

Of Muggles and Magic

by Aurette

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

Overture

Chapter 1 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

AN: This one is a birthday gift for the amazing Mollysister, who asked for one thing, and got this instead. It is an amalgamation of Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Gaskell, with a smidgen of Wm. M. Thackeray, and a very healthy dose of J.K. Rowling. It is AU in the truest sense of the term. I do stick to the Potter storyline in the background, but trust me, even that is alternative. You will understand as you read.

It has been beta-ed by Karelia and astopperindeath, and britpicked by HebeGB, who did double duty as Regency checker and did her level best to fend off my worst interpretations of British Society in the 19th Century. I drove myself demented researching facts, so please be kind when you spot an anachronism or a flaw, I truly did my best.

I own nothing but my fried brain cells.

1812...

Hermione watched as more trunks were loaded onto the cart outside her window. The rain had stopped, and Stephens and Thomas were scrambling to get the cart filled and covered with an oilcloth before it started again. Hester and old Mrs. Crabtree were flitting about, shouting encouragement and dire threats in that order. Thomas dropped a trunk, and it splashed water on Mrs. Crabtree's apron. Hermione winced and turned away from the window, hoping not to hear the ensuing shouts. She was unsuccessful.

"But why are we moving, Mum? I like it ever so much here. I don't want to move. It's so sudden!"

"Hermione, we've been over this before. It is an excellent opportunity for your father. His last paper on Modern Dentistry was highly received, and Sir Dalrymple told him to come straight away. He needs to strike while the iron is hot, as they say, to help set his reputation in the field. This is an excellent opportunity, child. He has been recognized by the scientific community for his work in proving microscopic animals have an effect on tooth decay. If we move to London, not only will he be able to expand his practice, but he will be able to take on an apprentice and lecture."

"But what about you? You wrote half of that paper yourself. Would it not be possible for you to lecture as well?"

Mrs. Granger snatched the sprigged muslin dress Hermione had been folding into a lump out of her daughter's hand and shook it back out. She took several deep breaths before she gave her daughter an over-bright smile.

"You must treat your things with respect, dear. If you wad them up like that, they will look dreadful when you pull them back out of the trunk. The servants do not need the

extra work, and besides, we will have far fewer of them once we get to London, at least for the foreseeable future."

Mrs. Granger carefully folded the dress and placed it in the trunk and followed it with Hermione's matching Spencer.

"As for that paper, I would thank you not to repeat that to anyone. No one but your father knows that I helped to write it. If the world found out his wife was his partner, he would be a laughingstock. I will no longer be helping in your father's surgery."

"But why? You are just as capable as he is, he says as much himself."

"It is not actually fitting for a woman in my position, dear. He has been wonderful in his indulgence of me, but the time has come to put an end to it."

Hermione fell into speechless sputtering before she let out an indignant snort. Her mother shook her head sadly.

"I worry for you, child. As much as I am extremely pleased with your intelligence, I must say that I fear for your common sense. You are eleven years old; surely you know by now that our sex is dependent on the generosity of our husbands' minds. Men like your father are few and far between. It would be best if you took these notions of equality you have and tossed them into the sweepings along with those books on fairy tales you burned when you were seven."

Hermione flopped back onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling.

"Mother, I got rid of those books because they were patently foolish. Once I was old enough to understand magic wasn't real, I was incensed. How thoughtless it was to make me believe in such things as a child, only to tear it away with a laugh once I grew older. Now you are trying to get me to believe that women are innately inferior to men after I have spent all my life watching you and father treating each other as equals. It leaves a child hardly able to trust in anything. Is up really up? Is down really down? Are we really moving to London? Is my name really Hermione?" She shoved herself up on her elbows. "And what do you mean fewer servants? Whom are we letting go? How will they get along without us? Have you found them proper employment elsewhere?"

Mrs. Granger sighed and leaned against the trunk.

"Hermione, this *is* a great opportunity for your father, but I will tell you truthfully that things are going to be a bit desperate for a while. Until he gets his practice up and running, we will be living on a much stricter budget. The cost of living in London is much higher. We have rented a nice house, not as large as this one, but we cannot afford to keep all of the staff. We will only be taking Cook and Mrs. Crabtree and, yes, I have found placement for everyone else. Of course I did. It is not their fault that we are up and leaving on a few days' notice"

"But wait, what about Stephens? Who's going to look after our horses?"

Her mother let out a shuddering sigh full of pain. "My mare and your pony have been sold to the family that will be taking up this house after us, along with most of the furniture."

"But...!"

"Enough, Hermione," she said in a harsh, clipped tone. "It is for the greater good. Put your tears away; there is no more room for them. You *will* be brave for your father. You will hurt him terribly if he sees your tears."

Hermione fell silent immediately, choking back her bitter disappointment. Her mother indulged her endless questions on most occasions but never after her voice reached that tone. Hermione swallowed clumsily around the lump of tears in her throat and finished helping her mother pack in silence. The sudden knot of pain in her belly tightened its grip with each thing her mother told her would have to stay behind.

Dinner was a miserable affair, with Hermione and her mother both pretending they were happy about the changes, Mr. John Granger pretending he didn't see the sadness in their eyes, and sniffling Gretchen serving the meal as if it wasn't their last as her employer. The pain in her belly spread up her spine to her head, and after a few bites, she excused herself to retire early.

Once in her room, she changed into her best cotton nightgown, wrapped herself in her nicest shawl, and flopped onto the embroidered seat before her mirror. The reflection of her room looked barren and empty. The crackle of the fire echoed too loudly, and the lone candle on her table seemed too pitiful for the job of illuminating all the empty spaces. Only the furniture that had been sold was left. Her wardrobe, her chest, and her reading chair by the window were gone. She bit her lip against the tears that threatened and unpinned her hair, pulling apart the plaits, hoping the sharp pain in her skull would settle. She closed her eyes and tried to be as resolute and determined as her mother about her fate and dragged her brush slowly through her thick curls.

It was at times like these that she missed Rebecca the most. Her childhood governess had always come in before bed and made a ritual of brushing Hermione's hair out. Her nimble fingers had always made short work of her night plait, and they would often talk about what life would be like when Hermione was grown. Rebecca had never laughed whenever Hermione had said she wanted to study medicine. She'd always told her that she was intelligent enough to do just that.

What a terribly cruel thing to tell a child when it was just a lie. And how terrible and cruel was it that Hermione should still resent that Mr. Landownes had taken her Rebecca away and married her last autumn? Rebecca had been her only friend. The other girls in the village were flighty, stupid beings, and as an only child, Hermione had grown used to being alone. But when Rebecca had come into her life three years before, it had been like the answer to a prayer. And then, like a blown out candle, she was gone again.

Rebecca was very happy now. Hermione had the sudden feeling that it would be a long time before she was happy again.

She didn't want to be petty. It wasn't in her nature. But it was a hard thing to lose one's only friend and then so quickly after that to lose her home and her pony. At least she was allowed to keep her books.

She looked out the window at the south pasture, recently dug up for seeding. The moon glistened in the muddy puddles that she would never get to inspect for interesting insects again.

The pain in her head increased as her need to cry grew. It was nearly blinding now.

She finished tying off her plait and pulled a cap over her head before staring at her reflection in the mirror. She would not cry. She tilted her chin up and clenched her jaw against the pain. She would not cry. An image of some other little girl riding her beautiful pony flashed before her eyes, and she curled her hands into fists. She would not cry. The knowledge that she would never be allowed to study medicine scraped down her body like broken glass, and a jagged sob escaped her.

"Oh, please..." she moaned, pleading to the Almighty for strength as her lip started to quiver. She bit it. She was losing her fight. A single tear spilled down her cheek, and when she saw its reflection sparkle in the candlelight, she was overcome with irrational fury. "*No!*"

Hermione groaned as her shout instigated an explosion of pain in her head that instantly dissipated to nothing, taking all the other pains with it. At first she thought that she had gone blind, but then the moonlight filtered back into the room, and she turned her head. All light had vanished. Not only had her candle been snuffed out, but the fire in the small grate was out. Blue smoke curled up the flue, where a moment before there had been a warm crackle.

Hermione blinked several times, and then a chilled claw seemed to scuttle along her scalp. She instinctively knew that the fire hadn't just gone out. She'd made it happen. The pain in her head had made it happen. She was terrified. She was caught between running for her mother and hiding under the bed.

She took several deep breaths and pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She couldn't ask for the fire to be relit. She would have to explain.

She couldn't have explained if her life had depended on it. The only thing she understood was that she had done something very, very wrong. Unnatural, old Mrs. Crabtree would call it.

She slowly stood up and made her way into bed. She wrapped herself tightly in her quilts and resolutely closed her eyes.

It was a long time before she fell asleep.

The house in London was always full of sounds and smells. Outside, the constant clip-clopping of the carriage horses played on endlessly while the intermittent sounds of screaming bubbled up from downstairs. Even the stink of blood seemed to seep through the floor and fill her nostrils, just as the smell of rot and decay and horse manure snuck in from the streets.

London was an eleven-year-old girl's perfect idea of hell.

Hermione had given it her best try, she really had, but she hated the city. She hated this house, with its 'convenient' shop-front downstairs. All day long, she couldn't escape the sounds of people in pain as her father tended to an abscessed tooth or cut away rotted gums. She had been isolated from the reality of what her parents' living entailed before. Sure, she had heard cries, but they had been muffled by several layers of stone, not these thin wooden floors, with their threadbare carpets, that made one feel like their feet were going to fall through and land on top of some poor unfortunate patient.

She especially hated the smell of the city, particularly in the summer, or on those days when the wind blew in from the Thames. The unending stench was unbearable. Last week, an old dog had died and had been left on the street to rot for days.

The only day she lived for was Sunday. On Sundays, the city quieted down, and her father's practice was closed. Sundays, they would dress in their best clothes and perhaps walk to the park after church, or go and visit with her father's mother. Her grandmother, Lady Granger, was a disapproving, dried-up stick of a woman, but the stroll to her house was pleasant and the meals were always fine, even if Grandmother didn't allow her to eat at table with the adults. It smelled better in that part of London, as well.

Today was not Sunday. Today was Thursday, and The Hon. Thaddeus Carlisle needed eight teeth pulled. The screaming was horrible.

Hermione retreated to her bedroom, closed the door, climbed under the covers, and stuffed her pillow over her head, but the spine-chilling shrieks and the pitiful begging still bled through.

She started to cry. She was long past trying not to cry anymore. It wasn't a matter of being brave anymore; it was a matter of simply not having the strength to pretend. She could deal with the lowering of her expectations and dreams, but she couldn't pretend she wasn't horrified by what her parents did for a living, even if she knew in her mind that they were potentially saving lives.

Another round of screams rang out through the house, and Hermione added her own.

"*Silence!*" she shouted into her mattress.

The sudden loss of all sound left her feeling like her ears were going to pop. She pulled the pillow off her head and sat up. There was no sound at all.

She turned her head to the window and saw the carriages, both the fine ones pulled by splendid teams of horses, and the hackneys pulled by weary old nags. They made no noise.

Hermione felt her blood grow cold as she scrambled off the bed and over to the window. She snapped her fingers in front of her face, but they made no sound. She tapped on the window. Nothing. She threw up the sash and was greeted by a cacophony. She slammed the window shut and the silence returned.

Her hair crawled around on her scalp as she made her way across her tiny bedchamber and over to the door. As soon as she opened it, she heard the screaming. She closed it quickly.

She backed away, shaking.

"Oh, Hermione Jean. What have you done now?"

A man stepped out onto the street of a busy industrial town in the north with a black cape draped over his arm and a valise clutched in his hand. He closed the door behind him firmly and reached up and placed his fingertips against the door for a moment. If the gesture was beseeching, or some form of benediction, it couldn't be told by his expression. That was hard and angry. He spun away from the door and headed off.

He cut a rather imposing figure as he dodged the cluster of woman plucking poultry in the middle of the street without a spare glance. He had features that could best be described as 'strong' and, worst, could be described with whole paragraphs that dwelt on his nose alone. He was tall and thin, and sported long, black hair, topped with an elegant black John Bull hat. His gaunt frame was draped in a severe black coat, waistcoat, pantaloons and high boots.

Those who saw him for the first time were never sure if he was a cleric or an undertaker.

His face discouraged inquiries.

He headed down the street toward the corner, amidst the clamor of street peddlers, and the bellowing of draymen and their teams, and the ever-present sound of the mills spinning away all over the city.

A young boy, maybe nine years of age, face covered with soot and dirt, hurried up with a broom and swept some horse droppings out of his path.

"There you are, Mr. Snape," the boy said with a gap-toothed smile. The man pulled a coin from his pocket and flicked it. The boy smiled and tugged on his forelock when he'd caught it and fell into step next to the man. "Thank you kindly, Mr. Snape. Is you off to your school again?"

"Indeed," the man replied.

"Then I'll be seeing you at Christmas. You have a good year, Mr. Snape."

"Keep yourself out of trouble, Simon," the man growled before he headed into the alley towards the canal.

"I will, sir! No more trouble for me, you can count on it!" shouted the boy as he scampered after another potential customer.

The man gave every appearance of being unaware of his surroundings as he left the gloom of the alley, so deep were the thoughts on his face. This was untrue. He was acutely aware of every man, woman, child, dog and rat within a hundred-foot radius of him as he made his way along the towpath. That was why, when he spun into a turn under the bridge and disappeared with the softest pop, he knew no one had seen him.

The door to the Headmaster's office swung open and the austere-looking man entered. The ancient-looking man behind the desk looked up and smiled with genuine affection.

"Severus! Welcome back. I trust you had a good summer? All is well with your family?"

"My mother is as sour as ever; however, my father's health is failing and he refuses my help. My summer was a mélange of miseries best not spoken of. What about you, Dumbledore? How was your excursion to the Isle of Wight?"

"I always find the fresh sea air delightful. I had a wonderful time, thank you. Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you, Headmaster. Now that we have dispensed with the civilities, I would prefer if you explained why you needed to see me right away. I have things to do before the new students arrive tomorrow."

"Of course. It's actually about a new student. Minerva has been in charge of gathering the Muggle students for the new term, but she took ill."

"Is she alright?"

"Perfectly; she's upstairs in the infirmary recuperating as we speak. However, it wasn't until she awoke from her fever this morning that we came to understand that there were a handful of students still on her list that she didn't have time to attend to."

"And you need me to gather a lost lamb?"

"Precisely."

"Fine. Give me his direction, and I will go a'gathering."

"Her."

"Her?"

"I think your hearing is up to snuff, as they say."

"But surely Muggle girls deal better with a woman's touch? And who would we use as a chaperone? Perhaps it would be better to send Pomona."

"I agree, but Pomona is already scurrying after another lost lamb, as is Septima, and Irma won't be here until tomorrow at the earliest. It was you or Filius. As you know, Hagrid is busy looking after the most important of our incoming charges, and, well, Professor Quirrell might get himself lost."

"And yet you trust him to teach defense."

"I have my reasons, Severus."

"Which you refuse to share, as always."

"I think it best to play my cards close to the chest in this. I have a feeling more is in the wind than just the return of young Mister Potter to the Wizarding world."

"Ah."

"Indeed."

"Very well, but if these Muggles decide not to send their precious daughter off to school with me, it will not be my fault."

"Do make every effort, Severus. This child came very late to her magic. She only stabilized in the book in early spring of this year, and I suspect she might be in quite a state. If the lack of a proper chaperone is their only quibble, then you have my permission to be a tiny bit *persuasive*. I expect you to do everything within reason to ensure the child arrives safely tomorrow."

The Headmaster handed over a slip of parchment. A quick look out the window showed that the sun had nearly set. "You'd best be off. Try to blend in a bit." He waved at Snape's attire, with a laugh. "Even when you dress as a Muggle, you scare them."

The gaunt man gave his employer a long-suffering look and then nodded. "I will see what I can do, Headmaster."

Emissary

Chapter 2 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale. As AU as you get. M for later chapters.

"It sounds terribly suspicious to me. No one has ever heard of this school. I have asked around, and I assure you, my society friends haven't either. I think if it sounds too good to be true, it is. The Almighty does not give anything we have not worked for until we deserve it. Besides, it is not as if you have the money to send her off to a fancy finishing school. Or is that what this is all about, John? Are you angling for a loan? Tell me you are not already living above your means now that you have returned to London?"

"Good heavens, no, Mother. Please, I beg you. Try to have a little more faith in me."

Hermione heard the footman's steps approach and slipped back away from the doorway and scurried to the steps leading up to the old nursery. She was livid. How dare that old battle axe imply her father was trying to beg money from her? And what had she ever done to deserve her wealth? She was only the widow of a Baronet. Her own father had been a merchant. It wasn't as if she was even that high up the social ladder.

Hermione's father was a fourth son and, therefore, quite out of the running as far as any serious money was concerned, but he made a good living with his practice. It was more than enough to supplement his and her mother's meager competencies. Hermione had eavesdropped on enough of their conversations, since that first serendipitous letter from the school, to know that they were sure they could afford the fees.

She heard more footsteps and scrambled back up to the neglected nursery in her stocking feet, gripping her kidskin slippers and her muslin skirts in her hands so she could move quickly and as quietly as a mouse.

She barely had time to retie the ribbons on her shoes before Charles, the footman, appeared in the doorway.

"Lady Granger has asked that Miss Granger join them in the parlor," he said with stiff grace.

"Thank you, Charles."

Hermione followed him out the door without a backwards glance. With any luck, that would be her last meal in this dreadful room.

"Come in, child, don't skulk about in the doorway."

"Sorry, Grandmother. I wasn't intending to skulk."

She received a withering stare for her impudence and sent her father a worried look. He smiled and winked at her.

"So, gel. I hear you are to be sent off to finishing school." Lady Granger put her spectacles up to her eyes and made a production of looking Hermione up and down. "I highly doubt this school is even worth it. She might come from good family, but she is plain as an ox and those teeth of hers are rather off putting. The dancing instructor you wasted on her reported that she had not grace, nor balance. Sadly, I think any more finishing would be folly. Save your money."

"Mother, I won't have you speak about my child so. She is merely eleven. There is plenty of time for her to come into her beauty."

"John, do not lie to yourself. Even her hair rebels against good society."

Hermione lifted her hand up and, touching her carefully pinned braids, felt the mild fuzz that always resulted from the damp. The misty rain that had started as they walked here had ruined her style again.

"Enough," said her father. He stood, and with a quick nod to his wife, he turned to Hermione. "Say your farewells, daughter. It will be quite some time before you see your grandmother again."

Hermione felt her heart swell at her father's blatant rudeness and her grandmother's frozen-stone expression. That he would walk out before the luncheon was officially over, in her defense, spoke more than any words. And her father had never been one to stint on words, either.

She curtsied prettily. "Thank you, Grandmother, for allowing me this lovely visit. I enjoyed it ever so much."

Her mother turned her towards the door, away from Lady Granger's stony silence.

"Well done, love," her mother whispered in her ear as they headed for the foyer. Behind them, there was an angry murmuring as Mr. John Granger locked horns with Lady Andrew Granger.

He joined them at the door just as Charles arrived with their hats and gloves.

Together, the three headed out into the misty drizzle.

Hermione paced back and forth across her small room listening for the sound of a carriage over the sound of the driving rain. Three paces back, followed by three paces forth, and she had covered the whole of it twice over. Outside, the wind howled as the rain lashed the window. The late summer storm was fierce, and the occasional lightning streaked across the sky, temporarily blinding her.

Her trunks were packed and waiting by the stairs. She had her own valise ready to go, and her Spencer and gloves were waiting on the bed next to her best bonnet. She sighed. Even the fastest dash to a carriage would destroy her poor bonnet.

If she was going to be dashing at all.

Her father had developed last minute reservations in the face of a last minute cancellation. The school governess, Miss McGonagall, had charmed and delighted her parents when her letters had arrived last August, but then she had failed to show at their scheduled meeting yesterday, and they had only received a note of explanation this morning. Whomsoever the school sent in her place would have to be rather impressive to get beyond her father's sense of injured dignity.

Another turn, another three paces, and she was back at her window, staring down at the rain pounding on the front steps below.

A violent flash of lightning revealed a man standing on the steps staring up at her window. The following flashes confirmed he was, in fact, looking right into her eyes. The subsequent crash and roll of thunder muffled the abrupt scream that she barely managed to stifle as she flew backwards three and a half steps and slammed up against her bedroom door.

A loud knocking echoed from down below. *Please don't let that be someone from the school*, she begged. She was convinced that whoever was at the door was absolutely the most terrifying person she'd ever laid eyes on. She gathered up her courage and set her shoulders. It didn't make a difference if it was or not. Hermione was going to that school tonight if she had to sneak out. She loved her parents dearly, but if she spent any more time in this city, she would go mad. She was already going mad. What other explanation could there be for what had been happening to her. She was going, come hell or high water.

She stepped back over to the window where another flash of storm revealed that the water down below was quite high, indeed.

"Hermione, dear," her mother called through the door. "Come and meet Master Snape."

Master Snape was decidedly less terrifying when seen looking half drowned whilst dripping on the faded carpet, next to the grate. And yet, somehow he didn't look any more pleasant, either. His clothes, despite their sodden state, were of a fine cut. His bottle green jacket and dun-colored waistcoat spoke of good taste. His elegant, yet simple, cravat and his highly-polished boots spoke of both wealth and restraint.

As she sank into her best curtsy, it occurred to her that he might just possibly be the ugliest man she had ever seen, despite his fine clothes.

"Tell me, Schoolmaster, what is your subject at this... *Hogwarts* School for the Gifted?"

Hermione's heart sank when she realized her father was supremely underwhelmed by the man slowly soaking the floor near the fire. She sent the stranger a beseeching look, and his dark eyes widened a fraction before he looked to her father.

Master Snape cleared his throat. "My specialty involves the Sciences," he said in a shockingly deep voice.

"Ah," her father said with an echo of his mother's voice. "A man of *science*. A *northern* man of science, unless I am mistaken by your accent?"

The schoolmaster bristled, and she watched as he nodded his head with a strained twitch of the lips that she suspected was supposed to be a polite smile.

"You must have some interesting views about science, seeing as life in the north has clearly benefited so greatly from the industrialization."

Master Snape's eyes flashed, and he flicked a quick glance at her, as if wondering if she were worth the insult. She returned a brittle smile of her own.

"It is, as you say, much changed. I will let history decide if it is a change for the better or for the worse. I am too busy teaching my charges to have any worthy comment and will let honorable men such as yourself fill the air with opinion instead."

Hermione sucked in a breath, realizing that her chances of making it out the door had most likely just died under the onslaught of Master Snape's subtle rebuke.

Mrs. Crabtree came waddling in, lugging the tea tray just in the nick of time.

Her mother practically lunged at the tray and began to pour. "Won't you have a seat, Master Snape? Our furniture will survive your damp assault, I am sure," she said with a warm smile. "How do you take your tea?"

The schoolmaster nodded his head politely and, after fastidiously flicking the tails of his coat out of the way, perched on the edge of the chair across from the settee with a striking amount of grace. He crossed one long leg over the other and said, "Milk and sugar, if you please, madam."

He reached forward and took his cup, and Hermione saw his manners were precise and unaffected, far less affected than her Grandmother's and far more elegant. He appeared to be a gentleman of some standing, aside from his teaching duties.

Hermione sat on the cushion next to her mother and bit her lip. From what she could decipher, her mother had chosen sides against her husband's rudeness. There was still hope.

"I understand your colleague has taken gravely ill," Mr. Granger drawled. "What reassurances can you give me that I am not sending my daughter off to a school with a pestilential atmosphere?"

Hermione felt her hope wither ever smaller.

"Is she well? Your Miss McGonagall?" Hermione threw out into the room.

Every head swiveled in her direction, and she suddenly wanted to sink through the settee and straight down into the surgery below them. A chorus of 'children are seen not heard' played in her head.

"She is well enough and is expected to be fully recovered by tomorrow," he replied gently.

"I thought she was taken with fever," her father mused. "That's what the note we received this morning said."

Master Snape looked nonplussed for a moment. "It was a minor illness, but there was fever, yes. She is under the school's best care."

"I thought this school was in Scotland. How the devil was she supposed to pick my daughter up yesterday, if she was languishing in Scotland with some mysterious ailment?"

Master Snape seemed to turn a slight shade of green.

"Forgive me. I misspoke. I have been traveling all day, and I find I am not at my best. She is in a care facility associated with our school. It is not far from here."

"What is the name of this care facility? Are we talking about a private hospital?" Mr. Granger's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Pomfrey House is a very exclusive place of healing. Only available to students, faculty and alumni."

"Do they teach medicine at Hogwarts?" Hermione blurted again. She sank her teeth into her lip to try and stem her stupidity and poor manners.

"Hermione," her mother pleaded. "I'm sure if they did, it would still not be a part of the curriculum they offer to young ladies. Tell, her, Master Snape. Tell her about the subjects she would be partaking in."

Snape caught her eye, and for the briefest moment, she felt like she might fall into his gaze.

"History, Mathematics, Science, Horticulture, Charm, Greek, Latin, French, Dance, Music, and Deportment."

Silence filled the room and Master Snape cocked his head to the side as if wondering what he had done wrong.

"That is a lot of education for a girl," Mr. Granger said with no small amount of awe in his voice. "Master Snape, I am going to ask again why my Hermione? Why have we never heard of this school before? Surely it would make waves with such a broad and, dare I say, a nearly scandalous amount of learning opportunities for young women?"

"Mr. Granger, the school is private because it does not wish to be crushed under the weight of all the people who would desire to have their children attend if it were known about. As for why your daughter, I will ask you a question first. Have you ever looked at your daughter and known that she was different? Have you ever seen a way about her and thought she was not quite of this world? That perhaps she had a destiny?"

Again, the silence in the room was nearly insurmountable. Hermione felt her heart hammering in her chest and discreetly rubbed her hands against the skirts of her linen gown.

The schoolmaster turned his black, crow eye on her and asked, "Have you not ever felt different, child? Have you not, perhaps, felt like there was something about you that made you feel as if you didn't quite belong in the mundane world of others?"

He knew. It was a ludicrous thought how could anyone know?...and yet, somehow, she felt in her bones that he knew she was different, and he didn't seem to find that a bad thing.

"Yes," she answered in a dry voice, tilting her chin up and giving him a challenging stare.

"My daughter is a highly intelligent girl, Master Snape," her mother said in a soft voice. "As my old nurse used to say, 'every crow thinks her own a swan.' Setting aside a mother's natural tendency to think her children special, I will try to impress on you one point. My daughter truly is brighter than other children, boy or girl."

"My wife speaks the truth," her father said.

Hermione stared at her parents, overcome with emotion at the sheer amount of defiant pride in their voice. Her mother may have spent all these months in London trying to dispel Hermione's notion of someday using her brains, but plainly, her mother was still proud as a peacock that her daughter had them.

"This is why your daughter was chosen. Our alumni are always on the lookout for a child that is out of the ordinary. Your daughter was selected for her singular qualities. If you allow her to attend our school, her talents will be honed, her skills fully developed, and a world of opportunity will be made available to her that will not exist ever again, if you chose a different path for her. However, I must ask that you decide quickly. I have a long journey ahead of me, one that will be even longer if you chose to let me take your daughter with me. I would need to make a start soon. If you have any further questions, I must insist that you ask them now."

Hermione looked at her parents with her heart in her throat and her desire plain in her eyes.

"Please let me go," she whispered.

Hermione stood in the entryway of her house while her parents, Cook, and Mrs. Crabtree all fussed over each other about how much they were going to miss her. She watched as Master Snape stood out in the rain under her father's umbrella to call a hack. How he expected one to see him in the pouring rain in the dark was beyond her. A flash of lightning off on the horizon showed him at the edge of the pavement, holding up what looked like a baton. To her surprise, a large coach pulled right up to the curb as if it had been waiting for just that signal. Everyone scrambled to hug her one more time as the driver climbed down and exchanged words with the schoolmaster.

Master Snape returned to the steps and held out his hand.

"I'll write to you every day," she called over her shoulder to her weeping parents as she took her teacher's hand and hurried down the stairs. He guided her to the carriage just as another flash of light revealed the driver huddled in his seat above, and another man tending her trunk and bags. Thunder crashed, and she jumped, and Snape placed a steady hand on her shoulder before opening the door and helping her in. As she fell into the seat behind the driver, she realized she no longer thought Master Snape the ugliest man she'd ever seen. The coachman took the cake.

The coachman stuck his head in the door to say something, but her teacher cut him off. "To The Leaky, Mr. Shunpike."

"Aye, Per'fessor, and welcome to the Knight Coach, Miss."

"Thank you, er..."

"Stan," the man said, whipping off his cap and splattering her with water.

"Get this blasted thing moving," snapped Master Snape as he took off his top hat and let the water drain off the brim onto the carpeted floor.

The carriage door closed with a slam.

Hermione leaned forward and waved uselessly to her parents through the rain. The coach started with a lurch, and she fell forward and hit the rear seat.

"Sit back and settle down, Miss Granger. I am in no mood to deal with foolish injuries."

"Yes, Master Snape."

"Professor Snape."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You will address me by my proper title. I am Professor Severus Snape; you will refer to me as such."

"Of course, Professor. As you wish."

They settled into silence, and she studied the strange man staring out the window at the streets that seemed to whip by whenever she caught a glimpse. The flickering light from the receding storm illuminated his prodigious nose, as well as his angry eyes. He saw her staring at him and snatched the curtain closed. It was as if he simply disappeared, so dark was it inside the carriage now.

Hermione felt a lump settle in her belly. Had she made a mistake? Any feelings she'd had that this man might understand her had evaporated as soon as the carriage set off. She went back over everything about this strange evening, and it occurred to her that her parents might have given him a slightly exaggerated idea of her abilities.

"Professor Snape?"

"What?" His voice, clipped and imperious in the darkness.

"I can't dance."

"How tragic."

"What I mean to say is, I have no balance. I'm just not that graceful. I'm not that accomplished in music either. As for Department, well, let's just say that I am far better at French..."

"Forget French."

"I'm sorry?"

"There will be no French."

She wished she could see him in the darkness to know if this was some sort of joke.

"I'm not following you, sir."

She heard the creak of leather as he sat forward in his seat. His voice came from just in front of her, and she wondered if his strange black eyes could see in the dark.

"There is no French. There is no Department. There most certainly is no class on Charm in the sense that you would understand. However..."

With each of his words, a new band of fear squeezed her heart. "Sir! I must ask you to turn this carriage around."

"...there is an extensive study of Potions..."

"Sir! Please! I don't understand why you lied to me and my parents, but I won't cause you the slightest bit of trouble, if you just return me to my home."

"...Transfiguration, Herbology, Defense against Dark Arts, Astronomy, and, of course, The..."

Fear gave way to panic. "TAKE ME HOME RIGHT NOW, YOU CLAP-ADDLED BOAT-LICKER!"

"...History of Magic."

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"*WHAT did you just call me?*"

For the curious, she called him a syphilitic mama's boy. Yup, she did.

Illumination

Chapter 3 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale. As AU as you get. M for later chapters.

The silent, oppressive darkness in the carriage was broken by the sound of ragged breathing. Hers came in short, hiccuping explosions, and his came in ferocious gusts through his prodigious nose.

She heard the creak of leather as he sat back against his seat, and she slowly pulled her own spine out of the seat she occupied and sat up straight.

"You will explain this insult immediately." His voice was low and threatening. Hermione had read the words "in a deadly voice" in penny-thriller books before. Now she had a rather good idea of what exactly that sounded like. She decided the situation called for bravery, determination, and, perhaps, a bit of honesty.

"To be completely candid, Professor...if indeed that is what you are...I don't actually know what I just called you. I just wanted you to turn the carriage around, and you weren't listening to me."

"I'm of half a mind to do just that. It would serve you right to end your days in ignorance. How does a young lady, such as yourself, the granddaughter of a Baronet, no less, come to have such a foul and wicked mouth?"

"Stephens."

"Stephens?"

"He kept my father's horses before we moved to London."

"Ahhhhh. Eavesdropping on the servants, Miss Granger? How coarse you are."

"No, sir! I only eavesdrop on my parents."

"You say that as if that is more acceptable."

"Isn't it mandatory for a child? How else is one to learn their fate, if not from overhearing it?"

"Indeed. You should take care when you listen in on your parents; you risk hearing what they actually think of you."

"I understand, sir."

"Do you?"

"Yes. For instance, I know that both of my parents think I am too plain to ever make a match, and yet they perpetuate the lie that someday I will suddenly transform into a great beauty. My father will even risk insulting his own mother to defend my nonexistent hope of future appeal. I detest lies. Adults lie to children all the time and then act confused when we believe them. They tell me I can be anything I want to be when I am seven and then treat me like a simpleton for actually assuming I could become a doctor when I am eleven. Was I simply to pick up the truth along the way by some form of mental absorption? It is a strange thing to know that the only people in the world who love you see nothing brighter in your future than being a governess someday."

"Believe me, Miss Granger. There are worse things a parent can think of their child. Now, if you didn't pick up your vocabulary from skulking after your servants with your ears wiggling, how exactly did you come to your, shall we say, colorfully ignorant euphemisms?"

"I would think the answer obvious."

"Pretend I'm slow."

"Surely, I must have asked him to teach me?"

"So you must have," he drawled.

"Have I satisfied your curiosity?"

"Barely, but it will suffice for now."

"Will you turn the carriage around and return me to my family now?"

"No."

The fear that had dissipated during their nearly polite exchange came stabbing back with vigor.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Do with you? I'm going to take you to school, you silly little girl."

"There really is a school?"

"Of course. What other reason would there be for me to confine myself in a carriage with a foul-mouthed little hoyden?"

"But you said..."

The leather creaked again, and she pressed herself back against her seat as she felt him draw near.

"What did I say, Miss Granger? Were you even listening? Or were you too busy rudely interrupting?"

"No, sir. I heard you quite clearly. You admitted to having lied to my parents about the curriculum and then went jabbering on about some other courses of study with obviously fraudulent names."

"Such as?"

"Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology, Defense against Dark Arts, Astronomy that one sounds rather exciting and..."

"And?"

"I admit, I must have misheard you with the last one. I thought for a wild moment that you had said there was a course on the History of..."

"Lumos."

"...Magic..."

Hermione's words trailed off into silence as the carriage filled with a cold blue light emanating from the tip of Mas Professor Snape's baton. His eyes stared at her intently, judging her reaction as if it was some sort of test. She struggled as the urge to cry welled up and didn't know if it was because she was frightened, shocked, or *relieved*. She swallowed with difficulty and took a deep breath before lifting her chin and reaching out to touch the cold light.

He pulled the baton out of reach, muttering, and with a flick, the light leapt to the ceiling of the coach where it spread out and pulsed.

"A Gryffindor, or I'll eat my hat. No wonder I find you so annoying. Mustn't touch what isn't yours, Miss Granger."

"Gryffindor?" she whispered absently whilst staring at the light pulsing on the ceiling. "How did you do that?"

"Then again, perhaps a Ravenclaw. It's magic, Miss Granger. It is the real reason you were selected for our school. You are a witch."

Hermione's head snapped back down to the man sitting across from her smirking with what looked suspiciously like contempt.

"I admit to having a rude temper, Professor Snape, but even you must see that I was fairly pushed to my limit from the fear that I was being carried off as some sort of plot. I see no reason for you to call me insulting names in return. You are the adult in this situation. I am most disappointed in you. I had thought you quite the gentleman up until now."

"I imagine with a slight pause whilst you assumed I was a kidnapper?"

"Obviously."

For the first time she saw a gleam of what might have been an amused expression.

"I did *not* insult you, girl. I was *explaining*. I am one of your teachers; it will be a common occurrence. You should also know that I seldom explain things *twice*, so pay attention."

He began to flick his baton in sharp and increasingly more complex patterns. In the blink of an eye, they were both dry, wrinkle free, and warm. She lifted up her hand and touched the brim of her bonnet and smiled to find it back in its proper shape.

"Magic. Miss Granger. You are a magic user. You were born with an innate talent that separates you from the Muggle *non*-magic users, such as your parents. Females are referred to as witches. Males are called wizards. We hide from the rest of Muggle society, so we don't end up burned at the stake anymore. Your magic was dormant for far longer than is usual. My notes reflect that although your name flickered several times in the book, it did not darken enough to add you to the list until this past spring. That means your magic didn't become an integral part of you until then. Usually, it manifests at a much younger age."

"It did," she whispered.

"Did it, now?"

"I made my dolls dance in my grandmother's garden once. I was six or seven at the time. When I ran to tell my parents what I had done, they were quite angry at me. My grandmother took great pains to let me know how foolish I was and that magic didn't actually exist. I was so ashamed. It never happened again."

She dropped her gaze down to her lap. "I threw all of my fairy books and magical stories in the rubbish fire when we returned to the country after that." A fat tear finally escaped and rolled down her face.

"Magic is a strange thing, Miss Granger. The link between a witch and her magic can be intuitive. It is possible that you understood even then that there was a threat if you were to be discovered, and you made your own magic go dormant until it simply couldn't lay dormant any longer."

"It was another lie. They lied to me again." She scrubbed angrily at her face. "You cannot trust what people tell you. Only what you read in books."

"That is utter nonsense."

"I don't believe you."

His head snapped back and he gaped at her, plainly insulted. "I'm one of your instructors. Why on earth wouldn't you believe me?"

"Because I haven't read it in a book yet."

"You had better rid yourself of that foolishness, you silly little girl. I will have an enormous amount of knowledge to impart to you and little time for idiocy."

"And I will willingly absorb the needed information when it is confirmed by a text."

By the time the coach came to a stop, they were sitting on opposite sides of the carriage with their arms crossed. He was glaring at her openly, and she was only slightly less subtle and minutely deferential in her defiance.

The door whipped open, and Hermione saw a man who beat out both Professor Snape and the coachman in sheer ugliness. He was bald and hunchbacked, with thick lips and snagged teeth and a large hairy wart on his nose. He was standing in the pouring rain and yet was quite dry.

"Welcome back to the Leaky Cauldron, Professor. I see yeh have another Muggle. Yer colleagues brought their charges here as well, but they've all retired for the evening already. We have yer rooms all made up for yeh. Not the best, mind, but we're full up. Here, Miss, allow me."

The doorman pulled out his own baton and flicked it at her before reaching for her hand. He steadied her as she stepped down from the coach and into the pouring rain. Her tensed body relaxed when she realized that not a single raindrop landed on her. She beamed up at the hunchback, and he smiled warmly.

"Oh, I do love the Muggle firsties. They always make me heart grow warm," the doorman said with a laugh.

She twisted around to her teacher and smiled as he cancelled the light in the coach and followed her onto the street.

"This is marvelous!" she blurted.

"Are you sure? You haven't confirmed that with a text yet," her professor quipped snidely.

Severus Snape entered the Leaky Cauldron with Miss Granger in tow. He stopped and allowed her a chance to take in the atmosphere of the place. Witches and wizards conversed loudly at the bar while still more came and went through the large fireplace. Mugs and platters sailed through the air bearing food and drink to those crowded around the private tables. A careless elbow knocked a glass off a rail, and it fell to the floor with a smash only to leap back up and reassemble itself with a flick of a wand.

The girl's eyes widened and her face was an open book, telling a tale of wonder and enchantment, quickly followed by overexcitement that became subsumed with nervous trepidation. She sank her teeth into her lip and took two small steps closer to him, stopping only when she actually bumped into his arm.

"Tatterwing, could you show us to our rooms? I believe Miss Granger has had quite enough adventure for the night."

The girl gave him a look filled with thankful relief.

"Right this way, Miss Granger. Up the stairs now."

They followed the hunchback up out of the common room and along the gallery rail to their door. Tatterwing opened it and gestured with a bow and a flourish.

They entered into a tiny sitting room, lit with floating candles and a warm fire. There was also a small round table with two chairs perched at it, a desk against one wall, and two other doors along the back wall.

"The miss's room is to the left, her bags and trunk are already there. Yer room is to the right. Yer things are there as well. Would either of yeh like a bit of something from the kitchens? A spot of tea, perhaps? We have some lovely ginger biscuits today. I set some aside for meself, but the little miss looks like her need might be greater."

"If you would, Tatterwing. That would be most welcome, I'm sure."

"No problem, Professor, no problem at all. In fact, I might could even suggest"

"That will be quite enough, thank you. Leave us."

"As yeh wish."

Snape pulled out his watch and cast a quick look at it. Shockingly, it wasn't quite as late as he'd thought it was. The evening had only seemed interminable.

"Make yourself comfortable, Miss Granger," he said to the girl, as she stood rooted to the floor staring at the floating candles and clutching her reticule like a talisman. She turned to him, a startled expression on her face, and he wondered if she had actually forgotten he was there.

"How do they stay up?" she asked, gesturing at the candles.

"Magic."

The girl had the cheek to roll her eyes at him. "Obviously, but there has to be some force involved, some physical manifestation that cancels out Newton's Law."

"And just what do you know about Newtonian Physics?"

"Only what my father explained to me. I did try to read the book, but I admit most of the words went over my head. My Latin is not of the caliber required to understand the nuance."

Snape felt his eyebrows lift despite his desire not to react. The scales were tipping towards Ravenclaw again. What a strange child. He didn't think he'd ever encountered one quite like her in all his years of teaching.

The tea tray appeared on the table with a pop, and she let out a squeak. She took a determined breath and lifted her chin as she pulled off her gloves and unpinned her bonnet.

Gryffindor. Most definitely.

"Tea, Professor? Milk and sugar, yes?" she asked, as if she were a tiny lady of the manor. The effect was spoiled by her futile tugging at the knot she'd made of the bow under her chin.

"If you would be so kind, Miss Granger. I have some things to fetch for you while you pour."

He headed into his room and quickly found the stack of books, cinched together with a buckled leather strap. He dropped his hat and gloves on the chest, ran his hand through his hair, and looked longingly at his bed. He suspected it would be some time before he was permitted to sink into that inviting pillow.

He headed back into the sitting room.

"Miss Granger, we will be leaving early in the morning to purchase your school supplies. However, earlier today I took the liberty of procuring your textbooks in advance." He set the pile on the table and quickly freed them from the strap. "I think you might start with this one tonight." He handed her a brand-new copy of *Hogwarts, A History*.

Her eyes widened, and she beamed at him, as if he was the greatest human being she had ever encountered. He blinked, thoroughly flummoxed.

"Thank you, sir. I shall be diligent in my studies."

"Indubitably."

Snape lay stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. His thoughts raced in circles, pricking at the knot of pain between his eyes. He longed for sleep, and yet he had promised the chit one more hour of candlelight to read. Gods, but she read fast. He'd abandoned her to her own devices to escape the endless questions.

He had to admit, she was a decent distraction.

Now he had nothing left to think about but the fact that the Potter boy would be arriving tomorrow. That fact had been eating at his gut throughout his whole summer. These past eleven years had been nothing more than one long countdown to what he knew was his doom.

His duty was to help protect the boy. Not much different than any of his other charges, but this boy was different. This one should have been his.

What would he be like? Would he look like Lily? Would he be smart and clever and endlessly patient like his mother? Or would he be a bullying dunce like his father? A

prematurely dissipated rake, like his godfather? Not that Black ever had any influence over the boy, thank Jove for that. Azkaban was too good for that one. No, young Mister Potter had been left to the care of that blasted Petunia and the chicken-nabob she was reported to have married.

Snape had wanted to care for the boy. He'd wanted to be a guiding force in the boy's life. But his constitution simply rebelled against the fact that the boy belonged to James Potter. He hoped that when he finally set eyes on the child he would see Lily instead. That would make things so much easier. It might even alleviate this feeling of dark destiny. Perhaps, if he were able to make his peace with the child, he would no longer spend so much time wondering why, at the age of only one and thirty, he was convinced his time was running out.

He scowled and pulled his watch out to distract himself from his own maudlin thoughts. He'd been staring at his ceiling for two hours. He hissed like a cat and sprang up off the bed, whipping open his bedroom door.

"Miss Granger..." He turned his head from the table to the desk where he found her frozen in the act of scribbling notes. She looked to have three feet of parchment covered already. Merlin spare him, the girl fancied herself an essayist. He was sure her assignments would be pure hell.

"Miss Granger, please observe common decency and go to bed. We have an early day tomorrow, and some of us actually need to rest."

"Yes, sir. My apologies, sir, I lost track of the..."

"Spare me your lengthy explanations. Please. I abhor them. I will ask you to keep that fact in mind in the very near future, if you will."

With an angry, "Nox," he put out every candle in the sitting room, leaving her in only the dancing light of the fire.

He shut the bedroom door behind him and stripped off his cravat. By the time he was reaching for his nightshirt, he heard the bed in the next room creaking.

Finally.

He dropped down onto his own bed with the heavy sigh of imminent relief.

Impressions

Chapter 4 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

Many thanks to karelia for her beta skills, and Hebe GB for her BritPicking/RegencyChecking.

Hermione woke up and dressed quickly into a fresh shift and her second-best gown. She'd worn her best yesterday. She hurriedly brushed out her hair and parted off the front section, pulling the back up tightly and twisting it in her best impression of what Rebecca had taught her. She never quite got it right. She carefully chose non-ink stained fingers to lick and used a little spit to defrizz the curls around her face and hoped it would pass muster. She stared at her reflection and sighed, but her frown was slowly replaced by an extremely unladylike grin.

Magic. She hadn't been in danger of being carted off to Bedlam. Her magic was escaping her control.

She might be as plain as a ha'penny, but she was a witch, by all the graces. That was something far more intriguing than beauty.

She snapped out of her reverie and jumped up from the mirror. She quickly made her bed, carefully tucking the fold around the lump of pillow, and did her best not to wad her nightgown too badly before repacking her things in her trunk. She realized she wouldn't be able to get all of her new books to fit. She bit her lip, but then stacked the books and buckled them together with the strap.

She grabbed up her bonnet, gloves and the butter-yellow Spencer that always made her look ill. It was the only one that matched her gown, unfortunately. Perhaps if it was warm enough, she could simply not wear it. She headed out into the sitting room, just as the other bedroom door flew open.

"Good morning, Prof...What are you wearing, if I may ask, sir?"

"Robes. We aren't Muggles; we don't dress like them unless we are trying to hide in their society. You are warned not to try to look too Muggle in Wizarding society. It can draw attention from undesirable people."

She smoothed a hand down her dress. "This is all I have, sir. I only have the three dresses."

"We will be purchasing you your school uniforms, which you will wear at all times during school hours. I only caution you about your leisurewear."

"And will the school robes be anything like that?" she asked, waving a hand in his direction.

He scowled and bristled like a cat. "Why?"

"Because I think you look quite splendid, sir."

"You...Ah... thank you."

And he did. He looked well-rested, although there were still lines of stress on his face that she thought might be permanent. He was dressed in long embroidered robes with a voluminous outer robe on top. They were unrelieved black, but they somehow suited him more than his previous haberdashery had. The only thing they had in common with normal dress, or Muggle dress, as she would have to get used to saying, was a waistcoat and cravat.

He looked distinctly uncomfortable with the way the conversation had gone, so she moved to the table where breakfast waited and placed her books next to her plate with a muffled thump.

"You won't have any time to read until you're on the Thestral carriages later. There is no use lugging your books about."

"I'm afraid they might get lost. They don't all fit in my trunk."

He pulled out his wand and, with a flick, the pile of books shrank until they would fit in the palm of her hand. She let loose with a delighted laugh.

"I love magic! It's the most marvelous thing in the world!"

He gave her an odd look as she jumped up and went to stuff her now tiny pile of books in her trunk.

After breakfast they headed downstairs where the professor stopped to greet a few other people without bothering to introduce her. She waited patiently for him to finish his conversation before, with an imperious gesture, he urged her to follow him out the backdoor of the inn.

She practically had to trot to keep up, and she constantly skipped to the side to avoid being enveloped by his billowing robes. A quick tap on a brick wall and she stood and watched in surprise as the bricks shifted to reveal a wonderland.

"This is Diagon Alley," he said in a bored tone. "It is the main shopping district and the heart of the Wizarding community."

He headed for the closest shop with an elaborate sign swinging above the door saying *Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions*. A cluster of redheaded people suddenly swarmed the door, and Hermione had to check herself before she barreled into her teacher so swiftly did he stop.

"And there is Arthur Weasley and his brood. Come. We'll head elsewhere first."

She scampered along at his side.

"Are they not people of quality? All those redheads? Should I avoid them?"

He stopped short again and looked at her. "You would take my word as to whom you should and shouldn't deal with?"

"Well, I'd rather form my own opinions, but your thoughts would carry a certain weight, yes. I trust you."

"When did that happen? Last night you thought I was trying to abduct you for nefarious purposes that shall remain forever unspoken."

"I do apologize for that. You have proven yourself a truthful man, and I sense that you are very honorable. Until you prove otherwise, I trust you implicitly on things pertaining to the social mores and customs of your world."

He flashed her a look she couldn't interpret. "The Weasleys are a fine family. An old pureblood family. However, when one encounters them *en masse*, they are more than a little overwhelming." He cocked his head to the side suddenly and blurted, "Why did you ask this Stephens to teach you such dreadful language? I had thought it was because you were of low character, but it would appear that is not the case."

She blushed to the roots of her hair. "A gentleman would not bring that up."

"I'm not..." He huffed and started walking. "Answer the question, Miss Granger."

"It was after Althea's garden party. I had been forced to go to another of her wretched teas, with all of the wretched girls in the village."

"Not up to snuff for a Baronet's granddaughter?"

Hermione stopped short. She could feel anger suffusing her face. It took him a few steps before he realized and turned back. He raised one eyebrow and came back to her.

"Quite the contrary, sir. I was the one who held the lowest social class, a fact I couldn't care less for, unless I am forced by the demands of polite society to choke down watery milk tea, and my pride, while I endure unrelenting slights. In those moments, I care very much. I hate it. I asked Stephens to teach me how to curse up a storm because I wanted to be able to look all those judgmental magpies in the eye whilst reciting my actual opinion of them in the privacy of my own head."

"Only in private?"

She felt herself color again. "Yes."

"So I am the first one to be honored thusly?"

"As you say."

He looked at her and smirked before he spun on his heel and began walking again. She hurried after him.

"I have good news and I have bad news for you, Miss Granger. Wizarding society doesn't have a gentry, per se. There are no titles to split hairs over. No Dukes, no Earls, no lowly Baronets. However, we are not without our stratiations. Our society is split into Purebloods, those who can trace their ancestors back to the age of Merlin himself, and..."

"Muggle-borns, like me. I know. I read it in *Hogwarts, A History*, last night. I understand there have been ferocious arguments against allowing my kind in."

He looked at her, and she detected the slightest flash of something indefinable before his eyes clouded with irritation.

"Do not make a habit of interrupting me, Miss Granger. Had we been in school, you would have just lost house points." He pulled open the door of the shop they had stopped in front of, and she scurried in after him.

It was while he was tearing apart a stack of cauldrons, thumping each one and tossing it aside, that she had her first taste of the darker side of the Wizarding world.

She was watching him intently, trying to understand what he was searching for from what he was rejecting. He gave a satisfied nod and was about to hand the cauldron to her, when they were interrupted by a polite cough. She looked up at the same time as he did and saw a rather handsome, and very distinguished-looking, man with sweeping robes of velvet and silk and an elegant walking stick.

"Malfoy."

"Snape."

The man looked at her, flicking his eyes quickly up and down her short length, before bestowing a magnificent sneer on her. "Running Dumbledore's errands, are we?"

"As you can plainly see. And how is Narcissa?"

"She is fine, as always. I shall tell her you asked after her. Draco is very excited to see more of you, naturally. Another fine addition to the House of Slytherin."

"He will see more than he's comfortable with soon enough."

Malfoy gave a false chuckle of humor, but to Hermione's eyes, he was not amused.

"Do make sure he is settled in, won't you, dear boy?" The man reached out and snatched the cauldron from the professor's hands. "I'm counting on you, Snape."

"I shall look in on him tonight and make sure he is settled."

"You are most obliging, old friend. I must run along, so many things to buy."

The man left without a further word of parting on anyone's lips. Snape watched him for a moment before turning and giving Hermione a look of anger that made her stomach sink. Without further word, he went back to attacking what cauldrons he hadn't inspected yet.

"I read about these houses last night. Do you think I will end up in Gryffindor? You do keep muttering about it. Will I have any say in it at all? I don't think I like this Slytherin very much. I do hope I don't get picked for that one. From what I read, most evil wizards belonged to that house in their youth. I can believe it, if that man Malfoy's son is anything like him. And this Salazar Slytherin hated my kind. I don't think I could have any truck with someone who belonged to a House whose founder fought to exclude me.

"What house did you belong to? I think it would be rather comforting to belong to your old house."

Her professor gave another satisfied nod, thumping the bottom of the cauldron several more times with his thumb for good measure before shoving it into her arms.

He straightened to his full height, which was considerable, looked down his nose, which was a good distance, and intoned, "I belonged to, and am now the Head of, the House of Slytherin."

"Oh, dear."

"Indeed."

"I'm sorry."

He raised an eyebrow and turned away, leaving the shop boy to clean up the mess he'd made. She followed behind feeling like an utter fool.

They remained locked in an uncomfortable silence until they reached Madam Malkin's again where he oversaw the purchase of three sets of school robes, a pair of sturdy boots that he highly recommended, and agreed that she had enough money from her parents' allotment to buy two more sets of robes for casual use. He balked when she asked for his advice on styles, so she had to trust the woman in the shop. She also bought the several pairs of thick, woolen stockings that he said she would be grateful for.

They made their way to a shop called Ollivander's in an only slightly more comfortable silence. There, she found her wand. Or the wand found her, if the old man behind the counter was to be believed. As soon as she felt the vine wood, with a core of what she was told was dragon heartstring, she knew it was hers. It almost seemed to purr like a kitten in her hand. When she flicked it, a beautiful cascade of sparks wafted gently from the tip. She felt tears in her eyes at her first, conscious display of magic and turned towards her teacher and beamed at him in pride and satisfaction.

He responded with the slightest of nods before he pulled out the money purse without further ado.

They returned to the inn and ate a quick meal in still more silence before repacking her trunks and heading back downstairs. She was now dressed in her school robes, sturdy, dark-gray bombazine with fitted long-sleeves and a delightfully whimsical low waist. After years of Empire-style muslin, she felt rather special. She couldn't make heads or tails of the pointed hat...it didn't want to cooperate with her high twist of hair...so she tucked it into the pocket of the cloak he'd also purchased for her and hoped she would get the hang of it through mimicry by watching the other students.

She said good-bye to an effusive Mr. Tatterwing and then walked with her teacher to a long line of carriages with no horses. The occasional Muggle strolled by on the street but didn't seem to notice the mass of students and families gathered around saying their good byes.

Professor Snape was staring intently at a shockingly tall man with a huge beard and matted black hair, waving a pink parasol, of all things, but when she looked closer, she saw he was actually staring at the young, dark-haired boy next to him, wearing spectacles.

Hermione found herself unaccountably frightened at the prospect of getting into one of those carriages without her Professor Snape. She didn't want to leave his side. She certainly didn't want to leave him with her misspoken words still hanging between them.

"He's a very nice man, Mr. Tatterwing. He frightened me when I first saw him, and now I feel bad about that. My mother always warned me about first impressions."

He looked at her with annoyance.

"Oh, please don't be mad at me. I didn't intend to insult you or your House. I don't want you to hate me."

"Miss Granger, you are eleven years old. It would be beneath my dignity to, as you say, 'hate you.' However, if you are implying a desire for some sort of friendship between us, I am afraid, that is also not to be countenanced. I am your instructor. I have dragged us both through the streets of London because it was my duty to do so. To project anything more would be the height of childish folly."

She sighed and looked down at her first pair of sturdy boots. "I wasn't suggesting that we go skipping rocks in a stream together, Professor. I just..." She looked back up at him. "Tell me something good about Slytherin House."

He raised an eyebrow at her and replied, "We've won the house cup for the last five years in a row, and our Quidditch team cannot be beaten."

"That's very impressive. Are there any other sports, aside from this Quidditch at the school?"

He looked back at the boy standing on the pavement next to the giant, looking just as overwhelmed and nervous as she felt.

"Nothing as organized as Quidditch," her teacher replied without looking away. "There are several clubs and organizations. Chess Tournaments, and Dueling Clubs, Gobstone Matches, that sort of thing."

"So unless you can ride a broom, then physical activity is limited to a morning or evening constitutional?"

"Trust me, Miss Granger. You will get more than enough exercise simply moving from one class to another. One could say that Hogwarts' other official sport is stair climbing."

"That hardly offers much of a challenge."

He snorted and turned to her finally. "You haven't seen the stairs," he said with a smirk.

She smiled, reveling in the sought-after return of his dry wit.

At exactly eleven o'clock there was a shout, and a general scramble ensued. Both Hermione and the professor actually stepped back from the sudden chaos. He turned to her and asked, "Do you have your food and drink? It is a seven hour carriage ride, with only a few short stops."

"I do. Thank you. Thank you for everything, Professor Snape. You have been most generous with your time and energy, as well as your patience and understanding." He opened his mouth with a scowl, but she raised her hand and cut him off. "You are owed thanks, despite it being your duty as a gentleman and a faculty member. You didn't have to do things like take the time to find me a decent cauldron. Twice. I am deeply appreciative."

His mouth closed, and he seemed discomfited. "You actually received the better cauldron in the end, Miss Granger. Remember that."

She smiled. "I shall."

She gathered her valise to her chest and took a deep breath before heading toward one of the carriages.

"Miss Granger," he called after her.

"Yes, sir?"

"I never managed to answer your question last night. The one you asked at your parents' house. You asked me if we taught medicine."

She winced and replied, "I always wanted to be a doctor. Silly, I know, but..."

"You can be, Miss Granger. If you are diligent in your studies and ambitious. Many of our finest Healers are women."

It felt like her entire face was going to explode from her sudden smile. "I'm going to like this school ever so much! Thank you!"

He recoiled from her enthusiasm, as if fearing it was contagious.

"You are holding up the carriages, Miss Granger. Do try to get into one of them before they leave without you. I would hate to have to give you a detention on your first day."

The look on his face told her he wouldn't mind any such thing at all, so she turned and scrambled towards the last carriage that still had a door open.

Another boy was running for it as well, but when he reached it, a toad jumped out of his pocket. He gave a cry, and she didn't hesitate. She just reached down and snatched up the toad and handed it back with a smile. They both climbed into the carriage, and when she leaned out the window to wave, her smile sagged.

Professor Snape had already gone.

She sat back in her seat and immediately pulled out a book. She had an enormous amount of reading to do between now and when classes would begin. She looked up and smiled distractedly at the boy with the toad.

"Thank you for saving Trevor. My name's Neville, by the way. Neville Longbottom."

"I'm Hermione Granger. I'm very pleased to meet you, Neville."

Manners dictated that she turn to the other two occupants. She recognized one of them as belonging to the Weasley brood. The red-haired boy was eating his food already, and they hadn't even left yet.

"Ronald Weasley," he said around a mouthful.

She smiled around her disgust and looked to the other boy. The one with the spectacles that her professor had been staring at so intently.

"I'm Harry. Potter, that is."

She smiled at him warmly and then returned her attention to her book, as the other two boys seemed to take great delight in being in the same carriage as the boy with the poor eyesight.

Orientation

Chapter 5 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

By the time Hermione had lined up with the other first years outside the Great Hall, she was overwhelmed by all the magnificence and completely surrounded by nervous wrecks. She stood next to Neville, alarmed at just how anxious a boy could actually get. Even that obnoxious Malfoy boy...oh, yes. She had recognized him right away, with his white-blond hair and his supercilious manner. He reminded her of all the worst affectations of her grandmother when he'd made such a point of insulting Ronald Weasley, calling him out in front of everyone because his family's fortune apparently had dipped a bit. How uncouth. The boy simply had no concept of good breeding.

And yet, here he was with the rest of them, worried just as much as Weasley, that he might not be accepted into the house of his forefathers.

Hermione really had no such fear. She had read as much as she could about the Houses in the carriage, and Ronald and Neville were very helpful in sharing their own knowledge as well. Both Neville and Ronald prayed for Gryffindor. Harry had made a comment about hoping for Gryffindor as well, and Hermione agreed it might be nice if they ended up in the same House as their new acquaintances.

She thought about what was important to her. Her mother had always put a high value on bravery. That would mean Gryffindor. Both of her parents felt that knowledge was the only means of transforming the human condition. So that was a plus for Ravenclaw. She did admit to a desire to be in Slytherin, despite the opinions tossed about during the carriage ride, and despite the odious Malfoy boy, only because she wished to remain close to Professor Snape and also to show him a bit of the loyalty she felt she owed him. Which most likely meant Hufflepuff.

Professor McGonagall, a frighteningly severe woman, who was also introduced as the Deputy Headmistress, managed to kick her small and reasonable anxiety over the fence into the field marked 'terror,' simply by leading her to understand that the Sorting Hat was their first test. A *test*. She'd never had a real test before. Her mother had quizzed her; her father had often tossed questions at her. Rebecca had tutored her studies for three years, but had never actually tested her knowledge. People *failed*

tests.

What if she was somehow chosen for the wrong House? What if the hat couldn't decide and they sent her home? What if they took it into their heads that she wasn't really a witch, just a Muggle with one or two aberrant episodes of the inexplicable? What if she didn't actually *belong* here?

Hermione's stomach lurched along with the door to the Great Hall, and before she had a chance to get her bearings, she was swept along with the tide and dragged before the head table. Her first sight of Headmaster Dumbledore left her not knowing what to think. He appeared both kind and wise, as well as slightly deranged at the same time. She slid her eyes along the head table and was overwhelmed by the sheer number of intimidating personages she would have to try and impress in order to not be packed back off to London. When she finally saw Professor Snape, she nearly sagged with relief. She tried to catch his eye, but he was talking to an odd-looking fellow wearing a turban next to him. She contented herself with quietly reciting everything she knew about the Sorting Hat while listening to the strange bit of doggerel it was spouting.

Hermione knew she was babbling to herself by the time they called her name. She gave a frightened squeak but then lifted her chin and sucked in a deep breath. She wasn't aware of how many steps it took to get to the stool, and she couldn't remember what the hat had said to her, only that the smell of it was less than pleasant, and her desire not to get lice was strong. The clearest memory was the shout of 'Gryffindor!' and the look of momentary disappointment on the face of Professor Snape before he politely applauded along with the rest of the staff.

Hermione stumbled in the direction she was pointed and found herself seated at an enormous table, surrounded by happy faces. She let out a breath and smiled.

She turned her head back towards her Professor, but found him, as seemed to be his new habit, staring hard at Harry Potter.

Hermione sat at a table in the library and fiddled with the satchel of books in her lap. Her roommates, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil entered and Hermione straightened up in her seat and smiled at them hopefully. They returned strained smiles and then giggled, as they hurried off into another part of the library. Hermione sagged back down.

Her roommates were thick as thieves, and as thick as bricks. Lavender was plainly dim-witted, and Parvati was too vain. She and her twin sister Padma were two of seven spoiled daughters of an Indian Nawab who had the wealth and influence to send his twin daughters here for their education. Lavender bought into the lavish exoticism of it all, and her two roommates started a mutual adoration society that frequently made Hermione gag behind the curtains of her bed.

It was a sign of how lonely she'd become that she was actually trying to court their amiability. She had sunk rather far in her despair.

The door opened again, and she saw Harry and Ron. Harry waved to her politely, but Ron only rolled his eyes when he saw her as the two of them headed to the desk to return some books.

She looked down at her scrolls and sighed. The phrase, 'be careful of what you wish for,' echoed in her head. She hated Hogwarts. Most especially for being the answer to her prayers.

Hogwarts was wonderful, an amazingly progressive school that in no way changed the girls' curriculum from the boys'. It offered the same opportunities to both sexes and graded in the same manner. They even allowed boys and girls to eat together, study together, and even relax together in the common room after classes and on the weekends. She'd been exposed to so many new thoughts, ideas, people, creatures, and cultures it made her dizzy with happiness. The only improvement Hermione would venture to make was to allow boys and girls into the same classes and let them compete academically, the way they were allowed to compete athletically. Instead, they had two classes for each year, one for boys, and one for girls. That made no sense to her, and apparently, little to Professor McGonagall, who hinted at changes in the near future.

No, the problem wasn't the education she was receiving, by any means. It was her outsider status. Magic was wonderful, of that she had no doubts, but she was still just as alone as if she were home, without the benefit of her mother or father or even old Mrs. Crabtree and Cook to be amiable with.

It wasn't just that she was Muggle-born, either. Other Muggle-born students in the school seemed to have made good friends. It was patently obvious that no one liked ~~her~~ except Neville Longbottom, and he liked everybody but Professor Snape.

Harry was a decent sort, a bit excitable, but hard not to like, with his unprepossessing manner. His only problem was that he was fast friends with Ronald. Ronald was an idiot. That much was plain to see to anyone. Sure he could be agreeable when he made an effort, but his study habits were a disgrace, his eating habits were worse, and he had rebuked her for each and every effort she had put into trying to show him the error of his ways. If he wanted to flunk out and be sent home, then on his head so be it.

She wondered again how she could turn her fortune around. It was clear to everyone that the hat had sorted her wrongly. No one in Gryffindor appreciated her work habits. She should have been in Ravenclaw. Then perhaps, Professor Snape wouldn't be so hard on her.

That man was an utter mystery and another source of despair.

It was increasingly noticeable to even the thickest wit that Professor Snape loathed Harry. The why was unknown, but his bias and dislike were plain. The man might have assured her that 'hating' an eleven year old was beneath his dignity, but from the stories she'd heard of the boys' Potions class, and the nasty glares she'd seen Snape deliver during meals, he was fooling no one but himself. The boys' class seemed to spawn endless stories of some persecution or another, and anyone who tried to defend him drew Professor Snape's wrath as well.

Even in the girls' Potions class, you could see that the professor's ire was spreading to the entire House of Gryffindor. Even she was not spared, and it broke her heart. She didn't mind his constant repetition of 'foolish little girl,' or even the occasional, 'insufferable know-it-all,' he had called her such from when they had first met; it was just his way. It was her *grades*. Try as she might, she couldn't seem to get the same grades in Potions as she did in her other classes. She would cram as many facts into her essays as possible in the most concise manner feasible, and yet his comments ripped her efforts apart each and every time.

She worried that he did hate her, that he'd looked into her eyes and lied about not hating her. Technically, the bad grades hadn't really started until she'd turned twelve, but that was splitting desperate hairs.

She sighed. She really didn't want to be lied to anymore. She had really wanted him to be a hero. She'd needed one ever so much, and he'd appeared with a flash in answer to her prayers. Now he treated her like some sort of soft wit.

She stuffed her books and scrolls back into her satchel. Perhaps she could go find Neville in the Great Hall and ask if they could work on their essays together after dinner. Hopefully he wasn't caught up in the silliness of the Halloween feast along with the others.

She gathered up her things and headed toward the door, ending up just behind Ron and Harry.

"Nah, mate. I just think she's a nutter. I mean, did you hear her at lunch? Correcting my pronunciation? *Win-GAR-dium Levee-OH-sa*.' Someone should tell her to wait until a wizard asks for help before pushing her bossy nose into someone else's business. I mean, who would even want her help to begin with? She's too strange."

Hermione's heart twisted painfully in her chest, and she knew she wasn't going to be able to stop the tears. She had to get out of there right away. She shoved her way past Harry and bolted through the library doors.

She wandered, struggling to keep herself together, until she found an empty bathroom and ducked inside. Once out of sight, she scurried into one of the privy stalls, closed the lid, sat down on the commode, and burst into tears.

She wanted to go home. If she wrote to her parents, they would pull her out of the school right away. It would definitely be her last chance at any kind of formal education, but then, after this sort of educational environment, it was highly unlikely that she would be content to study music, deportment, painting, sewing and globes. Not once she'd managed to make feathers fly, or seen a cat turn into her teacher.

She hugged her satchel close and sobbed. It was no use. There was no giving this up. She couldn't pretend she hadn't seen it. She couldn't go the rest of her life not wanting to be as good as those born in it were. She would have to stay, and staying would slowly eat at her soul.

She pressed her head against her knees and blubbered for what seemed like hours.

Eventually, she heard the creak of the door, and she pulled herself together with a mighty sniff. When the commode automatically flushed behind her, she marveled, distractedly, at the miracle that was Wizarding plumbing. There wasn't a chamber pot in the whole castle. Even in the midst of her hopes turning to ashes, magic was still magical.

She slung her satchel of books onto her back by the wide leather strap and pushed out of the stall. She walked over to the basin and smiled weakly as it filled with water. She washed her hands, splashed at her face, dried them with a quick spell, and then shrieked like the door to hell had just opened behind her.

She threw herself to the side just as a club the size of a tree trunk smashed down and destroyed the wet sink. Even as she scrambled and screamed, her mind raced through everything she had read about magical beasts and quickly spat out the needed information.

Troll.

She was trapped in the girls' privy chamber with a troll. A mountain troll, unless she was mistaken. She screamed blue-blooded-murder as she scrambled under the partitions dividing one stall from the next, only to be showered with more bits of porcelain as the stupid beast continually smashed too late.

The door flew open again, and she heard shouts. She shrieked again and bolted for the door, only to be nearly crushed by an uncharacteristically well-timed blow. She dodged to the side and flew into the corner.

Harry and Ron threw themselves into the fray throwing bits of debris and chunks of porcelain. At one point, Harry ended up on the beast's back, while Ron shouted encouragement and advice. Harry ended up dangling upside down. The relief that the boys were here to save her was destroyed by the fact that now all three of them were going to die. She huddled into a ball and awaited her fate with shocking cowardice.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Hermione couldn't resist looking up in surprise as Ron finally pronounced the spell correctly and saw the Troll's club drop down onto its head and knock it out cold.

Harry came running over to her.

"Hermione, are you alright?"

"Yes. No. I have no idea. How did a mountain troll get into the castle?"

Ron explained about Professor Quirrell's sudden announcement and their realization that she wouldn't know, and was possibly in danger, because of Ron's hurtful words.

"I'm really very sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I speak without thinking a lot. It comes from being in a big family. One has to talk when one gets a chance to be heard; there isn't always time for editing. I'm awfully glad you're alright."

"Me too," added Harry.

Just then, the door flew open and three teachers raced into the room. Hermione nearly fainted at the level of fury on the face of her Head of House, but the look on Professor Snape's face made her want to be sick.

It was obvious that the boys were going to be held responsible for disobeying the order to go to the common room. They would most likely be expelled from the school for saving her life. She instantly judged her loss as less than theirs, so she stepped forward and did something she hadn't done since she was four years old and found out what soap tasted like the hard way: she lied.

"It was my fault," she blurted. "I was curious about trolls and so I went looking for it..."

The rest of her words were lost amidst the sound of buzzing in her ears. All she really understood was that it had worked, the boys were looking at her with shocked gratitude, and Professor Snape... He was looking at her with bitter disappointment.

She took a moment to find her satchel in the mess and carefully stepped around the troll and Professor Quirrell. She followed the others out of the lavatory, but when she gained the hallway, a hand clamped down on her shoulder and spun her around.

"For a young lady who puts such emphasis on truth, you lie with suspicious ease," Professor Snape said in a quiet voice as the others drifted out of sight.

He placed a calloused finger under her chin and tilted her face toward the sconce on the wall.

"Tell me the truth. Why were you crying alone in there?"

She started to protest, but he cut her off.

"*DON'T*... lie to me. Your eyes are nearly swollen shut from weeping, and yet there are no tear streaks through the dust on your face. This tells me that you were crying even before you encountered our unwanted guest. Last chance, Miss Granger."

Her lip trembled and she couldn't control it.

"You will think it a childish thing."

"Nevertheless..."

"It's that I had so hoped that being here would be different. That once I found people like me, I would... have friends. But I don't. No matter what I do, I cannot seem to fit in. It's not just that I'm Muggle-born, the others get on well enough. It's *me*. No one likes me, and I don't know why. Just before dinner, I heard someone that I had tried to help ridicule me most viciously. It... broke my resolve."

"And the mountain troll? It just happened to find you alone, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I don't know where it came from. I was just washing my face when all of a sudden it was behind me, trying to kill me. Harry and Ron appeared out of nowhere as well. They saved my life, sir. I couldn't let them be expelled for that. I thought if anyone was to be sent away from the school, it might as well be me."

"Potter was the one who insulted you, wasn't he?" he spat. "He'd have had no other reason to know you were missing unless he was responsible."

"Actually, it was Ronald Weasley, sir. Aside from Neville Longbottom, Harry is the only other student in the school who treats me with any decency."

He pulled his hand away from her face, and she dropped her gaze toward the floor. She saw his badly injured leg through the tear in his robes.

"Sir! You're hurt!"

"I am aware of that fact, Miss Granger, you needn't shout it to the world. It is of no consequence. Listen to me. Potter might seem charming to you, but any association with people like him will almost always result in tragedy for those around them. You told me once that you placed great store in my opinions. I would advise you now. Stay away from Potter. He is thoughtless and arrogant and incapable of thinking a situation through for any other possible outcome but the one he has already decided on. His kind is only interested in their own self-aggrandizement.

"I understand what you are going through, Miss Granger. You are neither the first, nor the last, student to have trouble finding their place in the world, regardless of magic. Do not let your need for the society of others cloud your mind. You are here to fulfill your dream of making a mark on the world based on your own merit, not to become a social butterfly."

"Yes, sir."

"Go back to your common room. I believe it has been some time since your last meal. As dinner was interrupted in such a dramatic manner, I will ask the Headmaster to have food sent to each House."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"You can thank me by heeding my words, Miss Granger."

"I will give them considerable thought, sir."

She could feel the weight of his stare and shied away from looking up.

"An honest answer, at least," he said, with finality.

With a swirl of robes he was off, displaying a slight limp. She watched his retreat with worry and sadness.

She hurried back to Gryffindor Tower and slipped through the portrait hole.

Immediately, she was surrounded by students who were congratulating her on her survival and peppering her with a thousand questions. Harry and Ron squirmed through the press and both danced about her excitedly.

"Are you alright? We saw Snape nab you. I hope the git didn't give you extra detentions!" said Ron with worry.

"No, not at all."

"You were incredible, Hermione," said Harry.

"I rather thought you and Ron were the incredible ones," she said deferentially.

"Ah, go on," laughed Ron. "We just fought a troll. You looked both Snape and McGonagall in the eye and lied for us! Now that's bravery of the highest order! And we didn't even deserve it! We were the reason you were in danger in the first place!"

"You're a little free with this 'we' business, my friend," laughed Harry.

Hermione felt ill. She was to be finally accepted based on her ability to lie?

"Listen, Ron, Harry. I cannot express to you how grateful I am that you were in the right place at the right time. I am in your debt for saving my life. I do forgive you, Ron, for the insult that resulted in my being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am sincerely pleased that neither of you are to be expelled because you came to my rescue. Perhaps we could just call all debts paid and let it drop?"

Ron smiled warmly. "Absolutely, if that is what you want. But don't lose track of the fact that you saved my life as well. If I'd been kicked out, my mum would have killed me dead."

"*FOOD!*" shouted Seamus Finnigan.

There was a mass migration across the common room as everyone headed to the tables that had arrived, filled with a truncated version of the feast.

Ron dove in with a look of joy. Hermione walked over with more dignity but was just as famished. Neville smiled and made up a plate for her, and Harry somehow managed to commandeer two of the couches, so the four of them could eat in relative comfort.

She carefully balanced her plate on her lap as Ron sat next to her, and Neville sank down next to Harry.

"Did you see the cut on Snape's leg?" asked Harry after they had blunted their appetites.

"Professor Snape, Harry," she chided. Realizing what she'd done, she grimaced and looked at the others.

"Quite correct," Harry replied with a smile. "But did you?"

"I did," she replied.

"I didn't notice. I was too busy staring at his eyes. Bloody hell, that man's scary." Ron looked at Hermione quickly. "My apologies. The man scares my manners away."

Reluctant to ruin this rare moment of camaraderie, she just gave him a tight smile.

"I bet he had something to do with it," whispered Harry.

"With what?" she blurted.

"With the troll. I bet he lured the troll into the school for some dark and terrible purpose."

Hermione snorted, but Neville seemed eager to agree.

"There's something not right with him," Longbottom said. "I'm beginning to wonder if he hexes me somehow, just so I will make all those mistakes in his class."

"That's absurd," she huffed. "He's a teacher! What purpose would it serve for him to bring a troll into the school?"

"All I can say is, ever since I arrived at school, my scar has been hurting." By now, everyone knew about Harry's scar and about the dark wizard who gave it to him when he was a mere infant. "It's especially worse during meals. In fact, whenever it really starts to pain me, I can always count on looking up to find Snape staring at me."

"I have to admit," she said. "I have seen him staring at you quite a bit. I wasn't aware it made your scar hurt."

"You think it's dark magic?" asked Neville. "I've heard said that Snape was a follower of You-Know-Who."

"Weren't all Slytherins?" added Ron. "And no one is more Slytherin than Snape himself."

"Honestly, you are convicting a man on rumor and innuendo," she said in her most pleasant and reasonable voice. "I'm sure a man as wise as Professor Dumbledore would know if he had a dark wizard on his staff, don't you?"

"Hermione's right," said Harry. "If we are going to successfully convict him, we need proof. I'm going to keep an eye on him from now on."

Hermione found herself speechless as the three boys developed a strategy to prove her Professor guilty of a criminal act while stuffing themselves full of the food he had provided.

She stood up, and the three reflexively stood as well.

"Where are you off to?" asked Ron.

"I... I need to work on an essay. I'm going to head up to my room now."

"Always diving into the books, you are. Perhaps later you could look at my essay and tell me where I'm going wrong?"

Hermione was sincerely touched by Ron's peace offering, knowing how much he resented being shown his mistakes. If she wanted to encourage a solid friendship, now would be the time to close the link.

"I have a bit of a headache, actually. Probably from all of the excitement. I'll just turn in for the night when I'm done. I'm sure your essay is just fine as is."

She watched his face as he tried to understand if his gesture had been accepted or rejected.

"Good night, everyone."

She turned on her heel and left the company of Harry Potter and his friends. Professor Snape had been correct. They were a charming bunch, the three of them, but they were hotheaded and given to fantastic leaps of illogic and paranoia. She would seek solace in her studies and politely avoid them in the future.

Conundrum

Chapter 6 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

Thank you to karelia for her final polish!

Hermione threw herself into her studies with all the energy she didn't spend on having friends. Her books became her closest companions. The incident with the mountain troll had left a lingering good will amongst her peers...it seemed nearly dying was all it took to gain a certain amount of respect...but she only smiled and went on her way whenever someone tried to include her in a bit of conversation or enlist her in a scheme. Harry and Ron remained affable and distant, and Neville seemed to have found his niche with them, leaving him less time to be companionable. That was fine. She wasn't interested in maintaining any closeness with him anymore anyway.

Life was easier now that she had chosen not to have friends, as opposed to being condemned to not having any.

She made sure to be cordial at all times, only offer her help on an assignment when asked, and to be pleasant to everyone she passed. What she gave, she received. For the most part. Certain personages, Malfoy being the most glaring example, would never be amiable. She had tried to cultivate an acquaintance with some of the students from Slytherin House, in deference to her professor, but all she gained for her efforts was a more nuanced view of insults.

Mudblood was such a curious word. It was such a random choice of verbiage. At first, she hadn't even understood she was supposed to be mortally offended. That hadn't gone over very well. The term seemed so silly. Mudblood. She often came up with other terms in her mind that sounded equally dim-witted. Inkspit. Dirtpaste.

Sadly, the more she heard it, the more weight it seemed to gain.

She stopped bothering to even try and be pleasant where Slytherins were concerned. She just made sure she was never in the wrong and held her head up high. She also resumed her practice of shouting the filthy things that Stephens had taught her within the confines of her own head while holding her face frozen in a polite smile.

The whole blood status argument was worth an essay on its own. The fact that every race of magical human on the planet held equal status, as long as their families had never mixed with *Muggles*, actually bolstered her opinions on just how ludicrous her grandmother's posturing was. It reaffirmed her belief that a person should be judged on character, not the random luck of birth, or in her grandmother's case, a most advantageous marriage. The fact that the same wizards and witches looked down on her because of her own parentage was patently ludicrous. She was obviously as talented as they were. All of their arguments in favor of her lesser humanity only fueled her desire to show them all up.

She did wonder if at some point their beliefs would begin to gain weight as well.

Her lack of a social life seemed to please her perverse professor. That was obvious when he first spied her sitting alone on the bench eating her meal in silence the morning after the troll incident. As the school bellowed its gossip into the air around her, he gave her a look filled with unmistakable approval. After that, he seemed to make a point of seeking her out with his eyes at some point during each meal, as if her continuing solitude was a talisman that all was right in his world.

Unfortunately, her lack of outlets for amity seemed to be the only thing he approved of. He definitely continued to insist on detesting her essays. She knew because he had

told her that he abhorred lengthy explanations; however, when he expressly asked for three feet of parchment, why would he take points because she filled in as much information as she needed in exactly three feet? Surely it wasn't because she had eliminated margins and found a spell to reduce the size of her written hand? How else was she expected to cite her references and clarify the subject matter in such a limited space? She thought she deserved points for her initiative. It was three feet exactly, and it got the job done rather nicely. From the amount of spiky red ink, it was clear he didn't find her clever in the least.

She sighed and re-rolled her latest Potions debacle and turned her attention back to the game. Contrary to how it would seem, considering the sheer amount of energy that went into it, the all-important Quidditch that everyone, including her professor, seemed to think so highly of, was in actuality more pointless than watching grass grow.

She couldn't make heads or tails of the rules, and the behavior of the players was mind-boggling. Take, for example, Harry. It was her understanding that he was supposed to be looking for the Snitch. Instead, he was jittering around in midair for no apparent reason other than to show off his admittedly astounding skills. She acknowledged a certain amount of ugliness in her own manner. She disliked brooms and detested flying. It was the one aspect of the Wizarding world that she seemed to fail at spectacularly. But even setting her petty resentment aside, it would still seem that dangling one-handed from the broom was a bit vulgar.

She looked at the people around her, looking to see what the proper response to such an exhibition was, and was rather alarmed to see shock and fear. She turned her head back and reassessed the situation. It was plain, now that she understood, that Harry wasn't showing off, he was hanging on for dear life.

"Somebody help him!" she called.

"It's Snape!" Neville called out. "He's hexing him!"

"WHAT?" She snatched the spyglass without even a by-your-leave and turned her focus on the teachers' grandstand. Sure enough, Professor Snape was staring intently at Harry while his lips moved in a constant mutter. She saw Professor Quirrell doing the same thing. McGonagall was chattering away as well, but that looked more like running commentary than a hex. She scanned the rest of the stand and saw several people whose lips seemed to be in constant motion.

She handed the spyglass back to Neville. "Don't be foolish. Half the adults in the stands look like they're casting spells," she snapped.

Mr. Hagrid concurred that they were overreacting, but Neville and Ron took off to see what could be done anyway. Hermione pulled out her wand and wished she knew something, anything, which would help. She had managed to learn an enormous amount on her own, but, clearly, silly little magics such as Bluebell Flames weren't going to be much help in this situation.

Harry held on, managing to get one leg back on his broom, while the rest of the students shouted encouragement.

A rise in the level of noise had her turning toward the faculty grandstand. She reached up and grabbed the spyglass back from Seamus. Professor Snape was flailing at his robes, which seemed to be twisting around his body, trying to strangle him like a fast growing vine.

In the sudden commotion, no one at first noticed that Harry had finally regained control of his broom. The roar of laughter resulting from her professor's distress turned into a roar of joy when Harry zoomed around the field in command of his broom again.

Hermione looked away from Harry, who appeared to be fine, and looked back at her professor, who appeared to be furious. He also seemed to be fine. People had turned their attention away from him to Professor Quirrell, who appeared to have been upended during the fracas. She handed the spyglass back to Seamus with murmured thanks.

There was another roar, and she looked down to see Harry pulling the Snitch out of his mouth.

What an asinine sport.

She gathered up her satchel and made her way out of the stands.

Hermione dragged her trunk through the hallways on her way out the door to the carriages. She nodded and smiled and bid her au revoir to friendly faces as she passed.

She was looking forward to going home for Christmas. She couldn't wait to see her parents. Granted, she wouldn't be able to explain anything about her new life to them, but her previous months of letter writing had given her the skills and practice to be able to dance around the truth without lying. Thanks to a good bit of help from Professor McGonagall, she had been studying a normal course of Muggle education in her free time, and so could truthfully report on her progress in that area.

She did so wish she could tell them the truth; a part of her knew they would be fascinated and thrilled, but that was the childish part. She understood completely how little they would be able to assimilate this new reality, and they were better off ignorant. Her parents were progressive, but they were still Muggles. The fear that had kept her silent after her accidental use of magic the night before they left for London was squarely rooted in that long ago shared look of fear when a very young Hermione took such fierce exception to not being believed. Even as a young child, she'd instinctively known that her parents didn't want to believe her, because the alternative was too terrifying.

She waved to Harry and Ron, who were off to the side watching the other students leave and then waited patiently as her trunk was loaded on a carriage. She saw Professor Snape overseeing their departure and, on a whim, walked over to him.

"Sir, may I have a moment of your time?" she asked as she kept pace with his patrol along the line of carriages.

"It would appear to be unavoidable."

"Would you tell me, please, sir, exactly what I am doing wrong on my essays? I have applied myself to the task of improving them to no avail. I simply do not understand by what measure you are grading them, and it gives me no end of frustration that I cannot seem to please you. Just... tell me what you want."

He stopped and whirled around to face her.

"Instead of answering your question, I will ask one of my own. I do not want the answer straight away. I expect you to think about it on the way home to your family.

"Which do you think would give me the greater pleasure, watching a toddler struggling to climb stairs that are too high for him? Or watching a monkey trained to play violin?"

Hermione blinked rapidly several times, trying to make of his odd words.

He pulled open the door to one of the carriages and stepped aside with a curt gesture for her to get in.

"Your answer and accompanying explanation for why you chose that answer, is to be written on no more than one foot of parchment. Any longer, and I will burn it unread."

"Yes, sir." She climbed into the carriage and turned to face him. "Happy Christmas, Professor."

He grunted and shut the door in her face.

"Lady Granger requests your presence in the parlor."

"Thank you, Charles."

Hermione set her fork down next to her unfinished tart and followed the footman out of the nursery.

How very vexing it was to be treated like a child again after being held accountable for her own conduct at Hogwarts. It wasn't as if there was no supervision; it seemed that they were still terribly constricted once they were there, but it occurred to Hermione that if treated like young adults, children frequently rose to the occasion.

As she dawdled on her way to be presented to her grandmother, the merchant's daughter and widow of a minor Baronet, it also came to mind that the opposite was quite true as well.

She patted at her hair, smoothed a wrinkle out of her best muslin frock, settled her shawl around her shoulders, and lifted her chin before entering the parlor.

"I tell yeh, in my day we wouldn'a stood for it a'tall! And we didn'! When the wool merchants got their poxy tax on the cotton in eighty-four, and I were shut out o'the mill along wit t'other fellows. Do yeh know what we dun, boy?"

Severus knew exactly what the old man had done. He'd come home and beat his wife and son for a year until the Cotton Tax of 1784 was lifted and the mill reopened. He didn't bother looking up from his newspaper and tea. In fact, he didn't even bother listening. He'd heard the same words so often that his father only needed to supply the tone and Severus could sing the tune himself.

"We dealt wit it like gentlemen. We got up a petition, we did. Eighty thousan' signatures we got. Changed that law right' back to way it t'was before. There were none of this violence and strikes like they got today. No. These days they're all mad as hatters. We used our heads, we did."

The sound of the door opening put a merciful end to the moribund diatribe. Severus set down his tea and folded his paper as he got up from the table. There was only room for two chairs at the table in the kitchen. In order for his mother to sit, someone would have to give theirs up, and it would never be the other one. Not once in all these long years.

"Yer back then, Eileen? Did yeh get me medicine? Yer useless son's been bangin' on about his witchy ways again. I shoulda showed him the back of me hand, but I knew it would make yeh un'appy, and a'sides, 'e still runs too fast. Useless little coward. Yeh remember how fast our Sev'rus used to run, mother? All knees an' elbows flying up t'lane like demons were on his tail?"

Tobias Snape roared with laughter at his own humor because he was actually stupid enough to believe that making a joke about the old days made everything all right.

His wife patted him on the shoulder, as if he deserved a reward, and handed him the rum she'd gone out for. She scooped up a bowl of the stew and, before she sat, pulled a packet of letters out of her net bag and tossed them onto the table.

Severus leaned down and scooped them up and left the room, with a murmured, "There's tea for you as well."

He headed up the creaking stairs while flicking through the letters and arranging them into an order of importance based on some nebulous criteria that never fully presented itself to the light. He stopped when he saw a letter he had been half expecting but was still surprised to see. He headed into his room and closed the door. Dropping the rest of his correspondence onto the small desk, he flicked the tails of his coat out of the way and sat.

He untied his cravat and carefully folded it, laying it on his desk before popping the first two buttons of his lawn shirt. Then he pulled open the drawer of his desk, took out a ruler, and used it to pop the wax seal on the letter. He carefully folded it out and measured it. Satisfied, he replaced the ruler and closed the drawer. He sat back in the chair and settled one long, lanky, leg on the top of the desk before he started reading.

'Professor S. Snape, Hogwarts Academy for the Gifted

Dear Sir,

After careful consideration, my answer to your perplexing question is that you would prefer to watch the monkey.

I have taken into account several factors, not the least of which would be your apparent dislike of children in general. I cannot even begin to conceive of you taking time out to enjoy the sight of a child doing something entertaining. The idea of you enjoying watching one struggle, with the almost mandatory tears that would be involved, boggles the mind completely.

Therefore, I have decided that the energy and effort that went into training the monkey is the key factor. Even if we leave aside the notion that the monkey plays well, or even plays horribly, the fact that it could hold the bow and the violin in the proper manner suggests a level of skill that would be intriguing. If the animal were to bow well enough to even create one scratchy note, it would be worth accolades. Were the monkey to actually 'play,' it would be a worthy feat indeed, and one that I think might appeal to your interests.

I hope this letter find you well, and that you are enjoying your holiday even more than I am enjoying mine.

Yrs,

Hermione J. Granger, Southwark, London."

He tossed the letter onto the desk and picked up the next one from the stack and popped the wax with his thumb. He spread it open but then stopped and looked back at the letter from his student. He dropped his leg with a heavy sigh and snatched up a quill and a piece of foolscap.

Hermione sat in her chair in her bedroom and tried to read her text by the dreary light of the window. It was another overcast day and the sky was swollen with rain that coquettishly refused to fall.

A quick knock on her door was followed by Mrs. Crabtree's entrance. "You have a letter, dear."

"I do?"

"Aye. Your mother asked me to bring it to you right away."

"Thank you, Mrs. Crabtree. That was most kind."

"Your mother also asked me to tell you that your father has a patient coming very soon, and it looks to be another bit of fuss."

"Oh. Again, thank you, Mrs. Crabtree."

"T'was my pleasure, dear."

The door closed and Hermione looked quickly at the missive. To her surprise and delight, it was from her professor. She hadn't expected an answer from him, assuming he wouldn't receive her letter until he'd returned from his own holiday. What was even more surprising was that she had only sent hers yesterday. She had posted her letter as instructed when using Muggle methods and so had assumed it would take quite a bit of time to travel back to Scotland. However they did it, her letter seemed to have made it to wherever her professor was in good enough time for her to already receive his reply within eighteen hours.

She looked at the seal, but like hers, it was just a flattened blob of red wax and nothing special. No Slytherin House crest, or ornamental S.S., most likely the butt of a letter opener, as she used.

She didn't know if she should feel let down or validated.

She popped the seal and unfolded the letter and let out a squeak of indignation.

'Miss H. Granger, Southwark, London

Wrong. Ten points from Gryffindor for being willfully obtuse.

Prof. S. Snape, Spinner's End, Manchester.'

Hermione glared out the window as if seeking him on the street so she could run out and give him a piece of her mind.

A rising cry that quickly broke into a piercing shriek came up through the floorboards. She snatched two small twists of cotton out of the palm of her fingerless gloves and jammed them into her ears, cursing the restrictions on underage magic.

She read the short missive through one more time, before jumping up and throwing open her trunk to grab a quill and her ink.

Severus strode swiftly through the streets with his hat pulled down low against the bitter wind that tore at the flaps of his greatcoat. There were few people out on the streets, only a small cluster gathered around a broken dogcart that someone had cheerfully set ablaze. Since there was no one to watch out for, he read his post as he walked.

Prof. S. Snape, Spinner's End, Manchester.

Dear Sir,

I protest the haphazard manner of my demerit. School is not in session. I dispute your right to take points from my entire house over a private matter. You asked me a particularly obtuse question, and I answered in good faith, following your instructions to the letter. I took a week to craft my reply, and you took all of perhaps two minutes to toss me your disingenuous response.

If I had any power at all in this situation, then I would demand an explanation. I am well aware that I do not. Therefore, if I am to lose points, then let me lose them for a worthy reason. In fact, since you obviously miss taking points, let me provide one. I think much lower of you for perpetrating such a coarse jest on a mere first-year student.

There. I have said my peace. If there are to be consequences, then on my head so be it.

H.J. Granger, Southwark, London.

He refolded the letter and slipped it into his pocket with the rest of the day's post. From the corner of his eye he spied a huddled figure on the corner. He reached into his pocket again and made his way over to the boy.

"Mr. Snape, sir! I hope you're havin' a good day, sir. Reading letters I see. Anyone important writin' to you?"

"No." He dropped several coins into the boy's shaking hand. "Go get out of the cold, Simon."

"Bless you, Mr. Snape. You have a good New Year, sir."

Severus was already moving on.

He was not far from his parents' home when a door he was passing opened. Elspeth Spanner stopped just short of dousing him with the bucket of dirty water she'd been about to throw into the street. She gave him an amused, apologetic smile before turning to the side and emptying the bucket with more care. She straightened and gave him a direct look before turning back inside with a lingering glance over her shoulder. She didn't completely close her door.

Elspeth hurried across her one-room house and replaced the bucket by the stove. She wiped her hands on her apron as she quickly untied it and pulled it off. She checked to make sure her baby was still fast asleep in his crib and tucked one more fold over him, to keep the chill off. She tossed a bit more wood into the stove and was just shutting the door on it when her front door was pushed open.

She straightened up with a slow smile and turned to face Mr. Snape, who had already stripped off his hat and gloves and closed the door behind him.

"How long will your husband be gone?"

"A fortnight. His mother has taken ill in Surrey."

Mr. Snape didn't reply, he just continued to unbutton his greatcoat. Elspeth snatched up a pan from the top of the stove, and, lifting up her heavy quilts, she ran it up and down the sheets to heat the bed. She hurriedly stripped out of her woolen dress and scrambled under the quilts in her shift and knee-length stockings, pulling her shift up around her waist.

When she saw him about to strip off his waistcoat, she stopped him.

He gave her a quizzical look.

"I want you to keep your clothes on."

"Why?"

"If you're naked, you are just a man like the rest. Your fine clothing reminds me of what I gave up. It makes you special to me."

He lifted an eyebrow at her, and she shivered. Mr. Snape was special in other ways that Elspeth could never explain, but always anticipated with relish. That fact that he always left a discreet pile of money was a bonus as well. The baby needed food, and her Henry had left them with too little to keep them until he returned.

The bed creaked from his extra weight as he pulled off his polished boots and dropped them to the floor, revealing thick, woolen stockings.

She helped him get settled under the quilts, accommodating his weight with pleasure, thinking of the lumpy oaf she'd run off with. She fumbled with the placket of his breeches and shoved them down his narrow hips for him. A bit of spit and a small amount of attention was all that was needed. She'd been ready to go since she'd seen him passing her door. He always had that effect on her.

It always started the same. The bed creaking rhythmically and his face shuttered by his long hair, so it looked like she was being tugged by a stringy wig with a nose. At

this point, it was always just a pleasant business transaction. But Elspeth knew there was magic to be had if she was patient enough. Sometimes it took longer than others, and once, it didn't happen at all. He'd just spent himself with a grunt and rolled off her, and she'd gone for days feeling like a dirty whore. She hoped it happened again this time. She was desperate for it to happen.

He pushed his arms straight so he was high above her, and she helpfully pulled the tails of his shirt out of the way. Mesmerized by the patterns in the watered silk of his waistcoat, she traced a swirl with her finger.

He let out a long, deep breath, and she knew the magic was going to happen this time. Her belly fluttered in anticipation, and he twisted his head far to the side and stared unseeingly at the wall, as his mouth dropped open. A small moan escaped her. His black eyes found hers with an almost violent force, and she felt herself clench around him in reaction. *'Do it. Do it!'* she chanted in her head, needing the magic.

And then it happened. She groaned loud and long when his eyes seemed to ignite and his gaze slipped down to her lips. His face collapsed into that magical look of raw need as he tossed his hair to the side and crashed down on top of her to capture her mouth with his own. His long hands dragged at her shift, seeking her skin, seeking *her*, as he unleashed a need deeper than mere physical release.

This was what she craved. This was the magic. This was the moment when it changed from a pleasant way to make a few bob to two desperately unhappy people stealing heaven in a flash. In that magical moment, as simple fucking turned to passionate love-making, he was her entire world, and she knew without a doubt that she was his as well, for as long as this stolen minute lasted.

Afterwards, she marveled again at how quickly he could shut himself away. It always ended as it began, with few words and little connection. He would go back to being the aloof, respectable man who always stood out like a strange and exotic creature in a neighborhood already turning to squalor despite its newness. And she would stay in love with him for a few days before her practicality, which had waited until she had well and truly ruined her life to show its face, reasserted itself.

She shoved the pile of shillings into an old tea tin and hid it behind the leg of the stove before sitting down to peel potatoes for her dinner. She glanced at her remade bed and sighed. She should have left it. It would have made that moment of magic seem more real.

Tutorial

Chapter 7 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

H.J. Granger, Southwark, London.

Miss Granger,

Ten more points from Gryffindor for your lack of manners. If you insist on continuing to disturb my remaining time away from the incessant demands of my profession, you will lose even more points.

Since it appears that you lack the wit to understand the subtext, I find myself being forced to explain what should have been patently obvious.

Our hypothetical toddler's struggles are a necessary part of his development into a contributing member of society. He knows what he wants and seeks endlessly to overcome his limitations. He has a goal and uses his imperfect intellect and physical abilities in every way he can to achieve it. Every failure is a learning experience. He is aware, Miss Granger. He knows there is something beyond his present state and seeks to advance himself.

That said, let us now turn our attention to the monkey. The following essay contains an exact and detailed analysis on how exactly the monkey benefits and grows from its experience in being trained to play the violin.

Hermione hurriedly turned to the next page, but found it blank, as were the following four pages of parchment. That exasperating man hadn't even bothered to append his valediction. It was completely unsigned. He'd spent the money to mail her blank paper rather than save himself an extra charge and just write, 'Nothing.' He truly was a wicked man and a brilliant teacher.

"Who are all these letters from?" her mother asked across the breakfast table, "friends from school?"

"Not hardly. Professor Snape sent me the answer to a conundrum."

"Your teacher took the time from his holiday to write to you? That is either very diligent, or highly unorthodox. I'm not sure what to think."

"I think both descriptions fit him. I wrote to him first, actually. I am not doing well in his class, no matter how hard I apply myself. I finally asked him what I was doing wrong."

"Oh, I see. So he took the time to explain?"

"Not exactly, no. Instead of answering my question, he asked me a riddle. This is the answer to the riddle, not my question."

"How strange."

"He's a very strange man, but I have the utmost respect for him when he is not making me tear at my hair."

Her mother gave her a long stare.

"I envy you, you know. I think your father might as well. I cannot tell you how much we enjoy your letters home. We both wish we were young again so we could go to this school with you."

Hermione grimaced, imagining her parents' reactions if they knew Hogwarts School for the Gifted were really Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"If you could start your life over, what would you do differently?" she asked her mother.

"I would be a man," her mother said with asperity. Then her face softened and her eyes lit with mischief. "Which would make your father and I a bit of a scandal, and we would have lost out on having you in our lives. No, as much as I do wish I had more of an opportunity to explore my dreams, I have no regrets when I look at the balance sheet." She smiled wistfully and then pinned her daughter with one of her looks. Since Hermione had come home, her mother had been giving her many of these same looks.

"Hermione, I want you to enjoy this school experience to the fullest. But please keep a level head. Understand that the world limits us in ways that are and always will be more difficult for our sex. It is so difficult to watch your intellect soar and know that it will be slapped down in time. Be mindful of this doom at all times. We are not allowed to achieve our dreams. There are only ever little tastes that can be cruel in the truths they show."

Her mother stood up rather abruptly and left the table to attend to her day's sewing.

Hermione got down from the carriage on legs that weren't sure they actually wanted to work. She stamped her feet a few times to get the blood circulating again and waited until her trunk was pulled off the back of a different carriage.

She grasped the handle and tapped it with her wand and in a commanding voice said, "*Rota!*" She ambled along the graveled drive, dragging her trunk along on its spelled-on wheels. She was thrilled to be able to use magic again. The weeks at home had been pleasant, but it had felt as if she'd been forced to leave a limb behind at school.

She passed Mr. Filch with his clipboard, gave her name, and headed into the castle. She saw her professor standing off to the side looking like he had already had more than enough of the returning students. She headed over to him, determined to turn his little jest back on him.

"Hello, Professor Snape. I'm very glad to see you again. Thank you, very much, for the gift of parchment. That was very thoughtful of you."

He looked down his nose at her as if she'd sprouted horns, but then his eyes sparked with hidden humor.

"Get out of my hallway, Miss Granger."

"Immediately, sir."

Hermione settled back into her routine of studying, doing research, keeping up with her Muggle education, so she could have something to write home about, and despairing over her Potions essays.

She sat in her chair, staring at her latest paper, as all the other first-year girls filed out of the room. Ever since she had returned to the school last January, her essays only ever contained two words in Professor Snape's hand: "Monkey Scribblings."

"Miss Granger, are you taking up permanent residence at that table, or will it be possible at all for me to leave so that I might attend lunch?"

Her head came up, and she saw her professor standing in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest, looking down his nose.

"Why do you do this to me?" she whispered around the tears trying to block her throat. "You must be aware that I asked Professor McGonagall to look over this last essay for me so she could tell me if I had done something wrong. I just don't understand. You never call on me when I know the answer. You never give me any supervision when I am working on a potion, and despite my best efforts, you continue to grade my work by some esoteric measure that you will not reveal. *Why?* You know how important this class is to me!"

"Lower your voice, Miss Granger." His own was low enough to slip under a door. "You do not want to use that tone with me."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"No, sir. I do not. It was merely a sign of how frustrated I am. My apologies." She stood up and gathered her book and parchment into her satchel and slung it over her shoulder. "I'm sorry I made you late to lunch, sir."

He didn't respond as she left the classroom.

Severus had a blinding headache by the time he reached the Headmaster's office to attend the staff meeting. The tension in the castle had been growing worse since the new term had started, and everything centered around the object being protected by the school. Even he had to admit that every precaution had been taken, but the feeling of unease continued to grow.

"Good evening, Severus." Minerva handed him a cup of tea as they waited for the Headmaster to appear. "You look like you could use this."

"Thank you. I certainly could."

He looked around the room, and his eyes settled one more time on Quirrell, and he felt the hairs pricking on his arms. He thought it the height of stupidity that Dumbledore had included the poncy fop in his protections. None of the teachers knew how to get past the others' wards, but Quirrell's? A troll? Really? What was he thinking? Especially after the incident on Halloween. A pair of first years had taken one down. One would think that the Defense professor would have come up with a something that would actually defend against a Dark Art. He'd tried to have words with him about that, in fact, but the fool had actually fainted.

Snape still had his suspicions about him, but the Headmaster refused to hear them.

As he always did.

There was a *wrongness* about Quirrell, just as there was a *wrongness* about the boy. What was the good of keeping a Death Eater on a leash all these years if the man was going to ignore his advice and cautions once the Golden Child finally arrived? Trying to keep an eye on the Potter brat was increasingly difficult, but necessary. Whatever was going on...and Dumbledore never could be bothered explaining anything in a complete manner...Snape knew it centered around the willful little glory-seeker. It was almost as if the Headmaster only went through the motions of seeing to the boy's safety, while secretly encouraging his worst traits.

"While we are waiting on Albus's leisure, I was wondering if I could speak to you about a student," Minerva murmured.

"Of course."

"It's Miss Granger."

"Oh? What about her?"

"Why are you grading her so harshly?"

"Why do I ever grade harshly?"

"Severus, I hardly think Miss Granger needs to be encouraged to work harder. In fact, I worry about her constitution."

"Why? Has she been ill?"

"Have you even taken a look at the girl lately? She's at her end. And it's because of you. What on earth are you on about with this 'monkey scribbling' nonsense?"

He sighed and pinched his brow. "Minerva, I have my reasons."

"I know you do. But I just want you to take another look at the child. She's under too much strain. She has no leisure activities, no social life, nothing but her studies. It's not natural."

"Surely you are overstating the case. "

"Take a *look* at her, Severus. She is quite possibly the brightest student in her entire year. She is also a socially awkward student with no friends who compensates by throwing herself into her studies in a competitive manner that is unhealthy. She is developing a fixation on proving herself better than those who demean her. *Think* about that, Severus. And think about who else you know that was like that as a child. How well did things turn out for that person?"

Severus turned his head to stare at her so fast that he had to shake his hair back out of his face.

"How dare you..." He was so full of fury that he couldn't even catch his breath to finish the sentence. He jumped up from his seat, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. That's when he realized he'd been set up. Oh, not by everyone, but certainly by the usual clique, Sprout, Flitwick, McGonagall and Vector. They had obviously been talking about this student for a while and labeled him as the problem. As ever. *Always*. To hell with them. He set his teacup on the table and stormed out of the office.

To hell with Dumbledore as well.

Severus sat at his desk slashing red ink all over the miserable pile of parchments before him, stopping only for the occasional sip of wine. He finished the last stack and then pulled out his grade book and opened it up. Tapping his wand on the stack of essays, he then tapped it on the book and sat back, scrubbing his hand down his face. He drained the last of his glass and, with a flick, cleaned it and returned it to the shelf. He stood up, gathered his robes around him and lifted the book to see if there were any irregularities before putting it away. Upon occasion he had been known to get the spell wrong when tired.

He blinked as he looked at the page. Setting the book down again, he snatched up the pile of essays and began flipping through them. He repeated the procedure and then looked about his desk and on the floor. He stepped back and pulled his wand out again.

"*Accio Granger's essay!*"

Nothing.

It wasn't here.

She hadn't turned one in.

His head came up, and he looked beyond his office door at his classroom, as if he could see her sitting at her seat. His brows snapped down in anger and his face filled with fury. So. This was his payback for caring.

He snapped his ledger closed and put it away before setting out on his nightly rounds. Woe betide any student caught out after curfew tonight.

Severus's eyes never stopped moving as he watched his students' hands, waiting for one to make a mistake. His years of practice made him able to prevent the worst disaster, even while his mind was a thousand miles away. Today, all he could think about was the creature reported to be drinking Unicorn blood in the forest. The mind recoiled from the thought. It had to be some sort of creature. What madness would force a man to such lengths? He'd questioned Draco on the matter after his disastrous detention, but as usual, the boy was useless.

He came back to himself just as he saw Padma Patil about to add the wrong amount of liverwort to her cauldron. "Planning on giving someone a nosebleed, Miss Patil? Five points from Ravenclaw for not obeying instructions."

He looked about at the shocked faces in the room, scowling. Ravenclaw rarely lost points. They rarely earned them either. Not that they cared, they never pulled their heads out of their books long enough to notice. Which reminded him...

He'd been so busy thinking about the ramifications of having such a monstrous creature so close to the school he had quite forgotten Miss Granger. He walked over to the table she shared with Megan Jones, a Hufflepuff of the highest order.

As always, her hands moved with precision and her potion looked to be perfect. He loomed over the table, waiting to be noticed, but she was completely absorbed in her work. Miss Jones had nearly shaken herself apart before Miss Granger took note of her classmate's plight and looked to see what the issue was. When she saw him, her eyes widened with curiosity and... sadness.

"Miss Granger, where is your essay from last week?"

"I didn't write one, sir."

"And the purpose of this willful disregard of your responsibility?"

"I hardly saw the purpose of writing it, sir. I could put in several hours on it and get a failing grade, or I could put in several hours on my other courses and get the same failing grade. Sir. Surely, even you can see the logic."

The class went silent at this casual insult, and she looked around as if wondering why they had taken exception.

"If there is no purpose in doing your assignments, then there is hardly a purpose for doing classwork, either." He pulled out his wand and Vanished her potion. "You are dismissed, Miss Granger. I expect to see you at eight o'clock tonight for detention."

He'd anticipated shock, or indignity, even tears, or offended sensibilities. What he hadn't anticipated was resignation and...*disappointment*. She was disappointed in him.

He spun away from her and headed back to the front of the room as she packed up her things and left the class.

He spent the dinner hour pushing a carrot from one end of his plate to the other, finally looking at Hermione Granger and seeing what the other teachers had been seeing all along.

When he had seen enough, he left the table in a hurry.

He was pacing the floor of his classroom when she finally arrived. He pulled out his watch and checked, only to see she was precisely on time.

"Miss Granger, leave your satchel there and sit here." He pointed to the table in front of his desk. Fresh parchment, ink and quill were there, along with a closed wooden

box.

Once she was seated, she folded her hands in her lap and looked up at him. He took in the pinched cheeks, the pallid complexion and the sunken, bruised eyes. How long had she been like this? Damn that Potter brat for taking up all of his recent thoughts and leaving none left for any other student.

"Miss Granger, I am not a man to coddle students. I am not one to sing praises, offer flattery, or hold hands. I don't waste time supervising students that have demonstrated that they need none. I don't call on the same student over and over when I need the others to learn to think for themselves. I have a deep and abiding belief that one only truly learns when one struggles for the truth on their own. What good would it do for me to hand out a test, along with the answer sheet?"

"None, sir."

"Precisely, Miss Granger."

"However, it has come to my attention that perhaps I have judged you wrongly, and therefore, might have done you a disservice."

He watched as her eyes flared with hope. It angered him.

"I thought, perhaps, that you were exceptional. I was close to believing, as your other teachers already do, that you might actually be the brightest witch we have seen in any number of years. I perceived your only flaw as being a dependency on the words of acknowledged experts, and no understanding of how to use your own intuition. I thought you were above average."

He watched the slow horror spread across her face.

"Did I?" He placed his hand on the desk and leaned down to look in her tired, sad eyes. "Did I judge you wrongly?"

He watched as her eyes reddened and realized she was willing herself not to cry. He reveled in the moment he saw her anger spring to life. He contained his smirk when he saw her chin tilt up and her jaw clench.

"No, sir. You were *not* wrong."

"Then prove it. Before you is a test. Listen and follow my instructions to the letter, and you shall pass. I want you to write an essay on what is in this box. You may not open the box. Begin."

He spun away from the table and retreated to his own chair and turned his attention to his grading.

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

"You may."

"Are you making fun of me?"

His head snapped up, and he was shocked to see she was even paler and more hurt-looking than before.

"Why on earth would I lower myself to that level, Miss Granger?"

"I have no idea. You told me once that it was beneath you to hate a child, but everyone can plainly see that you hold an abiding hatred for Harry Potter. Most people suspect you of trying to kill him during the first Quidditch match of the season. I don't know what to think. I have defended you at every turn. I have entreated people to look at both sides of the issue. I have lost my chance at friendship because I held your words to my heart, above and beyond my own need. And now, I am forced to sit here and write an essay about what is in a box that I am not allowed to open! *Why are you toying with me, sir!*"

He had to struggle past the rage trying to cloud his mind. Always with that thrice-damned Potter. How DARE anyone think he would have tried to harm that little gobshite. He wished to hell that James Potter's spawn would fuck off back to where he'd crawled from. He took a deep breath and stood up and walked back to the table. He again placed his hands on it and leaned into her face.

"I am not toying with you. I am not having a jest at your expense. I am trying to get you over the hurdle that will keep you from realizing your full potential!" He hadn't even realized he'd started yelling until he saw her jump.

"But how on earth am I supposed to..."

"Use your *head!* I cannot tell you! You *must* figure it out for yourself, or it's *meaningless!*"

She took several deep breaths and then gave him a look of such imploring need he almost started screaming again until she said, "You believe I can do this thing."

He sighed. "Yes." He straightened up and went back to his chair and sat down heavily.

He watched as she picked up the quill and stared at the box as if a demon might jump out.

He silently willed her to make the leap. Gods, she had parents that loved her, he'd met them, surely they had given her presents? He'd never been given a present in his life, but even he knew the first thing you did was *shake* the bloody thing. Perhaps she'd never been allowed to. Perhaps the wall she needed to break through had been too firmly cemented into place by the strange in-between status of her culture. Her place in society. Not low enough to be free of the strictures, as he'd been, not high enough to receive any of the benefits that would have compensated for the lack. Perhaps her ilk was simply paralyzed into an inability to think for themselves, always relying on others they respected to do it for them. It was utterly foreign to him. But she hadn't grown up with the absolute lack of trust he had. She still believed there were people out there that would tell her the truth. Snape knew there weren't.

He was still staring at her when her head came up and her eyes widened.

"I cannot open the box."

"No."

Her eyes took on a spark that had been missing for weeks and he hadn't noticed. "But I'm allowed to touch the box, aren't I?"

He almost sagged with relief. "Yes."

The spark ignited into a fire, and she grinned in a most un-childlike, almost piratical manner. It was most disturbing, even if it was entirely welcome.

She reached out and lifted the wooden box.

He turned his mind to his grading.

He lost himself in the puerile scribbles of minds too ignorant or too disinterested in the subject matter to make a decent show of things, with the sound of shaking and

thumping and the 'hrrrms' of pondering going on in the background.

He lost track of time.

A polite cough disturbed him, and he looked up to see Miss Granger standing before him, her cheeks flushed with pride and excitement.

"Yes?"

She wordlessly handed him her parchment.

He took it from her and read.

'Based on my observations and manipulations of the box, along with auditory clues, I can say with a certainty that the object in the box is smaller than nine inches in length. It is approximately an inch narrower than the interior width of the box, and it is approximately four inches thinner than the height of the box.'

'I am less certain of the following, but it is my strong belief that the object inside has a weight of about half a pound. It is apparently a singular object, and yet not completely one piece, as it displays a tendency to flop at a different rate and the sounds it makes lead one to believe that it can expand and collapse again.'

'It is my belief that the box contains a book.'

He placed the paper down on his desk and said, "Bring me the box, Miss Granger."

When she returned to his desk, she held the box out to him, but he gestured for her to continue holding it.

"What if you are wrong, Miss Granger?"

She swallowed hard and tilted her little Gryffindor chin up. "Then I am wrong."

"Exactly," he said quietly. "But you learned from trying, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Open the box, Miss Granger. The content is yours to keep."

She placed the box on his desk and opened the latch, lifting the lid. She smiled and reached inside and pulled out a copy of *Beginner's Guide to Healing Spells*.

She looked at him and beamed. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank yourself, Miss Granger. You earned it. There is knowledge in the world that you can only get by using your own mind. You ask so many questions, and yet when it comes to the texts, you question *nothing*. All the books in the library were written by humans, Miss Granger. Not gods. You must discern truth based on your own experience."

He picked up his quill again.

"Your detention is over. I expect your essay on my desk in two days. Your grade will reflect its tardiness."

"Yes, sir."

"You may leave."

He went back to his grading before she'd even left the room.

Preordained

Chapter 8 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

Hermione hugged her new book to her tightly as she scampered back to Gryffindor tower. She felt ten pounds lighter than when she had left it to serve her detention. A huge weight of anxiety had been lifted away, and it was almost as if she had to keep herself from floating off the ground.

She was of a fair mind to run around the castle telling each and every person she had ever heard say something bad about Professor Snape, that he was, in fact, the most magnificent person in the castle. She was even of the mind that he was a far better personage than Professor Dumbledore, himself. After all, she *knew* her professor. She didn't really know the Headmaster at all. She'd read about him, but those books had been written by mere mortals.

She giggled at her own audacity.

She bounded up the stairs and, after giving the password, through the portrait hole and sat down in a chair by the fire to begin her essay. She kept her new book tucked next to her in the chair as if it were one of her old dolls. Occasionally she would stop and lift it up, open the cover to where it said 'From the Library of Severus Snape,' and stroke her finger across the words as if that would prove they were real. Then she would tuck it away again and throw herself back into creating an essay with her own thoughts.

She was still there, hours later, when she heard the sound of feet coming down the stairs. She looked at the clock and then peeked around the side of the chair.

"Who's there?" she heard Ron call out.

"Oh, Hermione!" Harry looked nervous and guilty. "I see you're still working on homework. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I lost track of time. What are you three doing up?" she asked Neville. The guilty looks were universal now. "You're sneaking out again, aren't you?" She planted her fists on her hips. "Don't you think that 150 points is enough to lose? Your adventures are ruining our chances to win the house cup. I'm sorry, but the three of you aren't going anywhere tonight. If you walk out of this room in any direction but the one that leads to your dormitory, I will have to stop you."

Harry looked chagrined but determined. "Look, Hermione..."

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Hermione didn't have any time to react. Neville's hex locked her in place and to her panicked mortification, she started to fall forwards. She landed on her face, which had been frozen open in the act of further reprimand. She couldn't feel anything, but she knew she'd hit the floor hard.

"Hey!" shouted Ron. "What did you do that for?"

"We had to get by, and she was going to stop us. Someone had to do something."

She heard Harry's voice much closer to her ear. "I'm really sorry about this, Hermione. We'll come back and release you soon!"

Ron leaned over and murmured, "I'm really sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Hermione," said Neville from somewhere to the side. "If you understood what was at stake, you would have done the same."

"Do you think we should at least roll her over?" asked Ron.

"I think she might be more upset if she were manhandled," said Harry. "Muggle girls take exception to that sort of thing."

She heard the sound of their boots scuffing across the rug before the portrait door opened and closed. After that, she was left with the sound of the crackling fire.

She was there all night. The carpet she had been staring at without focus for hours was starting to grow lighter in tone as the sun began to filter in the mullioned windows of the common room. She could hear the stirrings of the other students and was mortified that she was about to be discovered in such an undignified position. Mercifully, when she did finally hear the shocked chattering of the first students down the stairs, she couldn't see them at all.

She had never been so grateful for Lavender and Parvati before. They wiggled through the gathering crowd and announced that since they were Hermione's roommates, it was their responsibility to get her some attention. Between the two of them, they managed to float her up off the floor. As she lifted up off the carpet, she saw something that made her want to start screaming in despair.

"Aye, but would you look at that," said Seamus. "Whoever did this to her broke her pearlies, they did."

"Perhaps Madam Pomfrey can fix them?" said a horrified Lavender.

"Maybe she can even make her look less like she could eat apples through a fence as well," said Seamus. A hand, presumably his, swiped up the broken bits of her teeth and the floor moved swiftly under her as she was floated out the door of the portrait hole and up to the infirmary.

They hadn't made it far into the infirmary when she heard her professor shout.

"What's this? What has happened?"

"Please, sir. We don't know. We found her like this on the floor of the common room this morning. Is that Harry? What happened to him?"

"Never mind about Potter and his friends. You may all go back to your rooms. Immediately."

"Begging your pardon, Professor Snape, but here's her teeth. We found 'em on the floor under her face."

"Thank you Mr. Finnigan. You may go."

She was lifted up higher and turned over swiftly, then deposited down on what she assumed was a bed. The experience was nauseating enough for her to be grateful that she was Petrified or she might have been sick.

"Alas, poor Miss Granger." The Headmaster's voice drew closer to the bed. "Mr. Weasley tried to tell me something about her, but his injuries were too great. From what I gather, I suspect our newest patient tried to stop the boys from leaving their tower last night."

"Headmaster, surely you can see my logic now. Not only did they nearly get themselves killed last night, but they have willfully harmed another student. They should be summarily dismissed, the three of them."

"Now, now, Severus. They also stopped a dangerous plot and confirmed my worst suspicions, thus giving us some much needed warning. I believe the good outweighs the bad."

Professor Snape actually growled.

Hermione would have been intrigued by the conversation had she not been too busy being mortified. She was stuck lying on her back looking up at the ceiling with her mouth gaping open and an unknown number of teeth broken. She had no idea how many people could see her like this.

"Now, since our esteemed school nurse is busy with her other charges, I will see what I can do about our little trooper here."

The Headmaster's face floated into her line of vision, eyes twinkling merrily down on her.

"Miss Granger, I am going to remove the hex now. Unfortunately, you might experience a sudden pain. You have suffered an injury. I will want you to sit up as fast as you can and drink the potion that Professor Snape is procuring for you at this moment. All right? There's a girl, and here's our Potions master with the remedy."

The Headmaster's face disappeared and she heard the words, "*Finite Incantatum.*"

Nerves. All the nerves in her mouth surged back to life at once, and the pain was overwhelming. She screamed. Memories of all the sounds from all the patients in her parents' practice flooded her with new understanding, and she continued to scream and scream and scream.

There were voices shouting and hands pulled at her own hiding her face and trying to press the incredible pain away, but she was beyond being able to acknowledge them. Beyond being able to communicate. Beyond rationality. She was locked in a nightmare where she was one of her parents' patients, and her choices were to be in pain and wither until she died, or to be in worse pain only to end up healthy and permanently disfigured. She continued to scream until she heard a loud voice shout, "*Stupefy!*" and then the pain stopped as blackness flooded across her world.

Snape lowered his wand with a shaking hand. He stared at the girl in shock. Certainly tears and discomfort were to have been expected, nearly all of her front teeth had

been shattered, but the howling creature on the bed acted as if she had been Crucioed. Panic filled him with dread, and he quickly cast spells that he hadn't used in years. Spells that he'd needed to learn when he'd been the one curled up into a ball howling. His diagnostics picked up no trace of Dark magic, thank the merciful fates.

"Anything?" asked Dumbledore with sober concern.

"No. Nothing except for that which we see. Whatever that was all about, there was no curse involved." Snape raised his eyes to Dumbledore. A darting look at the other beds made him cast a strong Silencing Charm around the girl's bed. "Yet. It could easily have been. As long as that boy is in the school, every student will be in danger. The Dark Lord was *in* the school, Albus. Right under our noses, and this entire year you have been downplaying my concern. I sensed something was wrong about Quirrell from the start, and you acted like I was playing jealous bridesmaid. I sense the same thing about the boy. There is something dark about him. He is a danger to everyone around him. Look at Mr. Weasley. And Longbottom could have easily been killed; he's barely got enough magic to defend his toad! Can you imagine what would have happened if they had made it past my ward? If they had, by some chance, actually recovered the Philosopher's Stone before Quirrell grew impatient and attacked?"

"Severus, I will not, nor have I ever, ignored your expertise in this. However, I have my reasons, and I cannot tell them to you."

"Why not? Why ever not? Why leave your best sword half blunted?"

Dumbledore gave him a look of such concern and worry that Severus actually stepped back.

"Because I fear that this was only the first attempt, my boy. That thing is all fury and purpose and will not stop now. Tom Riddle is still not at his final rest. I fear he will come back. Not just to Hogwarts, but to life. And when he does, he will call his faithful."

Snape swallowed thickly as the blood drained from his body to his legs, making them suddenly shaky and weak. This was it. This was the doom he'd felt crawling towards him all this time.

"And I will be one of them," he said in a dry voice. "So you cannot tell me what you do not want him to know."

He looked down at the student who he'd helped overcome her own limitations just the night before. He could still taste the satisfaction he'd felt for hours afterwards until he'd been alerted to the situation with Mr. Potter. And now she was lying insensate, curled into a ball. Victimized by the hero of the day.

She'd been innocent. He looked at her and sighed. She was Muggle-born. Mudblood. If his understanding of what Dumbledore was implying was correct, then his very life could be in danger over lesser things than helping her hone her mind. He looked back at the Headmaster.

"I can't."

"You must."

He felt the blow like a kick in the gut. "This is why you kept me all these years. Not to be a champion, but to be a spy."

"Spies are silent champions, Severus."

Understanding lit a corner of his mind. "This is why you refused to allow me to confront Quirrell. You knew he was in league with the Dark Lord. You knew if I discovered his secret, I would have fought him."

"And Riddle would have still made his escape, knowing you were my man completely now."

"You play fast and loose with my life, Albus."

"The stakes are all or nothing. I cannot afford to be softhearted. You more than anyone understand what is at play on the table."

Oh, yes. He knew quite well what the stakes were.

"What say you, Severus. Are you still my man?"

He looked down on the girl in the bed, with her broken mouth and her tear streaked face. "I am," he replied.

"I am most gratified to hear that. Now, let's see about our patient here."

Hermione stared at herself in the mirror and wept silently. Her face was a mass of mottled bruises, already fading to light green. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen from the tears she'd cried when the pain had gripped her in its claws, but the pain itself was only a memory. What made her cry was her teeth.

They were perfect. They were neat and white and everything she had ever wished they could have been. She remembered her mother's warning about how life only cruelly teased their kind with glimpses of paradise and understood the lesson her mother had been desperate to teach.

She pulled her robes tightly around her and hurried out of the lavatory and down to the dungeons.

Her timid knock was answered immediately by a curt, "Come."

She pushed open the door and slipped inside her Potion master's office and over to his desk.

"Miss Granger," he said. "To what do I owe the interruption?"

"Sir, there is a matter of some urgency that I must ask your advice about."

"Yes? Go on."

"It's my teeth, sir." She lifted her head up and looked him in the eye as she opened her mouth and clenched her jaw, embarrassed at treating herself like a horse being judged as to its age.

"What about them? I see no difference. Are you now to be a vain girl like all the others?"

"How can you say there is no difference?" Realizing she had raised her voice when he had raised his eyebrow, she hastily added, "Sir." She clasped her hands together and wrung them. "They are perfect."

"And? Get to the point, you silly little girl, I have things to attend that have far more importance than whether or not your teeth are perfect."

"It's my parents, sir. They are dentists. Or, rather, my father is a dentist, but my mother is also expert in the field, if in an unacknowledged way. My former teeth were healthy and strong but rather large with a pronounced flaw in the fact that they stuck out rather unattractively. I can think of no way to explain their sudden state to people that know my visage as intimately as a set of parents that pay particular attention to a person's *mouth*."

He laid his quill down on his blotter and sat back. "I begin to see the point."

"I knew you would, sir."

"Have you considered telling your parents the truth? It struck me that they were rather forward-thinking individuals."

"They are, sir. But even they have their limits."

"Do you want them returned to their former state?"

She couldn't masquerade the disappointment and hurt. "Yes, sir. I fear that is exactly what must be done."

He looked at her for a long time in silence, and she bowed her head to evade his penetrating gaze.

"Miss Granger, if there were another alternative available, would you accept it?"

"I would, sir. I am not usually vain by nature. How can one be when one has been told they have no redeeming qualities repeatedly? However, I find I am loathe to go back to how I was."

"Then you will trust this situation to me. I will take care of it. However, there is a caveat. You must never mention my part in this, and in the future, you must take these issues, and any others you might have in the future, to your own Head of House. I have enough students to take care of without the added work of mollycoddling Gryffindors."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I will make sure not to bother you in the future, sir."

"See that you don't."

Severus Snape walked through the streets of London in his best Muggle morning coat of soft grey, with a matching hat, and a fine walking stick. He felt like a fop. He usually kept to a more subdued style of dress, but as the saying went, if you are in Rome, live as the Romans do.

He could have hired a hackney carriage, but he needed the walk. His gut still burned with anger and resentment over the Leaving Feast the night before. How dare Dumbledore change the points at the last minute like that? And the way he had called out Miss Granger as the recipient of just enough points to steal the cup from Slytherin was like throwing acid in his face. Bastard.

The long walk did little to calm his mood, or if it had, then it was certainly needed, for if his mood had been any worse, he'd be close to raving. He had to have his wits about him for this task he had set himself, and if he was any angrier he would make a hash of things for sure.

He found himself at the doorstep sooner than expected and looked up again at the window where he'd first spied the girl. He remembered the shiver that had gone through him when he'd first thought her a ghost. Ghosts that haunted Muggle houses were often violent and unreasonable and not to be dealt with lightly. He snorted. She might not have been a ghost, but Miss Granger was still not to be taken lightly.

He gained the stair and rapped on the door with his cane.

A rising wail from beyond the door made every hair on his body stand up. He shouldn't have been thinking of ghosts, surely his imagination was playing tricks on him. The door opened and the sound of shouting grew louder. No, that wasn't a shout, it was a blood-curdling cry from the soul. Only the placid look on the housekeeper's face kept him from reaching for his wand and bursting into the house.

"May I help you? Oh, I say! You're the gentleman from Miss Granger's school!"

"Indeed. I was in the neighborhood and was hoping to be able to have a few words with her parents if I may."

"Come in. I'll take your things."

He followed her into the small foyer and stripped off his gloves, handing them over along with his walking stick.

"If you'll wait here sir, I will see if the mistress of the house is available. Please don't mind the cries. Doctor Granger is with a patient. It will be over very soon. He really is a gentle doctor; the poor people already come in such pain, and they are always better off for his care."

Snape didn't reply. He just nodded his head as the housekeeper turned to walk away.

The sound of screaming and begging went on, and he found himself moving without his own volition to the doorway off the entryway. In a normal house, this would be a parlor. He pulled aside the curtain just enough to peer into the surgery. What he saw made him shudder. How barbaric. How tragic. These foolish Muggles had no concept of how their lives would have been improved had they not chosen to persecute his kind. There was no pain remedy. No antiseptic. Nothing looked sterile, only clean. Except for Mr. Grangers' hands. They were covered in blood, as was the pile of rags he wiped them on.

Severus finally had an understanding of what had gone on inside Miss Granger's head when her hex had been removed. This is what she'd lived with. This is certainly the first association she would have had. By Jove, no wonder she'd gone spare.

He stepped away from the curtain and back to the door as the housekeeper made her way back down the stairs.

"The missus will see you, sir. Right this way."

Snape followed behind her with a nod, slipping his wand out of his sleeve.

Severus headed down the drive, away from Lady Granger's overly grand home. It was such a statement of bad taste. As was Lady Granger *That* woman had been the most absurd Muggle creature he'd dealt with in a dog's age.

He hated dealing with Muggles. He had since he'd finally gone off to school. And especially Muggles of her class and above. They always made him feel like he was unworthy, and he resented it with a steady burn that hadn't gone away since he'd been nearly run down in the street by an Earl's coach, as a wee tyke, and kicked for his pains by the outrider.

Thank goodness that Miss Granger was an only child and a solitary little mouse of a girl. He was drained to his core and grateful that there were few people in her life whose memories needed tampering with. It wasn't the altering of memories that was so draining. It was the scouring of their memories to find who else needed to be dealt with that tired him. There was another Aunt in Devon that she was fairly close to, but he thought enough time had passed since she'd seen the child that her teeth might not be an issue. He was too tired to Apparate back to The Leaky, never mind Devon.

Now that he was done with his mission, he put aside all thoughts of his student. He had performed this last service as a form of letting go. From here on in, pains taken with Muggle-born students could be fatal. He had no idea how long it would be before the Dark Lord rose again, but there was no longer a doubt in his mind that he would. Best thing for it was to start planning for the eventuality.

He headed down the avenue, blending in with the other people of the town out strolling, making their early calls, dropping their cards, putting a great deal of importance on the simple act of inviting someone over for some fucking tea. He detested them all.

Secrets

Chapter 9 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale. As AU as you get. M for later chapters.

Hermione had only been home for two days before her father called her into the sitting room after dinner.

"Hermione, your mother and I have recently decided that having my surgery below is simply not healthy for a young girl. In light of this, we have decided to make some changes. I will be moving my practice to a different location and will be supplementing the added expense by taking on a paying apprentice."

Hermione's eyes widened with surprise and a relief she couldn't hide. She wondered if this sudden new decision had anything to do with the fact that no one in the household, or even her Grandmother's seemed to have noticed her teeth.

"Ah, lamb. I can see you are pleased with the idea," her father remarked. "It will be some time before we can get things situated, and so your mother and I have decided to send you on holiday in Devon until we can make the needed changes around here."

"Devon? Are you talking about Aunt Alice?"

She looked over at her mother and found her smiling. Hermione's heart thumped in her chest. Her mother's older sister was, by far, her favorite relative. An eccentric of the highest order, Aunt Alice had been married off to an older man who was so happy with his young bride that he'd died quickly to reward her and left her a good bit of wealth and property in his will. Alice had never married again to show her thanks for such a magnanimous gesture.

"We will be rather sad to have you gone," said her mother, "since we only just got you back after so long away, but we think it for the best."

"I admit, I'm not happy to be away from you so soon, but I would love to go. I haven't seen Alice in years. I do so love Otterwold."

"And go you shall. Your mother will take you shopping tomorrow, and then Monday next, we will get the two of you on a coach for Ottery St. Catchpole for the summer."

"Thank you!" She jumped up and ran around the table to hug her father tightly.

The coach bounced heavily as it turned onto a well-rutted road, jarring Hermione out of the partial doze. She reached up automatically and adjusted her bonnet before pulling at her Spencer, trying to get some air. She wanted to take it off, but the loathsome cretin sitting across from her was the reason she had put it on after the first stop. The way he stared at her budding décolletage had made her distinctly uncomfortable. It had taken some time to get used to the change from her high-necked school uniform to the low-cut muslin gowns she'd grown up in again. She'd taken to wearing her mother's lace fichu, tucked into the front, to try and undermine the style's determination to show off more skin than she was ready to. Even that hadn't been proof against leering.

Her mother woke up with a start and looked around blinking. She gave her daughter a wry smile and swiped delicately at the bit of drool on her lip.

"How much longer?" her mother asked her quietly.

"Almost there. We just turned onto the Stoatshead road."

"Marvelous news. I do love my sister, but I so hate to travel."

"Can you not spend the summer as well?"

"No. Just the week. I want to help get the surgery in order for the move, and your father has asked me to help him chose a new location."

Hermione nodded and looked out the window again at the rolling landscape, dotted with apple orchards and wheat fields.

Half an hour later they rolled into Ottery St. Catchpole. Hermione was grateful for the hand that helped her down, as she wasn't sure she wouldn't simply fall out of the carriage. She went and sat on the bench perched along the low stone wall of the small inn while her mother directed their luggage down from the top of the coach.

The town was rather small, but highly pleasant, featuring the inn and a church with a nicely laid-out churchyard on the north end of the square and, to the south, a blacksmith, farrier, harness maker and wheelwright. Heading out of the center to the north east were more shops, with a bookseller, a draper, the post, and one or two more shops if she remembered correctly. She hadn't been here in over two years.

She loved it here. Aside from her former home in Pearheath, this was the place most often thought of to fend off her darkest moments.

The summer sun felt warm against her skin, and after the coach had loaded back up and headed on to the next town, she finally shrugged out of her Spencer. They didn't need to wait long before a landau pulled into the square with a team of unmatched horses. The driver hopped down, and Hermione got up from the bench and bobbed to her Aunt's old coachman, Pete.

"Hello, Mrs. Granger, good teh see yeh. And look at this mite, not so small anymore, are yeh? Come, come. I know yehs tired after all that jouncing. Lemme get yer things up off the ground here, and we'll have yeh home in a jiffy. Mrs. Perthwit is in a right state waiting for yehs, she is."

Twenty minutes later and Hermione was alighting from the carriage in front of a stately house, with a long graveled drive lined with chestnut trees and glorious fields spreading out to the hills on either side. There was a walled garden to the east side and a glassed-in conservatory to the west. It had once belonged to a wealthy country squire, but had been bought by her aunt's departed husband when that family had fallen on hard times and sold off the untailed properties.

Mr. Perthwit, a nabob who had made himself quite the fortune in the East Indies, had spent many years improving the property before he had finally decided that the last thing it needed was a pretty young wife to adorn it.

The front door flew open, and a loud cry of happiness announced Aunt Alice. She was in her late thirties and wore her age well. Still a very handsome woman; she wore a whimsical, silk turban over her curly, blond hair, that matched her deep burgundy silk gown. To Hermione, newly aware of such things, it was cut shockingly low but had a high, stiff collar that fanned out behind her neck. Hermione thought she looked splendid.

"There you are! *There* you are, my darlings! Helen! You look absolutely fetching in that frock." She opened her arms wide. "*Mydearest* sister!"

"*Only* sister, Alice," her mother replied with a droll laugh, giving her a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Regardless, you are my favorite person, aside from this young girl beside you. Hello, Hermione, welcome back to Otterwold. My dear child, you have grown! And look how pretty you are! I told you she would grow into those teeth, Helen. You only needed to give her some time!"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Her teeth are fine, always were."

Hermione froze for a moment, as Alice gave her sister a quizzical look.

"Indeed," Alice said finally. "That is what I always said. It is of no matter. Come in! Come in! I have tea and cake waiting for you, and then we shall get you both to your rooms for a proper lie down." She wrapped her arms around Hermione's elbow and walked them up the wide front steps. "I have so many splendid things planned for us this week. I'm having a lawn party tomorrow and have invited only those neighbors who can hold meaningful conversation. After that, I shall take you both around the countryside, and we shall picnic in the park. I have a few more things on the list, but I thought I would let you dictate how the rest of the week should go, Helen, as this is such a short visit for you."

The week went quickly. The garden party was, to Hermione's surprise, quite fun. The parson's children, Fredrick and Henrietta Janssen, were a year older and a year younger, respectively, and very welcoming. They were new to their parish, and so Hermione had never met them before. Fredrick was a dead shot at lawn bowl, and Henrietta admitted to a quiet passion for cricket. The other children were all younger, and Hermione had a pleasant time chasing them around in an endless game of hide and seek in the rhododendron garden.

Every morning, she would ride out with her mother and aunt, through the pasturage on her aunt's property and into the Earl's park. The Earl was apparently never in residence, keeping to either London or another of his homes, but his property was kept in immaculate condition, and riding through its old trees and across the splendid ornamental bridges was pure pleasure.

Eventually, the time came to see her mother off, and Hermione was conflicted by how much she would miss her and how grateful she was not to be returning to London herself. She'd been away from her parents for an entire school year, and yet seemed overly willing to not see them for the summer. The guilt put her out of sorts.

"There you are. I should have known I would find you here," Alice said upon finding her in the library. "Come, this isn't good for you. Not the reading, mind, I highly approve of that, but this maudlin countenance. You will find the summer will pass soon enough, and then you will be back with your family again." She walked over and plucked the copy of Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, out of her hands, marked the page with a feather she pulled from her hair turban, and closed it.

Hermione admired Alice's crazy collection of turbans. The biggest reason being that they had the same head of wild curls, but Alice had liberated herself by cutting them all off and slapping her turbans on to hide the fact. Hermione thought that was a deliciously wicked thing to have done.

Holding out her hand, Alice said, "Come with me. I have a secret to show you."

Hermione uncurled herself from the chair and took her hand with a smile. Her aunt folded her hand around her own arm and patted it as she led her out of the library.

"You come from a long line of blue-stockings, child. Blame it on your father, as I blame it on mine, and my mother blamed it on hers. The women in our family are too smart for our own good and have been overindulged by our fathers. With the exception of my own husband, God rest his soul, we have always attracted men who valued our intelligence, and then spoiled their daughters shamelessly when they saw it had passed to another generation. The weight of our intellect demands support; however, the weight of society demands discretion. Thus, we are smart in secret. Having a secret can be a good thing, Hermione. Holding onto a mystery about yourself can see you through the darkest times. I will show you mine, so that in the future, you can have an idea of how to construct your own."

She led her up the stairs, toward her own rooms.

"Mr. Perthwit, may he rest in eternal peace, broke with tradition. All he wanted was a beauty. I actually had to work rather hard to infuse myself with the tittering insipidness that he found so charming. I did so well at my dramatics that he indulged me in any way I wished. My one wish was a private chamber of my own. This is where I keep my secret.

"Even after his passing, bless him for his timing, a mere eighteen months after our union, I kept it a secret. I know I didn't really have to, but I wanted to. It became part of the fun."

She walked across her large and well-appointed bed chamber to a small door. "In here is my secret self. This is where I hide when life gets a little blue. Go on, open the door."

Hermione gave her a quizzical smile, unsure what she would find beyond the small door. She turned the knob and pulled. When she saw the inside, she gasped. She stepped in and whirled in a small circle before looking at her aunt with a bright smile.

"This is amazing!"

Her aunt clapped her hands in delight. "I knew you would approve!"

Hermione looked around again, at the hundreds, if not thousands, indeed, there might even be a hundred thousand, specimens of insects pinned inside frames, displayed under glass, covering the walls of the surprisingly large room filled with sunlight streaming in from the windows.

"How long have you collected insects?"

"Oh, it must be almost twenty years. I thought them fascinating as a child, but it wasn't until Mr. Perthwit, may he rest in peace eternally, told me I should find myself a hobby that the idea came to me. I have no doubts that he intended something more along the lines of drawing or painting."

"This is simply marvelous!"

"I know! And it is ever so much more than a hobby now. I am actually a recognized authority on the subject of local population variants. I've had several papers published, and at least once a year I am asked to give a lecture to the Royal Society."

"How exciting! What is that like?"

"Oh, I never go. They would probably have a fit of the vapors if I did. I publish everything under a pseudonym. They think I am a man." She laughed and walked over to the neat desk in the corner and picked up a paper she had been working on and handed it to Hermione. "No, I just write the lecture and send it off, and they squabble amongst themselves as to who gets the honor of delivering the speech for me. You see, *Mr. Alistair Perth*, is of delicate health, after his forays into the Hindu Kush as a young man." She giggled like a little girl. "I've made myself an entire biography. My alter ego is quite the distinguished gentleman. I've left instruction with a lawyer in London, that upon my death, my entire collection will be donated to the Royal Society along with the truth. I only wish I could hang around as a ghost and haunt them to drive the point home."

She took her paper back and laid it on the desk before sitting down and arranging the folds of her morning dress fastidiously.

"My mother's passion was mathematics. Your mother's was teeth, of all things. I doubt they ever told you this, but it was Helen that fired John Granger's interest in the subject. I am only sorry they reached such a level of success. Now she has to hide. It cannot be easy for her." Alice waved a regal hand. "That is neither here nor there. The point of this little expedition to the hidden reaches of Otterwold is to show you that you're not alone. You are not so singular as to be entirely misunderstood. You are

young yet; there is plenty of time to find your own passion and create your own secret, but when the dog does bite you, so-to-speak, know that in our family, it is perfectly normal.

"The trick is in choosing your partner. Either find a man you can share your secret with, one like your father and mine, who will not just take pride in, but adore, your mind, or find one who is nearly decrepit and already suffering from an affliction, like my dearest Phillip, rest his soul. Those are your only two options. Do not marry for love alone, and do not marry a healthy man out of practicality, or you will either starve or wither. You are the captain of your own ship, Hermione, but the currents are always against you."

Alice rose up from her chair. "Enough. That is all the advice on that subject you shall ever receive from me. I wanted to jolt you out of your melancholy, not dictate how you should run your life when you are merely twelve years old."

"You have done both with great success," Hermione reassured her. "In fact, if I could count on your absolute discretion, I would share with you the fact that I already have a secret."

Alice sat back down in her chair with a delighted smile and pulled a stool out from under a bench and patted it. Hermione sat down and folded her hands in her lap nervously.

"You have my utter discretion. I give you my solemn vow."

"I would need one. In fact, it would be rather mandatory. You see, my secret is of such strangeness as to be easily dismissed, and yet, the consequences of my telling you would be severe if you were to ever let it slip."

Alice's smile faltered and her face became serious. "You have my word. But I think you ought to tell me right now. I admit to disliking the idea of a child your age carrying a secret that sounds more like a burden. Are you in any trouble, Hermione?"

"No! No. It's not quite the way it sounds. You see, I'm a witch."

Alice looked at her for a long time without blinking. "I'm afraid I don't follow," she finally said.

"I'm magical. I can do magic. I know it sounds fantastical, and it probably makes me sound like a candidate for Bedlam, but it's true. The school that I go to is not a finishing school for young ladies and gentlemen; it is a school where we learn how to control our magic and train to use it in all manner of ways."

Hermione squirmed under Alice's piercing look.

"Your teeth," she finally said. Hermione sagged with relief and nodded vigorously.

"There was an accident of a sort, and my teeth were all broken. They fixed them with a spell, but... I think they thought they were doing me a favor. I asked one of the teachers to put them back the way they were. I could never explain this to anyone, let alone *my* parents. Instead, my teacher seems to have... Well, I don't know what he did. But my parents, Cook, Mrs. Crabtree, even Lady Granger, Charles, her other maids... None of them noticed anything. You're the first."

Alice sat back in her chair and blew out a breath.

"Do your parents know?"

"No. I've not the courage to tell them. I have reason to suspect that they would be less than pleased."

Alice nodded slowly, looking out the window to the hills beyond.

"Hermione... When you were a child, a babe really, you did something I've never been able to forget. Your parents were off on their morning ride, and I was walking with you in the field. A butterfly came and danced about your face. When it flitted off again, you were quite upset, as most children are. However, not a moment later, an entire cloud of butterflies came up from every part of the property and swarmed us. I was actually rather terrified, and I ran with you back into the house with this hoard of parti-colored Lepidoptera on my tail." She pressed her hand to her bosom. "Your parents refused to believe me with an almost violent insistence. I was always rather suspicious of that."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "They say that we're supposed to come into our magic young. But my one experience that I can remember, I was about seven, resulted in such shame that it seems I managed to drive my magic away. That is, until last year. I came to the attention of the school after an episode of uncontrolled magic, and they sent someone off to collect me. Their kind hides from the world, ever since the witch trials and the burnings."

"Well, they're rather smart then, I say. However, I suspect your parents already know on some level. I won't counsel you in this, but take that into account. Having this sort of secret isn't particularly healthy."

"True, but it is better than being sent off to an asylum or burned at the stake."

"Pshaw. As if I would have even allowed that. Can you show me some magic?"

Hermione pulled her wand from the pocket she had sewn into her skirt and waved it in the air, causing a cascade of sparks. Alice clapped her hands together and marveled.

"That's all I can really show you, actually. Underage witches and wizards are not allowed to use their magic anywhere but at school. They have ways of knowing when we do, and I would get into a lot of trouble."

"*Wizards*... That sounds so... delicious, actually. Can I meet one?"

"I promise, someday. But I don't know any well enough to invite them to tea anytime soon."

"Surely we could invite a friend from school to spend some time?"

Hermione squirmed on her stool and looked down at the floor. "I don't actually have any."

"Oh." Alice gave her a look filled with too much understanding to be comfortable. "Come, let's retreat to my boudoir and order up some tea. I want to hear all about your school and why you don't seem to have any friends."

After that they developed a habit of retreating to Alice's research chamber in the afternoons where Alice taught her an enormous amount about insects, and Hermione showed her the spells in her school books and could study without fear of discovery.

For the rest of the summer, they never mentioned either insects or magic outside of the confines of Alice's rooms, with the singular exception of that first night during dinner, when Alice tossed her fork down onto her plate with a huff and said, "*Muggle*. What a wretched word. I don't particularly like being termed a *Muggle*."

Hermione had giggled into her lemonade.

For the rest of the summer, she spent her time reading, riding, walking, strolling, and even painting a bit. She had lunch at least once a week with Fredrick and Henrietta,

and they became fast friends. She wandered across the countryside on long, rambling walks, and thoroughly enjoyed her time.

Aunt Alice found a way to see magic. At the end of Hermione's summer visit, she'd packed her things as well and personally took Hermione back to London. They made a side trip to The Leaky Cauldron and, with the help of Mr. Tatterwing, went on through to Diagon Alley, for the express purposes of outfitting Hermione for school. Certainly not just to satisfy an overcurious aunt.

Alice was speechless during the entire time it took to exchange currency at Gringotts, and Hermione was hard pressed to keep her from purchasing a copy of *Holometabolous Insects, and their Uses in Potion Making* explaining for the fifth time the Statute of Secrecy and its accompanying penalties.

Alice pouted, but gave in when she realized that the alternative was having her memories tampered with.

They had lunch in *The Leaky*, simply because Alice needed to chatter desperately about everything she had seen before she could hope to keep a straight face in front of Hermione's parents. When luncheon was finished, Hermione jumped up from her chair and barreled into a man behind her.

"Oh! Forgive me! I'm terribly sorry..."

Hermione's apology died in the face of the look of pure malice she received from Mr. Malfoy. He stared at her as if she had spit on him, and then his gaze slid over to her aunt and only became ruder.

He turned to his son and said, "Come, Draco. I see the quality of the establishment has fallen to an all new low when they will let anyone in. Let us take ourselves elsewhere."

Draco laughed at his father's remark and gave Hermione a sneer as well. The two of them stormed away.

Alice put her hand on Hermione's shoulder and drew her close. "Is that one of your purebloods?"

"Yes. If you listen to Draco, the *purest*."

"I find I'm rather more comfortable being a mere Muggle now," Alice quipped with a smirk. "Come. Let's get your things together and get you home. Your parents have been waiting long enough."

They gathered Hermione's packages and books and turned to find yet another wizard staring down at them.

"Hello, Professor!" Hermione smiled widely at seeing her teacher once more. "This is my Aunt, Mrs. Phillip Perthwit. Alice, this is one of my teachers, Professor Snape."

"How do you do, madam?" he said, with a distinct lack of warmth.

"Very well, indeed, sir. We've just been to fetch Hermione's new school things."

"How fascinating," he replied with a condescending sneer. "Miss Granger, do take care. There are reasons we have rules." His black eyes slid from Hermione to her aunt and back again before he turned and left without further word.

They watched him billow out the back door and then made for the front quickly.

"Another pureblood?"

"I believe so, yes."

"I'm not sure I entirely like these purebloods."

"I'm sure that's fine, since they have no use for us either. But I will say that Professor Snape isn't like the rest."

"You can't tell that by his manners."

"No, that much is patently true. He does have some, though. You should have seen him the night he arrived to pick me up. Father was in full Granger-mode, and the professor set him down with amazing skill."

"I would have liked to see that. I do love when your father goes Granger. In fact, I would love to see your professor go toe-to-toe with your grandmother herself. I'd even pay to see it."

Hermione giggled as Pete helped her up into their carriage. "I would as well."

Smitten

Chapter 10 of 10

A witch struggles to conform in a society that restricts her. A wizard thinks he has nothing to offer anyone but his duty and, ultimately, his life. An SS/HG Regency Tale.

Hermione's remaining summer was just as enjoyable as her stay in Devon. Aunt Alice stayed for a week, taking them to the theater and Hyde Park and buying them all ices after a visit to see the Crown Jewels.

Father had indeed moved his practice to a new location, taking on a paying apprentice to help defray the costs even further, so the house was blessedly silent.

When the summer was over and she had to pack her trunks, she wept sad tears, wishing she could stay and go at the same time.

She climbed into the hired hansom next to Mrs. Crabtree and waved to her parents with a quivering lip, until they were lost to sight.

Just as she had over the Christmas and Easter holidays, Mrs. Crabtree went apoplectic at the sight of the people gathered around the Thestral carriages. Again, she

demanded the driver take them back forthwith so she could explain to the Grangers just what sort of people they had delivered their daughter to.

Again, Mr. Tatterwing Obliviated the housekeeper with a smile and a stooped bow. Hermione watched Mrs. Crabtree set off back toward their home with a smile and a wave.

"Hello, Hermione!" She turned to see Ron waving at her from where his family stood in a cluster. Harry was with them, dressed like a common street urchin. He was caught up in a chat with Neville.

Hermione bristled like a cat. "Hello, Ron."

"Now, don't be mad at me. I'm really very sorry about what happened that night. And you did get nice teeth out of it? I bet that made you happy."

"Actually, Ronald, that caused me even more problems. Honestly, how exactly was I supposed to explain brand new teeth to my parents?"

"Oh, sorry. That must have been awful. How did you explain it?"

"The situation was taken care of for me, thank you very much."

"Look, Hermione. I felt awful about what happened. I'm really terribly sorry. I know I already apologized, but I spent all summer trying to figure out how to say it again. I don't want you to be mad with me. Could we start again?" He stuck out his hand. "Hello, I'm Ronald Weasley."

Hermione scrunched up her face but then let slip a wry smile. She sighed and held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Ronald." She shook his hand quickly. "I would appreciate it most sincerely if you would stop creating situations where you have to apologize to me in the future."

"I promise."

"Good. Well, then. Did you enjoy your summer holiday?"

"I did, in fact. Harry was able to spend some time with us. But that's his story to tell. How about yourself?"

"I had a lovely summer. I spent a great deal of time with my Aunt. I so love it there. She lives in Devon."

"So do we! I wish we'd known you were nearby. What part of Devon?"

"Ottery St..."

"...Catchpole? That's where I live! Oh, what dashed luck! You were my neighbor!"

"Then you might know my Aunt! Mrs. Phillip Perthwit?"

"No, we don't actually know any Muggles. We do know a few of the other Wizarding families around. The Diggorys and the Lovegoods."

"Say, Hermione, my sister Ginny is starting this year. You'll look after her in the girls' dorm, won't you?" He turned and pointed to a young witch standing by his mother looking excited and lost at the same time.

"I will. I'll go and introduce myself now."

"I would be grateful. I'll go and round up Harry. We were late, so we didn't get a chance to get ready. I need to grab him and change into our uniforms in the Leaky before my Mum has a conniption. Save us a seat on the carriage!"

"I will!"

Hermione smiled as she watched Ron hurry over to Harry and tug his sleeve. Harry grabbed for his valise, and they headed inside.

Hermione piled into a carriage with Ginevra Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Neville, and even though they had saved the boys a seat, the carriages left without Harry and Ron.

Snape was heading to the feast when Dumbledore stopped him in the hallway.

"Might I have a moment of your time, Professor?"

"Of course, Headmaster."

"It seems that we are short two students. Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley did not arrive with the others." Dumbledore gave him a significant look over the heads of the students scurrying by.

Snape's gut clenched with instantaneous concern. Had something terrible happened to Potter? Had it started already? Was this it?

"I would be grateful if you could look into it for me."

"Of course, Headmaster. Immediately."

He spun on his heel and headed off out the front doors. Unsure of where to start, he headed for the stables first.

The Thestrals had already been released back into the forest, and a quick look showed him all the carriages were empty. He checked for any traces of Dark Magic and found none.

The sound of a tremendous impact had him hurrying out of the stables. He stopped short when he saw an entire coach-a-bower thrown from the Whomping Willow, with its ghost horses thrashing in the air.

Someone had been enchanting Muggle coaches again, and he would put his Galleons on it having been Arthur Weasley.

The carriage door flew open, and the missing boys seemed to be tossed out, along with their luggage. The coach took off for the forest with the boys shouting behind it uselessly.

Snape's rage was such that he took a full minute to calm himself before he headed up the sloping hill after them

He caught up with them outside the window to the Great Hall. He was less than pleased to hear that he was the topic of discussion.

"Maybe he left because he wasn't given the Defense position again!"

"Or maybe he was sacked! I mean, everyone hates him..."

"Or maybe he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive with the Thestral carriages," he intoned. He indulged himself with a smile when he saw them give a guilty start. Surely, Dumbledore couldn't ignore *this*. "Follow me," he ordered.

"Leave it to those two," snapped Hermione, as she braided Ginny's hair for bed. "They've only been back one day, and already they're in trouble and already they're complaining about some dark plot. I mean seriously. Why would anyone lock them in the men's facilities at the Leaky? I'm surprised Neville wasn't with them."

"I blame Ron," Ginny said. "Harry's too nice to be the sort to cause people trouble intentionally, but Ron is always making a hash of things. I shudder to think what will happen when my parents find out they stole the coach-a-bower. My father could get in serious trouble if the Ministry finds out he's been charming Muggle coaches. There was a fellow over in Ireland that was caught when his charmed coach went out of control. It started stopping to pick up Muggles and carried them off. It was a mess. There was no way to Oblivate everyone who saw it. The Ministry imposed heavy fines after that."

"I wouldn't count on Ron being the only guilty party. From what I could see last year, the three of them had a tendency to whip themselves into a lather over the silliest things."

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named isn't a silly thing."

Hermione tied the braid off with a red ribbon that clashed marvelously with the girl's auburn hair.

"I really need to take more time and read up on this Voldemort. I really don't know much beyond what he did to Harry's family. I did miss a good bit of the gossip last year. I'm afraid I do have a tendency to shove my nose into a book and not come out."

"I'll tell you everything I know. It's all Harry could talk about this summer. It's just terrible what he went through at the end of the last school year."

"Oh, yes. Wasn't it just..."

Hermione walked to her next class thinking over how odd it was that her Professor had seemed to ignore her at breakfast. All of last year, he had generally looked her way at least once each mealtime. It could have just been that he was in a bad mood. He'd been plainly furious, shooting both Harry and Ron overgenerous glares on several occasions during the meal. But it was the way that he stared down at his plate immediately afterwards, that had her perplexed.

Had she displeased him somehow? Could he be upset that she had taken lunch in the Leaky Cauldron with Aunt Alice? Surely not. How else was she expected to gather her school supplies? Was she supposed to have contacted him? Surely he had better things to do.

No, whatever reason her professor had for suddenly ignoring her, there had to be a good explanation. One thing last year had taught her was that Professor Snape never did anything without a good reason. It was just extremely difficult to find it.

She decided she was being silly. She was fretting over her professor in a way that made Ginny's mooning after Harry look subtle. It wasn't as if the professor was actually her friend. He was just her teacher. Certainly, she'd felt that they'd shared a bond last year. He hadn't exactly gone out of his way to be solicitous, but to her mind, he had certainly gone farther than he had to. She wasn't blind. As far as she could see, she was the only student outside of Slytherin that showed him any respect at all, and he had seemed to take such loyalty to heart.

She realized, on her way to her first Defense Against Dark Arts class, that she was making too much out of one distracted meal. She shook her head to clear it and hurried to catch the door before it closed.

She was most interested in seeing the new teacher. She had read Professor Lockhart's books from cover to cover and thought him a most impressive man. From his pictures, he certainly seemed a rather handsome man, as well. She hadn't been afforded a good look at him during the Welcoming Feast last night. He had been seated too far away, and the Ravenclaw table had blocked her view. She wondered why he was even in Ravenclaw. His series of autobiographies certainly seemed like the stuff Gryffindors were made of.

Hermione seated herself at an open seat, next to Lavender, since Padma and Parvati were sharing a table already and pulled out her books, parchment, quill and ink. She'd been hoping that the school would have instituted Professor McGonagall's changes and integrated the boys with the girls again, but apparently that was not to be this year.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the office door flew open, and Professor Gilderoy Lockhart swirled into the room.

Hermione wasn't even aware that she had stopped breathing until Lavender quietly exclaimed, "Oh, *my!*"

Hermione sucked in a breath before replying, "Indeed."

Hermione spent the next few weeks smitten. She did her best not to make a fool of herself like the other girls who were plainly besotted by the handsome professor, but she wasn't entirely sure of her success. After all, this was her first smit.

She'd begun to take extra time braiding and pinning her hair, which amounted to quite a lot, since it was always so unruly, and spent even more time spelling out any wrinkles in her robes and uniform. The only person who noticed was Luna Lovegood. They had taken to studying together in the library, and the first-year seemed to be a touch too perceptive for Hermione's comfort level.

She sat at the Halloween Feast by herself and looked around. This was actually her first Halloween Feast, and the extra pains she'd taken with her appearance hardly seemed worth it. It was a good deal more enjoyable than crying in the girls' room and nearly getting killed by a troll, but on the whole, a bit of a letdown.

Several people were missing: Ginny, Harry, Ron, Neville, even Professor Lockhart. Dumbledore twinkled merrily while the other teachers seemed to gossip and laugh amongst themselves. Professor Snape looked as irritated as ever, his mood seemingly capable of fathoming new lows without an end in sight.

It was rather too dull. She looked again at Professor Lockhart's empty seat and decided to go for a stroll. Perhaps she could find him near his office and ask him a question or two about his books. That would be a nice thing to do. Everyone liked a chance to talk about themselves. Especially Professor Lockhart.

On the way there, she spotted Harry. She was about to call out to him when she realized he looked to be in some distress. He looked pale and frightened, as he stared at the wall on the hallway.

"Harry? Are you alright?"

"Did you hear that?"

"No. What did I miss?"

"I heard a voice. It sounded like it was in the wall and moving very fast."

"What did it say?"

"There! That! Did you hear that?"

"No."

Hermione backed away a step as Harry darted down the hall, running his hands along the stones.

"It's going to kill someone!"

"What is? What did you hear, Harry?"

She took off after him, pulling her wand out and gripping it tightly in her hand.

As they ran along, Ron and Neville came around the corner and met up with them. "There you are, Harry! Why did you run out of the deathday party so fast?"

Harry didn't stop to explain; he just kept after the mysterious voice he heard. Hermione told them what she knew in a hushed voice as the three of them hurried to keep up with Harry. Around another turn and they were suddenly running through water.

Hermione couldn't tell where it was coming from, but the floor was covered.

"Look at the spiders!" shouted Neville.

Ron went pale, mumbling something about hating the wee beasts, as Hermione watched a long line of common house spiders making their way to the window and out through a crack in the mortar.

"Look!" shouted Harry.

They all stopped dead in the middle of the hall and looked at the writing on the wall. Large red letters, still dripping fresh, and Hermione wondered if it was paint, or blood.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.*

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Who is the heir?" asked Neville.

"Merlin! What happened to Mrs. Norris?" moaned Ron. He grabbed Harry by the back of his robes. "We have to get out of here *Now!*"

But it was too late.

It seemed as if the entire school had suddenly descended on them. Hermione found herself surrounded by a large crowd, all reading the words and exclaiming.

Draco Malfoy pushed through the crowd and hissed, "Enemies of the heir beware!" He turned to Hermione and spat, "You'll be next, Mudblood!"

Hermione shrank back from the venom in his voice and the hatred on his face. She backed into someone and turned quickly to both apologize and flee, but found herself tangled in Professor Snape's robes.

He did something strange then. He snarled at her to get out of his way, with a face full of annoyed disgust, yet he extricated her from his person with a gentle hand, guiding her behind him in a way that looked far rougher than it actually was. In fact, if one didn't look at his face and ignored his words, it would seem just as if he had *hidden* her behind him.

When she tried to explain about Harry having heard voices, she was glared into silence by both Ron and Harry. Luna reached out and pulled her by her arm, and Hermione ended up in the background.

Confused, she watched as Ron, Harry and Neville were taken away for questioning.

She stared at the words on the wall, finally beginning to understand that Harry might not be the attention-seeker she'd thought him to be. She remembered the look of terror on his face when she'd first spied him outside Lockhart's office, and it occurred to her that Harry might, in fact, be in a great deal of danger.

Hermione walked out of the Great Hall after the first meeting of the Dueling Club with two brand-new shiny bits of information whirling around in her head. First, Harry was a Parselmouth, and from the muttering and thrilled gossip, it would seem that made him an even more likely candidate to be this Heir of Slytherin McGonagall had explained about. The other fact that dazzled her was the sudden realization that Professor Snape was worth ten Lockharts any day. Her interests in Lockhart had been vanquished as thoroughly as the man himself, by her dark and dashing Professor Snape.

How could she have been so blind? How had she not seen it before? The man was an ode to grace and nobility hiding in plain sight. She turned around and looked behind her just in time to catch a glimpse of him storming out of the hall with a sneer. To the unskilled eye, he looked as dyspeptic as ever. In fact, he looked even more likely than ever to start laying about with curses, finally driven over the edge by the students around him, but to Hermione's newly opened eyes, he also looked misunderstood and lonely. It was tragic really.

Hermione had a sudden vision of an immortal doomed to earth as a punishment for some Olympic crime. What worse fate for a hidden god was there than to be locked into such a less than perfect form and driven demented by the incessant chattering of the half-formed minds of mere mortal children?

Hermione stopped and blinked, suddenly embarrassed by her own thoughts. She really didn't seem to be very good at this whole 'smitten' thing. It took up too much of her time and seemed to have her always on the verge of writing bad poetry. She thought about the little doodles of hearts and flowers she had scribbled around the name 'Gilderoy' and winced. Somehow she had the feeling that if she tried to do the same thing with 'Severus,' her hand might explode in the act.

Being thirteen seemed to be more difficult than one would have thought.

She puffed her cheeks as she blew out a breath and pushed her varying smits and unsmits from her mind. There were far more important things that needed her attention. This Heir of Slytherin and the voice Harry could hear in the walls seemed to be first and foremost.

Anyone with half a brain could see that Harry wasn't evil. Hotheaded and impulsive, yes, but a future Dark wizard? Hardly. To her mind, the most obvious choice would be that odious Malfoy boy. Who else embodied all the traits of Slytherin House so completely?

She stopped with her hand on the door of the Library as a cold finger trailed down her spine.

Actually, there was one other person that displayed the traits of Slytherin House in a manner far more flawless than the pitiable Malfoy. Professor Snape.

Now that she thought about it, he looked like an even more obvious candidate. Not that she thought he was the Heir, but it was certainly an obvious conclusion. One many people might leap to without a doubt. After all, how many of them were still convinced that he had tried to kill Harry during the first Quidditch match last year? Even after it had been clarified that Professor Quirrell was responsible, no one really wanted to pay attention to the glaring fact that Professor Snape had been trying to protect Harry. Even Harry himself downplayed his need for gratitude to the man.

Hermione snatched open the door to the library with a new sense of purpose. She needed to find out who the real culprit was before her poor, misunderstood professor took the blame.

Oh, or Harry. Yes, mustn't forget him either.

My betas wish me to inform you that smit was not a werd even 200 years ago, and they abstain from all responsibility. I say it isow.

gigglesnort

*Denotes text taken from the Books.