onto him, her own wishful thinking that he was attempting to understand her as much as she was him. It was more likely, she thought, that he didn't notice or care about her presence much at all.

She had seen him with all the Malfoys, of course, but she still had no idea who, if anyone, he ever spoke to otherwise. After a childhood of neglect, he had been relegated to two decades of solitude amongst the masses. She imagined that these years since the war had probably provided him with the first real friendships he'd had since Lily and Dumbledore, even if they only extended to this small family. Even they had known him most of his life, but from what Draco had told her earlier, she doubted that he was honest with them about who he was or close to them at all until the rebuilding years.

His gaze shifted from the cauldron at his left to her hands at her waist. "Do you remember how to prepare root of asphodel?"

"Sliced or powdered?"

"Powdered."

She nodded.

He lifted his head towards the far cabinet. "Top shelf. Check the measurements in the notes."

She went to gather the items and set up a work space across from him on the table.

He spoke acerbically. "Don't overdo it."

The three of them continued working on some aspect or another of this potion (or was it potions? Hermione still wasn't sure) for the better part of the afternoon. When she was finished with the asphodel, the pair conferred for a moment and then directed her to prepare another root for use. Her time with a scalpel had apparently thrown her off her habits from Potions class. Every so often, Severus would instruct her to change her knife hold or cutting technique, repositioning her fingers around her blade or mortar or whatever tool it was she was using at the time. He routinely gave her about thirty seconds to fall into her standard knife hold before he coming over to curl her fingers around a handle in a certain way or demonstrate the cutting strokes he knew were best. Otherwise, they all worked in relative silence. Draco and Severus seemed to be reading one another's minds as they seamlessly passed off cauldrons to one another to stir and flipped pages through their notes for one another to read.

Sometime later, a quiet rapping at the door alerted them all to a visitor. They all looked up to see Astoria and Scorpius in the doorway, keeping clear of all the bubbling substances on the table.

"Ah, there you all are," Astoria said, approaching her husband with her usual grace despite the wiggling toddler on her hip.

"Darling." He leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"They let you brew with them?" Astoria asked Hermione with wide eyes. "I ought to be jealous, you know."

"Nonsense," she responded with a shake of her head. "They only let me prepare ingredients, and it was only after a certain amount of pleading on my behalf." She let out a small laugh as she began to return excess powdered moonstone to its glass storage container. "I don't even know what exactly it is they're brewing, although..." She stole a glimpse of Severus to observe his response. Austere as ever, he remained unmoved. "Although I think that this one," she pointed at the cooled purple liquid before him, "this one may be related to..."

"I was meaning to ask you about that," he interrupted gruffly. "That is what I wanted to speak to you about today in our meeting, but obviously the brewing precluded a further review of your tests. Draco and I have to gather a few more ingredients tonight, which will, I'm afraid, keep us from our original plans. Are you free to return here tomorrow?"

She frowned, mentally going over her work calendar. "Late shift. The earliest I can meet is Wednesday evening."

"That will do."

"Seven o'clock?"

He merely harrumphed out what she assumed was his acceptance.

"Dinnertime already?" Draco asked his wife.

"Probably past. It's seven o'clock, which is late for Scorpius."

"Probably?" Hermione asked. "I thought everyone with children kept regimented schedules. That is, everyone I know with children keeps a pretty regular schedule."

"Only when Mother's visiting," Draco reassured her. "It's not like there's a great variety in mealtimes or bedtimes here otherwise, but she keeps everyone in line. Refusing to keep to a timetable like a Swiss train conductor is my own little rebellion against Mother's expectations. She's quite particular when it comes to performing all the social niceties, no matter how passé."

"It's a pureblood practice," Astoria confirmed.

"Yes, well, it means that I can waltz and polka and mazurka with the best of them. I also know what to do with that pesky fifth spoon when faced with it at a dinner, and I know how low to bow when greeting someone of each station or title. I can even insult a man just by shaking his hand a certain way...a useful skill to possess, Granger, even though it wasn't particularly pleasant when I was forced inside for dancing lessons rather than allowed out with broomstick over the grounds." He put a Stasis Charm on his cauldrons and began cleaning up his corner of the table while Severus did likewise. Then he turned to his wife. "We're at a fairly good stopping point with this potion right now, but I'm afraid we can't join you for dinner, my dear."

"Why not?" Astoria asked sweetly with a slight pout of her lips.

"Time-sensitive materials, I'm afraid. We're off to the New Forest."

"Quite time-sensitive," Snape added with a glance to his pocket-watch. "It's later than I thought. We should have left twenty minutes ago."

Draco pulled his son into his arms and threw him into the air before smothering him in kisses and handing him back to his wife. "I might not be back for story time, Scorp, so please mind your mother and know that I love you." He then went to move the last of his cauldrons to an empty table. He finally headed for the door where the Professor was waiting with arms crossed across his chest and a bemused look upon his face.

"Any other sentimental goodbyes before we can leave?" Snape asked dryly. "The house-elves need tucking in, perhaps, or the peacocks require some warm milk?"

"Drat!" he exclaimed, ignoring Severus' remarks. "Let me just... find..." He hurried back to the storage shelves to look for something, and Snape waited for him to pull whatever it was he was looking for, surveying the scene before him silently.

"I brought Peter Rabbit to read today," Hermione reminded the boy, who beamed in delight. "He's in the library."

"Good!" Astoria exclaimed. "I'm glad you're staying for dinner. It'll be a cosy little party with just the three of us."

"And then Peter Wabbit?" Scorpius asked excitedly. "I can show my pway woom."

Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy froze in place.

Draco finally spoke up. "Scorpius, maybe you can read in your room tonight instead. Is that all right?"

The boy 'mmm-hmmed' his approval, and Astoria said quietly to a confused Hermione, "His play room is ~~is~~ was the drawing room."

"Oh." The drawing room. She had tried to forget about that room's existence, and she had largely succeeded in doing so.

"I'm sorry, Granger," he said quietly.

"No, no," she stated firmly, keeping her composure, "I'll be just fine." She turned to Scorpius and tickled him behind his knees, forcing a bit of a smile onto her face. "Scorpius, can you show me your play room some other time? Not tonight, please."

Draco snatched the silver mesh bag he had been looking for from the shelves, and he traipsed over to kiss Astoria on the cheek one last time. "We're off."

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

Hermione and Severus forge ahead on their work together, and Hermione theorizes on the use of the Pensieve.

That was unfortunate.

Hermione had largely been able to block out thoughts of the Malfoy drawing room, but Scorpius' innocent request threatened to break down her carefully constructed walls. Having never spent any time at the manor during her student years *the very idea was laughable!* her brief captivity during the war had only exposed her to a few isolated areas in the expansive house. Returning here three... no, four months ago now, she kept herself to the library, the dining room, Astoria's garden, and a few other select places in the Malfoy's home.

In her mind, it was almost like it was two separate buildings. In one, she joined new friends for a meal or a chat, indulged in the archaic beauty of tapestries and stone, and relaxed in this peaceful oasis when she needed a break from her hectic life. (The hospital was a madhouse, and Grimmauld Place no matter how much she loved Harry and Ginny and littlest Potters was often just as busy and as noisy, depending on how Lily was coping with separation anxiety that day. The Burrow, quiet? Not a chance. She didn't think it had ever seen a quiet day in its existence. Even if the family was far from home, the house itself was filled with the sounds of the talking mirrors and the self-stirring kitchen supplies and the ghoul rattling about in the attic.)

The manor library was also the only sizable magical library she'd been in since Hogwarts, and every moment she sat at her adopted desk or in one of those leather armchairs, curled around an old book, was a reminder of the old castle. She knew she should return and greet her old professors now that she was back Minerva, at the very least but she still wasn't sure if they would approve of the way she had turned her back on everything when she left and didn't want to have to rehash everything that had led her to Australia. It was just easier putting it off for now.

In the other manor, she had watched her friends being dragged away to the cellar by a werewolf while she endured unspeakable things before losing consciousness on the bloodied carpet.

She was losing the fight with her mind's eye as it mapped out the floor plan she was beginning to know rather well. Her now weekly visits to the manor reinforced the length of each hallway, the orientation of each room, and the connection between each floor; so the trouble with staying and reading stories to Scorpius in his room (delightful audience that he was, with his shrieks and giggles at all the appropriate moments and his clumsy, fumbling goodnight hugs) was that it opened up a whole new network of corridors around the places she was trying her hardest to pretend didn't exist.

"I truly am sorry," Astoria repeated again dolefully as she walked Hermione down to the Floo room. "I'm so sorry. Obviously, Scorpius doesn't know why he shouldn't invite you to his playroom for story time."

Hermione saw a mixture of regret and shame register on the blonde woman's face shame for something she had no part of, for crimes perpetrated long before she was ever attached to those who had and she offered a sad smile in return. "No, no. Of course he doesn't. He can't even conceive of it. And he shouldn't be able to."

At least one Malfoy should get the chance to hold onto a little innocence she thought. Draco certainly had never stood much of a chance against the demands of his family during their school years. From what Sirius and others had told her of Narcissa, it didn't seem likely that she'd stood much of a chance for normalcy growing up in the Black family, either. Of course, Hermione had never thought a wealthy Pureblood could be even remotely balanced before meeting Astoria, so she was starting to realise that she may have been quick to judgement on all things Malfoy.

Hermione watched as Astoria visibly relaxed and redoubled her efforts to reassure the pureblood of her understanding. "It was terribly sweet of him to invite me. I really should be able to..." Her voice trailed off as she tried to explain herself, regretting this weakness and trying to convince herself it was justified. "I wish... I just wish that I could have accepted the invitation."

Astoria nodded roughly, wiping her eyes quickly with the back of an elegant hand. "I'm sure he didn't think anything was wrong. Severus doesn't go in there either, so... so someday, I know Scorpius will start to ask why. He's curious about everything. *Everything.*"

Hermione laced an arm through hers as they continued on in silence.

When she dusted herself off, stepping from the Floo into the quiet room at Grimmauld Place, she was met by a half full teapot and a drowsy Harry in an oversized chair. Lily was draped bonelessly over his arm, drooling on his elbow, and not even the startled jump from her father at Hermione's appearance could rouse the child from slumber.

He held a finger to his lips as he caught her eyes and slowly, exaggeratedly mouthed the words, "She finally fell asleep. Give me a minute, will you?" He then nodded in the direction of the teapot as if telling her to help herself.

Hermione mouthed back her agreement, slipped off her coat, and hung it up in the small closet behind her. She was relieved to note that Harry had placed a Warming Charm on the pot of chamomile, having learned the hard way that not even magic could salvage reheated tea. Once it cooled off, tea was irretrievable dreck, but it was drinkable for hours if charmed to stay hot. Stirring in a bit of honey, she curled up in the other chair and waited for Harry's footsteps on the stairs.

"Do you think I can slip her something in the evenings to make this whole process easier?" he asked upon his return. "A mild Sleeping Draught, maybe?" He stretched up at an odd angle and collapsed in the seat next to her, not even trying to stifle his yawns. "Or a strong one. The strongest formula you can find. Or the Draught of the Living Dead that would put her under indefinitely, wouldn't it?"

"A respected Auror, drugging his beloved daughter with potions?" She smirked, enjoying the feeling of warmth from the cup seeping into her hands. "What would Rita Skeeter have to say on the subject? I can just read the headlines now."

"Firewhisky, it is, then," he declared, refilling his cup. "Just enough to..." he interrupted himself with another yawn, "to knock her out."

"Harry, do yourself a favour and go to bed."

"I need to hear how everything went with your plans to conquer the world. That, and she really just wouldn't fall asleep tonight, and Ginny's exhausted." He set his cup on the side table next to him and turned to face her fully. "So, can you already read my mind? What am I thinking?"

Hermione placed her cup on the table next to his and raised her fingers to her temples. She spoke in low, portentous tones. "You, Harry James Potter, are thinking about calling the office with a mysterious ailment so you can catch up on sleep tomorrow."

"Nope, but..." He shook his head in another yawn before focusing again on her eyes. "That sounds great, though. Try again."

"You're thinking about leaving your children with Arthur and Molly so you and Ginny can bolt off to the Canary Islands for a holiday."

"Not that, either."

"You're thinking of nothing at all."

"You're crap at this, you know."

"Are you telling me you don't want to head off for some sun?" she asked, momentarily distracting him from noticing that she still had no practical training after all her weeks of revising.

He pulled off his glasses, streaked with tiny fingerprint smudges and grime, and began cleaning them on the hem of his shirt. "We talked about visiting Greece before Al

came along, but now it'll have to wait."

"Tell me, then, unless you'd like to watch me attempt a reading of the tea leaves." He snorted loudly in response. "I know, I know. Trelawney would be terribly proud."

"Not unless you're predicting my untimely death."

Hermione chuckled. "Back to the point what *were* you thinking, Harry?"

"Mostly..." He stuttered a bit, collecting his cup and taking another sip as he watched her above the rims of his frames. "It was mostly about how I think Malfoy sees you more than I do these days."

"Harry, Harry," she mumbled under her breath, reaching over to pat his forearm in reassurance. "Probably not."

Whatever she was expecting him to answer, that wasn't it. As she spent more and more time at the Malfoy's home, Harry had gone out of his way to ask fewer and fewer questions about what she was doing there and how things were going. She didn't think he had even mentioned Draco by name in the last two months.

"It won't be too much longer."

"April, right?" She knew what he was asking. April was when her parents would be back in England. Well, April was when Wendell and Monica would be back.

"April."

"Do you need to cut back at the hospital?" he asked. "You know... so you can spend more time working on this?"

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "I don't think I should have to. I've come quite far on the theory, I think. I just need to put it all to practice now."

"You look like you're just as wiped out as we are."

"I'm just fitting in around here with you parental types, acquiring matching bags under my eyes." She gathered up their china on the table, telling herself she'd wake up early the next morning to wash them. "I think the kids and Crookshanks are the only well rested ones around here these days."

"Doubt it. Lily really likes Crookshanks these days."

"So?"

"I mean really, really likes him. And his soft fur."

"I don't see the problem. It's not as though he'd ever bite her."

"No, not that. I think he spends most of his day hiding from her. Or just her fingers."

"Ah..." That might explain his standoffishness with her lately. She had merely chalked it up with his being a cat. "He's not as fast as he used to be."

"Night, then," he yawned, heading up to bed. "Don't stay up too late."

"Good night, Harry." She puttered about in the room a bit longer before sitting down with a journal, planning on going to bed after she finished reading the article she had begun earlier in the day.

It wasn't until James and Albus, pretending to be lions, pounced on her sleeping body the next morning that she realised she had fallen asleep in her chair.

The following Wednesday, Hermione was set to return to the Malfoy library once more. It had been another crazy week of odd hours and long shifts, but she found herself energized by the anticipation of working with Severus on both her studies and whatever it was he wanted with her old experiments.

Frankly, Harry's sleepy demand that she read his mind played itself over and over again in her thoughts. She had finished with all the prep work, hadn't she? She really couldn't wait any longer if she wanted to become an accomplished Legilimens. And she needed to have some level of control this time around in order to have any hope that she could help her parents return to her: control to be able to dissect the false memories she had implanted and let them find themselves again.

Her choices had already cost them over a decade, and she wasn't about to let her own hesitation or Severus' reticence to talk to her hold her back any longer. Maybe she shouldn't have joined him and Draco in the lab last time, or maybe she should have asked that he spend just ten minutes with her to start her own project. But he seemed terribly preoccupied with whatever it was he was brewing, and she was convinced that at least part of it was related to the studies she had handed him in her old notebooks.

Her own reluctance to ask him for help, she told herself, had more to do with the fact that he was doing her a favour than that she still felt so foolish for falling apart on him when they first met. Yes, he had said that he set up their work together as an exchange, but as far as she could see, she was gaining the most from their relationship. She knew what she had discovered in her experiments, and although the ability to tailor basic potions to individuals was helpful, it was hardly groundbreaking. He seemed to be using it for something, but she didn't have the potions knowledge to figure out what it was. Regardless, she told herself, her Legilimency studies weren't about her or some insatiable quest to learn everything under the sun, but about restoring her parents to the lives she'd stolen from them. That would have to be enough of a motivation to demand some hands-on experience in her lesson later on that evening.

In a pinch, she knew she could ask Draco and Harry to let her try with them, but it had been a long time since either of them had studied Legilimency, and neither of them were any good at it. It was her worst-case scenario. Plan C.

During her time at the hospital earlier in the day, she had found herself checking her clock with increasing regularity. It started with an obsessive-compulsive patient clutching his decidedly sprained (not broken, as he feared) elbow who felt the need to announce the time to the entire waiting room at ten-minute intervals. An idle glance at the aluminum wall clock a bit later whilst fishing a cerulean crayon out of a toddler's left nostril informed her she had three hours and forty minutes to go in her ten-hour shift.

After a while, she began checking her watch, unprompted by patients. *Two hours left and I'm off to see Severus* she thought, and after what felt like no time at all had passed, she checked again. *Less than an hour and a half to go* The clock hands moved as slowly as ever until it was finally time to change out of her scrubs and head off.

"Your notes are a mess."

Severus Snape greeted the young woman abruptly as he watched her bound into the library with an unnatural energy and a smile from ear to ear. He was pacing back and forth along the far side of the central table, sleeves rolled up to his elbows and hair tied back from his face. The glasses he sometimes wore were tucked into his shirt pocket, and he positively thrummed with an air of frustration as she approached him. He had planned to tackle this conversation the last time he saw her, but the brewing with Draco had gone on longer than he had planned and had preempted any questions he might have asked about her experiments. Like a buffoon, he'd started to adapt a few of her theories for his own work before he had worked out all that she was doing. She may have stumbled across some fresh ideas, yes, he could concede that. Her idea to monitor the success of potions with the Muggle means she used as a doctor was original, unusual. A nice surprise from the girl who could do little more than regurgitate facts for six years in his classroom. And yes, he was finding that using her suggested substitutions gave him mildly better results with one of the patients he

was working on and substantially better results with another. But the happy result of following her stupid rabbit hole meant that the last three days without her answers to his questions were almost a complete waste of his time.

"And a 'Hello' to you, too, Severus," she said, walking over to the table where he had sorted her notebooks and his parchment scraps into evenly spaced columns of ideas. "Have you already finished with them?"

"Only with what's intelligible in them," he muttered under his breath, more to himself than to her. For all the unfortunate byproducts he'd expected when reading Granger's work too many questions, too many variables, too much attention lost in details that didn't seem to amount to anything he never thought he'd have to fault her for a lack of clarity. He stopped pacing and turned to her, palms flat on the table as he leaned over it, ordering his thoughts before launching into questions. Before he got a word out, she placed her satchel on the table and dropped into the empty chair beside him. "I've read through all your trial synopses, and I've gone back to work on two of them in detail, but whatever system of abbreviation you've employed is questionable at best. What does this even mean?" Looking up at her and her slowly fading smile, he demanded accusatorily, "Tell me you've at least *heard* of the scientific method."

She rolled her eyes and chuckled lightly. "Of course I have. I kept to a strict protocol." When he didn't respond but kept flipping through his notes, she spoke again. "You know, you're rather snippy tonight."

He looked up long enough to glare at her, but there must not have been any real bite to it. She didn't back down like he thought she would have.

"What's unclear?" she asked. Her hands made their way down to her hips as she looked up at him defiantly. "What don't ~~you~~ you understand, Severus?"

The cheek. He was a bit startled by this, since he had rather enjoyed how cautious Granger had been since they renewed their... association a few months ago. He assumed it was a combination of her gratitude that he would actually give her any of his time and a holdover from that professorial respect she was accustomed to paying anything with a title. She was probably also still in mourning for that fateful day in which she'd fallen apart on him in the Malfoy study, even if he understood belatedly how trying the whole experience must have been for her.

He stood up quickly and pulled out two of her notebooks alongside a thick navy journal of his own. After rifling through the pages to find what he was looking for, he pointed at a series of charts connected to the generic regenerative potion he had been working with. The margins were riddled with asterisks and 'see further's' and other symbols in her hand, and he stood back watching her countenance change from confrontational to questioning. She frowned as she looked over the page he had opened to, then thumbed through a few more pages and flipped to the back of the notebook.

"Hmm." She was jogging her memory. "Oh, dear," she said, holding open the inside cover, "I'm sorry, Severus. I suppose this is why you're so discouraged." She looked up to gauge his reaction, but he simply raised his eyebrows in annoyed agreement. "I should have thought to give you a list of what all these things stood for. I hope you haven't lost much time on this."

He wasn't about to tell her about the hours he had spent looking through Muggle medical dictionaries in an attempt to avoid this conversation. It already appeared as though he was asking her for help rather than merely asking that she make her findings reasonably presentable to an outside party. She should have done it in the first place.

Of course, he would have stopped in his tracks and waited for an explanation had he had been looking over almost anyone else's work Lovegood's notebooks, for example, or Weasley's. (*Ha!* He thought to himself. *The giant squid will sprout wings and fly before that boy engages in any kind of research.*) He wouldn't have wasted his time with a disorganized person. But Granger? He knew she had a well-ordered mind often too well-ordered to do anyone any good but he would be damned if he admitted that he couldn't follow her train of thought.

"Of course not," he replied gruffly, not meeting her eyes. "That would be a fool's errand, indeed."

"Let's see," she said to herself as she pulled out a spare sheet of paper. After scribbling out a list of letters and signs and corresponding page numbers, she looked up at him. "These are standard abbreviations... and this is what they mean. We use them all the time." She flipped the sheet over and began a second list, pausing to double check herself. "These are my own shortcuts. Obviously, there are no Muggle abbreviations for things like Dragon Pox, so I had to improvise."

He congratulated himself on being right - there was a method to her madness, and it was related to Muggle medicine and excused himself from failing to translate Grangerian (Grangerese?) into English, since her system was obviously the brainchild of her own idiosyncratic mind.

"I was just shifting back and forth between a common medical shorthand and my own system of abbreviations for magical maladies. It made sense to me at the time, but I'm sure it looks confusing to anyone else."

"Have you even seen a medical chart, Granger?" he asked.

She carefully folded her hands across her chest as her eyes narrowed. "Why, no, Severus. I don't spend all my waking hours with charts under each arm." Her voice was terse and pinched as she barely kept her temper in check. "I don't live in wretchedly frumpy scrubs, either, and I don't eat the tasteless garbage they disguise as food, and I..."

"I meant a chart from St. Mungo's," he snapped, raising one eyebrow at her burst of indignation. His voice softened just a bit as he took the seat beside her. "A Healer's chart. Good god, Granger, I'm not an imbecile. I know you're a doctor."

"I... I..." she huffed, looking momentarily surprised. "Well, it's been... I mean... Yes, I have."

"You have or you haven't?" he asked flatly. "What's the hesitation?"

"It's been a while." She pulled herself together and rebounded on him in defensiveness. "It's not exactly like I've had the free time to take on additional training over and above everything I'm already doing. Besides, they track a completely different set of vital statistics. Where our Muggle medical records track personal and family medical history, X-rays and scans, blood work, their wizarding equivalents track different levels of energy and magical power. I remember Madam Pomfrey performing some of those kinds of scans on me as a student, but I never knew exactly what they were."

"Always the underachiever," he observed dryly.

"Better an underachiever than an arse," she countered in quick retaliation. It dawned on him that she actually thought he was accusing her of underperforming - an impossibility, really, looking at everything she had done, but then she'd held herself to impossible standards. Before he could give it much thought, she dropped her head into her hands and began running her fingers through the curls she found there, letting out an impassioned cry. "Oh! Severus, this whole..." here she began waving her arms about wildly, gesturing at nothing, "thing is going badly. You're clearly frustrated, and I know I get a bit tetchy when I'm tired, but I was so looking forward to this." She looked him in the eye and waited for him to acknowledge her. When he finally nodded, she continued on, insisting, "All day. I've been counting down the minutes since the early afternoon."

He swallowed, noticing her eyebrows raised in fervent expectation as if awaiting his response. *Well, of course she had been looking forward to their meeting* he thought, *if she was desperately trying to save her only family.* Miss Granger on a crusade was a terror to behold, although he'd never had the opportunity to witness it in close proximity before, and never on a subject that actually mattered. Truthfully, he'd had no idea why he hadn't been informed about her parents months earlier. When Draco approached him months earlier with the request that he teach Hermione Granger Legilimency, he initially refused. Good god, what kind of masochist did the boy think he was?

The encounter had been wholly unexpected, since he had largely blocked out her and everyone else from the Order or Hogwarts from his life. In the end he relented,

partially because Draco had been so insistent and partially because he knew she'd fled the notoriety and the publicity just as he had. Potter's smug faced filled the papers as he opened new hospital wings and gave speeches at fundraisers hell, even Weasley in all his familial fecundity was featured from time to time. Granger was different. He'd heard neither hide nor hair of the girl since he saw her last at the Battle of Hogwarts, and that was something he found he could respect.

The truth of the matter was that Draco rarely asked him for anything. He was usually foisting elaborate gifts on him, all under the auspices that Severus was doing him a favour. ('Mother and I can't keep up with the cottage in Cumbria. The one overlooking the Irish Sea, Severus, you've been there. We don't want to sell it to someone we don't know, but if you wouldn't mind taking it? Sales and negotiations mean paying someone else to push papers, so let's avoid that. We'll just sign the deed over to you.') As a result, the only times he asked for something, Severus usually gave in.

Up till now, the only real thing Draco had ever asked him for was his acceptance of people in their odd familial circle. At first, Severus only stayed at the Manor when Draco and Narcissa were residing there. Then came Astoria, an intelligent young woman far too good for the likes of the snotty little sycophant Draco had been growing up to become, but an even-tempered match for the man he was now. Despite the fact that she played by all the rules of polite Pureblood society, Severus found that he enjoyed her company and her conversation. And her ability to keep Draco in line. He less happily accepted Astoria's extended family, but suffered through the occasional meal with Daphne Greengrass, knowing she would ignore him completely and allow him to pretend she didn't exist. When Daphne married Zabini a year or two later, well, that added another to the mix, but Zabini was likely the least offensive of all his former students, and fairly tolerable in small doses. He'd begrudgingly added one person to the circle every few years or so, finally ending with Scorpius. Based on things he had read, he was fairly certain that Scorpius was, objectively speaking, a better child than most: he remained largely silent when being held, he was rarely covered in sticky substances, and he had never yet made an attempt to leap or wriggle to his death from Severus' arms when Astoria forced some kind of interaction between them.

The difference between all those people and Granger was that those people were all staying for good.

"Next time, please just owl me if you have a question," she said earnestly. "Had I known you needed it, I could have written up something on Sunday and sent it back to you."

She looked over the piles of books before them and frowned. "What we need is a way to... Hmm... Had only someone anyone done any amount of work on this in the past, I wouldn't be cobbling together charts I don't understand and handing you statistics you can't read." He let her babble to herself awhile longer in that tone of voice that suggested she already knew the answers to her questions. "The problem as I see it is that there's no overlap between Muggle and wizarding medicine, right?"

"In one," he agreed. "Granger, simplify things here. Keep the Muggle and the magical of it all straight by calling it medicine and Healing."

She cocked her head and nodded her agreement. "And while I know how we in medicine go about treating an illness and monitoring someone's health, I'm not equipped to understand the way a Healer would go about the same process."

"No, you're not."

"And there's a disconnect between how medicine interprets and monitors a patient's health and how healing does the same."

"Obviously, but you already knew that." He left the statement open, giving her a chance to explain herself.

"I knew in Australia that what I was doing was unusual, but I never dwelled on it. I wasn't even really participating in the magical community there, except to buy supplies when I needed them and pick up a few books here and there. I suppose that I wanted to keep the experiments private." She was steadfastly avoiding his gaze now as she tapped her ballpoint pen idly on the table. "After all, it might not have worked at all. What would have been the point?"

"Not a fan of public failure?"

"I'm not a fan of any kind of failure, although lately I've become more accustomed to it than I'd like." Placing her pen down, her nervous energy was channeled into her fingers. She was uncomfortable talking about the subject, and didn't relax until she deflected attention away from herself back onto her project. "So why *hasn't* anyone tried to bring together medicine and Healing before, Severus? I was just looking at the Malfoys' copy of *The Sceptical Chymist* it's lovely, by the way, and in excellent condition and thinking about what his work meant. An alchemist, a chemist, he was at the forefront of science for wizards and Muggles alike."

"Boyle was before the Statute of Secrecy, so don't think about him in today's terms." She shook her head ambivalently, and he pressed his argument. "I trust," he drawled slowly, "you remember Nicolas Flamel?"

The matter of Albus Dumbledore remained unspoken between them.

"You know that I do."

"He was another, just like Boyle. Both magical and Muggle." Her interest clearly was piqued, and yet she held her tongue. "People like you, Granger, you operate today in both the magical and Muggle worlds. You cross the divide." He paused, waiting for her to give a sign of agreement. She tilted her head to the side, holding her tongue and waiting for him to continue. "People like Boyle and Flamel - people before the Statute ever went up? There was no divide for them to cross. You shouldn't think about this from a contemporary perspective."

"I don't see why not," she stated petulantly, ever so slightly raising her voice. Her eyes were alight with a fire he hadn't seen since she was a girl. "Perhaps we could stand to reevaluate our beliefs from time to time. Perhaps we need to! Merlin forbid we ever break with tradition."

"Calm yourself, Granger," he replied. Offhandedly wondering whether Gryffindors always had to be so emotional, he found himself greatly satisfied by the predictability of her response. "We've largely divorced ourselves from Muggles since those days, and we did it for a reason. Think about the specifics of your circumstances. Given how little medicine has to contribute to the way Healers do things, are you honestly surprised nobody's ever bothered to bring the two together?"

"No-one thinks medicine has anything to contribute, do they?" she asked sullenly, her brow furrowed and her lip dropped in a small pout. "I remember them all laughing at Arthur behind his back when he asked for stitches."

"Can you blame them in that scenario?" he asked neutrally. "What good would stitches do against abnormal venom?"

"Of course they didn't work! His Healer had no clue what he was doing. I could have told him as a first year university student that it wouldn't work. But that doesn't," she contended forcefully, "mean that medicine has nothing to offer the practice of healing."

"You'll notice that I'm not arguing with you on this point."

She considered his expression thoughtfully as if trying to verify the truth of his words. When she was apparently satisfied by what she found there, she relaxed again into her chair, dropping her hands into her lap. "Will you tell me what you're doing with my studies?"

He had wondered how long her discretion would keep her curiosity in check. *Evidently, not long.* "Extrapolating."

"That's not terribly specific."

"No, it's not."

"For your work at St. Mungo's?"

"Perhaps."

"Is this what you and Draco were working on last time?"

"Perhaps."

She smiled archly. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Confidentiality agreements with the patients and their Healers."

"Ah," she sighed, a look of regret in her eyes. "I see. In that case, please keep your confidences."

"So," he said, "let's get this over with."

"Legilimency?"

"It's time, don't you think, Granger?" he asked. "If you haven't mastered the spellwork by now, you never will."

"There's that vote of confidence I was looking for," Hermione said with an optimistic smile. "Will you be entering my mind, then?"

"The sensation of entering someone's mind isn't particularly jarring," Severus said, comfortably shifting into his seldom-used lecture mode. "It's akin to the sensation of using a Pensieve." He paused and looked to her to make sure she was following his words.

"That makes sense, I suppose. There must be a similar disembodied state as you enter someone's active mind as when you enter their memories." Hermione considered him thoughtfully. "But you don't actually walk around in someone's mind in Legilimency, do you? Not like when you enter a Pensieve. I've heard that you actually bodily walk around inside a memory in a Pensieve."

"You've never used one?"

"Theoretically, I know *how* a person uses one. I've heard the whole procedure described."

"But you've never used one."

"No."

"How is that possible? Albus was always loaning his out to all and sundry."

"I was sixteen, Severus. Why would he let me use it?" she asked him pointedly. "Besides, I had never heard of one before my fifth year. It's not like a broom, where everyone owns one. We never used them in lessons, and I would never have..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, thinking it wisest to cut her off before she picked up much steam. It didn't actually stop her from talking, but it did encourage her to redirect.

"Will it make a difference if I haven't used one?" she asked with a note of concern in her voice. "Will it be difficult to make the leap into Legilimency if I've never used a Pensieve?"

"It shouldn't." He frowned at the worry that was writing itself across her features. "Listen, Granger, this is easily remedied. Draco's is in his study. You'll use it today."

"Oh, will I?"

"Do you need an invitation?"

She paused at his words. "Yes, I'd love to use his, if you don't think he'll mind." She began fiddling with her fingers in her lap. "Could you have the house-elves clear it of anything important before we use it?"

"I highly doubt Draco would actually have anything in the Pensieve, but yes, of course I will." He didn't want to consider what Potter had told her about what he'd seen of Severus' private life years earlier, and he hoped her request was unrelated to any embarrassing stories she had heard. "He should know well enough by now to protect his private thoughts."

"Thank you." Courtesies now attended to, she looked eager to begin. "How... how exactly does one of them work?"

"You pull out your thoughts with a simple spell, place them in the basin, and..."

"No, I don't mean 'How do I operate one?' I mean, how is it possible to recreate a moment in time from someone's anyone's - rather limited perspective? And not just recreate it, but to lose your position as the subject of the memory? It doesn't seem possible."

The corner of his mouth lifted into mischievous smirk. "It's magic, Granger."

She glared at him in return.

"No, I didn't think that would do for an answer," he said, standing to gather all of his and her notebooks and journals to clear the table.

"I'm glad you realised it wouldn't."

"How does it work?" he repeated, putting the stacks on his desk behind them. "Well, Granger, what's the first most basic thing people are told about their brains?"

"Muggle or magic? I'm afraid I've never studied medicine from a wizarding perspective."

"Muggle, then."

"You read Muggle magazines? Or newspapers?"

"I read a wide variety of things."

"Yes, I remember the Dryden you recited earlier," she agreed. "I suppose I'm just surprised that your Muggle reading branched out beyond the classics to such mundane things as newspapers."

"Four subscriptions arrive by owl or post weekly."

"You still read the Prophet?" she asked incredulously. "Even knowing that it's filled with trash?"

"The Prophet is worth less than the scraps of parchment it's printed on. It's typically trash, yes, but most newspapers are little more than tabloids filled with lies and slander penned by narcissists and egomaniacs. I find that it's still useful to know what's being said about the world."

"Actually, I kept my subscription for the same reason." She accepted the rest of his answer without any further questions. "Things we say about the brain, hmm? Obviously, there's the idea that left and right hemispheres that dictate personality traits."

"Besides that."

"The brain is the body's other sexual organ?"

"What?" he asked, startled by her response.

"Actually, I suppose it would be that the brain is the largest sexual organ."

"Spare me," he said darkly. "That sounds more like the wishful thinking of the scientist who's never touched a woman." Again, Granger surprised him. She was certainly capable of much more frankness than he would have ever expected. Perhaps it was due to her living among Muggles, or even just living among Australians. Not personally knowing any, he would venture to guess that Australians were much freer than the English, what with the warmer climate and greater use of beach attire.

"You sound so surprised, but any medical professional would agree, Severus." *Ah*, he thought, *it's because she's a doctor. Her familiarity with the human body would necessarily put her at ease with...* He stopped himself there and redirected his attention to her words. "...and physiologically speaking, it's a fact of nature that the stimulation of sensitive nerves..."

"Granger. Focus." He felt the need to rein her in before she waded too much farther up that stream. "Besides, why would that be related to the function of a Pensieve?"

"Right, you're right," she agreed, throwing up her hands. "I think it's also common knowledge that regions of the brain govern specific functions. Sensory information is stored in the parietal lobe, long-term memory in the hippocampus, and so forth."

He was somewhat familiar with this concept, but she was still missing what he thought was the obvious answer. He shook his head. "Another?"

"Listen, Severus, I don't know exactly what you want me to answer here. We've already established that the reason you're meeting with me is because ~~d~~*an't* read your mind, so if..."

"It's not mind reading!" he hissed in interjection. "Have you no subtlety? Surely you know..."

"I know that! It's just an expression," she retorted. "What's the answer you wanted me to give, then?"

"The correct answer is that one only uses a small percentage of one's brain at any given time. Ten percent or less. That's what popular science tells people about their brains."

"It does, yes, but..."

"Okay, Granger. I'll concede on regionalized brain function as well."

"The personality stuff is rubbish, but you should also concede on the brain's sexual capacity."

He scoffed again. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"I'm telling you, Severus, if you think..."

"If the brain," he interrupted, willfully ignoring her, "plays host to significantly more activity than registers in the active mind, it stands to reason that the senses have gathered enough material to reconstruct places and experiences from memory."

"The Pensieve allows you to tap into data stored in your subconscious. In your parietal lobe, one might say."

From what he knew of neural anatomy, that sounded familiar enough to agree with. "Essentially... yes."

"Then I was right about regionalized brain function playing its part," she said, sounding quite pleased with herself. "And that would mean that two people could share an experience, each remove the thought of the experience independently, and, if comparing them side-by-side in Pensieves, essentially have the exact same memory?"

"Yes."

"So if I pulled my memory of my first Potions class with you, and you pulled your memory of the same event, they would be identical in the Pensieve?"

"Yes, of course."

Suddenly, she launched out of her chair and began pacing quickly beside him. "Now what if, say, a patient is blind, blind due to some severe trauma to their optic nerve, would their memories in the Pensieve be incomplete? There would be sounds and smells and other data that their healthy senses could gather, but all else would be dark?"

He paused to consider this. Blindness was rarely an issue in the wizarding world, as prosthetics like Moody's had been commonplace for decades. He didn't know where she was going with this line of inquiry. "I suppose... that seems like a possibility..." he offered tentatively.

"Of course, there are different reasons why a person can't see. Some have damage to the eyes or the optic nerves themselves, and others have a blindness caused by neural trauma." Her eyes shone with excitement as she began to think through the possibilities. "If, say, a patient was blind, and the blindness was caused by neural trauma rather than damage to the optic nerve, wouldn't her thoughts in the Pensieve still have images? Her eyes themselves are undamaged; they could still gather that sensory data." Her excitement was building as she probed the edges of possibility. "Would I be able to walk through her image and see her memory? For that matter," she continued breathlessly, "could she? Could she see in a Pensieve what she couldn't see in real life?"

He was struck by her words. She was exactly what he'd expected in some respects, but she had grown into herself and learned to trust her instincts. Oh, the same ruthless idealism was still there, and that naive progressivism that annoyed him to no end was there as well, but he now found himself reluctantly enjoying the way she thought. It was inevitable, really, that she finally began to see the world differently. Most half-bloods and Muggleborns went all in, giving up their old ways to embrace their new lives as wizards. He certainly had. But Granger tried to cope honestly with everything in the Muggle and magic worlds, and the juxtaposition left her with a unique ability to see things that others would miss.

What was she nattering on about now? Blindness and Pensieves. "Theoretically," he stated, trying to position himself in their conversation once more, "I suppose, it's plausible..."

"Or if I were to pull a memory of my own, gathered with my own senses, could a blind person enter the Pensieve and see it?" Enthusiasm was bubbling out of her at every turn. She didn't wait for his answer this time, too swept up in her own thoughts. "Can you even imagine what that would be if it worked? What if I could give a blind mother the chance to see her baby - if just for a moment? An elderly man could see his grandchild get married?"

"What are you intending to do with this Pensieve, Granger?"

"I want to know if I can use it to give a blind man sight. To give a deaf woman music. To... Well, I'm not entirely sure what it could entail." She turned to him and lightly laid her hand on his exposed forearm. "If it worked, you could give someone a brief glimpse of something they would never get to see otherwise."

Was she aware that she was touching him? Trying to underscore her point?

His eyes moved from her fingers on his pale skin up to her face with a stunned expression. "You think that would be a good thing?" Her face fell when she saw his shock. He pulled away from her and directed his eyes at the blackness beyond the far window. His voice lost its richness, growing ever more strained as he forced out his words. "No, Granger, that would be torture. Unmitigated torture."

"Why?" He heard her pull out her chair and sit beside him.

"To be given an experience outside all you've ever known, only to have it ripped away again?" He paused, unaware of her eyes focused on his hands rhythmically gripping and releasing the arms of his chair. "No. No, I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

"It wouldn't necessarily be taken away." She spoke with a kind of gentleness in her voice, but he barely heard her words as his thoughts drifted to things he knew he'd never have. "No, nobody can or should live their life in a Pensieve, but they could still use it from time to time to share their experiences with the people they love."

A few moments passed in silence between them. If she was waiting for him to agree with her, she would find herself waiting a very long time.

"Well," he said, rising from his seat and walking briskly to the fireplace. His voice was clipped and brusque. "I shall call the house-elves for the Pensieve. You're probably behind whatever schedule you've drawn up for yourself anyway. I won't have you blaming me for whatever happens here."

He did as promised and called for the tool to be brought up for her use, an empty black obsidian stone basin surrounded by runes. After setting it up in a corner alcove, Severus and Hermione each pulled one silvery thread of memory to deposit in the bowl, where they now swirled around in a kind of cloudy vapour. Drained and exhausted, he was relieved that she kept her questions to a minimum as they entered the Pensieve, but then, she seemed as tired as he felt.

They attended to their younger selves there, first wordlessly following her walk along a beach. She was maybe seven or eight years younger in the memory, he thought, much closer to the girl he had taught than the woman she was now, and her hair was wildly whipping about in the breeze off the ocean, a chaotic, uncontrollable mass of curls. And she was much too thin. For about ten minutes, Severus and Hermione stepped in line behind the girl as she walked briskly passed brightly coloured beach huts. They followed her as she moved closer to the water's edge and again as she moved away from the sand, turning inland to the small houses along narrow residential streets. She had just broken out into a run when her memory dissolved, and they found themselves back at Hogwarts in his.

They now tracked him as he paced the hallways of the old castle as a young professor, a calculated decision on his part to choose a memory from Hogwarts. She didn't need to see anything of his private life, so a memory from Spinner's End or his current home was out of the question. The memory selected was from an ordinary, uneventful night, nothing more than a student or two roaming the corridors past curfew as the feared Professor Snape swooped by in his black robes. She was watching his memory self intently, scarcely sparing a glance to him now as he walked beside her, and he couldn't help but feel like the odd man out as he observed her and his younger self as they made his evening rounds. They were both around thirty years of age, as he was then about the same age as she was now. *Twenty years ago*, he thought. *A lifetime ago*. Two floors and one detention later, the memory dissolved and Severus and Hermione found themselves in the Malfoy library once more.

She thanked him perfunctorily as she always did as he withdrew their silvery thoughts from the Pensieve, restoring the night along the beach to her by the use of his wand before returning the night's patrol to himself.

As he saw her off for the evening, he couldn't shake himself of an odd feeling of uneasiness, and they exchanged their goodbyes. She was unexpected. She was uncomfortable. And somehow he suspected his life would be simpler when she was gone.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

Hermione learns the Art of Memory.

When she returned to Grimmauld Place, Hermione was relieved to find that Harry and Ginny were busy with the children's bedtime ritual. She meandered through the house and up the stairs, knowing that the sounds of Ginny cajoling the boys to brush their teeth and Harry singing lullabies to Lily would cover her footsteps as she headed to her room.

Her thoughts were an agitated jumble as she tried to wind down for the night. Thoughts of the old Hogwarts she had known as a child Severus hadn't realised it or hadn't known what it would have meant to her at the time, but they walked right passed Susan in his memory Susan, her year's Susan, Ron's Susan, who looked no more than eleven or twelve at the time. And he himself looked so young and so unhappy, just as she remembered him from her first year. *Not that he would ever be a happy man* she thought, but it was clear that he had found some measure of contentment in his life with the Malfoys as his friends.

Then there were the possibilities she could see years down the road if she could only exploit a Pensieve for all its peripheral capabilities: a blind parent being able to see their child, an injured wife having the chance to look upon her husband's face again.

There were more thoughts of the past, of medical school and her late-night study sessions at the local chip shop she and Severus had passed as they followed her younger self through her old neighbourhood.

And there were thoughts of Severus' unexpected words to her in the midst of it all: "I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

Although she was tired, the busyness of her mind kept her from sleep, and she kept hearing his voice saying over and over again: "I wouldn't wish it on anyone. On anyone." And more than the words, it was the unusual timbre of his voice, the hollowness and sadness that slipped through his usually stoic façade and leached its way into her bones. It was an almost physical ache, and she knew as he spoke that he had something specific in mind. But what? What was it he had touched and felt and tasted, and what had been taken away?

A dozen easy answers came to her mind as she thought through what little she knew of his life. Lily, of course. Once a dear friend, then lost to him forever. A friend, or at least a mentor, in Dumbledore? Severus had seemed particularly bitter at the mention of the elderly wizard earlier. Perhaps what he was missing wasn't a person or a relationship at all. Recognition, maybe? Approval? In the years since the war, he'd never received the accolades like the others of the Order, despite the fact that the tasks handed down to him were easily the most miserable of the lot.

She had long thought that just to have survived that last year alone at Hogwarts with nobody to support him was tremendous. But to have done it while all your old colleagues people like McGonagall and Flitwick, who you thought trusted you believed you to be a traitor and a murderer? It was a price she couldn't imagine anyone paying. She still wasn't quite sure what he had used to hold onto his own sanity during those months.

"I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

It was a while before she eventually drifted off to sleep.

"Legilimens."

Hermione was grateful she was sitting down. Grateful also for Severus' choice of the two Queen Anne chairs in one of the library alcoves rather than a desk or one of the centre tables. It was unnerving to watch moments of her past fly by in her mind's eye under someone else's control rather than her own, and she was grateful for the creature comfort of a soft seat under her and a heavy woolen blanket on her lap. And although they had discussed the parameters of Severus' first venture into her memories ('Keep it simple for my first time,' she had requested. 'Rifle through boring days at work.'), she was oddly discomfited by the gentle prodding and pulling she was feeling as he entered her mind.

When he cast the spell, she was swallowed up in a kind of moving light. Images emerged rapidly, and suddenly she was thrust into the old teaching hospital at Melbourne where she had held her first rotation. She walked down the narrow hallway to the nurses' station for a glass of water with a few of her fellow interns.

"I'm changing days now," he stated perfunctorily, his voice ringing out above her like an announcement over the hospital loudspeakers. "Keep alert."

She felt another soft push as the scene before her dissolved into another day at the same hospital. Little had changed the building was the same, the scrubs were the same, the clipboard on her arm was the same, the nurses...

Something was off.

Not off, just different. She was angry in this flashback, and she felt the itch of resentment just under her skin, the heavy pulse of her heartbeat. None of her emotions showed in her actions - she went about her rounds with a calm and professional demeanour - but she felt them all just under the surface. It wasn't until she began writing corrections on an older patient's chart that she remembered why she was so upset that day: the elderly gentleman had been misdiagnosed by the person who admitted him hours earlier and hadn't been as effectively treated as a result of the mistake, and it wasn't until she had double checked something on his medication that she had caught the error. He had been fine in the end, but it bothered her to know that something could have gone terrible wrong. Still, understanding her emotions in the memory didn't explain the violent strength of them, for although she was justified in her anger, she was almost physically overwhelmed by her feelings.

"Changing years now," she heard him say, his voice echoing vaguely in both the hospital lounge of her memory and now also the library they were presently in. Was she supposed to be aware of Malfoy library? She wasn't sure, but she felt torn between her mind and her body, the past and the present.

And the scene changed again to another day in another hospital altogether. Actually, the dissolve itself also changed, as it took about three or four times as long to shift to the next reflection. She was older in this memory and quite happy to be in a revamped clinic with the green and grey checkerboard floors. This was early on in her residency, and an eagerness for her work swept over her. A supernatural enthusiasm quickly replaced the negative feelings from the previous scene almost instantaneously. Severus stayed in this place and time for a few more minutes, but nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"I'll focus on one type of experience now," he interjected again. "Something you would have done repeatedly over the years. Is there one kind of task you'd like me to follow, or one co-worker? The consumption of dreadful hospital coffee?"

"How did you know it was so foul?" she asked, now flashing back and forth between the clinic and the library. "Wait...which hospital?"

"Hospital coffee is always foul," he insisted sharply. "One of life's great universal truths."

"Agreed," she said, idly wondering how much time he would have had to experience the over-roasted, mildly burnt-tasting sludge at St. Mungo's. It seemed that he avoided the place at all costs, but if Draco was working...

"Granger," he called a bit more loudly. "Focus."

"You felt that? Er... Heard that?" she asked, startled at finding herself caught woolgathering.

"Yes." He then wordlessly dissolved the spell, withdrawing completely from her mind. Breaking off a piece of the chocolate he had procured, he pushed the plate towards her. "Eat."

She snapped off a large hunk of dark chocolate as she reconsidered the man before her. He was exceptionally efficient in his instruction, sparing few words for anything other than the essentials she needed. She felt exposed and raw, knowing that her own emotions were laid before this man with his unnerving ability to remain cool and detached. As she took a bite, a shock of warmth spread through her fingertips and up her arms. She hadn't even realised she had grown cold.

"You're right, you know," she said calmly, thinking over their meeting together from a few days earlier. "The sensations are quite similar with the Pensieve. I'm not sure I would have the same kind of awareness of you in my mind without having gone through that earlier."

He didn't actually affirm her statement, not that she was expecting him to, but he simply stated, "Your first advantage is awareness."

"How does that help me?"

"One could say it always helps, Archibald." He broke off another piece of chocolate for himself. "The unexamined life and all that rot."

"Yes, yes, *hilarious*, Severus," she retorted, a sharp edge to her voice. "And 'Archibald'? Must you?"

"Here I thought I had permission to use it each time you asked a stupid question."

She glared at him. "If we're accepting 'stupid' according to your standards, I'll never hear my name again."

He smirked in return.

It was hard to tell at times, but he was either being a complete arse tonight or this was him in a good mood. She didn't want to discourage him in case this was the playful side of Severus Snape, so she let it go. "How does awareness specifically help with Legilimency?"

"Demanding, aren't we?"

"I like to think of it as being thorough." She smiled up at him, imploring him, beseeching him. "Please? How does it work?"

"It's said that any Legilimens should be able to enter and exit a mind undetected, but that's simply untrue. Stepping into the mind is like stepping into a still lake, Granger. No matter how careful you are, you will still cause small ripples along the surface. The alert mind will see the ripples and want an explanation." He then reached for the corner of her blanket, fingering a loose edge before dropping it. "You really should..." he offered awkwardly, gesturing at her still shivering arms. He then abruptly turned away from her. "As I said, the alert mind will want an explanation. Those who are unaware, those who don't expect it..."

"Those who are Muggles, like my parents?" she interrupted.

"Yes, of course," he continued. "They would be the easiest targets for any kind of mental magic."

"Then the fact that they're Muggles is probably the only reason I was able to perform those spells in the first place."

"Most likely," he agreed. "Unless they're both terribly weak-minded people, but if they raised you as their child..." His voice trailed off, allowing her to fill in the blanks. She decided to interpret it as a compliment to her own fortitude rather than another slight against Gryffindor stubbornness. "What else did you notice?" he asked, now pouring himself a glass of water.

"Memories are physically linked somehow, aren't they?" she asked tentatively. "Closely related memories are easier to shift between than those removed by space or time. It was easy for you to move between days that were closer together."

"Correct." He observed her thoughtfully. "And?"

"And... this is an extremely subjective process, Legilimency. What I mean is..." Her eyes darted around the room as she recalled her feelings and attempted to explain. "I had a heightened awareness of my emotions as each event was recalled. I know you tend to think all Gryffindors are emotionally overwrought, Severus, but I don't think it's possible that I was actually quite that happy over a new building or quite that upset over a minor mixup with a patient. My emotions were magnified in the visions you saw."

"That's perfectly normal. You now see how this differs from the use of the Pensieve, which is, essentially, an objective process. You're transmitting basically the same information, but the Pensieve offers a clinical distance from the remembered event. Legilimency does not."

"And," she added, "you get to walk around in your own body when you use a Pensieve, but I didn't see you anywhere just now."

"Obviously not. During Legilimency, you watch the memory just like you would the cinema or a play."

The pair continued their discussion a while longer over chocolate and tea and water. When he was satisfied that she fully understood the basics, it was time for Hermione to finally put her skills into practise.

"I can't believe I'm letting you do this," he said darkly, shaking his head. He flipped moods completely, now quite serious. "If at any point, you become uncertain of what you are doing, Granger, pull out."

"Of course, Severus."

"If you ever overstep what I want you to see, pull out."

"Yes."

"If I ever tell you to pull out..."

"I'll pull out," Hermione finished for him. He quirked an eyebrow, as if asking if he should trust her with this task. "Severus, I don't want to pry. I'm already rather nervous, knowing there's a chance I could be invading your privacy, but couldn't you just block me if I began to uncover something I shouldn't?"

"If you leave of your own will, you can't hurt either of us. If I forcibly expel you from my mind, I could do damage to yours." He turned his chair to face hers head on, taking the delicate china cup from her hands. He made no effort to conceal his scowl. "You don't actually have to question every single thing I say or do, Granger."

"And you don't have to assume that my questions are motivated by mistrust," she insisted defensively, pointing a finger at his chest. "That's not up for debate. I trust you, Severus, whether you believe me or not. I just wanted to know why you were so unrelenting on this when you're clearly powerful enough as an Occlumens to prevent me from going too far."

"Well," he sputtered out, "Well... Now you know."

"Yes, now I *understand why*," she said, pointedly emphasizing the difference. "Although I'd rather you Occlude me if push comes to shove."

"Are you planning on ignoring my instructions?"

"Of course I'm not! I just want you to know that I want you to protect yourself first if I do something incorrectly."

He didn't answer. Didn't look away, either.

She wondered if she was supposed to get started.

"Well?" he asked impatiently, prompting her into action as he sat back in his chair.

"I just..." She waved her wand aimlessly and looked up at him for confirmation.

"Get on with it, Granger."

"What would you like me to search for?" she asked, hesitation in her voice.

He replied quickly, as though it was obvious that he'd thought this through earlier in the day. "Look for days where I'm teaching at Hogwarts, giving lessons to students."

She nodded in understanding.

"And don't look for any with yourself as a student. Keep it impersonal," he demanded quietly.

She nodded again.

"Legilimens."

Hermione was swept up into darkness as the spell took over. She wasn't walking exactly, but then again, it couldn't quite be said that she even possessed a body. And yet she felt herself moving through space as flashes of light and colour swirled past her at incredible speeds. It was incredibly disorientating, as she suddenly felt herself simultaneously hurtling through a nondescript sea of memories and curling up in her own chair in the Malfoy library.

"Control, Granger," she heard echoing around her. "Slow down." His voice was soothing, calming in this foreign place. *Where am I?* she wondered. In his mind, perhaps? *I must be.* "Slow down," he repeated in a soft voice, smooth and deliberate. She felt her racing heart relax, heard her erratic breathing begin to pace itself, and watched the flickers of light as they morphed into distinctive images. "Slow, Granger, slow yourself down. Breathe."

Something clicked for Hermione in that moment, and an unnatural kind of peace washed over her. The images themselves slowed down. They hovered around her, not quite still, but silent. She could walk among them as though she were walking through the National Gallery looking at paintings.

"Remember what you're looking for," his voice reminded her. "My teaching years, Granger. Nothing more."

And she walked around a series of memories from Severus' teenage years, she felt a floor beginning to materialise under her feet. Cold stone pavers, large slabs of rock as far as the eye could see. It felt natural, somehow, but she hadn't been told what she was supposed to be experiencing. *Was this right?* "Severus, am I supposed to be walking on a road or a path of some kind?"

"It looks like a road to you?" he inquired, not actually answering her question about the path.

"Well... it's stone. Not cobblestone, so I don't think it's exactly a road, but... I'm not sure."

"What do the walls look like?"

"What walls?" she asked.

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a hazy presence of what must surely be walls began to appear around her and around the floating memories.

"Oh," she said in a hushed voice. "I think I see... I see..."

But whatever had begun to appear flickered and failed.

"So where are you, Hermione?" Severus asked.

"I... I..." She paused in embarrassment, floundering in disappointment. "They're... That is, the walls are... They're gone."

"Try again."

"How?"

"Focus, Granger." It was a mantra with him. Hermione considered herself to be a fairly focussed and motivated woman, but when she was with Severus, he was continually demanding that she focus on the task at hand.

"Focus on... what? Walls? Or your memories?" she asked aloud. When he didn't reply, she concentrated on what she already knew with certainty: the floor beneath her feet, Severus' mementos all around her. When she began to walk the halls, walls made of smaller stone slabs came into view. With each length she walked, she uncovered the walls that were there all along, walls upon which Severus' thoughts and experiences were hanging. The building she was in was now almost solid around her. Familiar. As she turned a corner, discovering a long gallery of armour, she put the last of the pieces together.

"It's Hogwarts," she said, astonished and shocked to be walking around his mental model of the third floor Charms corridor.

At first he didn't respond.

She momentarily wondered if she had gone too far in and lost the connection with him, and was working her way towards a fully fledged panic attack when she heard him again a few moments later.

His voice, low and sure, rang out like a loudspeaker echoing through the halls of the castle. "Your first mistake, Granger, is in assuming that it's Hogwarts. It's not exactly like it, although it is similar. Most do resemble a building or a place of some kind."

It was incredible, Hermione reflected, *this whole process of Legilimency*. She understood the reality of things, a reality in which she and Severus were sitting calmly in a tucked away alcove in the Malfoy library. She knew it, and yet here she was, walking through the castle that had been her home for six years. Walking through a kind of Hogwarts, at least. A kind of Hogwarts of Severus' making, filled with a lifetime of remembrances. Good and bad, young and old, she watched little snippets of his life on the walls of the castle. And yet... His memories were here, she was speaking with him, and yet he was nowhere to be found.

No one was anywhere to be found.

She walked alone in his Hogwarts, accompanied only by the sound of his voice.

"But why Hogwarts?"

"It possesses a structure upon which I can superimpose any of my life's experiences."

"Is that why you chose it?"

"Your second mistake, Granger, is assuming there is a conscious choice."

"If it's not a choice, then..."

"The subconscious provides the place. The palace, actually. Most texts on the subject call it a memory palace."

She accepted that, having recalled the term from some of the texts he'd asked her to read earlier on.

"Your memory palace is no more a choice than your Patronus or your Animagus form."

"Most are places, you said." She stood in place, admiring the stone walls of her school as she chatted with Severus' disembodied voice. "Is it common for most witches and wizards to use Hogwarts as well?"

"I have come across several who use the venerable old castle, yes." He paused, and she reached out to touch the wall, solid under her fingertips. "Some use their childhood home."

"Is Draco's the manor?"

"You'll find out when you Legilimise him, won't you?"

She considered him carefully, knowing that he usually told her outright when she was wrong. "I'll take that as a yes."

She could hear the grimace as he confirmed her suspicions. "Yes."

"What else do people use, if not a building?"

"Minerva used the entire village she grew up in, including several miles of footpaths in the Highlands around her home. But then, she has a tremendous breadth of mind."

Hermione smiled to herself, pleased that Severus could say such things about the older woman.

"Professor Sinistra's was, unsurprisingly, the night sky."

"Which season?"

"All seasons, all hemispheres. Her memory palace was literally a sphere, a perfect model of the universe in miniature."

"Vector's was completely abstract, the likes of which I had never seen before and have never seen since. Concentric circles layered over top of complex fractals over top of geometric puzzles."

"You Legilimised Professor Sinistra? And Vector? Why?" The unstated question hung in the air: What would they have possibly done in the war that made them interesting to the people pulling the strings?

"It was not idle curiosity. Keep in mind, Granger, that at one point or another, I entered the minds of almost every prominent witch and wizard in Britain. Not because I wanted to or because I could," he hissed at her defensively, "but because it was demanded of me."

She dropped the subject, although she longed to ask about Dumbledore's and Voldemort's orders. The strain in his voice was palpable, and she didn't want to push him. It was time to return to a safer topic of conversation. "Are most scholars' or professors' related to the subject they work with? Or..." Thinking about him, she corrected herself. "No, that can't be, can it? Yours isn't a laboratory. But why would Sinistra use the constellations and Vector uses mathematical and Arithmantic models?"

"No one is entirely sure," he said. "I believe the mind gravitates to the first system it can make sense of. Aurora's mother and her grandmother were also accomplished astronomers, so I suspect she was familiar with the celestial models at an early age. Vector worked on an abstract level at almost all times, so I wasn't surprised by her memory palace, either. Who knows how young she was when she began to think like that?"

"Is Professor Sprout's a garden or a green house?"

"Hers isn't, but..."

He hesitated.

"But what?"

"Pull out."

"Are you certain?"

"Pull out now."

"Why?" she inquired, confused. Nothing about that question could possibly threaten his privacy. She removed herself from the third floor of Hogwarts, slowly adjusting to her presence in the manor once more. Once she felt her body coming under her again, she reached for a piece of chocolate to steady herself.

"Your palace, Miss Granger," he stated calmly, looking her in the eye as though anticipating some kind of outburst from her, "was/is an English garden."

Even after hearing that he had entered the minds of so many even all her old professors, wholly unrelated to the war somehow she persisted in the thought she was beneath his notice during those years. She was mildly pleased at the thought of her old importance, mildly unsettled by the wonder of what he discovered, and greatly relieved that those unknown invasions were in the past.

His eyes were open slightly wider than usual, and he hadn't blinked once as she considered his words, as if bracing himself for the onslaught of some kind of explosion from her. She honestly hadn't even thought of snapping at him, and she knew he was worrying for nothing. After thirty years with her own temper, Hermione knew herself well enough from experience to realise that if she didn't instantly launch into some out-of-body tirade, she never would.

"Do you mean... Just now, when you entered my mind, you were walking through a garden? My garden?" she asked curiously.

"Unless you live in an impressive country house surrounded by acres of sculpted land, I doubt it is your garden. But yes, I was walking beside a small stream. Your memories of work are primarily stored in the rotunda in the clearing."

"Definitely not my garden, then. I grew up firmly ensconced in the upper middle class." She folded up the blanket, finding herself quite warm now. "And that, Severus, means that our garden consisted of several indoor pots. My mother's annual pass card to National Trust properties was utilised every free Saturday, though. I think she took me to the great gardens to somehow make up for the fact that she killed every plant in sight. Oh, sometimes a hardy one would hold out for several months before it succumbed to the inevitable, but none of the plants in our house were ever more than a year or two old. My father," Hermione continued, smiling and forgetting herself in the past, "teased her continually for having a black thumb. Once he gave her a plastic pot plant as a gift, telling her it would be the only green plant in the house. Another time, he..."

She stopped herself cold. Snape was graciously putting up with her rambling stories, but he wasn't the sort to sit back and reminisce, and she didn't want to assume a familiarity that didn't exist between them. Or did it? He was almost friendly with her at times, and he was easily the most intriguing person she knew. It was then that she realised just how comfortable she had grown in his presence. A few months ago, she wouldn't have offered up old family stories for Severus to hear. Then again, a few months ago, she wouldn't have guessed that she would regularly read bedtime stories to Malfoy's son, or that she would regularly dine at Malfoy Manor, or that her former Potions professor would have given up so many hours to help her.

He didn't look at all put out by what she had said, but she figured he was probably relieved that she hadn't started shouting at him for what he'd done years ago.

Still, she wanted to know.

"You... entered my mind as a child?" she asked softly.

"Not by choice." He shrugged. "Never by choice. I generally fulfilled the... shall we say 'requests' of my masters," he smoothly supplied, "through more mundane means."

"By simple observation, you mean," Hermione suggested.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's almost insulting how easy it is to learn anything about anyone. In general, people are stupid and self-involved. They think they're infallible and don't realise how clearly they're broadcasting their secrets to the world. I preferred to retrieve information the old-fashioned way."

"Even the idea of Legilimency is uncomfortably invasive for me," she replied. "I don't want to be able to root around in someone else's mind. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful to you for teaching me this, but if I could forget how it all works after setting my parents to right, I would."

"Afraid you'll be tempted to use it?"

"I just... don't even want the option. I like knowing things a bit too much for my own good, I think."

"You may discover that the act of using Legilimency increases your distaste for it, making it easy to set aside when it no longer serves a purpose in your life."

She looked at him, quite sure as she examined his eyes that he was speaking from experience. Since he wasn't one to broadcast his own secrets to the world, it was clear that he wanted her to understand his own reluctance to use his abilities. His admission pleased her.

"Anyway," he continued, "you were no longer a child when I examined your memories."

"Was it often?" She could feel the blush spreading up her neck to her ears.

A beat of silence passed.

"Twice."

"During my... I suppose it must have been my sixth year?" she guessed, interpreting his words about her age. She'd come of age just a few weeks after the start of that year.

He nodded.

Question after question flooded her mind, and she found herself wanting at least a few answers. "What were you looking for? Did you find it?"

He jerked away from her and stood up, taking a few steps away from her.

She pressed on. "May I ask which of your masters asked you to... asked you..."

And just as suddenly, he turned back to face her. "Routine questions about Potter's plans everyone knew who was running that particular show. Yes and no, I believe." His gaze drifted to the ceiling as he answered the final question. "Both."

Well.

So Dumbledore and Voldemort both had wanted a glimpse into what she had known, had they? What she had helped Harry plan? She fought back the petty part of herself that wanted to ask Severus if he had also Legilimised Ron at their request.

He looked at her expectantly, tension again evident in the way he subtly clenched his jaw.

She asked an innocuous question. "Has my garden changed much over the years?"

He visibly relaxed when it was clear she was choosing to drop her interrogation, and he answered simply as he returned to his chair. "It's always spring there, but..."

"But...?"

"But now the daffodils are finally opening."

As they continued on in their practise, Hermione entered Severus' mind again and again. She wandered around his Hogwarts, finding the way his subconscious mind ordered a lifetime of memories. The classroom memories? At first, she thought they were all located in his Potions lab. It made sense, after all, that memories of something happening in one location in Hogwarts would be placed in the corresponding location in his memory palace. She went through about a half dozen lessons from his early teaching years, sniggering quietly to herself when a young Tonks showed up in one as a second or third year.

She constantly felt the projection of his emotions during each memory, just as she had of her own when he'd walked through her memories earlier. She felt his frustration when a student didn't listen to his instructions and his annoyance when they haphazardly went about their cutting and mincing and stirring. There was the occasional moment of satisfaction when a student brewed a potion well, or when he was brewing himself, but by and large, Severus Snape was not happy teaching at Hogwarts.

Hermione realised that his insistence that she was to keep to uneventful lessons on nondescript days was a shrewd move. It protected his emotions from her scrutiny.

Then she witnessed a terrible explosion as she moved to another Potions lesson on another day, and Severus raced the poor child to the infirmary for help. When she pulled out like before, she found herself not in the Potions lab, but in the hall filled with armour. Odd, that. She looked around and found a vision of him returning from one of his missions to Grimmauld Place and another of him retrieving a family before a Death Eater attack. Apparently, Severus unknowingly placed the memories of courageous deeds there.

She hadn't meant to intrude, but he knew what she had just witnessed. He snapped at her sharply to stop poking around for the hell of it or pull out.

She did as he requested and pulled out, only to find him blushing ever so slightly as he berated her for her inability to control her curiosity. He grabbed another piece of chocolate while they regrouped.

Some rooms clearly had other associations. If a moment of bravery was to be found in the armour gallery, would she find moments of pride in the trophy room? What would be in his Chamber of Secrets?

After another foray into Severus' mind, they both decided to call it an evening. Exhausted, Hermione realised that they'd spent six solid hours together working through all the practicalities of Legilimency. She felt much better now, more in control, and for the first time in over a decade, she thought she actually stood a real chance at bringing her parents back home.

As he walked her to the Floo room, Severus tasked Hermione with a revision plan of sorts to hone her skills. She was to set up meetings with willing participants no more than twice a week in order to gain experience and confidence using her new skills. More to the point, he told her to go after people who were parents and to stick to their memories of their children. After all, those were the types of memories she'd erased from her parents, so any amount of insight she could gain here might provide the piece of the puzzle she needed.

When they arrived, he shook her hand with a kind of solemnity. "I trust you've gathered all you needed from me?"

"Yes, Severus, I can't thank you enough." She tried to convey her appreciation with the warmth of her words, knowing anything more would make him ill at ease.

"Then this is goodbye," he replied, his expression unreadable as his eyes met hers.

"It had better not be," Hermione admonished him. "Good night, Severus."

As luck would have it, Astoria was the first person after Severus to volunteer. After a few false starts, Hermione entered her friend's mind, watching memories materialise all around. Slowly, steadily, parquet wood floors appeared below her feet and elaborately papered walls appeared to her left and right in what she could only assume was the Greengrass home. It was quite easy to find memories of Scorpius tucked away in an indoor conservatory filled with exotic ferns and other plants. Remembering how much Astoria loved the winter garden at Malfoy Manor, Hermione wondered if the young woman had filled the room she loved best with the people she loved the most. She watched Scorpius as an infant in a few memories and then as a little boy, his mother's love for him palpable at every turn.

Harry and Ginny were both eager to help, volunteering any spare time in the evenings for Hermione's project. With the two of them, Hermione had decided to view the same memories from each in order to make a comparison. Taking turns with each, she saw the first birthday parties of all three children, their first steps, their first words. Even though their memory palaces were different - Ginny's was the Burrow, whilst Harry's was, like Severus', Hogwarts - their celebratory memories of their kids were all placed on a Quidditch pitch, surrounded either by an overgrown orchard or tall wooden stands. As with Astoria, Hermione was overwhelmed by the rush of love pouring out of them for their children. It was a beautiful thing to behold, but she'd almost needed to pull out of Harry's memories during James' first birthday.

Even Draco offered to assist, although his work schedule was the most difficult one to work around. Their first meeting didn't go particularly well, but Hermione blamed it on the weather. It was a cool April evening, and Draco's windows were open to let the air flow through his study while they worked. As a result, her hair had doubled in size in the first ten minutes alone.

She entered Draco's mind and watched a memory of him and Scorpius puttering around the manor grounds on matching broomsticks. Each time Scorpius was in danger of tipping off, his father's hand would reach out and steady the broom.

Then she heard an aristocratic, womanly voice.

"You need to brush your hair, young lady."

Hermione looked around the memory, trying to find Narcissa somewhere. When she couldn't find her (or any other woman) anywhere in sight, she dismissed it and refocussed on the father and son.

A few moments later, it spoke up again.

"I daresay some women can get away with the natural look, but you really must take care to tidy up your appearance, my dear."

Peals of Draco's laughter rang out over the memory, and Hermione pulled out of his mind quickly.

"What was *that*?"

He pointed to the far wall at an elaborate antique. "That, Granger, was the mirror. Likes to give advice."

"On my hair?"

"You must admit, you're looking a bit shrubby tonight."

"Shrubby?" she retorted. "It's windy, Malfoy. It happens. You and your mirror should get over it."

"A proper young lady would have arrived prepared for all circumstances," the mirror interjected.

"And a proper mirror," Hermione snarled at the object, "would have suggested a comb *not a brush* to a young lady with curly hair."

"You can't blame her on that point, Granger. She's only ever had straight-haired blondes to advise, so she couldn't possibly know what to do with you." He grinned impishly then. "We're probably lucky, all things considered, she didn't crack at the sight of you."

Hermione smacked his arm and promised retaliation before they got back to work.

She didn't have to wait long. Retaliation came by accident a few moments later, when she was confused by a passing image of a small blond boy with shoulder-length hair. She entered the memory, only to find that the young boy she'd thought was Scorpius was, in fact, Draco.

Little Draco was dressed in a velvet periwinkle suit, complete with short pants and a frilly lace collar and shiny, buckled shoes. He sulked and pouted as he ran wild around an elaborate outdoor set with manicured hedges and white peacocks stunned into submission. As she looked around, she saw a painter seated behind her easel, barely managing her disgust while Narcissa coaxed her son to return to his posed position with a slab of Honeydukes' finest. Hermione had stayed to watch for ten seconds - fifteen at the very most - but it was glorious.

She died laughing.

Then she apologised, explained her initial mistake, and took the oath of silence Draco demanded she make before he allowed her to leave his home that night.

Her time with her friends kicked off a new pattern in her life. Every few days, she tackled one of the four of them, always looking for memories of their children. She became faster and more efficient with every passing week, able to find connections between memories and able to regulate her own emotions when faced with someone else's.

It was surreal, being so close to the thing she'd worked so hard for. She'd been carrying around the Wilkins' Christmas card wherever she went as a tangible reminder of what she needed to do, but soon 'Wendell and Monica Wilkins' would no longer exist, rightly replaced by John and Helen Granger. When she tried to remember the last time they had all felt like a family, it had felt more like a foggy dream than a reality. She ached to feel that again, to be a part of her family as she always should have been.

At the end of a day at the hospital, she would close her eyes and imagine them as she knew them in Australia, sitting in their kitchen with a slice of Monica's bread and a milky cup of tea. She stopped calling them by the names she'd made up for them, names she'd picked out of a book of essays she'd enjoyed, and finally called them 'Mum' and 'Dad'. And they answered her as their child.

The week before they were set to fly in, she and Monica talked over the telephone, setting up an afternoon together at Kew Gardens and a dinner on the town for their second day back in London. They exchanged all the particulars of their flight and hotel, and Hermione gave them an arsenal of telephone numbers in case they needed to reach her. Now all she had to do was wait a few days longer, in eager expectation to see her family returned to her at last.

It was time.