

Haunting

by Aurette

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This is a giftfic for **mrs. helenesnape**, who won the first round of the 2011 **SS/HG Exchange Bingo Mini-round!** Her prompt was: Hermione is attempting to change some 1000 year old tradition/law/custom (of your choice) random hilarity &/or heartbreak ensues...

Thank you to my beta, Karelia. Someday I will give her more notice before I fling a fic at her. I swear.

It started with her files. Hermione walked into the offices of Halpurnicus, Osterio and Farthingale at her usual hour...seven o'clock, precisely...and stared in horror at the files. The outer office was festooned with parchment.

She dashed into the records room only to see everything in tiptop shape. Confused, she peeked into the offices of the senior partners only to find their personal file cabinets locked tight and everything in order.

Odd. Then where did these files come from?

She bent down and began gathering up the strewn parchments and papers when she noticed the smell. The air carried the faintest hint of wood smoke and... geranium? Some earthy, spicy green thing anyway. It reminded her of something, but she couldn't place it.

Shaking her head, she pulled together the papers into a file and, in doing so, realized that they all pertained to ~~her~~ case.

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"And that's it?" Harry said. "No one else's things were messed with? Just your project?"

"Not that I can tell," Hermione replied with a shake of her head.

Ron finished another series of detection spells and shook his head. "Nothing. Are you sure these offices don't have a ghost? Poltergeist?"

"I've been here three years. I think someone would have told me."

Harry closed his notebook and crossed his arms. "But you said you did detect a smell..."

"That doesn't imply a ghost. Honestly, let's not get mixed up between causation and correlation here. It could have just been a nice-smelling burglar."

"Nice smelling? You didn't mention that. You just said wood smoke and pot plants."

Hermione paused. "Yes, but it was a nice smoky scent and..." She frowned and turned to her ex-boyfriend. "My opinion of the smell is not germane, Auror Weasley."

Ron threw his hands up. "Easy, Hermione, no need to go all legal-eagle. I was just curious. Anything could be a clue."

Harry cleared his throat and drew her attention back. "So if we rule out a ghost, and I'm not saying we have, then we need to think of motive." He sat on her desk, earning her glare. "How would someone benefit? Why would someone take only some of your notes and not all?"

She shook her head and poured the tea. "Honestly, it's an ancient and obscure bit of legislation, and I can't see why anyone would have an issue with it.

"Kingsley asked our firm to press cases that would illuminate archaic laws. For instance, did you know that in Plymouth, it's still illegal for a witch to ride a red broom?"

"Really?" blurted Ron. "Is that because it used to signify she was a prostitute?"

Hermione grinned. "I'd thought that, too! But, no! When I researched it, it turned out that the twelfth-century town fathers thought it looked like the witch was menstruating."

Ron turned green and put his tea down quickly. "That's just... Eugh! Keep that law, I never want to see a witch riding a red broom again."

She narrowed her eyes. "Women bleed, Ron. Get over it."

He scowled. "Some women apparently don't stop," he muttered.

She flung her hands up. "You see? That right there is why we were impossible! Just because a woman is constantly fed up with your lazy attitude doesn't mean she's constantly PMSing!"

"And just because a bloke is sitting on the couch when you walk in the bloody door doesn't mean he's been there the whole time you were gone!"

"Oi!" shouted Harry. "Enough! Will you two just get over it? Bloody hell. I'm sick of it. Just shake and move on, for Pete's sake. You tried, it didn't work, you stopped trying. Enough already! It's been three years! You know, you're only still angry because you both still care."

Hermione and Ron stared at each other in surprise before they both turned to Harry.

"Well, of course we still care," Ron said as if Harry was daft. "That's why we still yell. It's better than the sex was."

Hermione nodded. "We like yelling at each other," she said. "It's fun."

Harry shook his head and then scrubbed his hands through his hair. "You two are daft. I could almost see the logic if the yelling was foreplay..."

"That's how it started. We'd run out of good insults because we would get distracted," Ron said, sharing a look with Hermione that almost made her heart skip a beat. Ah, they'd had some good times there in the early days.

Harry waved his hands frantically. "Can we get back to the case? I really don't want any more details."

Ron turned to her with a shrug. "So what law are you trying to get off the books now?"

Hermione riffled through the pile on her desk. "An obscure clause pertaining to patent rights in the case of the inventor's demise. It states that if a patent was granted in February of a leap-year, then the patent-holder's royalties must be paid directly to a separate Gringotts account for two hundred years before being turned over to his heirs."

Harry tilted his head. "What's the point of that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No idea. It's been on the books for over nine hundred years but I can't find any reason."

"Are any royalties still being paid out in that way?"

"Yes. That's what brought it to our attention. Four families have bundled together to form a class-suit to get the law changed. One of them is quite impoverished, and yet there is a rather large sum of Galleons just piling up in a vault gathering dust. All told, there are seventeen vaults accumulating royalties for no logical reason."

She picked up the list she'd found and handed it to Harry. "Look at the most recent."

Ron came and looked over Harry's shoulder, when he saw his friend wince as if in pain. "Ouch," he muttered when he saw the last name on the list.

"Agreed," Hermione said softly. "It's always an ouch when I stumble over his name. I don't know why I was surprised he had so many patents. I'm still curious about why nearly all of them were filed in February of a leap year. It's either a twisted coincidence, or his own perversity. If he was aware of the law."

Harry sighed and set the list down with an almost reverent care. "Snape was too detail oriented not to have known. I bet he thought it amusing. He didn't have any heirs anyway," he said quietly. "He never planned to."

Each of them looked inward and remembered. The sight, the sounds, the shocking, horrific violence of Snape's end was etched in all their minds above and beyond the rest of the horror they'd faced. For Hermione, the worst was the memory of how surprised Snape had sounded just before the Dark Lord turned on him.

There was no doubt in her mind that Snape anticipated his death, but she didn't think it went the way he expected. To be found out for the traitor he was? Yes. To be killed by fellow Order members who didn't know his role? Yes. To be tragically cut down accidentally in the sheer chaos of the battle with all the spells that went wild would have been more... noble. But to have Voldemort kill him casually because he'd not thought the issue through clear enough? That was inglorious.

There was a deep sigh from all three of them, and then Hermione started taking up their cups. It was almost nine, and the senior partners would be along any moment. It would be better if her friends looked like the Aurors they were and not like they were gadding about slurping tea with their chum.

"So who would benefit from keeping the law the same?" Ron asked.

"No one," she said. "The only person that would have access to the money would be the deceased. It's a logic loop."

Harry stood and straightened his robes. "We'll file the break-in down at the MLE and cross check it against any other reports of breaking and entering filed recently. Let us know right away if you find anything else missing besides your research notes on the law."

"I will." She hugged Harry and Ron in turn. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Of course I'd come quickly," Ron said with a warm smile.

Hermione smirked. "And that's another reason we're not together anymore."

Ron's face turned red, and he took a deep lungful of air, but Harry Apparated him away before he could get off his retort.

Damn. That would have been a good one too.

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Justinian Halpurnicus looked up from his desk with a distracted air at her knock. His thick moustache was still bristled in concentration. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"My apologies, sir, if this is a bad time...?"

He sat back and waved at her. "Come in, come in. What's on your mind? How's the patent case coming?"

She slipped in the door and sat down in the sturdy leather chair before his desk. "Well, sir, it's actually a bit stalled. I keep having to retrace my steps. Which is why I'm disturbing you."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm not exactly sure what the cause is, but, well... Do we have a ghost?"

His bushy brows snapped down in confusion. "Say again?"

"A ghost. Is there a ghost or spirit in these offices? You see, ever since that break-in three weeks ago...where my files were tossed about and my notes stolen? Ever since then, I've been plagued with issues. My notes are repeatedly missing, and now little things like my quills seem to be cursed and my parchment won't hold the ink... It's daft, I know, but I can't find any other explanation. Now today I come in to find my entire file is just gone. I'd just finished the first draft of the brief yesterday, and now the entire thing isn't in the office anywhere. I'll have to rewrite everything from scratch."

Halpurnicus frowned magnificently. "Miss Granger, is this some sort of joke? I really don't have the time right now."

"No, sir! Or, if it is, then the joke seems to be on me."

He sat forward and folded his hands on the desk before him. "That case goes before the Wizengamot next Thursday, Miss Granger. If I don't have the finished brief in my hand at that time, I will look like a fool, and you will be out on your ear, is that understood?"

She swallowed thickly. "Yes, sir. May I take some time to complete it at my home? I'm sure I can get it done there."

"Do so. Just get it done, Miss Granger. No more excuses. Were this a more important case, I would have your head."

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir. There will be no more delays."

She jumped up from the chair as if it had scalded her and hurried out the door, hearing him mutter, "Ghosts. Now I've heard everything."

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Hermione sat at her kitchen table scribbling away. She was a wreck.

She'd been working non-stop since she'd arrived home after lunch yesterday, recreating all of her notes, precedents, and documentation. She'd only now started on rewriting her brief.

Add to that, she was pretty sure she was losing her mind. She was now utterly convinced her work was being picked on by a ghost. A ghost that smelled rather nice, but who was out to destroy her career.

A whoosh announced an in-coming Floo call. She looked down at herself to see if she was even vaguely presentable and then wobbled over to her fireplace.

Justinian Halpurnicus' moustache filled the fire. "Miss Granger? Are you there?"

"Yes, sir! Here!" She knelt down and thrust her face into the flames. "I've just started on the brief, I should have it to you by tomorrow afternoon at the latest," she said in a panic. "I'm sorry I'm not done yet. I had a lot of..."

"Settle down, Miss Granger! I don't expect you to be done yet; I need to ask you something."

"Yes, sir?"

"What made you think there was a ghost?"

Her brows flew up and she didn't really know what to say at first. "I know it sounds strange, after all, I never actually saw the ghost, but some of my things disappeared while my back was turned. I would get up to pull my lunch out and come back to my desk to find someone had erased all the words on the parchment I'd spent hours on. I repeatedly cast *Hominem Reveleo*, but no one was ever there, aside from the obvious office staff, that is."

"Did you see things move?" he asked. "Was there a smell?"

"Yes! There *was* a smell! Whenever I would come in in the morning, and especially when things would be disturbed during the day. I would always smell the ghost first. Sometimes I would get the feeling I was being watched. And once or twice, I could have sworn I felt something touch my hair. I didn't ever actually see anything move though." She cocked her head to the side. "Why? Has something happened? I haven't had any trouble since I came home."

The senior partner looked distinctly uncomfortable. "When we arrived this morning, your desk had been turned out. Everything was all over the place, your quills, ink... all of it. Drawers had been snatched out and thrown all over the place. It looked like someone had lost their temper. Then a little while ago, about nine-thirty, to be exact, Philicity came screaming out of the records room. Drawers were being snatched open and files were being ransacked. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Good heavens! Did you try and catch the ghost?"

At this, he looked embarrassed. "I did. Several of us did. Whatever it was, it wasn't human, no human could have deflected that many hexes and jinxes that quickly, and I don't think it was your ordinary ghost either."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a ghost can't harm anyone, can it? We were stunned! Literally! The room grew incredibly cold, and then I woke up lying in the floor of the records room along with everyone else! Most undignified!" He seemed to collect himself and continued. "The Aurors arrived and all they could say for sure is that magic had been used. Useless!"

"Was anything taken?"

"In fact, yes. That's why I called. The only thing that was missing was something from our employee files. To be precise, your personnel file had been left on top of the cabinet."

"Mine?"

"Your latest address-change request had been taken." He looked even more embarrassed. "I'm sorry. We really did try and stop whatever it was, but I'm fairly sure it now knows where you live. Perhaps you ought to come back to the office?"

"No. I have an even better idea. I'll have that brief for you tomorrow afternoon, sir."

He looked more human than she'd ever seen before as he shook his head. "I'm so sorry for not taking this serious yesterday, Miss Granger. You can be assured that you have all of us behind you. Do be careful."

Hermione cut the connection as she sat back on her heels, pausing for a moment. Then she sprang up and started grabbing her things.

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"Right, well, you're warded from the cellar to the shingles on the roof. Are you sure you don't want to come to Grimmauld?" Harry said, looking out the window to see Ron cast even more wards on the garden.

"No. Whoever is behind this now knows I used to live there, and since you removed the Fidelius Charm anyone can find it."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, that wasn't really one of my better ideas."

Hermione put her hand on his arm. "It was symbolic for you. The war was over."

"True, but all those damned memory charms on the neighbors... And now when something does come up, we have nowhere to hide."

She patted him. "None of us have needed to hide in all these years. And this? This will end as soon as we get to court on Thursday. It's not about me."

"Are you sure it's not a ghost?"

"Absolutely. Why would a ghost care where I lived? Or about obscure lawsuits coming before the Wizengamot? No, there's a human at the root of this. Probably someone who's not quite right in the head."

Ron came in the front door and looked around. "It hasn't changed much, has it?"

Hermione grimaced. "I can't bring myself to sell it. Or live here. I keep hoping someday they will remember and want to move back."

He winced. "It could happen," he lied. They all knew there was no chance. "It's a good choice. No one knows about it but former Order members. You should be safe here, but are you sure you wouldn't like us to stay?"

She pushed him away. "No, I really need to get a lot of work done, and I can't afford the distraction. All you would need to do is ask me how to use one little gadget, and I'll go off. And not in the fun way."

He grimaced. "It's that bad, is it?"

"It's a vendetta now. I'll get this done just to prove whoever it is can't stop me."

"Right. I know enough to run when you get that look in your eye." He kissed her on the forehead. "Give 'em hell."

Harry patted her on the back, and she watched her two best friends leave. Then she picked up the box with all her shrunken files and headed towards her father's study.

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Hermione woke up to find she'd drooled all over her brief. Irritated, she spelled the slobber away and rubbed at her sore neck. She picked at the remnants of some Chinese, picking out the chicken and eating a few more bites, then pushed it to the side. A glance at the clock showed her it was midnight.

Right. A hot shower and some caffeine should get her at least a few more hours of productivity. She stood up from her desk and, as an afterthought, spelled all of her papers invisible and set them on the floor under the desk. Then she pulled out a stack of fake briefs she'd made and placed them on the desk. For a last touch, she added a Sticking Charm to the top of the first sheet.

She was in the middle of deep conditioning her perennially dry hair when she realized she'd forgotten to use the Dropsy Precedent. She swore up a storm and shoved her head back under the spray. This was her third time trying to rewrite this stupid brief from memory, and she was beginning to lose track of pieces. Her steel-trap mind was rusting.

She bounced out of the shower, wrapped one of her mother's beloved over-sized towels around her and padded down the stairs.

It was the smell that tipped her off. Again, that subtle scent of wood smoke and spicy greenery, but this time there was a hint of something else. Leather? It tried to trigger memories...scents always did...but like before, the memories refused to come. It was almost as if they belonged to a part of herself she didn't want to revisit, and so she refused to remember them.

She hesitated on the stairs, silently calling her wand to hand, and when she felt the handle slap against her palm, she silently made her way toward the study.

She peeked in the door at a crouch and let forth a feral smile. Raising her wand she sent a silent Incarcerous flying towards where her forged papers were hovering above the desk. The papers flew up into the air, scattering in every direction, as her magical ropes were slapped to the ground.

She already had a Stunner on its way, aimed at the flapping parchment stuck to the 'ghost's' hand. Again, her hex was blocked with incredible speed. She leaped up and sent a flurry of hexes and a jinx or two, only to have them miss or the colored jet whisk off in another direction. Whoever this was, they were a master duelist. That's when she started to grow afraid. Time for bravado.

"Give it up! You can't stop this from happening! If I don't get that brief in tomorrow, I'll file for an extension and get everyone in the office to rewrite it! You can't be everywhere at once!"

She had to dodge her own spell as it ricocheted right back at her. Curiously, her silent opponent had yet to throw his own. "Why would you even want to stop this law from being expunged? There's no percentage in it for you. There couldn't be! The only people who would benefit from it are, by the nature of the law, already dead!"

She moved in a wide circle around the room, keeping up a non-stop barrage and trying to hold onto her balky towel. She really hadn't thought this through very well. "Don't make me use something stronger," she threatened. "I will, you know. You know who I am, so you know what I've been through. So far, you've been a huge pain in my arse, but you are starting to actually get me hacked off."

Breaking pattern, her opponent shot a Binding Spell at her that she only just managed to dodge. He followed it up with several more keeping her darting and diving, barely able to send back her own.

The blasted towel was a serious problem now, hampering her movements with her desperate need to protect her dignity. An idea struck her and she acted on it. She

needed an advantage, and she only had one.

She jumped up and threw off the towel, firing a Repulso in the direction of the floating parchment that had gone quite still. She was rewarded by the sound of a body flying backwards and striking the wall behind the desk. She didn't hesitate, two bounding steps and she was up on the desk and over, leaping down toward the floor like naked vengeance personified.

She landed on a body that gave a satisfying, "Oof!"

"*Finite incantatum!*" she bellowed, jabbing her wand into what she assumed were his ribs. The parchment stuck to his hand fluttered loose, but nothing else happened. In a flash she had her opponent trussed up like a Christmas Goose.

Whoever she'd caught was still invisible underneath her, but at least she had him. It was definitely a him. A very nice smelling him, to be honest. There was a bit of a wrestling match before she got his wand out of his hand...it had been trapped in the ropes. A final Stinging Hex delivered between the small bones did the trick. He went slack under her and there was a good deal of heavy breathing.

She wriggled around until she was approximately face to face. "I'm about to call the Aurors. If there is any reason in hell why I shouldn't, you better start talking. Who the bloody hell are you? And how the hell did you know where I was?"

Nothing but the sound of ragged breathing, her own and his, answered. She hissed and pushed herself up on his chest, her knee digging into soft flesh. He cried out and tried to throw her off with no success.

Finally, she heard a tight, slightly pleading voice, "Miss Granger, please remove your knee from my bits."

She was so shocked, she flew off him...not without him emitting another whimpering cry.

"It can't be," she said in a whisper, still aiming her wand at the form wrapped in her conjured ropes. "I saw you die! I saw it! It can't be!"

But he was blatantly not a ghost. A ghost didn't hyperventilate when their bits were crushed. Nor were they so... warm. It couldn't be him...

Her mind went blank.

The figure on the floor rolled, and she shot him with another Stinging Hex.

"Ow! I'm down! You have me! Christ, why don't you just kick me and get it over with already!" It was *definitely* him.

"Why can't I see you?" she said angrily.

The snide voice was all Snape. "That would be due to the *potion*. The potion that I created, that I took, and that you did *not*. Thus, the obvious result is that you cannot see me, and yet I can see you. Rather a lot of you, in fact. Do you really mean to interrogate me in the nude?"

Hermione felt her body flush to the roots of her hair, and darted back across the room, snatching up the towel and covering herself. She came racing back when she heard him thrashing to get free.

"Ow! For fuck's sake!" he yelled when another Stinging Hex found its mark.

"You said you were down!" she snapped.

"That doesn't imply anything! What would you have done if our situations were reversed?"

"Probably the same thing," she admitted in a mutter.

"And there you have it," he muttered back. The rope form sagged back down to the floor.

She folded her legs and knelt down next to him. "How did you get past the wards?"

His voice came back in that distinctive tone one used when they were talking to the stupid. "*Death Eater...?*"

"Why didn't *Hominem Reveleo* work?"

"That would be because I taught *Defense* and know how to escape detection."

She clicked her tongue. "How did you find out where I was?"

"It was obvious, wasn't it? You'd left your flat in a hurry, and you would have thought yourself too clever to go back to Grimmauld."

"Yes, but no one knows where my parents used to live..."

He sighed dramatically and went back to his mocking voice. "*Order member?*"

"Oh. Right."

"Any other dunderheaded questions? You're on a roll."

"Just one," she said quietly. "Why?"

"Why do you think? Bloody hell. Use that vaunted brain of yours, Granger."

She shook her head and then it clicked. "Because with you legally dead, the only person with access to your money is you, and you're still alive enough to need it."

"Right in one."

"But you would have had your money anyway if you told someone you were alive!"

"I didn't want them to know I'm alive!"

"Why? You're a hero!"

He was quiet for a long moment before saying. "I'm not anyone's hero."

"But you are! You're mine! And Harry's and Ron's!" Her voice grew quiet. "We realized we'd been wrong about you the entire time."

"Oh, joy," he said snidely. "How fulfilling to have the three biggest thorns in my backside finally realize they were mucking up everyone's plans and feel remorse. You can

take your guilt and go bugger yourself with it, Granger. Just leave my fucking money alone."

She grimaced. "I can't."

"Why, because of the poor, down-trodden Hartleys? Oh, I read the files; I know what families are involved. I went to pay a visit to your ruddy Hartleys, and let me tell you, they are playing you like a fiddle. If they're poor, then Lucius bloody Malfoy is destitute.

"They're just greedy! I need that money to live on! It's barely enough as is! The Ministry seized my house and my other vault. How am I supposed to get on, eh? What do you think, I can simply wander into Diagon Alley and apply for a job? I tried. I was treated like a pariah! I had to Obliviate them! Or perhaps you think I should leave the country. Start over somewhere where they don't know me. Well, I have news for you, sunshine. I tried that as well. I'm known. Thanks to you and bloody Potter making such a huge production out of the story of my life, I'm known even in Trinidad and Tobago."

She sighed. "What a bloody mess."

"Too right!"

She snorted and then looked up. "How did you find out about the law? How did you know I was the one working on it?"

"It was in the paper, after that last case where they eliminated the law against riding a Thestral backwards while wearing a kimono in Coventry. Your Mr. Halpurnicus gave an interview about other laws they were looking into. I didn't know you were there until I went to investigate. When I saw you were already working on the patent law, I decided to take action."

"By haunting me? You almost got me fired!"

"Boo. Hoo."

Something inside her snapped. "You know what? You really are a bastard. And to think I've wasted these last years feeling horrible over your fate, and you were out there the whole time sulking like a pathetic git."

"How dare you!"

"How dare *you!* You don't want to be a hero, and yet you whine because you can't catch a break? We could have helped you! Anyone in the Order would have helped you get a leg up."

"I don't want your help!"

"Good! Because I'm not in the mood to give it anymore!"

"You... *brat!*"

"Yeah? Well, you're just a-a... a git!"

"Oh, that's original," he said in a voice that was mocking and yet lacked the sting it had earlier.

"I'm getting distracted," she said.

And she was.

All she could think about was how much fun she was having. It was incredibly liberating to be screaming at this man when these last years every thought of him had made her crawl with guilt. *Catharsis*, she thought to herself. She wished she could see him. His voice alone was... affecting her.

"What's the matter, Granger? Run out of insults already?"

"No. I'm just getting started. Ready?"

"Give it your worst."

And they were off.

Snap berated her for every single time she'd waved her hand, and she tore him a new one over the incident with her teeth. He insulted the dress she wore to the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and she verbally walloped him for his horrid teaching practices. He blasted her for the chances she took while out hunting Horcruxes, and she lambasted him for not being better prepared for his own end.

That one brought them both up short.

"I mean, for God's sake! Why didn't you even try to defend yourself? You just stood there like a pillock!" she shouted, bursting into tears. "It was so... horrible! It was awful! Oh, god, I still wake up at night and hear the sound!" She buried her face in her hands.

"Granger," he called softly, but she was so far gone she barely heard. "Granger, untie me."

She pulled her hands away. "What?"

"Untie me, damn it."

She shrugged and picked up her wand. "Oh, what the hell. *Finite*," she mumbled through her tears. She dropped her face back into her hands as the ropes slithered away and dissolved.

There was a rustling of cloth and then she felt his arms go around her. It was clumsy, obviously comfort wasn't his strong suit, but that made the gesture even more painfully wonderful. Enveloped by the wood smoke and spicy scent at last, she sagged into his arms and started sobbing again.

"It had to be the snake," he said quietly. "If Voldemort attacked me himself, there was no chance for me. Only Harry could kill him. But I could survive that snake. Of course I could. Didn't you even look at the list of my patents, you foolish little girl?"

She gave a snuffling hiccough. "No. It hurt enough just to see your name."

She untucked the corner of her towel just enough to mop at her face. "I'm sorry," she said when she'd calmed.

"For what?"

"Thinking the worst of you all those years."

"You were supposed to, child."

She snorted. "I'm not a child anymore. I thought you would have noticed that when I came flying over the desk naked."

He chuckled. "And that's a sight I won't soon forget. However, I'm trying to be decent here. If you keep untucking that towel, I'm going need to keep calling you a child just to remember where I am and whom I'm addressing."

She laughed. It felt good to laugh. She opened her eyes and was startled by what she saw.

His potion had worn off. He must have caught on by her expression because his earnest face soured, and he seemed to pull in on himself as he withdrew his arms.

He was much changed. His hair was longer and lankier, looking more like black seaweed than hair. His face was obscured by an unkempt beard that had grown nearly to his chest. His nose seemed even more crooked than she remembered, and his eyes seemed almost hidden behind purple bruises. His clothes were threadbare and tired. She realized by the rents that they had to be the same robes he'd been wearing the day he'd been 'killed'.

Wood smoke. Oh, gods. The memories she'd been avoiding were of her miserable camping trip that last year before the final battle.

She blinked and then tilted her head. "Where have you been living these last years?" she asked.

He pulled his arms away and sat back against the wall, scowling magnificently. "In a cave in the Forbidden forest."

"And you've been using Cranesbill as a disinfectant, haven't you? Are you hurt?"

He shrugged. "I had a run-in with the Centaurs a month ago. My injury is slow to heal."

She grimaced. "And if this law passes, you won't even have enough to buy food, will you?"

"I said as much," he snapped, fully defensive and completely nasty again.

She nodded and crawled over to the desk, reaching underneath and grabbing her real brief. With a tap, the stack of parchment became visible again.

He tsked in obvious disgust.

"Don't get mad at me," she snarked. "You fell for it."

"How do you know I wasn't reacting to the full moon you just displayed?"

She jerked upright and felt herself blush, but then smiled. "I'll get you for that one later. Right now I need to make a loophole. Are you hungry? I have some Chinese under stasis and a box with more food over in the corner. You know your way around a Muggle kitchen?"

He gave her a wary nod.

"Good. Make us some tea while I go get dressed. It's time to finish this."

He gave her a hard stare and then a sharp dip of his bearded chin before unfolding himself and standing up. He held out his hand, and she took it with a smile. She smiled deeper when she caught him staring at her cleavage.

:

Hermione celebrated the implementation of the newly revised patent law a month later by going to lunch with Harry and Ron.

"So how did you get around it?" asked Ron.

"Oh, that was actually pathetically easy. I just introduced language that stated basically 'Unless contested by the deceased' and then arranged to have Snape give his own statement in the Shrieking Shack. That poor building is destined to have the worst reputation forever. Anyway, Snape has a slew of marvelous potions that can make him look quite ghostlike. He made the poor court officer wet himself.

"I plan on helping him create a dummy company so he can patent his newest creations. He should start earning a tidy income within a year."

"So his money's secure, but what about him?" asked Harry. "I really can't see him content to just be dead. I would have thought he'd want to be recognized for his efforts."

"Not a bit of it," she said. "He's done with the Wizarding World except as a means of income. He's rather content for the moment. He's living in my parents' house now and currently digging up the garden to plant potions ingredients. He actually gets on with the neighbors and is making a nice little life for himself in the Muggle suburbs. I tried to pay him to be a caretaker, and he tried to pay me rent. He won't take charity, and I won't take his money, so we're at a standstill on that point."

"That must have led to a few arguments," said Ron, looking at her closely.

She gave him a secretive smile.

"I knew it!" he said with mock despair. "I guess this means I have to go find someone else to bicker with now as well."

"You probably should. I'd forgotten how much fun the rest of it could be."

He winced. "Please. No details."

"Now you know how I feel!" cried Harry.

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Back at her desk after lunch, she pulled out a thick stack of files and began drafting a brief to dissolve a law making it illegal to yell at a corpse in Lincolnshire.

She flexed her neck from side to side, trying to work out a kink. She'd slept all night in the crook of Severus' arm and was paying for it.

She jumped when she felt warm fingers slide across the skin and start kneading at the crick. The smell of wood smoke, cranesbill and bergamot enveloped her, and she smiled. He'd made himself a cologne when she expressed how much she missed his distinct scent.

Now that he was no longer living in a cave, his health had improved. He'd filled out a bit, healed his nose and the gash on his leg that had been bothering him. She'd magically altered some of her father's old clothes for him and eventually, he even started wearing them, although the majority seemed to have turned black.

The bruised eyes and bruised ego were healing.

"How did you get in here?" she whispered. She glanced up, but couldn't see him. "Halpurnicus put all sorts of wards up after your last adventure here."

"*Death Eater...*" he said with gentle mockery.

She laughed. "Are you going to haunt me again?"

"I rather liked haunting you before. Are you coming over for dinner tonight?"

He asked it casually enough, but she was learning him and knew enough to pick up the subtle hint of awkwardness. He still wasn't comfortable with all the bits and pieces that went into having a relationship. He needed space, and yet was a bit clingy.

They had danced around each other for two tension-filled days before they'd finally tumbled into bed in the midst of an argument. She knew he obviously found her irresistible from the way he constantly touched her. He was learning that as independent as she was, she needed to feel little upon occasion when she was drained. A bad day of work was met with a quiet offer of tea and an arm to wrap around her and hold her close.

She was slowly becoming addicted to the man.

She breathed in his scent and let it out slowly. "That depends. What are you making for dinner?"

She felt his clean-shaven face nuzzle her cheek. "Roast beef and veg." That time, there was a distinct tone of submerged playfulness. He was so obviously enthralled by the way she could hold her own when they argued and loved to start little ones just for his own amusement. They rarely ever finished them, they usually grew distracted.

"I hate roast beef and veg. What about cannelloni?" she said, tilting her head to the side and offering her neck. "I have a taste for Italian."

"Faux-Italian food is for philistines, and pasta will make your arse fat." He kissed his way to her ear and bit it gently.

"Maybe I'm trying to grow a protective layer of fat so your boney hips won't leave bruises."

"If you exercised more you'd be more flexible. I wouldn't have to struggle so much." His knuckles grazed her jaw. Oh, lord, he was a sensual creature. Her heart started to pound.

"Well, if you... weren't so... Damn it. I can't think. Kiss me, and get out of here. The more you make me dawdle, the later I'll be."

He tilted her head back and gave her a scorching kiss that curled her toes. With a last, lingering caress, his scent faded.

She sighed, smiling like a loon in the direction she assumed he'd left in. "Oh, heavens. I think I love that man."

"I heard that," he said from across the room where a window was opening silently.

She whipped her head around and glared at the window. "You cheated!"

"*Spy*," he drawled with a dark chuckle.

As the window slid closed, she heard his voice whisper, "And I think I love you, too."
