

A Devil on Her Back

by ks51689

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 10

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Sweat slid down Hermione's forehead in large, heavy droplets. It created moist trails in the layers of dirt and grime caked on her cheeks, nearly blinding her as it dripped into the corners of her eyes. It felt like every part of her, from her camel-colored hiking boots to the laminated I.C.W. name badge clipped to the hem of her jumper, was splattered with mud and grains of loose dirt. At the moment, the young inspector was hunched over, gripping her knees for balance as she expelled large puffs of breath, numb to any pangs of disgust as she felt the muscles in her chest constrict. Perhaps she shouldn't have neglected to exercise for so long... nor had that third croissant at breakfast. But she was supposed to be a bureaucrat, for Merlin's sake, leading a sedentary lifestyle, not rolling about in country pastures, chasing pigs. Sorry, *demon* pigs.

Lifting her head slightly, Hermione felt her heartbeat begin to settle, the scent of manure becoming apparent once she ceased to gasp for breath. Before she could express any revulsion, she found herself toppled, a white creature throwing itself heedlessly at her body. Dog saliva now mixed with the mud and sweat, and a defeated Hermione lay flat on the ground, wondering how she even got to this point.

"Beau!" a voice shouted sharply. "Beau, ici maintenant! Ne fais pas ça!" Beau lifted his head after a beat, sheepishly eyeing his master across the grassy field before setting off towards him at a lively trot, his hanging jowls swishing slightly with every step. Hermione propped herself up on her elbows and watched as the pure white bloodhound "assis!" where his master pointed. Then his master, a slight man with receding dark hair, jogged over to where she lay, offering a hand.

"Desolé, Madame Inspector, desolé!" he apologized, quick to pull Hermione to her feet. "Ze rest are très obedient, mais Beau est trop lazy, non?" he continued in his broken Franglais. As if to demonstrate his words, Beau could be seen at that very moment rolling on his back with abandon in the wet grass while his fellow bloodhounds sat patiently at his side, waiting for their next command.

"It's quite all right, Alain," Hermione assured the farmer, uselessly dusting off her loose-fitting navy trousers and pulling down her rumpled black jumper. Straightening with another deep breath, she surveyed the country landscape, establishing that the true, non-demonic pigs were boxed in their pen and releasing loud grunts of contentment, and the Nogtail, with its malicious black eyes and too long legs, had run for the hills, so to speak. The sight was certainly a relief. This farm was the fifth and last farm in the vast, wheat growing region of Beauce, where she had been forced to deal with a string of failed harvests due to Nogtail infiltration. Why the ever powerful French Ministry of Magic couldn't handle the concerns of a few poor wizard farmers was a mystery to her, but once their concerns had reached the ears of her bosses, that is to say the International Confederation of Wizards, and the Office of Magical Creature Regulation and Concealment specifically, it had become her problem.

"Well, Alain," Hermione said, reaching to shake the farmer's browned and callused hand, "everything seems to be in order here. You have your own pack of hounds now, which should scare away any skulking Nogtails." Grinning gratefully, Alain shook her hand enthusiastically before leaning over to give her a quick kiss on each cheek, clearly immune to her messy state.

"Ze Muggle farms, I can help?" Alain asked, gesturing to his posse of albino bloodhounds. Hermione gave the ragtag bunch, and then their happy owner, a considering glance before nodding in agreement.

"Just remember, don't mention a word of magic, Alain," Hermione cautioned. "Perhaps you could say it's something religious?"

Alain agreed immediately, saying, "Oui, of course," with an authoritative nod. Smiling warmly, Hermione gave one last wave of farewell to Alain and his bloodhounds before Apparating to the outskirts of the nearby Muggle town. Taking another cursory look at her filthy state, Hermione pulled out her wand and sent a well-aimed Scouring Charm at her boots. Though there was no hope for the rest of her without a bar of soap and warm bath for heavy soaking, at least she wouldn't drag any dirt into Madame Vallée's home.

The town was quiet in the Sunday twilight, the afternoon summer heat giving way to the cool breezes of evening. Hermione walked along the edges of the main road, passing a row of stone homes, each two or three stories in height with pitched roofs and dressed in creeping, green vines. A brimming flower box sat in the sill of each glowing window. Noting the lack of pedestrians or any other traffic, Hermione guessed that the residents were probably gathered around Sunday supper.

Turning a corner, Hermione caught a glimpse of her destination—a two-storied stone home which served as Hermione's residence for the week. Its walls were speckled with beige-, silver- and charcoal-colored stones of differing size and shape. The light in the wood framed windows left a warm and homey feeling in Hermione's chest as she thought of the kindly owner, Madame Vallée, and the savory meal that most likely awaited her. But before she could even reach the front door, Madame Vallée had opened it, watching from the doorway as Hermione approached.

"Oh, ma pauvre!" Madame Vallée gasped when Hermione reached her, taking in the dirt and grass stains. In contrast, Madame Vallée wore a crisp cotton dress with a soft black shawl gathered around her shoulders. Her silver hair was twisted into a tight chignon at the back of her head, a punctuation mark on her neat style of dress.

Feeling guilty, Hermione's cheeks reddened, as if being scolded by her own grandmother after dirtying her good tea dress. "I am so sorry, Madame! Très désolée! I promise I will clean up immediately!" Madame Vallée simply clucked in response, her hands hand on her hips with a single raised eyebrow. Her stern demeanor, however, quickly gave way to a sympathetic smile, reaching her hands forward to dust off Hermione's clothes slightly, straightening the hem of Hermione's jumper. Satisfied that the loose dirt had been disposed of, she beckoned Hermione into the warm hallway. Turning immediately to climb the stairs to her room on the second floor, and thoroughly chastised, Hermione was halted by the soft pressure of Madame Vallée's hand on her shoulder.

"You 'ave a visitor," she informed Hermione, nodding to the sitting room with a knowing look. Unsure of what could have caused such a smile, or who this mysterious visitor was, Hermione approached the sitting room with a practiced tenseness, keenly aware of the wand literally hidden up her sleeve. An eyeful of her visitor, however, left Hermione less than impressed. Hunched over on an aged dark leather couch, his arms folded over the tops of his knees and his hazel eyes firmly focused on the patterned oriental rug before him, was a skinny boy with cropped, almost copper-colored hair, and a thin, long nose. Donning a pair of wire rimmed glasses, Hermione barely refrained from rolling her eyes at the sight of his large black wizard's robe, I.C.W. neatly embroidered just above his heart. This hack didn't even have the sense to take off his wizard's clothes before entering a Muggle home! Hermione was suddenly quite thankful that Madame Vallée thought the British hopelessly tacky; this idiot's appearance was not helping one iota.

"I suppose you have my next assignment," Hermione stated briskly, not even considering it a question, but curious as to why the I.C.W. didn't simply convey the message by owl as usual. The boy's head snapped towards where she stood, and he jumped up, nearly tripping over his feet to meet her at the sitting room's entrance.

"Uh, yes, Inspector Granger, I..."

"Well, let's have it, then," Hermione beckoned him impatiently. She had no desire to hear this rookie prattle on, feeling the grime sinking into her pores. The boy paused, mouth agape, but fished a scroll out of his pocket and soldiered on.

"That's the thing, Inspector, I'm..." The boy was forced to pause once more after the scroll he had clutched in his right hand was ripped violently from him by an ever irritated Hermione, who unrolled it with haste and read aloud the bullet points in a mutter.

"Nonnative creature found... sighted by Muggles, *well, of course...* Washington, D.C. ... *my apprentice?*" Tearing her gaze from the carefully inked message, Hermione looked at the string-bean-like wizard with disbelief. Apparently, it was her turn to be shocked. Seeing his opportunity, the boy thrust his right hand forward, grasping Hermione's, which hung limp at her side, and shook it vigorously with a near bone crushing grip.

Finding no resistance from Hermione, the boy continued his introduction. "I'm Thomas, Thomas Cook," he said with clear excitement. "I'm just so honored to work with you, Inspector. I mean, you have accomplished so much, and at such a young age, and I have, of course, heard so much about you from Professor Hagrid."

Professor Hagrid? Hermione thought, unable to engage her jaw enough to respond. How old was this kid?

Clearly not put off by Hermione's silence, Thomas continued to jabber on like an eager lap dog. "Your work with the Order against Voldemort was impressive indeed, that goes without saying really, but the legislation you wrote to empower house-elves over at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, that was masterful. I can't believe the Ministry wouldn't even consider it! It's shameful how they drummed you out like that. I mean, I know they said you had a nervous breakdown of some sort, but I don't believe that for a second! Well, you're here now, anyway, and..."

Well, that was quite enough. Hermione could no longer bear to listen and was seconds away from covering her ears with her hands like a petulant child.

"Dîner!" The sharp call cut through Thomas' babbling, effectively silencing him once more. Peering around the wall and into the kitchen, Hermione saw three places set at the small rectangle table in the center. Silently indicating that they should join Madame Vallée at the table, Hermione and Thomas entered, Hermione making a slight detour to wash her hands and face in the kitchen sink before joining them at the table. The two young people took seats at opposing sides while Madame Vallée sat at the head. Grateful for the interruption, Hermione sent Madame Vallée a look of appreciation before tucking into the steaming beef stew set before her. She wasn't sure how much of the conversation Madame Vallée had heard, or really understood for that matter, but she could have sworn that Vallée had winked at her in response.

The meal was taken, for the most part, in silence. Thomas seemed to be as ravenously hungry as Hermione, taking to shoveling the stew in his mouth sloppily, bits of broth dripping around his bowl. Hermione might have said something about it had she not been so focused on inhaling her own meal, although in much more polite, ladylike manner. Madame Vallée seemed hardly perturbed by the entire situation. Hermione guessed that her years of renting out rooms to foreign visitors had taught her when and when not to ask questions.

Choosing her moment, Madame Vallée turned to Thomas with a curious glance and asked, "Are you a farm doctor as well?" Thomas spluttered the stew in his mouth, managing to spill even more than he had before. Sending him a murderous glare, Hermione swallowed her own mouthful of stew before beginning to speak.

"Yes, Madame, Thomas is... my assistant. He flew here from England to join me. You see, the pig virus has been quite widespread. But do not fear. All of the area pigs have been cleared." Madame Vallée nodded approvingly and went back to her meal. Across from Hermione, Thomas soundlessly mouthed, "farm doctor?" with confusion, but Hermione elected to ignore him for the rest of the meal.

Once they had finished, Madame Vallée began to clear the table, and after thanking her for the lovely meal, Hermione literally pulled Thomas outside for a private chat. Dropping the arm she had used to yank him out of his seat the moment they had exited the home, she began giving him his first lesson in an angry whisper.

"I don't even know where to begin with you," she hissed, watching the boy shrink awkwardly in his place. "First, do not ever come into a Muggle residence, or even walk around in any Muggle community in wizard's robes! Especially not in the middle of the summer! Second, do not loudly talk about magic in a Muggle's sitting room. I feel like

all of this should be terribly obvious, but perhaps not." She stopped for a second just to glare before continuing. "Third, learn to think on your feet! Did you really think I was going to tell her I was here to deal with a Nogtail infestation?"

Feeling she had said enough for now, Hermione ended her rant with a sigh. The violent exertion had her feeling all of the aches of the day's activities, and she wouldn't be surprised if at this point the whole town could smell her.

"Now, I am going to go to my room to wash this mud and grass and Merlin knows what else off of me, and then I am going to bed. I will see you in the morning, Thomas." With that, she trudged towards the front door. But before she could grasp the handle, she heard Thomas ask a question.

"Did you really train several packs of albino bloodhounds to chase off the Nogtails?" Giving another sigh, Hermione trained her voice into a weary calm.

"There really isn't any other way."

Thomas' only response was "fascinating," and Hermione gave a tired nod, pushing open the front door and walking into the house again.

It was only after soaking in the bath until the water had turned cold and wrapping herself in a clean nightgown that Hermione figured out what had set her so on edge with Thomas. Even in the moment, she would admit that she had been unreasonably short with him, and it was more than her state of dress or her level of exhaustion which had set her on him. No, she decided as she climbed on to her full-sized bed, it was the eager look in his eye, the energetic spring in his clumsy steps, and his unmistakable desire to please. The sum of their interactions had to have been less than ten minutes, but he was clearly still so new and shiny and young. How long ago had she been like that? Not that she was over the hill at 25, she had hardly begun to climb it but this Nogtail mess had only served to amplify her growing weariness with her lifestyle.

Turning onto her side, wide awake, the thought skittered across her mind that she was training her replacement. Reproving herself for her paranoia, Hermione considered the options. She was far from the oldest inspector on the team, many of which were hovering near 80 and 90 years of age, prime retirement age for a healthy wizard. Perhaps Stevenson, who had refused deal with another dragon case anywhere in the world without being efficiently inebriated, or maybe Wong, who claimed to still suffer from night terrors following his decade-long stint aiding the German government with their Erkling problem. If nothing else, the position certainly made for great retirement stories.

Groaning, Hermione turned over again, burying her face in her pillow. Despite her gruffness with Thomas, her bleeding heart had not been fully stitched, and pangs of guilt radiated off her person. When had she become so snippy anyway? Was it the war? No, she couldn't carry on blaming all of her problems on the bloody war, though it may have borne many. Her stalled relationship with Ron? Yes, well, who hadn't seen that coming?

The elf legislation was that where it began? Perhaps she would cop to this one. Rolling on to her back and closing her eyes, she envisioned the burly department head, with his quivering walrus-like mustache, who had told her in no uncertain terms that her legislation on basic elf rights was dead on arrival as long as elf enslavement was legal. Well, maybe he hadn't used the term "enslavement," but he had made himself quite clear: it was too soon after the war to make waves. She had stood her ground of course and soon found the ground taken out from beneath her when she was pushed into her current role, now four years ago. You're a rising star, they had said, we would regret holding you back from your true potential. Apparently, that's what they called a career dead end.

There was also the 'breakdown,' as Thomas had more delicately phrased it, somewhere among those events, but she had long since filed that one away in the imaginary filing cabinet in her head. If one were to thumb through those files, they might also find tabs labeled 'Parents Australia' or 'Snape Dead' or even, 'Best Friends Who?', but she rarely reviewed personal files. Pulling the bed sheet to her chin, Hermione resolved to be far gentler with Thomas in the coming days. The process might even remind Hermione of what she liked about the job in the first place, if there was anything at all. Unfortunately, this resolve didn't lead to sleep, and she tossed and turned through the night, on the brink of exhaustion.

Hermione stepped lightly down the worn staircase the next morning, her tawny leather travel bag in hand, careful to prevent a creak or groan from the elderly wooden steps. She hadn't given Thomas any specific departure time, and though she would much prefer to leave as soon as possible, she also didn't want to barge into his room for the purpose of throwing him out of bed. She may have been snippy the night before, but she was no monster. Once she had reached the ground floor, however, she found Thomas seated at the small kitchen table, devouring a slice of bacon in a single bite. Hermione found herself torn between disgust and jealousy. *She's only been serving me croissants and butter this entire week!* Hearing the click of her heels, both Madame Vallée, who stood at her stove top frying eggs and bacon, and Thomas turned to watch her enter.

"Bonjour, Madame," Hermione greeted, smiling brightly at her host before taking a seat at the table across from Thomas.

Smiling in response, Madame Vallée glanced at Hermione's matching charcoal skirt and suit jacket, and exclaimed, "Ah, 'ermione! Très belle et professionnelle!" Hermione couldn't help but redden at the compliment, meekly murmuring, "Merci." Facing Thomas, she noted that he was not as thrilled by her appearance, choosing to stare pointedly at his plate instead. At least he too was dressed in business casual, in a pair of black slacks and a white button-down shirt with a striped vest on top. Fighting the urge to sigh, Hermione looked over her shoulder, to find Madame Vallée engrossed in her cooking, and then turned back to Thomas again.

"Thomas," she began in an undertone, not wanting Madame Vallée to be privy to their conversation, "I know I was a bit... harsh yesterday. I apologize, but you must realize the ... sensitivity of our work." She nearly rolled her eyes while saying the last bit. Who was she kidding? She had just spent the last four weeks chasing pigs around. The statement, however, seemed to strike a chord with Thomas because now he was nodding fervently in agreement.

"You are absolutely right, Inspector," he whispered dramatically. "I won't let you down, I promise."

"Yes, well," Hermione replied awkwardly, taking a slice of bread from the platter in the center of the table and working her jaw to stifle the amused smile forcing at her lips. "Let's just start over, shall we? And, uh, just call me Hermione, okay?" Thankfully, Thomas didn't speak, having just stuffed another slice of bacon into his mouth, and instead gave her a very direct look, which Hermione read with amusement as "aye, aye, sir!"

After breakfast, Hermione thanked Madame Vallée for her hospitality and bid her farewell, Thomas following closely behind. The walk from Madame Vallée's to Hermione's preferred Apparition point on the outskirts of town was about a mile's walk, so Hermione decided it would be prudent to begin Thomas' training. She hadn't been thrilled about the prospect of dragging an apprentice around, but somewhere, very deep down it seemed, she was still Hermione Granger.

"Right, then, Thomas," Hermione said as they walked along the town's central road. "As you already know, the International Confederation of Wizards is an international organization made up of ambassadors from the many wizarding governments of the world. Like the Muggle United Nations."

"The what?" Thomas asked with confusion. *Looks like a Muggle Studies refresher's in order,* Hermione thought, adding it to her mental to-do list. Hogwarts had very clearly failed him there.

"Never mind," Hermione continued. "The point is, our office, the Office of Magical Creature Regulation and Concealment, exists to help our member states with their regulation practices. As Clause 73 of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy states, '*Each wizarding governing body will be responsible for the concealment, care and control of all magical beasts, beings, and spirits dwelling within its territory's borders.*'" She had stated the clause from memory, as if she was suddenly eleven again. If only. "Now, in truth, we're supposed to hold each state responsible for any infractions, but not every state has the means to keep up with these things..."

"So that's where we come in!" Thomas cut her off enthusiastically. Grinning openly at his eagerness, she nodded.

"Yes, exactly, we offer consultation and education on best practices." Despite this last statement, Hermione had already come to see that their stated mission and their actual function had diverged quite a bit since the 17th Century. In her experience, she had spent more time wrangling creatures, Obliviating Muggles, and cleaning up

messes, than any kind of consulting. It seemed to her that rather than lacking the means, most countries which sought their help simply didn't care enough to bother with the dirty work themselves. Case in point: Noggling.

At the conclusion of her introductory spiel, the pair found themselves drifting off of the main road and into a nearby pasture. After casting *Homonym Revelio* and finding no other humans to be in the vicinity, Hermione directed Thomas behind a clump of close growing trees before grabbing his hand and *Side-Along Apparating* them both to the Portkey Receiving Center inside Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris. The title 'Center' was a bit of an exaggeration, as it consisted of a single desk sitting at an unlabeled gate in the terminal, one which Muggles didn't seem to notice as they walked hurriedly by, too fussed with not missing their flight to notice a line of oddly dressed people approaching the desk, taking a piece of rubbish, and disappearing onto the tarmac.

"All international Portkeys departing from France have to be arranged through Paris," Hermione explained to Thomas after they left the desk, a single galosh in hand. Exiting the terminal through a door behind the counter, they walked down a retractable staircase on to the sizzling tarmac with 15 minutes until their Portkey launch.

Examining the galosh, Hermione wondered aloud, "Wonder if we'll need this in Washington, you know, weather-wise."

"Haven't you been there before?" Thomas asked.

"Never," Hermione confessed. "They're a bit funny over there in the States. The country is just so big; most of the wizarding community is quite spread out and decentralized. They take care of themselves. It must have been some sighting for their Ministry to get involved."

"Maybe it's Bigfoot?" guessed Thomas, a dreamy look in his eye. Hermione threw him a worried glance. So he didn't know what the United Nations was, but he knew the Muggle lore of Bigfoot? And he was impressed no less. Hagrid's star pupil, no doubt.

"Well, I highly doubt that," Hermione said, turning the galosh in her hand so she held the thick, ridged sole of the boot and the top stretched towards Thomas. "For one, it certainly wouldn't be the first time that a Muggle has seen that exhibitionist. And two, if it's anything like the Yeti I met, the message would have included 'sighted by Muggle, who was promptly relieved of his appendages.' Now, quick, grab the galosh, it's about to leave!"

Thomas' eyes were now round as saucers as he grabbed the galosh's rubber top, and Hermione faintly heard him ask, "You've seen a Yeti?" However, they left the ground only a second later.

Hermione and Thomas hit the hard pavement of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport only a minute or so after departing Paris, both finding it difficult to right themselves. Hermione couldn't help feeling sorry for Thomas as he wobbled next to her; his legs seemed far too long for him at times, like a newborn deer's. An attendant waited patiently at their side to retrieve the galosh, not at all perturbed by their difficulties. Hermione wondered about the hilarious stories he probably told his friends of the travelers' drunken-like stumbles around the tarmac.

Their trip through the airport was rather uneventful, save for Thomas' incurable fascination with all of the electronic gadgets and gizmos to be found. It seemed that seated at every gate was a group of businessmen, typing on laptops, talking on phones, using both of their hands to do the two activities at once. Muggle progress being what it was, Hermione had lost track years ago of what each electronic whatsit's function was, or rather, what its function wasn't. But Thomas could not be dissuaded from staring, and it was nearly by his shirt collar that Hermione was forced to pull him away and keep him focused on the task at hand: actually exiting the airport. This, however, was not Thomas' only dog-like response to Muggle innovation. She felt as though if she hadn't kept pulling him away from the window of the taxi to their hotel, he might have rolled it down and stuck his head out, tongue hanging over his slackened jaw.

The only thing which kept Hermione from scolding Thomas once again for his obvious behavior was the sight of their hotel. In general, her occasional hotel stays, when the assignment's locale allowed it, were one of her few luxuries over the last couple years, and at the very least, the I.C.W. did not skimp on the cost. On this trip, they had booked them Phoenix Park Hotel, a European boutique hotel near the Capitol Hill area of D.C. and within walking distance of Union Station. While she thought it a little highbrow for their purposes, with marble floors and crystal chandeliers, she couldn't resist the comfort of the queen-sized pillow top mattress, even amongst the ornate wallpaper and high thread count sheets.

Eyeing the soft cotton robes hanging in the doorway of the bathroom from the vantage point atop the bed, Hermione was deciding between taking a long bath or a quick shower when there was a rhythmic knock at the door. Guessing who it was, Hermione groaned before begrudgingly rolling off the bed, not caring about the wrinkled state of her suit or the dented shape of her brown fluffy hair. Padding across the thin green carpet, Hermione wrenched open the door, only to be pushed aside as Thomas barged into her room uninvited.

"Have you seen the... the ... telly?" he asked, pausing for confirmation. Hermione's hands clenched slightly at her sides.

"Yes, I've noticed the gigantic *telly*," she assured him, tiredly waving a hand at the 32-inch flat screen. "Now, if you'd kindly..."

"Did you see the pub downstairs?" he interrupted. It was all Hermione could do not to swear aloud.

"Yes, I did, but I'm not really in the mood for..."

"Let's have a drink, then?" Thomas invited, completely ignoring Hermione's protests. *Are there actual qualifications for this job?* Hermione wondered silently. As he seemed in no hurry to vacate her room without incentive, Hermione agreed to meet him downstairs in 10 minutes. After he left, she used those ten minutes debating whether or not to stand up her apprentice. However, acknowledging the precedent that might set, she ran a comb through her hair and tried to flatten the creases in her skirt.

When she entered the darkened pub, Hermione found Thomas sitting at a round, wooden table just off the bar, a glass of pale liquid already in front of him. Taking a seat across from him, she couldn't help but wonder how he managed to get served since he didn't look a day over 17, and she knew the drinking laws to be quite strict in the States. The bartender arrived at the table shortly after she had and gave her a knowing nod that both answered Hermione's questions and raised her suspicions, but she ordered a glass of their house red wine and left it at that. Thomas was nursing a "Bud Light," something he informed her with his customary enthusiasm, though by the face he made with each sip, it was obvious his alcoholic experience had not strayed far from Butterbeer.

Sensing he was about to start another barrage of questions, Hermione decided to turn the tables. Taking a fortifying sip of her wine, she placed the glass down and asked, "Well, Thomas, I feel like you know so much about me; why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

Clearly unprepared for the question, Thomas stopped for a second before jumping back in. "Well, let's see, I've just turned 18," he relayed proudly. "Graduated Hogwarts with full honors. Didn't beat your scores though, couldn't manage that last 'O' in Muggle Studies, unfortunately." Listening with a bit of smugness, Hermione couldn't help thinking, *No kidding.*

"My favorite course was Care of Magical Creatures, of course. I know what people think of Professor Hagrid, but he really is quite brilliant," Thomas continued, cringing slightly as he took another sip of his drink. Hermione's heart softened at this statement, and all smugness left her. "Um, and let's see, what else. Well, I've got a mum and dad, of course, a little brother, Stewart, oh and there's my girlfriend Cheryl; she's really great. Actually, she's really quite impressed that I'm..."

Hermione had tuned out. Her attention was instead on the figure that had just entered the lonely pub from the street, dressed in a long black trench coat, despite the oppressive D.C. summer heat. Hermione felt her heart begin to beat aggressively against her ribs. She was sure a dead man had just walked into the pub. The dead man, or more specifically, the ghost, she guessed, had just ordered a drink from the omniscient bartender. The ghost sat on one of the plush stools, taking a quick swill of his drink before setting the glass down with a soft clank. Given his digestion of said drink, the ghost theory was quickly thrown out for... the impossible.

"Inspector? I mean, Hermione? Are you listening?" Hermione heard Thomas ask a notch too loudly, and Hermione watched in horror as a very much alive Severus Snape turned his head, their eyes making contact for the first time in... Hermione involuntarily shuddered.

"Hermione..." Thomas tried again, concern crinkling his boyish features. Hermione could not tear her eyes away. All of this time... but she knew what she had seen...

"Snape," she croaked. It had tumbled from her lips before she could stop her disobedient tongue, and it carried across the space. It seemed that was his cue as he broke eye contact, throwing a wad of paper bills onto the bar counter, and left the pub as swiftly as he entered.

Thomas had resorted to waving his hand uselessly in front of Hermione to get her attention, but without much forethought, Hermione stood abruptly from her chair, nearly overturning it in the process. In fact, not much thinking occurred in the span of time in which she mechanically ran to the door, threw it open and ran out onto the sidewalk, looking down each direction before spotting Snape's receding figure. It was early evening by then, and staggered streetlamps lighted her way as she single-mindedly pursued him, down one block and then two and three, perspiration gathering at the roots of her loose tendrils.

And then Snape turned a corner. Only seconds behind now, Hermione rounded the corner as well, only to find an empty alleyway. Gasps for air now wracking her entire body, she leaned against one of the bordering walls, eyes closed and lips parted. Even as she felt her legs tingle in exhaustion and her throat chafe from heavy breathing, only one thought circulated her mind: *What the bloody hell was that?*

Author's Note: Thank you to my lovely beta, justine 34, and my newly enlisted Britpicker, magicalpresence, for their help and encouragement.

The title of the story is reference to Florence and the Machine's "Shake It Out."

French translations (Note: these were only approximations, my French is kind of rusty):

Beau, ici maintenant! Ne fais pas ça. Come here now, Beau. Do not do that.

Ze rest are très obédient, mais Beau est trop lazy, non? (Français) The rest are very obedient, but Beau is very lazy, no?

Desolé/ Desolée Sorry

Oh, ma pauvre! Oh, my poor girl!

Please review!

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

The digital clock on the bedside table read 7:00 a.m. when Hermione rolled over for the umpteenth time. Soft light bled through the shuttered cream curtains, casting streaks across her blanketed body as she lay sprawled across the queen-sized bed. Lying on her stomach, her cheek flat against her pillow, Hermione clenched her eyes shut, desperate to reclaim at least 20 minutes of lost sleep before she was forced to face the world again.

Was it terribly selfish to blame everything on *him*? Ugh, she didn't even want to think about *him* anymore. Forget the passed over legislation, the shipment into career Siberia, even bloody, doesn't-know-what-he-wants Ron Weasley; forget all of it. It was all *him*, wasn't it? Bleeding to death there on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, couldn't he have given them a clue? Well, he had, hadn't he? About 30 seconds too late. She roughly took the pillow from beneath her head and reversed its position, pulling its corners so it curved around her head completely, only the top left uncovered. It wasn't as if she had gotten over it before *his* appearance last night, all smugly alive.

Reflecting on that last thought from beneath her pillow cavern, Hermione wondered if she was finally and truly becoming unhinged. Here she was internally ranting and raving that someone had the temerity to be alive when she should be rejoicing, relieved even. After all these years, shouldn't this bring her peace? If only it were that easy to forget what she had, or rather, hadn't done that night in the Shack. Unlike Harry and Ron, she hadn't simply left the scene blissfully incapable of changing Snape's fate.

A familiar knock finally broke the cycle of thoughts she had been running through for the eight hours she had been in bed. Throwing the pillow aside, Hermione rolled off of her stomach and sat up in bed, running a hand through her dangerously knotted hair. Breathing deeply, she threw her legs over the edge of the bed, standing with effort, and put on her cotton robe, which offered little comfort that morning. Stumbling tiredly towards the door, she flipped the lock and opened the door only a few inches, peering into the hallway. Thomas stood outside the door, fully clothed in proper Muggle dress wear and holding a steaming cup.

Leaning slightly closer to the crack in the blocked doorway, he held the cup more prominently and said in an undertone, "I, uh, thought you might need some help getting up." For the first time that trip, she was thankful for his presence, and she opened the door slightly wider to claim the mug.

"Thanks, Thomas," she said quietly, a note of gratitude ringing clearly. "I'll be down for breakfast in a bit. Just need to get sorted." Thomas nodded in response, looking noticeably relieved, and left. Shutting the door again, Hermione took a sip from the mug, savoring the bitter flavor of the coffee before setting the mug down on the nearby vanity. *Well, enough of that*, she thought firmly as she rubbed the exhaustion from her eyes. She filed away the image of Snape's dark, focused stare in a new mental folder, this one entitled, "Snape Apparently Alive".

Hermione arrived in the pub thirty minutes later, clad in a black skirt suit with a lavender button-up underneath her jacket and a pair of smart black pumps on her feet. She had also managed to untangle her knotted hair and tame it into a respectable bun.

It took Hermione nearly a minute to spot Thomas; the breakfast crowd far outnumbered last night's patrons. The hotel's guests seemed to consist primarily of businessmen and lobbyists, each of whom had commandeered their own table. They spent the breakfast hour picking at their eggs and toast while having heated discussions on their cell phones, thumbing through newspapers, and typing quite angrily on their computers. This was how Hermione had managed to find Thomas, as he had neither the stack of paperwork nor gadgets to distract him and instead was leaning quite precariously in his chair, sneaking a peek at his neighbor's computer screen.

Reaching the table after winding around several others, Hermione made a show of clearing her throat as she sat down, causing Thomas to nearly topple over in surprise. With reddened cheeks, he righted himself, pulling down his jacket in the process.

"You really need to work on being less obvious," Hermione greeted, hiding her smirk behind the breakfast menu. Thomas let out a strangled chuckle but made no further response. *Odd*, Hermione thought as she placed down the menu to look at her table mate. He seemed to be very engaged by the crumbs on his plate, quite determined not to look anywhere else. A waiter arrived a moment later, and after placing her order, she turned her attention to the squirming Thomas. Trying to offset the mood, she began discussing the day's agenda.

"Well, after breakfast, we'll be heading over to the Ministry. I think we'll take a taxi because you might find their underground a tad overwhelming..." She paused for his reaction, but when he refused to look up, she went on, trying to put him more at ease. "I mean, I know I do." Not even her nervous chuckle seemed to stir him. "Right, then I guess we'll meet their Creature Regulation Department Head and get to the bottom of the situation. I do hope it's not terribly boring since you're training and all. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression..."

"Can I ask you about last night?" Thomas interrupted, finally making eye contact. Startled, Hermione stuttered slightly.

"Oh, oh, er, yes. Yes, of course you can. You know I really am sorry about that. I'm not usually so... abrupt?" Thomas was wringing his hands nervously now, and for the life of her, Hermione couldn't figure out why. Did he think she was going to go after him with the butter knife in another bout of insanity?

"No, no," Thomas replied, now looking at her very sincerely. "It was me. I shouldn't have brought up my girlfriend. Not so soon after your break up with Ron Weasley at least. No wonder you just ran from the table."

"What?" Hermione reacted, her head cocked sideways. Now, how the hell did he know about *that*? She had avoided the Daily Prophet like the plague for the last couple of years, but it was hardly front page news. It wasn't even a true break-up as they had never really started.

"No, no, it's got nothing to do with that, with him," Hermione explained quickly. Looking at him closely, she asked, "Didn't you see him? Snape? In the pub last night?" It looked as if the gears in Thomas' head were turning as he murmured the name aloud.

"Snape? You mean Severus Snape? The former Death Eater?" *Merlin*, Hermione thought, *he really didn't see him*. She must truly be coming unhinged. Then it occurred to her that Thomas probably wouldn't even know what Snape looked like. He was only a child while the Second War ravaged the wizarding world. He might have heard the names, but he was certainly far removed from the details.

"Yes, well, former Death Eater turned spy for the Order," Hermione corrected, reaching for her glass of orange juice.

Thomas looked thoughtful for a second. "Hmm... strange, I thought he was dead." Swallowing her sip, Hermione locked eyes with Thomas.

"So did I." They finally seemed to be on the same page as Thomas' eyes widened with realization. They both sat in quiet contemplation, Hermione occasionally taking a bite of the toast that had just arrived at the table. After a while, Thomas finally articulated in a low whisper what Hermione had been feeling under all of the resentment and guilt the night before.

"Blimey." Blimey indeed.

The two had, at least temporarily, put any thoughts of Severus Snape behind them by the time their taxi pulled up beside a dilapidated warehouse. Checking the address again, Hermione nodded to Thomas, and the two exited the cab into the deserted street. All around them were similar looking warehouses, all of which appeared to be abandoned, with broken windows and scraps of garbage strewn about. Even the trees that had managed to spring up amongst the industry were leafless and dead. Despite this, Hermione wasn't too perturbed. It was well known that wizards usually took up residence in seemingly abandoned buildings, creating magnificent interior designs within.

Approaching the tinted glass door, Hermione grasped the metal handle, half expecting some resistance, and pulled it open. When it opened without difficulty, she and Thomas entered the building. Both twitched slightly, as if expecting something to impede them as they passed over the threshold, some magical charm or monster, but they found themselves inside the shabby lobby of the United States Ministry of Magic with all limbs intact. The ceiling was low, forcing Thomas to crouch slightly as he neared a ceiling fan, and the walls were a grimy off-white, which appeared to have been pure once. A set of chartreuse couches lined two of the walls, and a light gray-colored desk with two high counters sat in the back corner, with a platinum blonde, curly bun poking out from behind it.

Since no one appeared to greet them, Hermione took the initiative, approaching the desk briskly. Behind it, she found the owner of the curly bun, a small young woman with black-rimmed glasses that partially concealed her bright blue eye make-up. At the moment, she was entirely focused on the nearly completed crossword puzzle in front of her. Hermione cleared her throat to gain the woman's attention, but she remained completely ignorant of their presence (or at least feigned ignorance).

Hermione felt Thomas come up behind her and peek at the woman over her shoulder with a thoughtful look. "I believe one across is Augurey," he said pointing to one of the many empty boxes in the puzzle. "And I think three down might be Glumbumble." The young woman looked up at them crossly, forced to acknowledge their presence.

"Yes?" she drawled impatiently, her blue eyes narrowed.

Hermione shook off her desire to snap angrily at "Martha", as her nametag read, and stated, "We're here to see Mr. Bob Stephens, the Head of Magical Creature Control."

Hermione had expected Martha to take them to Mr. Stephens' office or at the very least retrieve him for them but instead, sounding very put out, she told them, "He's in office 115 down the hall." With this task completed, she returned to her puzzle. Hermione gaped in irritation, but Thomas softly pushed her away from the desk and led her down the hallway. This was ridiculous! There had been no security measures, no credentials, not even a polite inquiry into their business.

The pair had barely walked two doors down when Hermione could no longer hold in her fury.

"She didn't even ask who we were! And, really, she honestly couldn't walk us to his office herself? How incredibly rude! I would have at least expected oof!" Ready to turn her ire towards Thomas for not paying attention, Hermione noticed that it was she who wasn't paying attention. They had collided in front of a dark wooden door labeled '115, Bob Stephens, Head of Magical Creature Control.'

Unconsciously checking that not a strand of her hair was out of place, Hermione stepped forward and made three short knocks. From behind the door, the squeaking groans of a straining office chair could be heard, followed by a few heavy steps, and then the door was thrown open revealing the Head of Magical Creature Control.

Bob Stephens was a large man with great upper body heft, as if he had once had defined muscles which had since begun to sag. His dark hair was chopped into a blunt crew cut, and his dark brown eyes were overshadowed by two thick, caterpillar-like eyebrows. Unlike the neatly dressed Thomas and Hermione, he was dressed in a long camouflage overcoat and wore large brown hiking boots with red laces. However intimidating his appearance, he wore a big, yellowing smile as he greeted them, swallowing their right hands in rough handshakes as introductions were made.

"C'mon in, guys," he beckoned as he moved aside to allow them to pass into his office. Taking a seat in one of the soft leather armchairs placed in front of his desk, Hermione noted the many maps and posters decorating the walls. The posters depicted magical creatures from all over the world, from Erumpents to Dragons to Pixies. The maps tracked the migration of Re'em's, giant oxen with golden hides, across the American plains. A small, speckled Jobberknoll tittered in a large wire cage in a corner behind Stephens' desk. However, it was the map labeled, "Washington State Bigfoot Sightings", which had caught Thomas' attention.

"Ah, I see we have a fellow believer in the room," Stephens said good-naturedly, clapping Thomas on the shoulder as he passed. Taking his eyes off the map and moving to sit in the empty armchair next to Hermione, Thomas grinned meekly at Stephens, who took a seat across from them behind the desk.

"You've seen him, then?" Thomas enquired curiously, leaning forward in his seat.

Stephens chuckled, his hands folded on his desk. "Not yet, but I think I've got the rascal cornered!" he replied excitedly, referring to his map, marked with nearly a hundred x's and circles. Hermione snorted with quiet skepticism. *Men.*

"Hermione here's seen a yeti," Thomas shared proudly, as if it were he who had come face to face with the terrifying beast.

"Have you now, Inspector?" Stephens asked with genuine interest. Though she counted the experience in her top ten most horrifying, she nodded, slightly proud.

"Yes, not too closely, mind you. They're a bit bloodthirsty, you see." Stephens gave her a hard look before breaking out into a loud guffaw. Hermione wasn't sure what was so funny about her comment, but gave a small smile as he continued to laugh, slapping the desk lightly with his right hand.

Stephens finally settled a minute later, wiping a tear from the corner of his eyes with one of his thick, sausage-like fingers. "You Brits are a witty bunch," he exclaimed as his breathing tempered. "We've got one working with us over in the Auror Department. A quiet guy but sharp as a tack, I tell ya. Actually, he's the one who helped us out with this nonnative situation. Had no idea what the creature was myself."

"Could you please brief us on the situation, Mr. Stephens? Unfortunately, my assignment documents are woefully vague," Hermione explained as she pulled out a notepad.

"Call me Bob, Inspector," he directed as he pulled out an unlabeled file and began to thumb through the documents. "Let's see here. Where to begin... ah, yes, about a week ago we heard a report over the Muggle police radio that someone had spotted a creature in a park near Dupont Circle, about two to three feet in size, hairless, large protruding eyes and sending off sparks. The Muggle cops thought the caller might have been playing a prank and ignored the call, but we knew better and went in to investigate. Boy, was I surprised when I saw it. Even my grandparents probably never saw one in their lifetime." As Hermione listened, she noticed that one key detail remained unsaid.

"Erm, Bob," Hermione interrupted cautiously, "the creature, what was it?" She asked as if she had perhaps misheard him the first time. His eyes lit up excitedly.

"Of course, Inspector, forgot to mention that, didn't I? Well, what d'you say I take you two down to the storage closet for the big reveal?" he asked, rubbing his hands together. He was like a child with a secret.

"Is the storage closet a proper enclosure?" Hermione questioned the bureaucrat suspiciously.

Stephens waved his hands in front of him. "Don't worry about it, Inspector. It's totally comfortable. Oh! Let me grab the lead investigator, the guy who helped us with the I.D. I'll just be back in a sec!" With that, Stephens hurriedly vacated his office, leaving Hermione and Thomas to entertain themselves.

Leaning back in her armchair, Hermione sighed as she made a few scribbles on her notepad. What was with all the theatrics? Hermione couldn't stand how these department heads, with all of their enthusiasm, didn't know a thing about the creatures they managed. It was like having one big national menagerie for them. Thomas had left his own chair to take a turn around the room.

"Do you think he'll actually find Bigfoot?" he wondered aloud, examining the map at close range. Hermione snorted in response.

"Many have tried, Thomas, but I doubt it. If the creature's kept itself well-hidden this long, I doubt it's going to introduce itself to the next wizard it meets."

Moving to read another poster, Thomas asked, "Funny, this poster says you can find Pixies in Belgium. Isn't it only Cornwall?"

Scratching out a few lines in her notepad, Hermione replied, "Yes, only Cornwall. Must be a misprint."

"Still an insufferable know-it-all, then?" The voice was far deeper than Thomas' and far too familiar. Gripping the arms of the chair, she patently refused to turn around. Not because she was scared of him, but because she was scared of what she might do: faint or hyperventilate or projectile vomit or...

"Come now, Miss Granger, don't act so surprised. After all, you did just chase me down several blocks only last night." He was closer now, perhaps right behind her. Well, now she had to turn around. She had to stand up and turn around and face him and...

"Uh!" was what Severus Snape exclaimed as Hermione's right hand came into contact with his rough left cheek. *Crack* was the sound of their skin making contact. "Wow," Thomas gasped as he witnessed his trainer of two days slapping a magical law enforcement agent within minutes of introduction.

Hermione recoiled immediately in embarrassment, trying not to glare at her treacherous hand. This must be breakdown part two. She watched with horror as her former professor rubbed his cheek, a hint of surprise pulling his eyebrows slightly upwards. "Oh, oh Professor, I don't know what... I'm just so sorry." Truthfully, she wasn't sure if she could have helped it really, it was just the way he had made that throw away comment; he had known she was following him, and he didn't even have the decency to stop, to assure her of his living state, at least to tell her to mind her own business. After all of these years, the comment had rolled off his tongue as if his not dying meant nothing.

Stephens stood a few feet behind Snape, clearly amused by the scene. "I see you two have met before. Regardless, Inspector, this is Detective Severus Snape, Head of the Auror Department."

"Head?" Hermione squeaked, watching the former Death Eater with trepidation.

"Yes, Miss Granger, Head," Snape bit out, still rubbing his cheek. Turning to Stephens, Snape added, "She's a former student."

Stephens was positively gleeful at hearing this. "No kidding, Snape! Small world, eh? Anyway, let's head down, crew."

Stephens led the way to the mysterious storage locker, Thomas following close behind, and Hermione and Snape taking up the rear distantly, refusing to look at each other.

"You're alive," Hermione sniped accusatorily.

"Nice catch, Granger," Snape retorted. "Sorry, I didn't have time send a postcard while trying to escape the country before the impending media circus. Thought I'd let your lot handle that."

Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "You could have at least..."

"I don't owe you anything," Snape cut her off. Hermione sighed slightly, not sure if she was more frustrated with herself or the man walking next to her.

"No, you don't," Hermione conceded quietly. She turned her head slightly to steal a glance at him. He looked much as he had when she had last seen him, with long, curtain-like black hair that obscured the majority of his face, save for his large, beaky nose. His hair swished slightly with every step, allowing small glimpses at his lined face and fathomless black eyes. Despite the lines of age, he actually looked a bit healthier than he had seven years ago, having lost the bruise-like dark circles under his eyes and the gauntness of his supposed final days. He looked... *good*.

"So, you're Head Auror then?" Hermione finally asked awkwardly. She couldn't remember the last time she had sounded so half-witted. "Congratulations, sir. Do they, er, do they know about..."

"No," Snape replied sharply. "Not that it would have been of any consequence. You might be surprised to hear that I was the only applicant." Looking around the dank

hallway, Hermione understood perfectly.

As they walked in companionable silence, Hermione tried to create some kind of order in her head. Snape was alive; he was Head of the Auror Department for the United States; he looked *good*. Wait, how was it that he was alive?

"Profess- erm, I mean, Detective," Hermione stuttered over his various titles, "how exactly are you oof!" It seemed the party had finally reached their destination. Throwing Thomas a deeply apologetic look, she wondered if he thought her the biggest bumbling idiot in existence. Refusing to even guess Snape's expression, she kept her eyes focused on Stephens and the door to the storage closet.

"Well," Stephens began with a flourish of his hand as he reached for the doorknob, "are we ready to see the creature?" Hermione eyed Snape for confirmation but found that he only looked irritated, so she nodded in agreement.

"Let's see it!" Thomas cheered. Grinning, Stephens threw open the door with a loud "voila!" At first, Hermione only saw a few shelves of cleaning supplies and a small white cot, but then, sitting on the edge of the cot, she saw it.

"Oh, well, that's all?" Thomas said, sounding let down at the revelation. Snape snorted slightly at this. However, moving closer, Hermione understood Stephens' excitement. In fact, she probably understood the significance of this discovery more than Stephens did. He was right, though. His grandparents probably hadn't ever seen one, as they had been practically outlawed in the United States for at least 150 years. But now, over a century later, what was it doing wandering through a Muggle park in Washington D.C.?

A/N: Thank you to my beta, justine 34, and Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises which may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring and, perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

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There was no doubt in Hermione's mind as to what sat before her, sniffing and rocking back in forth in a distraught manner, what with its pointed bat-shaped ears, bulging eyes, and its long, gangly arms cradling its oversized head on its equally gangly legs. The gender was always bit tricky to determine on a house-elf, especially since the pillowcase it wore, with arm and head holes poked through, had no specific design or pattern that might hint one way or the other. Hermione squatted down onto her haunches in the storage room doorway, deciding against entering the room and startling the elf further. Though its back was partially turned from them, she could see that the elf's eyes were red from sobbing, and the skin around its eyes was puffy from rubbing.

"Has the elf said anything since you took it into custody?" Hermione asked Stephens, peering up from her crouching position on the floor.

"Not a word, just wailing mostly. Extremely obedient in following us, which I guess is to be expected, but after that it refused to speak," Stephens replied, concern crinkling his features.

Finally, Hermione thought with agitation. The way he had been going on about the elf earlier, it was as if he had a new pet.

"But I don't understand," Thomas interjected as he crouched down next Hermione. "The practice of elf enslavement has been outlawed in this country since... I reckon, the mid-1800s when the Muggles abolished it."

"1865," Stephens corrected solemnly. "It's true. History tells us that the wizarding families didn't want to pay their elves, so they just sold them to traders who shipped them overseas for sale. There hasn't been a sighting in this country for at least a hundred years."

Hermione bit her lip slightly in thought before inquiring, "Have you investigated, then? If it's the only one, I mean. It's seems a rather slim chance that a single elf suddenly appears after a century, doesn't it?"

Snape finally elected to speak. "I was prepared to head the investigation myself, but Stephens insisted that I wait on you," the last word uttered in a hiss of disdain.

So, this is how it's going to be, then Hermione thought in frazzled annoyance.

"Well, Mr. Stephens, I mean Bob, was just following proper protocol in this situation," Hermione replied airily without bothering to look at Snape's sneering face.

"Given your constant delinquency during your adolescence, I wasn't aware that you even recognized protocol, Inspector," Snape retorted, the sneer obvious in his voice. Hermione almost laughed aloud at this; clearly he and the boys had very different ideas on delinquency.

"Regardless, Detective, we'll need to get to the bottom of this right away given the possible implications," Hermione replied crisply, choosing not to take the bait.

"Which are?" asked Thomas. Hermione watched as the elf blew its nose into its pillowcase suit.

"Smuggling. Illegal smuggling for the purpose of enslavement," Hermione replied quietly. Wondering aloud, she asked, "How shall we get the elf to talk? It hasn't even bothered to acknowledge us since we arrived." She stood up, her legs starting to cramp painfully from the position. Thomas, however, remained on the ground.

"We'll give it something to clean," Thomas replied thoughtfully. Turning his head to peer at Snape's black leather boots, he remarked, "Your boots look a bit scuffed, Detective. If someone has a bit of polish, that task should do."

"There must be some in this closet; it's just a bunch of odds and ends," Stephens said as he began to rummage through the shelves.

The elf continued to ignore them pointedly as office and cleaning supplies were thrown around. Despite Snape's obvious displeasure with the suggestion, Hermione leaned forward and ruffled Thomas' hair affectionately.

"Good call, Thomas. Perhaps you do know how to think on your feet."

Thomas' cheeks reddened slightly at the acknowledgement; he was clearly pleased to have finally done something right in his trainer's eyes.

"Ha!" Stephens called out as he presented Snape with a small circular container of black shoe polish. "Knew there'd be some in here."

Hermione nudged Snape forward slightly, and with an unhidden eye-roll, he approached the elf with the polish in hand, muttering something about the usefulness of Veritaserum.

Reaching the elf, Snape cleared his throat loudly and said, in a slightly stilted manner, "Elf, I appear to have scuffed my boot." The elf, however, did not seem to be listening, sobbing especially hard at the moment. Sighing with annoyance, he glanced over at the other three standing in the doorway. Hermione waved her hand to indicate he should keep going. She almost giggled when she noted the dark look Snape threw her. He would have probably preferred to throw the shoe polish at her head instead.

"Oh my," Snape said, in perhaps the worst attempt at a conversational tone Hermione had ever heard. "It seems my boots are scuffed. If only someone could polish them for me."

Hermione was covering her mouth now, hoping to prevent the outburst of giggles that was playing at her lips. Beside her, Thomas was shaking indiscreetly with laughter. This seemed to work, though, as the elf stared up at Snape with its large, globular, bloodshot eyes and a drop of wet mucous dripping from the tip of its long nose.

"I will do it, sir," the elf squeaked hoarsely, eagerness creeping into its features.

Snape shoved the polish into the elf's bony hands, and after tearing off a tattered end of its clothing, the elf began to shine Snape's right boot. It seemed any sort of distress the elf had felt the moment before had drained, its shoulders relaxing as it focused on the task at hand. Seeing the concentration in the elf's eyes, Hermione took the opportunity to approach as well.

Staring down at the elf, as if to assess its work, she commented brightly, "Well, that certainly looks much better, wouldn't you say, Detective?" Snape responded with a noise of irritation. Hermione ignored him. "Yes, much better indeed. Wonderful job. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

Without pausing from the task or looking up at Hermione, the elf replied, "I is Flora, ma'am."

Hermione sighed with relief. *Progress.*

Crouching down next to the elf, Hermione focused on the boot as she gently questioned Flora. "Are you from Washington, D.C., Flora?"

"No, ma'am. I is from London." Hermione lifted her eyebrows in faux surprise, careful to continue watching the elf's work on the boot.

"Well, that's quite a distance from here. How did you find yourself here in D.C.?"

Flora's hands only faltered minutely. "In a crate, ma'am." Hermione could see the frightened awareness in Flora's rounded eyes and decided to take a chance.

Placing a hand lightly on Flora's shoulder, Hermione whispered, "Who is your master, Flora?" However, this seemed to be just enough for Flora, who scrambled away from both Hermione and Snape's boot to lodge herself in a shadowed corner of the room, her entire body trembling. Snape expelled a disgruntled snort and raised his wand slightly in Flora's direction.

"No," Hermione commanded, standing up to block Snape's wand. Whatever former student/teacher awkwardness had remained after all of these years was superseded by Hermione's nearly blinding need to protect the weak. To be completely truthful, she hadn't felt it in so long it was almost overwhelming. "I can handle this, Detective." Snape looked skeptical but stepped back, sheathing his wand. Hermione sighed slightly with relief before turning back to Flora, whose body vibrated with tension. How exactly was she going to handle this?

Settling herself on the floor, only a few feet from Flora, Hermione sat on her folded legs, her bare shins pressed uncomfortably into the cold concrete. "Flora," she called, nearly crooning. "We just want to get you home, Flora. We can't help you if you won't let us." For some reason Flora moaned at this, her tears starting anew.

"I wouldn't dare make any assumptions about *your* responsibilities, Granger," Snape argued, disregarding formalities, "but I don't have the time to sit here all day waiting for this ridiculous, little..."

"My... my master doesn't want me! He is sending Flora away!" the elf wailed loudly, easily drowning out Snape. Hermione latched onto this.

"Why, Flora? Why did he send you away? Did you do something wrong?"

Flora sniffled loudly, but her shaking stilled. Hermione couldn't help thinking, hoping really, that the elf was finally making an effort to calm down.

"Flora did nothing wrong," Flora finally responded in third person. She bunched the ends of her pillowcase suit in her hands as she continued. "Flora is good elf. Flora... Flora loves the Martin family. They is good, good people. But it looks bad to have Flora. No, not good at all. So, master sold Flora so Flora could go work for a new family."

Hermione's eyebrows scrunched, perplexed. She had watched her career in the Ministry ruined because of the influence of elf-owning families, and now it was suddenly out of vogue? The uncharacteristically quiet Thomas stepped in to clarify this point.

"Er, yes, she's right. I mean, about it looking bad. You see, since you were, uh, dismissed from the Ministry, it seems the new generation has begun to look down on those old aristocratic-type pureblood families. Among many things, elf servants seem to be the epitome of pureblood excess and, well, their arrogant superiority." It was hard to miss the awkward way Thomas rubbed the back of his neck as he cast an apologetic glance at Flora and fell silent. He met Hermione's eyes, the look lingering. Hermione, however, had no time to dwell on the particulars of that revelation.

More to herself than anyone else, she murmured, "So, there must be hundreds at least, maybe a couple thousand..."

"Precisely," she heard Snape intone insistently behind her, but she ignored him, turning towards Flora once again.

"How many elves were with you, Flora? How many were in that crate?"

Flora's features shadowed as she looked down, her face twisting slightly, as if holding back a particularly wracking sob. "Flora is not being the only one in the crate. Binky... he... he was in the crate too. Binky is my brother!" And with that revelation, Flora was once again reduced to sobs, moaning dejectedly as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Oh, for Christ sakes!" Snape exclaimed in exasperation looking as if he were ready to hex at random. "This is not a bloody soap opera..."

"Shut it, Snape," Hermione growled. After all, they were equals now. Dropping the gentle questioning for a more authoritative approach, Hermione said, "Flora, please listen. We want to help you and Binky, but you have to stop crying. You have to tell us everything you saw and heard before you were taken in by the Aurors." Then, as a second thought, she added, "That's an order."

Flora stiffened. She stifled a sob by desperately stuffing her right fist in her mouth. Pulling it out, her knuckles slick with saliva, she began her recount in a soft whisper punctuated by high-pitched, emotional squeaks.

"Master is taking us to a bald man with very mean eyes. The man is our new master, he says. Our new master is not a nice man. He put us in a big, big cage with lots and lots of other elves. Every day, our new master and other scary men is taking elves, two or three, from the cage. They is disappearing. Flora doesn't know how many days she was in the cage... many." She paused, a hiccup escaping her. The three wizards and the single witch waited on tenterhooks.

"Then, Flora and Binky and another elf is given a potion to drink and put in a big crate. So dark. Flora is scared, but Binky promises our new master would not do anything bad to us. The crate is so dark that Flora fell asleep. When Flora opens her eyes, she is in a strange room. Flora sees other elves, like Flora and Binky, sleeping. Flora gets up to walk around because there's no cage there. Flora sees an open door and walks toward it. Strange men shout at Flora and Flora starts running away, outside. Flora runs and runs, but they is coming after her. Flora is hiding in a bush until a big dog chases her out."

Her story over, Flora sank slightly in exhaustion, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. Hermione, careful not to startle her, reached forward and took one of Flora's hands, giving it an affectionate squeeze. The poor elf was traumatized, that much was clear, and it seemed she was one of many, as Hermione had guessed.

"Thank you, Flora. That was an amazing job. Are you hungry?" Hermione asked.

"No, ma'am. Flora is tired."

"All right, Flora, we'll leave you now." Nodding to the three men behind her, the group exited the storage room as the elf pulled her body onto the cot, bending her knees into her torso as she lay on her side. Hermione gave the elf one last glance before pulling the door in with a soft *thump*.

The department head, the head Auror, the inspector, and the inspector-in-training reassembled in Stephens' office. Hermione and Thomas retook their seats in their respective arm chairs, Stephens sat behind his desk, and Snape leaned on nearby on a wall, obscuring a rather graphic illustration of a snarling Bigfoot.

"Well," Stephens began briskly, appearing for the first time like the authority figure he was, "it seems we have a rather extensive smuggling ring on our hands."

"We can't be certain of how extensive it is, though, can we, sir?" Thomas pointed out thoughtfully. "We only know that there were more than three elves. We don't even know who the customers are or if this is the final location or if it's only a stop during their shipment."

"Thomas is right, of course," Hermione agreed, watching the tips of Thomas' ears redden. "We'll have to watch the location first, where we found Flora, before we can make any assumptions regarding the complexity and scope of the operation. It would be best if we could search the place, but I assume obtaining a search warrant in Muggle D.C. might prove difficult." Hermione directed the latter of this statement at Snape, who appeared to have quite a bee in his bonnet, so to speak of course.

"Well, I'm not sure where this *we* originated, as it is *my* men who will be performing any sort of surveillance or serving a search warrant. But, yes, we may require further cause before we can override any sort of... regulations regarding our entrance into a Muggle establishment." Hermione bristled at this.

"I think it is you who are mistaken, Detective. Thomas and I will be essential components to any sort of investigation of this matter. That is, if you and the Ministry expect to avoid any repercussions from the I.C.W. in regards to the elf sighting itself. And do remember that those fines tend to be quite hefty, Detective."

Snape narrowed his eyes silently, but a shared look with Stephens seemed to demonstrate once again that his authority would be disregarded. Clearly displeased, he pressed his lips into a straight line, as if to contain any explosive reaction which might be ticking behind them.

Stephens sighed from behind his desk, leaning his head forward to ruffle his dark hair in obvious frustration. "I... I just don't know how this happened. I... I just..." His feelings of guilt were evident in his slumped shoulders as his comment merely drifted off unfinished.

Hermione glanced around his office again at the creature skeletons, the maps, Bigfoot. She wanted desperately to wave her hands at the frivolity and yell, "This, all of this nonsense is how it happened!" However, her position wasn't to scold; it was to *consult*. And, at the end of the day, it was to clean up messes.

Reaching across his desk, Hermione patted his hand with feigned sympathy, mustering her most reassuring tone. "Don't fret too much, Bob. We'll have this sorted out in a couple of days." *There, you big baby*, she thought with disgust, *now you'll be able to sleep tonight*. Straightening, she turned to the sullen and sulking Severus Snape, who practically bared his teeth at her upon making eye contact. "Right, then, Detective, shall we retire to your office to discuss our next move?" *Where you will undeniably bite my head off*, Hermione considered as she and Thomas followed him out of the room.

As it turns out, he only required the emptiness of the hallway to unleash his angry tirade.

"Now, you see here, Granger," he growled, backing Hermione into the opposing wall to Stephens' office while Thomas stood off to the side, watching with frightened confusion. "Much like when you were a student in my classroom, this is *my* domain. And I certainly will not be taking any suggestions from any know-it-all busybodies like *you*."

Judging from the manner in which he was staring directly into her eyes at such a close range, she thought for a few seconds that he might try to slip into her mind. However, his obvious and barely controlled rage seemed to negate that possibility, so Hermione stood her ground, meeting his glare defiantly as he stared down at her. After all, this wasn't the first time she was forced to deal with a disgruntled official who seemed to think he knew what was best. On the other hand, none of the previous cases involved the one professor from her adolescence who she was sure truly hated her, or a former Death Eater, for that matter.

Honestly, the whole situation had her head spinning. Snape was dead, and then he wasn't, and elves were banned, but here they were. Not to mention Thomas, who had certainly improved in her eyes but was still another thing on her plate. And, was she losing her mind, or did the hovering Severus Snape smell rather *enticing*, like the soft smell of baby powder with sharp hints of... peppermint? Merlin, she needed a bloody drink. But first, she needed to sort this out.

Standing up straight, almost smashing the top of her head into Snape's large nose as she did, she was careful to make herself clear. "I will not be intimidated by you, Snape. I am no longer a schoolgirl, and those days seem to be quite behind both of us, I would say. And to be frank, I'm much too tired at the moment to be putting up with any sort of power-grabbing hissy fit you intend on throwing. So, just tell me where to meet you tomorrow, and we shall begin the surveillance. The sooner we wrap this up, the sooner we will be out of each other's hair."

Snape looked as if he had something else to say, but refrained, stepping away. Did her heart just sink slightly at the loss of his randomly enticing smell? She really needed a vacation. And more general human contact.

"Dupont Circle, 10 a.m.," Snape finally instructed in a bored voice.

Merlin, it's like he flips a switch Hermione thought irritably.

Then he turned rather abruptly, his robes billowing behind him in a familiar fashion, pausing only to shout over his shoulder, "Take the Red Line."

Wanting to sink to the floor and scream, Hermione instead turned towards Thomas and, with a silent nod, indicated that it was time to leave.

Well, there she was in the pub below the hotel with her bloody drink. Feeling none too adventurous, Hermione had simply ordered her rudimentary glass of the house red and sat amongst a handful of businessmen, all nursing their own drinks while poring over documents and computer screens. Thankfully, it was silent, save for the soft *taps*

of typing and the soft *clanks* of glass meeting wood.

Overwhelmed didn't seem like a powerful enough word for how Hermione felt at this moment. It was like everything chaotic in her life had conspired to make an appearance on what should have been a routine site inspection. Well, not everything, unless Ron had suddenly decided to make some unexpected trip to the States or her parents had somehow remembered that she existed. Actually, it was a completely different redhead who joined her in the pub.

"Thought I'd get a drink," Thomas said awkwardly as he took a seat across from Hermione. He didn't quite meet her eyes at first, but when he did, there was a friendliness that made Hermione feel slightly less frazzled.

Smiling apologetically, Hermione replied, "I'll bet you need one after today. I guess I've turned out to be a real mess of a trainer."

Thomas seemed reluctant to meet her gaze and instead said, "No, of course not. I can understand, really. It's not like you had expected to run into your presumed-dead, former professor. Not here, at least. And the house-elves, well, I'm not sure who would have seen that one coming." Hermione laughed lightly at this before taking a sip of her wine.

"You know, one would think by now I would come to expect this sort of plot twist. And yet, here I am, constantly surprised by the strange turns my life takes," she reflected, almost more to herself than Thomas. There seemed to be something else on Thomas' mind, however.

"I apologize if this comes out rudely, it's just, I was very young when the war happened, but I've heard things, of course. Were you... well, did you... when he supposedly died..."

Hermione took a fortifying breath before answering the unfinished question. "I suppose 'yes' is the simple answer," she replied, her voice soft and uncertain. "I know, at least, what I thought I saw. Given recent events, however, I don't think I know anymore."

"Right," Thomas said solemnly, and then added, "and was he always so... angry?"

Hermione nearly choked on her wine. *I suppose the history books never really cover that bit, do they?*

"Professor Snape, as I knew him, was always very demanding, very precise, and at times, very cruel. He showed blatant favoritism towards his house, had little patience for anyone who was even slightly incompetent, and had a sort of vicious wit that seemed to take the most pleasure out of belittling others."

She paused slightly to consider what she would say next.

"Of course, and I'm sure this still stands today, he's perhaps one of the most intelligent and powerful wizards to have ever graced the halls of Hogwarts. He's much braver than I think he would like to admit. Quite simply, he's a hero. A hero I thought I had watched die without making a single effort to help. But here he is, still alive, and fully prepared to belittle at a moment's notice."

It was odd, but she had said the last part with a strange affection. She had never truly hated Snape, despite the many times he had tried to bring her down a peg. At times, she had even felt a twinge of sympathy, something she was sure would incense Snape were he ever to find out. Perhaps that was why she had carried his death around with her for so long. And now it seemed that all of that had been for naught, and perhaps even worse, that this revelation did not seem make her feel any better.

A/N: Thank you to my beta, justine 34, and Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Hermione could feel the wispy, baby hairs framing her forehead curling in the punishing sunlight. She had already disposed of her gray suit jacket and released the top two buttons of her crisp, white shirt in the fifteen minutes she had spent seated in the thick, stifling humidity. Washington, D.C. in the summer was apparently something akin to the flaming depths of hell, even as early as midmorning. Not even a breeze passed to disrupt the stale air.

No comfort was to be found in the metal chair where she was seated, either, sandwiched in between her surly, former Potions professor, still the picture of cool composure in his black overcoat, and her sloppy trainee, who had just managed to fit an entire donut in his mouth without any resistance. *He must be able to literally unhinge his jaw*, Hermione wondered as she marveled, fascinated in spite of herself.

"Was it necessary to swallow your entire meal in one bite?" Snape questioned, his nostrils flared in obvious disgust. It was the first thing the man had said since they had met him in front of the Krispy Kreme at Dupont Circle at 10 a.m. sharp. Thomas' mouth had hung open then, too, panting from the exertion of climbing what seemed like hundreds of steps in lieu of riding the escalator at the metro station. Admittedly, that had been Hermione's fault, as she was quite anxious to prevent Snape from cutting her out of any part of the investigation for any reason. So they had arrived on time, legs trembling, quite prepared to sit for an extended period and watch wherever they were directed.

It seemed, however, that their surveillance was to be completed in silence, Snape preferring to point at the building in question instead of replying to any pleasantries. Apparently, they weren't going to talk about yesterday, much to Hermione's chagrin.

"Mhm mhm," Thomas hummed in reply, his cheeks puffing out as he chewed voraciously.

"No need to respond immediately," Snape replied, looking away. "Wouldn't want you to choke." Thomas had evidently ignored this warning, because only a second later, Hermione heard a muffled cough to her right, followed by a slightly more frantic gag.

And he had been so good on the train, too, Hermione thought with despair as she handed Thomas her cup of lukewarm coffee. Thomas poured it down his throat desperately while she patted him gently on the back. He really had been good on the train, keeping his eyes to himself, his hands in his lap and his 'gee whiz' type comments to a minimum. She hated treating him like a child, but really, for all of his intellect, he truly lacked a certain amount of common sense and social grace.

Placing the empty cup down, Thomas let out an ungraceful burp. *His girlfriend must be so proud.* At least he had the sense to look slightly bashful, excusing himself to retrieve some napkins from the donut shop behind them.

And then it was just her and Snape, sitting in silence. Shifting uncomfortably in her chair, Hermione uncrossed and re-crossed her legs, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow. Containing a frustrated sigh, she cheered herself on internally. *Right then, Granger, muster some of that Gryffindor courage.* It hadn't been so difficult yesterday in the Ministry hallway, but perhaps she was just the right combination of shocked, angry, and, well, *crazy* then.

"So," Hermione began, deciding to disturb the silence cautiously, "were you able to..."

"I approached the presumed smuggling site earlier this morning, and was unable to discern any wards or enchantments to prevent entrance," Snape said, steamrolling quite easily over her line of questioning. As he said this, he pointed across the street to the area under observation: an abandoned storefront with newspaper on the windows, squished between a mobile phone store and a bakery dedicated entirely to vegan cupcakes. "It seemed premature, however, to enter without further observation, especially if it turns out to belong to Muggles. The elf was clearly traumatized and could have given us inaccurate information. No need to create an even bigger mess."

Hermione held her composure, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of viewing her fish impression. "Ah, well, that all seems to be in order. And the local proprietors, did you..."

"Questioned them. Casually, of course. Told them I wished to open a business in the area and asked about the availability of the vacant space next door. They all seemed slightly flummoxed by the revelation that there was indeed a vacant space between their stores. Not sure if there's some sort of enchantment or the idiots are just completely ignorant. I'm tempted to guess it's the latter."

Fair enough.

Hermione nearly groaned in frustration at this information. While vivid, Flora's story was quite incomplete. They still didn't know the exact aim or scope of the operation, nor did they have the slightest inkling as to who was behind it. Clearly there were no witnesses, Muggle or otherwise, to account for any parts of Flora's story, either. If the Muggles hadn't even noticed the gap between their stores, they could have hardly noticed the movement of boxes or the like.

She was also sure that if the smugglers had an ounce of sense, they would have moved shop nearly a week ago when Flora had originally escaped. Before she could tell Snape that they might as well pack up and move to Plan B, Snape interrupted her thoughts.

"There is something of interest, however," he said, his voice as monotone as if he were stating the weather. "The woman in the bakery mentioned that she always seems to hear a loud, sharp *bang* noise around midday, only to be visited by a short, shabby-looking gentleman within the hour. Heavy 'British' accent, little hair, always orders a dozen cupcakes."

Hermione looked back at the abandoned storefront. "That certainly fits our profile. Quite bold, though, don't you think? Wouldn't they be afraid that someone might notice all of that commotion every day, certainly if it was occurring at the same time? Especially if the building has been abandoned..."

Snape looked unconvinced. "Given what little we know, I'm apt to believe the risk was minimal."

Hermione nearly laughed. It was true, the Muggles seemed to be completely oblivious to the possibility that men, wizards no less, were illegally trafficking elves right in the middle of their street. Even years after she had found out she was a witch, she often wondered how many wizarding establishments she had passed in life without even a second glance. To be Muggle and ignorant.

Something did seem a bit off. "If you were questioning her so *casually*, as you said, why would she bring up something as random as a strange midday customer?" She thought he was a hero, yes, but a saint?

Snape suddenly took on a disgruntled look, glaring rather pointedly. "Are you intending to investigate me as well, Inspector?"

Perhaps. "No, of course not. Just curious."

Thinking she had just unintentionally set herself up for another confrontation, Hermione was bewildered when she saw something of a sly grin slide onto his face.

"You know, Granger, I do not require magical means to be *persuasive*." Well that was a turn. Whatever other manner he had employed previously, Snape had certainly not used that voice in his curriculum at Hogwarts.

Feeling her face warm in the most embarrassing fashion, Hermione found herself once again grateful for Thomas' reappearance at the table.

"Haven't missed anything, have I?" Thomas asked with concern as he eased back into his seat, a few donut crumbs still clinging to his chin.

"Not a thing," Hermione murmured with her back turned to Snape's visible smirk. With that, the group plunged back into silence, Hermione's questions multiplying by the second.

Hermione didn't care to know what her hair looked like now, two hours into their surveillance. It wasn't as if she were trying to impress anyone, but she really wouldn't have wasted that extra ten minutes battling it into submission if she had known the humidity would have it crackling at its ends. Between her growing hair, Thomas' drooping eyes, and Snape in his antisocial overcoat, they made quite a motley crew. Honestly, Hermione half expected the staff of the donut shop to come around and tell them to leave because they were scaring off customers.

During the prolonged silence, Hermione had thought to ask many questions: whether Snape's men were combing the records offices for any evidence of a leasing agreement, what he knew of the local expat wizarding community, how far-reaching he thought all of this was. All of these questions, however, remained suppressed between her closed lips. Their partnership had become antagonistic the minute she had stupidly slapped him the day before, and for the moment, it might be best to shut her mouth and keep her eyes peeled. Besides, she had a strong suspicion that Snape knew much more about the situation than he was letting on. Perhaps her quietness would unnerve him enough to let it spill out.

She had just picked up her thin, yellow notepad and begun to fan herself, its pages fraying slightly at the ends, when Thomas broke the silence, effectively startling her. While chasing after the notepad as it somersaulted in the air, Hermione had to politely ask Thomas to repeat himself.

"I said, isn't it such a happy coincidence that you would be assigned this case?" Thomas repeated his eager grin ever present. "I mean, who better to investigate this?"

Of her past failures, the elf legislation debacle ranked fairly low on the list of discussions Hermione wanted to have in front of Snape. If possible, she would prefer none of her failures to be discussed, of course, but at least the Polyjuice/cat mishap demonstrated a certain amount of ingenuity and flair. She could find very little redeeming about being drummed out of the Ministry because no one wanted to give up their elves just yet.

Attempting to steer the conversation away from the subject, Hermione replied, "Well, I'm sure any of the inspectors would be well-versed enough to take on this case. It'll all be part of your training, Thomas."

"But I do wonder why he would single you out, Inspector," Snape inquired softly. Meeting Snape's gaze, all Hermione could see was pure, wicked malice.

Why, Thomas, why?

Thomas could only be Thomas though, and recognizing this with resignation, Hermione simply sat back as Thomas recounted the work which had become the sum of her nearly two years in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

"She was a crusader for elf justice," Thomas declared proudly, his unabashed admiration oozing out of every pore. Eyeing Hermione as she slowly sunk in her chair, cheeks red, he asked, both considerably and ignorantly, "Would you like me to get you some water, Hermione? You're looking quite red at the moment. Is it heat stroke? Bloody hot out here today, isn't it?"

Grasping at the reprieve, she nodded, answering aloud, "Yes, that would be great, Thomas. Thanks." Dutifully, Thomas left the table once again to retrieve a bottle of water from the shop behind them. Satisfied that the subject was dropped, Hermione scooted back into her seat, her eyes trained on the abandoned building.

"A crusader for elf justice? I suppose it's safe to say that didn't pan out." So perhaps the subject wasn't dropped.

Hermione stared down at her steepled hands on the table, unsure of how to reply. She knew he was referring to more than the fact that elves were quite possibly being trafficked across the street from them. His remark wasn't a shot in the dark, either; he had to know that to end up in a job like hers, you probably did something to openly offend your prior employer, Thomas' strange interest in the position excluded. It wasn't that you were incapable, very much the opposite. You were just too capable, too passionate, and to use a term that she was sure her co-workers had used often behind her back, fanatical. It certainly wasn't the most lauded job, either. It was a necessary job, sure, but no one ever really appreciated it; it wasn't as if she were receiving medals of honor for keeping that damned kelpie hidden in Loch Ness.

Bottom line: you really needed to muck everything up to end up where she was, and she had quite fulfilled that requirement.

Finally feeling brave enough to face him, Hermione looked over at Snape. She had expected to see a supercilious smirk, but he seemed more intrigued than looking to take her down a notch.

"Yes, quite safe," Hermione agreed, smiling wryly. "It was during my time with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I suppose, well, let's just say I may have been a little overzealous in my pursuit of 'elf justice,' as Thomas so eloquently put it." She paused for Snape to make a biting remark, but none ever came. "It had all culminated in a piece of legislation I had written. It contained every sort of safety net and right I thought the elves deserved: paid wages, holidays and sick leave, a bureau to deal with both physical abuse and the abuse of their rights. Perhaps even more controversial, I suggested that failure by their owner to uphold their rights should result in elf emancipation."

Snape managed to smirk slightly at this, rejoicing, "So, of course it failed."

Hermione responded with a rueful smile. "Spectacularly. I would like to point out that the legislation gave owners quite a few chances to reform before such serious actions were taken, but I'm afraid as soon as the word 'emancipation' jumped out at the reader, all other considerations were thrown out the window." Hermione imagined her beet-faced supervisor as she said this, his walrus-like mustache quiver.

"Such a failure would really be paltry for any normal bureaucrat, but I wouldn't let it go. I held on, white-knuckled, for what bordered on a ridiculous amount of time. I think it eventually went beyond any sort of passion I had for the ethical treatment of elves. I had literally gone mad over it."

Hermione didn't know why she had shared that last part with him. It had taken her years of retrospect to truly accept it herself, much less say it aloud to anyone else.

"Over-eagerness was always one of your more detrimental traits," Snape opined in a drawl. "I can recount at least one situation in which it led to a considerable mishap."

And now they were talking about her weeks spent as a half-transformed cat. He was right though; she had always been driven, sometimes to excess. At Hogwarts, it had always been to prove herself. This time was different though, and now that she allowed herself to think about it, she was more able to connect the dots. Things were complicated, as life often inevitably became, and it was just easier to focus on one thing at the exclusion of everything else, even the true source of what kept her up at night.

"Towards the end of it," Hermione replied, retaking her story, "I remember spending one evening obstinately sitting outside my boss' chambers. As a form of protest, I suppose, though I honestly couldn't tell you now. At that point, I think I had already realized I had gone over the edge, so to speak, but that also meant there was no turning back." It was almost an out-of-body experience thinking of it now; she felt so entirely removed from how that Hermione had felt. Well, that was, until yesterday.

Chancing a glance at Snape, Hermione found her expectations confused again as she noted a hint of understanding in his otherwise emotionless eyes. Undeniably, if anyone knew what it was to be freefalling, it was he. Not that he would ever discuss that with her. But if she could just broach the subject...

"Oi, did you see that?" Thomas' urgent question broke through Hermione's introspection. He stood rigidly next to his chair, water bottle in hand, squinting at something across the street. Following his gaze, she could clearly see the back of a man entering the suspected storefront, struggling with a large object that was less clear.

Before she could say anything, Hermione heard Snape succinctly order them to stay. How had he known that her legs would move without any proper guidance? It seemed they were calling all of the shots on this trip, and she soon found herself dashing across the street, nearly clipped by oncoming traffic, and smoothing herself against a wall of the storefront. Even from a distance, she could see the murderous look on Snape's face as he got to his feet, wand peeking from his sleeve. Thomas looked simply awed, no judgment made as to whether she had already cocked everything up.

Merlin, was she sweating now, her heart thumping loudly in her ears. It almost felt as if the madness was creeping over her again, though, at least this time, she was acutely aware that she could have well botched everything up in the last thirty seconds. Regardless, she was in the thick of it now, and quite frankly, in her comfort zone. If only the boys were here to see her.

Funnily enough, as she slithered against the wall towards the slightly agape door, countless Muggles passed without sparing a glance. *Some sort of cloaking spell, no doubt*, Hermione surmised, though why the occupants hadn't done something more elaborate to disguise the place was beyond her.

Before entering, she took a moment to cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself, slipping her wand from her sleeve and tapping the top of her head with a practiced hand. Feeling the familiar cool trickle extend through her body, Hermione raised her right hand for examination. The spell had become an everyday charm for her in this line of work, and she was satisfied to see only the soft outline of her hand as color of her bare hand bled away.

Careful to pull the door only wide enough for her to slide inside, Hermione could already hear conversation from within. Glancing across the street one last time, and noting the livid look on Snape's face, Hermione quickly slipped behind the door.

"One of those buggers bit my finger! I thought these things were supposed to be obedient!" It was the first thing Hermione heard as she crossed the threshold, quick to duck behind a large, abandoned counter standing near the entrance, despite her nearly invisible state.

"More trouble than they're worth, I always said. Get a woman handy with the housekeeping charms, and there's really no need for 'em," a second voice answered.

Rising from her crouched position just enough to see over the counter, Hermione spotted two figures towards the other end of the nearly barren room. Though she couldn't see their faces in the dimly lit room, it was clear from their voices and body language alone that they were both male. A few three foot by three foot wooden crates stood haphazardly in front of them.

"Should we take 'em out of the crates?" asked one, gesturing to one of the crates as he used a piece of cloth to sop up the streaming perspiration running down his face.

"Are you kidding me? We're lucky Malfoy didn't hear about the one that ran off the other day. Probably got hit by one of those bloody Muggle cars while crossing the road," commented the other, before aiming a disgruntled kick at one of the crates. The man glanced over at the door and his body stilled slightly. Holding her breath, Hermione ducked behind the counter again.

"Oi, and look, you've left the bloody door open again!" Smacking his partner on the back of his head, the man silently pointed his wand at the door, which shut with *alick*.

Feeling braver in her camouflaged skin, Hermione inched further into the open space of the room. The space was gutted, all traces of its former function torn from its walls and floors. Instead, a threadbare, brown couch sat in the middle, with metal folding chairs placed haphazardly about. Old take-out containers and empty liquor bottles also dotted the expanse. And, of course, there were the large crates behind which the men stood, most likely containing more elves.

Preparing to take down the men with quick Stunners, Hermione listened to their continued conversation while slowly unsheathing her wand.

"We better hurry, boss man wants the elves by half past, and we gotta catch our Portkey right after that," said one with a slight glance at his wrist.

"Yeah, yeah, might just slip next door before we head out," placated the other, who began walking backwards toward the door, maintaining the conversation. "Not sure what the hell vegan is, but those cupcakes are..." Hermione sent a Stunning Spell at his back, retrieving his dropped wand and leaving him to crumple onto the dusty cement floor as she stalked towards her next target.

"Jack?" the other man called out in a panic as he watched his lifeless friend from afar. Holding his wand out in front of him, he walked out from behind the crates, eyes darting. Finding a clear shot, Hermione sent another Stunner, only to narrowly miss it as he flinched out of the way. It seemed Snape could wait no longer.

"Granger!" he snarled as the door burst open, a meek Thomas following closely behind.

"Bloody hell! Severus Snape?" The unknown man appeared to be just as surprised as Hermione had been two days ago. Glancing at him as if he were no more than annoying insect, Snape also aimed a spell at him, but the man blocked it this time, running back behind the crates. As he made this trip, Hermione sent several more Stunners his way, but nothing seemed to impede him. Instead, he parried back at the pair before aiming his wand at one of the crates. Blasting it open, he grabbed several semi-conscious elves, holding them in front of him while they groggily wiped their eyes, unaware of what was happening around them.

Hermione hesitated, but Snape didn't, attempting to disarm the man. However, with a twisted grin, the smuggler popped out of vision, his two arms wrapped around the necks of three elves each.

"Damn it, Granger!" Snape growled, staring directly where Hermione stood, invisible. Removing the charm, Hermione's form once again became visible. "Bind him," Snape ordered, pointing at the still motionless man left behind before stalking around the room, taking inventory. Nodding silently, Hermione pointed her wand at each of the man's arms and legs, each time a thick, braided rope erupting from her wand and wrapping around the prisoner.

Well, she thought, we've got one of them, at least. She didn't dare share this note of optimism with Snape.

Pausing his prowl, Snape addressed the room-at-large. "I can see now how you ended up in your current position." It wasn't said in any particular tone, but the message was clear: Hermione had cocked it up completely. "We've wasted two hours monitoring the area, only for *you*," and he made sure to glance at Hermione specifically, "to run in to 'save the day,' or whatever it is your foolhardy mind was thinking, and derail the entire investigation. The rest of this clandestine operation is now aware of our suspicions. Whoever they are, they know I'm alive. And instead of two witnesses, we now only have one, and by all accounts, this one is probably the bigger idiot."

Hermione swallowed hard.

"Perhaps more than that, sir," Thomas called from the other end of the room. Visibly gritting his teeth in annoyance, Snape turned his head in Thomas' direction. Motioning for both Snape and Hermione to approach, he pointed to the two crates he had managed to open. Inside each lay four elves, all sprawled out on top of each other, sleeping peacefully.

"I would say these guys make nine, sir," Thomas continued with not a hint of cheek in his voice. Hermione gave him a small smile, but cowered slightly when her eyes met Snape's again. If she had wanted to show Snape that she had grown up, she certainly wasn't doing a very good job.

A/N: Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

"Please enlighten me, Inspector. As one who regularly deals with wild creatures, do you often find it effective to run up to them and introduce yourself?"

Hermione, Thomas, and Snape had already left the abandoned storefront for a poorly ventilated conference room in the warehouse-like American Ministry of Magic. The smuggler, whoever he might be, had been locked and warded in an unused office, with no proper interview room available, and the elves, still quite asleep, were placed side by side on a long cot in another storage room. Hermione had to bite her tongue at this, as there really wasn't any other place for them.

Despite the change in location, it seemed Snape was more than ready to resume his lecture.

Round two, then. "That is certainly not what I did, Detective, and I object to my actions being characterized as such," Hermione spat back, finding that anger was indeed the key ingredient when standing up to Severus Snape. "Hell, you saw me Disillusion myself before I even walked in." Both she and Snape stood at opposing ends of an oval conference room table while Thomas was seated somewhere in the middle.

"It's true, sir," Thomas piped up, careful to look directly at Hermione. "Brilliant, really. As close to invisible as I've seen."

Snape only grunted. "Rather the point... whatever your name is," he muttered with disinterest.

"Oh, are you too important to bother to learn anyone's name?" Hermione asked with indignation. "Or is just because *Thomas* isn't some sort of sycophant, hanging on your every word?" It was strange how as a student she had been so disciplined, but here, as an adult, the man could slither under her skin with little effort.

"Gryffindors," Snape said with disgust, pointedly ignoring Hermione's last line of questioning. "So little respect for authority, so little sense. Ready to throw themselves heedlessly into conflict without so much as a thought..."

"This discussion of house traits has become rather tired, hasn't it?" Hermione inquired, her hands finding their familiar place perched on her hips. "It's been years since either of us has even been near Hogwarts..."

"I was in Hufflepuff myself," Thomas ventured.

"Enough! Sit, now!" This contribution came out in a grizzled roar as Stephens stepped into the room, clad once again in camouflage and hiking boots. He stood much straighter than the day before, looking far more authoritative, with his broad chest puffed out slightly and his friendly, dark eyes crackling. That was enough for Hermione, who took her seat at once. She noted Thomas cowering and Snape, looking rather put out, taking his seat with narrowed eyes.

"I was under the impression that you folks were professionals, but all I've heard from the hall is a bunch of children arguing," Stephens reprimanded, his tone firm.

"I told you from the beginning that Granger had an issue with following directions," Severus relayed lazily to his colleague, as if he found the whole endeavor rather tiring.

Instead of a verbal reply, Stephens silently slapped a newspaper down in front of Snape. Raising an eyebrow, Snape glanced at it. The raised eyebrow managed to quirk slightly as he read, but Snape made no other response. From her vantage point, Hermione caught a glimpse of the headline, "Head Auror Accused of War Crimes in Homeland."

With widened eyes, Hermione met Snape's gaze with alarm. When he didn't Disapparate on the spot, Hermione turned her stare to the door. Although she knew the charges had been buried long ago, along with Snape's empty coffin, Hermione was sure the scandal alone would cost him his job. But when the Minister didn't fly through the door demanding an answer, Hermione sighed with relief slightly, loosening her grip on her wand.

"Well?" Stephens asked expectantly, his voice quieter but his tone just as sharp. "How'd this get out?"

"Wait," Hermione interjected, throwing Snape an accusatory glance. "You already knew?!"

"Lucius Malfoy," Snape replied calmly, answering Stephens' question.

Malfoy? Hadn't she just heard someone else talking about him...?

"What?" Hermione and Thomas gasped.

"Must you two comment on my every interaction?" Snape barked before resuming his conversation with Stephens. "Lucius Malfoy is an old... *friend*. From the days of *that* unpleasantness. As far as I can tell, he's also behind this elf nonsense."

The metaphorical light bulb lit above Hermione's head. Amidst all of the verbal sparring since, she had completely forgotten about the conversation she had overheard back at Dupont Circle. The men had mentioned that "Malfoy" was the man in charge. Hermione nearly laughed aloud; apparently she was not the only one to have fallen from grace. Things must have really gone awry for Lucius Malfoy if he was involved in small-time creature smuggling.

Her amusement must have shown as Snape gave her a stern look before continuing again. "As to how he found out," he paused momentarily, "it seems among the many things the esteemed Inspector has accomplished, she is still unable to grasp concept of subtlety." Hermione's mouth flew open to protest, but a second stern look from Stephens prompted her to close it.

"Thus, the gentleman who escaped most likely related my presence, and Lucius determined that damage control wouldn't be amiss," Snape finished finally. Watching his lips press together, Hermione took her chance to voice what she had previously suspected.

"So, all of this, you already knew about *all of this*?" In the back of her mind, the thought kept circling that she could simply leave. The I.C.W. was just a governing body, after all. What were they going to do, fine her? Pshaw, let them try. She would be safely tucked away on some lost tropical island with a cocktail in one hand and good book in another. If she closed her eyes, she could see it all quite clearly...

"I'm sorry, Granger, are we boring you?" Sighing, Hermione opened her eyes grudgingly. Thomas' head was tilted slightly like a befuddled dog, and it was Stephens' turn to raise an eyebrow. Snape, of course, still looked very much at his leisure. Smugly so.

"I surmised," he answered languidly, appearing to savor this advantage. "I had heard that Lucius was in town, and then my men uncovered some paperwork that indicated he was making his visit permanent. But, to answer your question completely, no, I did not know the extent of 'all of this'."

Would it appear odd if I just slammed my head against this conference table? Hermione wondered as she processed this. And who were these 'men'? She hadn't seen another soul in the building in the past two days, aside from the surly receptionist. As if summoned by these thoughts, the conference room door finally swung open, two figures of similar height darkening the doorway. As they stepped forward, the light revealed them to be nondescript. It wasn't laziness that prevented Hermione's brain from supplying simple descriptors; it was their average state of dress, their standard-length brown hair, combed to the side in a similar manner, the sheen-less leather of their dress shoes. Their faces were dissimilar one had a longer nose, the other's eyes were farther apart but really, nothing which would have turned her head even momentarily.

Wordlessly, they swiftly crossed the conference room to hand Snape a written scroll before exiting. While Snape scanned the newly acquired document, Hermione turned to glance at the closed door once again, considering for the first time that this whole performance could be a part of some elaborate prank.

Rolling up the scroll, Snape said to the room-at-large, "It might be prudent at this juncture to review the facts."

Nodding in agreement, and hoping that she displayed only the slightest tone of resentment, Hermione suggested, "Perhaps you should go first, Detective. After all, you seem to be the *best* informed on the case." Snape eyed her warily in response, but seemed to be satisfied when she pulled out her yellow notepad, her self-inking quill poised.

"The timeline begins six months ago," Snape began, writing notes on his own piece of parchment as he spoke. "As far as the intelligence can demonstrate, Lucius Malfoy moved to the Washington, D.C. area last February..."

"I apologize, Detective," Hermione interrupted, her face still buried in her notes, "but, by intelligence you mean..."

"Property records, surveillance, 'word on the street', as they say..." Snape listed with clipped restraint. Still not lifting her head to acknowledge him, she prompted him to continue with a wave of her hand. Only later would she remember to be thankful that he hadn't magically severed it in a fit of annoyance.

"Up until this elf incident, Malfoy has maintained a low profile. So low, his residence is Secret-kept. However, with the discovery of the escaped British elf earlier this week,

and a bit of consideration given to the level of logistics and palm-greasing required to maintain even a small operation of this kind, everything immediately pointed to Malfoy. No American wizard would have the reach in Britain to not only enlist sellers, but also secure the shipment of the elves." Pausing, Snape looked around the room, as if daring any of the three to ask a question.

Striking out a line from her notes, Hermione peeked up, and catching Snape's stare, she impatiently nodded, saying, "Yes, yes, you're right. It's Malfoy. One of the bumbling idiots from earlier today mentioned a 'Malfoy' before the chaos ensued. Now, the scroll..."

Snape worked his jaw, as if fighting several disgruntled insults ready to fly from his lips, and answered, "Smith and Brown have uncovered some Muggle shipping permits Malfoy obtained through the ambassadors' office. That seems to be how he's getting the elves into the country without alerting the British Ministry."

"The Muggle ambassador?" Hermione queried.

"There's an ex-pat working in the Muggle ambassador's office, a wizard. His name's Wright," Stephens answered with a thoughtful look. From the look on Snape's face, Hermione easily determined that he was not a fan of this Wright.

Finally placing her notepad down, Hermione assessed the situation aloud. "Right, then. We know half of the 'who', that being Lucius Malfoy, elf smuggling kingpin," Thomas snorted with amusement at this "and we know the 'how': chiefly pureblood Brits selling their elves to traders, who are shipping them through Muggle shipping channels, but the 'where', as in where the final destination is, and the rest of 'who' and 'why' still remain unclear."

"Succinct, as always," Snape drawled sarcastically. However, Hermione would not be goaded into another argument.

"All that's left, at least for the moment, is to interview our witnesses," Hermione concluded.

"I will lead the interrogation of the smuggler," Snape declared definitively. He was leaning forward in his seat, his chest hovering over the oak conference table, and his chin jutted out, his dark eyes set to intimidation mode.

Deciding that this would only be reasonable, Hermione conceded, replying, "All right. It's probably best I interrogate the elves anyhow. But all interrogations must adhere strictly to I.C.W. treaty law."

"Of course," Snape agreed, a smirk of victory curling his lips.

It had taken two hours for the interrogations to be completed. First, Hermione had watched as Snape questioned the oafish smuggler, and then she tried her hand at extracting information from rather drowsy elves. Despite the difficult nature of the interrogations, there were some revelations. Among them was one that had nothing to do with the case, but with the interrogator.

Perhaps it was his Death Eater past, or maybe the threats of Veritaserum and pet poisoning made during her schoolgirl days that had Hermione convinced that Snape would seek out the information he required by less than legal means. What she had forgotten was that voice, the very hypnotic tone he had trained his deep baritone to inflect, as well as his knowing stare, one that had nothing to do with Legilimency and yet still had you convinced that he was actively probing your mind. Watching him work was very... fascinating, to say the least.

Of course, even these tools were less than necessary when your witness was as forthcoming as 'Eddie', the smuggler, had been.

"Yeah, it's all Lucius Malfoy's scheming," he had related freely, relaxed in the interrogation chair as if he had only been invited to tea. "I don't really give a flip about house-elves one way or the other, but the money he was putting up to mind the buggers, well, certainly couldn't turn that down, could I?"

One would think being stunned and bound would leave someone at least angered at his treatment, but Eddie seemed to roll with it, appearing quite pleased to have the room's attention.

"Course, they're a bit vicious. Probably should have asked for more in light of this recent injury." Then he had displayed to his audience his left index finger, tiny, rounded indents dotting the circumference. Snape had had no patience for a discussion of war wounds, especially those of such little significance as elf bites.

"Could we please keep our attention on the task at hand?" he had commanded, carefully avoiding Eddie's outstretched finger.

"Yeah, okay," Eddie had agreed, retracting his outstretched arm. "Well, let's see. We usually picked up the crates from a warehouse in London and then Apparated with them to an air-o-port or whatever. There's a bloke there that takes care of it. Something about artwork, don't know the details. Anyway, me and one of the other guys would then catch a Portkey from there to here and pick up yesterday's shipment."

From that statement, it occurred to Hermione that Lucius Malfoy was in fact throwing quite a bit of money at this problem. From paying the lackeys to paying off the Portkey office, quite a few hands were already in the cauldron. That was not all that was revealed, however. As to the recipients of the elves:

"Housewives, you know. Ex-pats over here to start over after the war; American wizarding wives who can't trust Muggles with their kids, a bunch of rich types really. Have to be, I guess, 'cause as far as I know, Malfoy's charging an arm and a leg."

And where did he think the elves were now?

"Haven't a clue. Hardly saw Malfoy myself. Owls and such usually drop by with a sack of galleons, and self-incinerating notes told us where to drop the elves. Can't say I was overly worried about it, either. The money, you know."

Well, if not where, how many? How many elves are being trafficked?

"I don't know. I'm sure there's other blokes involved that even I haven't seen. I... I suppose over about a hundred in my experience."

Satisfied with the information yielded, the group moved on to the elves, who proved to be far less helpful, but quite a bit more difficult to control. Once awakened, the group had gone into full-on panic and hysterics; it had basically been Flora times eight. However, after Thomas had very loudly exclaimed at the 'filthy' state of their closet prison, they, like Flora had, threw their concentration into cleaning every surface.

Unfortunately, all Hermione could get out of them was much of the same. Each had belonged to an ancient pureblood family who saw canning the family elf as a major part of their new PR campaign. If anything, it told Hermione that this was no great secret, at least among the elite, and despite the fact that owning an elf had become a major faux pas, much of wizarding Britain still didn't care about their treatment.

Now the team was left to figure out how to answer the remaining questions.

"It seems that those involved only know bits of the entire chain and are paid enough to be satisfied with that," Hermione reasoned as she thumbed through her notes, the thin pages crinkling loudly. "I suppose that is trafficking 101, but no help to us at the moment."

"That Wright bloke from the Ambassador's office might know a bit more, though," Thomas pointed out. "He did arrange the permits after all."

"He'll be next, then," Hermione replied before glancing over at the suspiciously silent Snape. Sighting the sneer of distaste gracing his features, she added, "Oh, if you're all right with it, of course, Detective."

"I'd prefer not to..."

"Then Thomas and I can just..."

"I will make the arrangements for tomorrow morning," Snape concluded unhappily. What it was that Snape detested so about this Wright character remained a mystery, but Hermione was eager to find out.

"All right, then," Stephens said, rubbing his hands together. "You guys can call it a day, then. I'll worry about what to do with the witnesses, but you guys get some rest. Good work!" Then turning to Snape, he added in an undertone, "I'd watch out around your apartment. You know those crazy news people will do anything for a story."

"Oh, I am well aware of that," Snape muttered as he left the conference room.

Hermione found herself, as she did during most free moments this week, lying across the queen-sized bed in her hotel room. Too exhausted to bother, she still wore her business attire and her feet hung uselessly over the edge of the bed, her black pumps hanging precariously from the tips of her toes. Closing her eyes, she returned to her lost island fantasy. It didn't have to be a fantasy, though. She had, after all, a few months' worth of vacation time banked. Somewhere in the back of her mind, though, she knew that wouldn't happen. It was easier not to take vacations. Those just left too much time to think about... well, things, and she hardly required that.

A tap on her window disrupted the fantasy. Figuring it was a missive from the I.C.W., she sat up begrudgingly, rolling her shoulders slightly and shaking her head to release some of the tension nestled in her neck. Another insistent tap came at the window and Hermione grumbled.

"Yes, all right. I'll just be a moment." Flicking off her shoes, she shuffled barefoot across the velvety soft carpet towards the window. Unhinging the locks, she wrenched open the heavy window with a heave, ducking as a tawny owl flew in and landed primly on the bed. Hermione had half-expected a pigeon, given their sheer quantity in the city, but took the scroll tied to its leg nonetheless. Finding an old packet of cashews in her purse, she offered it to the owl, but with a haughty hoot the owl turned away and took off through the window once more.

Settling herself back on the bed, Hermione unrolled the note and began to read. About thirty seconds later, she wadded up the note and nearly chucked it out the open window. Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself, internally, that she was being irrational. She was, of course, thrilled that Harry and Ginny were having a baby...over the moon, really. And they already wanted her to be the godmother, which was such an honor, especially since she hadn't been the most... reachable friend the last couple of years. And it really only made sense that Ron be the godfather. And, look, he's got a new girlfriend. Well, good for him.

The only outward sign of Hermione's irrationality was when, with the crumpled note still clutched in her fist, she slipped her black pumps back on, ran a hand haphazardly through her unkempt hair, and left her room en route to the downstairs pub. It was only after she had strode purposely up to the bar and seated herself on one of the plush, red leather barstools that she noticed that she currently shared the bar with her chief antagonist at the moment, Severus Snape. Well, she certainly wouldn't let that impede her.

"Snape," she greeted succinctly, twisting towards him on her stool. For his part, Snape simply grunted before taking a swig of his beer, a dark, murky liquid.

Unconcerned with his nonverbal response, Hermione queried, "What are you drinking?"

Turning the glass, Snape replied, "Guinness." Indeed, the Guinness logo was printed on the revealed side of the glass. Considering the glass for a moment, Hermione outwardly shook her head. *Nope, that just wouldn't do.*

Unclenching her fist, she let the ball of paper rest idly on the counter before reaching for a laminated drink menu. Honestly, she didn't recognize most of these, not in the habit of frequenting bars, but she prepared to order as the bar tender approached.

"Glass of red wine?" he asked, recognizing Hermione.

"Not tonight, no," replied Hermione, still browsing the drink menu. "But tell me, what is your strongest drink? I suppose it's all a bit subjective, but I would appreciate your opinion." The bartender considered her for a moment and then a toothy grin spread across his face, teeth crooked and yellowing.

Lovely teeth, Hermione thought wryly as he caught her eye.

Leaning forward slightly, he said in a breathy whisper, "I've got some Firewhisky in the back, if you're interested." Pulling slightly away from the close proximity of his face, Hermione glanced over at Snape, who merely shrugged. Taking that as a sign that the man probably wouldn't poison her at least, she nodded.

As the bartender hurried away, Hermione said, to no one in particular, "A bottle of Firewhisky in a Muggle bar."

"He's a squib," a familiar baritone replied. *So he's deemed it bearable to speak to me.*

Anxious to keep the conversation going, Hermione noted, "He's got an English accent."

"He moved here during the first war, as many ex-pats did."

Before Hermione could reply, the bartender had returned, looking strangely eager. Unscrewing the lid, he asked Hermione, "Would you like it over ice?"

Giving the bottle a decisive appraisal, she answered, "Neat."

The bartender lifted an eyebrow, reaching under the counter for a clean glass tumbler. Filling the glass a quarter of the way, he pushed it towards her, waiting to see her first sip. Disappointingly for him, it was not so much as sip as a glug as she downed the contents in one go. Her throat burned as she choked the alcohol down, but refusing to cough, she clenched her jaw together.

As she felt the sensation slowly die, she allowed her jaw to slacken. Hoarsely, she requested more. Clearly displeased, the bartender poured her another glass before leaving Hermione and the bottle to attend to the other patrons.

"I do believe he intended for you to savor that," Snape commented from her left.

"Yes, well, I'll have to savor this glass, I suppose," Hermione replied moodily, taking only a sip this time.

"What is it, Granger? Discouraged by your poor showing today?" Sighing, Hermione shifted in her barstool again.

"It's got nothing to do with today, thank you very much. I'm not even sure I have anything to be ashamed of on that account. If you weren't such a bloody control freak..."

"Look who's talking," he grumbled as she took another, much larger sip of her drink. "All you've done is relentlessly harp on about I.C.W. protocol while doing whatever you like without any consideration for..."

"Me, inconsiderate? You've practically lied to me from day one. Really since seven years ago when you supposedly DIED!" Hermione paused. That last bit came out quite loudly.

"Well," Severus continued, in a much lower voice this time, as if controlling his own volume might affect hers, "if it isn't today that has you knocking them back with abandon, what is it?"

Hermione snorted. So, now he was concerned? With a poke of her finger, the balled-up note rolled unevenly towards Snape. Unraveling it with a look of curiosity, Snape scanned the note, his obsidian eyes dancing back and forth as he read. Finished, he placed the note down on the counter and slid it back to her.

"Jealous, then? They've all got their lives together and you're here drinking with your most detested professor?"

"No." Yes.

Snape hummed lowly and took a slow sip of his drink, as if thinking something over.

"Tell me, Granger, why is it that you are here, drinking with me, and not there, celebrating new life and keeping Mr. Weasley company?" The look he gave her told her that he didn't want to hear about the elf legislation. So she asked him a question instead.

"Tell me, Snape, why is it that you are here, drinking with me, and not *six feet under*?" It might have been an insensitive way to ask, but Hermione was just tipsy enough at this point not to care.

Snape glared at her at first, looking like he might just up and leave at that moment, but then relaxed slightly.

"Fair enough," he ground out, looking very much like part of him was still fighting to keep his survival a secret.

"Fawkes," he finally stated.

"Fawkes? The... the... phoenix?" Even though she had asked the question, Hermione still hadn't anticipated having this conversation while halfway pissed. "So he, er, flew away with you or..."

"No!" Snape exclaimed in frustration. Hermione considered that he too might be regretting the venue of this conversation. "His tears." Snape paused to sigh. "Actually, I'm not absolutely certain. I had certainly taken precautions, anti-venom and the like. I had guessed I might have to face the snake, but I knew it was all worthless compared to the Dark magic in its venom. I had expected to... By the time it happened, I had lost so much blood that I was in and out of consciousness. His presence is really all that I can remember. It seems someone retrieved me, though."

"On Harry's orders," Hermione added quietly.

"Yes," Snape agreed hurriedly, "and they took me to St. Mungo's. Whoever they were, they were discreet and so was the Healer. None of the other staff were aware of my occupancy. My blood supply was replenished, my wounds were healed, and once again, I'm not certain of Fawkes' role, but not a trace of the venom was left in my body. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough that I could leave. I procured a dose of Polyjuice Potion and took the first Portkey out of the country. I landed here."

Hermione emptied her glass once more, and with sly glance towards the bartender in the back of the room, she reached over the counter for the bottle and poured herself another drink. So after all of that, it had been a bird, a wonderful, magical bird that had saved him. Not in the right frame of mind to consider this properly, she let out a snort of laughter.

Snape growled. "Did you even understand a word of that, or are you already too drunk?"

"No, no," Hermione protested. "It's just, I've felt so guilty over your death all of this time. When I found out what Harry, Ron, and I would be doing that year, when I knew that Nagini would be a factor, I attempted to find some way to at least delay what might be inevitable. It wasn't easy; of course, no normal healing spells would work against her attack. But while preparing for Bill and Fleur's wedding, I found Mr. Weasley's medical records. Truthfully, it seemed it was jumble of spells and counter-curses and potions that eventually healed him, and there was no way I could do it all and have enough time to save anyone, but I knew enough for there to be a fighting chance."

Here she let out a deep breath, if only because she couldn't bear to cry at this moment. "So when I saw you there in the Shack... well, I didn't know... I... and then I guess Fawkes came along... and..." She couldn't continue. Instead, she took another sip of Firewhisky.

Throughout the entire explanation, Snape sat perfectly still.

He probably thinks I'm mad Hermione reasoned as she placed the glass down. Would he be wrong? She had been nothing but erratic this entire trip. Breathing in and out deeply, she attempted to at least sound sober.

"I suppose that's my roundabout answer to your question," she finally said. "I've spent the last seven years trying to block out that single year, possibly even just those ten minutes of you there, bleeding out on the floor. At the detriment, it seems, to my personal relationships."

"My death?" Severus echoed, appearing skeptical. "You're not married with little redheaded Weasleys running about because of me?"

"Well, that's not just because of you... certainly helped it along, I suppose," Hermione answered thoughtfully. "And it's not just your death I've been running away from. My parents are off in Australia with no memory of their past life, all to save them from Voldemort's wrath. I'm not sure I feel quite as guilty about that, truth be told, but I can't bring myself to go there and fix it, either. They certainly wouldn't look at me the same after that."

They sat quietly for a few moments. It was awkward, both of them being so emotionally naked.

"I can understand the need to hide, to compartmentalize the past," Severus offered.

"You would," Hermione replied with a slight smile. "I guess I've gone and mucked it up though. Showing up here and throwing it in your face again." Severus actually smiled at this.

"If our interactions over the last couple of days are any indication, I believe the hostility is mutual."

"They'll know now, though," Hermione pointed out apologetically. "All of wizarding Britain will know. Harry will kill me for not writing him right away."

Snape nonchalantly finished his beer. "Know that you've died for a valiant cause, then." Hermione blinked, watching a ghost of a smile grace Snape's lips, if only for a couple of seconds before disappearing again.

Drumming her fingers on the counter, Hermione asked, "Is this the part where we agree to let bygones be bygones?" Severus only nodded stiffly.

Stretching in her seat, Hermione dug through her purse, leaving a tip she hoped was suitable but she was a bit too out of sorts to check it properly. She stepped off the stool, stumbling slightly on her heels as she went.

"Perhaps I should help you to your room," Snape offered, concern crinkling his features. Her immediate impulse was to refuse, but with the way her feet seemed to be completely uncoordinated with her other movements, she gave in.

"Yeah, okay, thanks," she replied as he wrapped an arm around hers, steadying her stance. As they walked up the stairs, Hermione leaning heavily on him as her legs seemed unwilling to support her weight properly, she found herself ensconced in his scent again. Something about the hint of soap and peppermint just seemed so cleanly masculine. However, she might have been leaning against him far more than necessary, because he cleared his throat loudly once they reached her floor.

"The room number?" he asked.

"Yes, oh, it's, er, oh, I really can't remember, but it's that door," she replied, more flustered than intoxicated as she pointed to the third door down the hall.

Upon arriving in front of her room, Snape managed to unlock it wandlessly before helping her inside. Leading her to her bed, he left her seated on the edge, staring up at him.

As he stood over her, he looked a little unsure of what to do.

"I'll be all right," she assured him, slipping her feet from her shoes and kicking them off before lying across the bed.

"Right," he said, turning to leave, but she caught his hand. Just holding it there, she admired its rough texture and the way she was sure it could swallow hers quite easily. He made another sound above her, reminding her she had stopped him for a reason.

"Thank you," she said simply, releasing the hand and nestling into her pillow. Though she didn't see him leave, she did hear his muffled footsteps, followed by the soft *thud* of the door closing behind him.

A/N: Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Tap tap.

"Eughhh?" It was a guttural sound, its volume undulating between mute and just audible. And even so, the moan was still a small achievement given Hermione's state. Finding herself paralyzed by the weight of her exhaustion, she gathered whatever determination she could muster and focused it on opening her heavy eyelids. After several seconds of seemingly ignored messages from her brain, Hermione's vision expanded from fathomless darkness to a sliver of her darkened hotel room. She wasn't hungover, exactly, though the dull headache nestled between her temples did indicate there were some repercussions from the night before. More so, it was the endless nights of tossing and turning which had finally caught up to her after her first night of fit-less sleep.

Tap tap.

The staccato raps on glass sounded as if they were coming from the room's expansive window, hidden behind tall ivory curtains and three feet too far from the center of her bed. Blindly grasping for her wand on the night stand, Hermione grumbled. Given how the week had gone so far, she could only imagine what could be awaiting her on the other side of the window. Perhaps, deciding her tenuous grip on her sanity was still too firm, her leaders had decided to ship her off to the Black Forest next, the cackling Erklings to be her final undoing. More likely, however, it was a hovering, buggy Rita Skeeter, Quick Quotes Quill gripped between her spiny front legs, her shiny black wings fluttering in glee.

Tap tap.

Well, no use delaying it. With a lazy lift of her arm and an inexact flutter of her wand, the curtains were drawn, sunlight flooding the room and increasing the throbbing behind her eyes. Shading her vision with her free hand, Hermione squinted towards the illuminated window, still unable to spot the culprit. With another flick, she could hear the city bus below exhale as the driver pressed the accelerator, a whiff of exhaust floating through the open window, along with a small, gliding owl. Landing confidently on an upturned pillow, the creature, its streaked plumage ruffled, presented Hermione with its leg. She couldn't help but blink at it, unsure what to make of the thin glass vial tied with twine to its appendage. Noting the owl's stare, matching her blink for blink, she scrambled to relieve it of its burden, the vial tumbling to the bed with one pull of the twine. Before she could offer it a treat for its trouble, the owl had taken flight again, gliding back out the open window.

Groggily running a hand through her chaotic tresses, Hermione reached for the vial with the other, curiosity clearing some of the clouds of alcohol and exhaustion. The liquid it contained ... transparent with a golden honey hue ... didn't look familiar. Glancing back to where the vial had rested, Hermione spotted a furled snippet of parchment. *Drink it,* it read tersely. Hermione silently added, *you dunderhead,* recognizing the spiky script. His version of a peace offering, no doubt.

Shaking away any lingering doubts, Hermione released the stopper, held the vial's aperture to her lips, and downed the liquid without a second thought. It took a minute or so, and then, *relief.* As her dull headache receded, Hermione suddenly felt more alert, her eyes widening as exhaustion left her muscles. But then, as quickly as her head had cleared, panic and embarrassment sunk in.

"Fuck."

It was a simple statement, one she had been inclined to think on certainly more than one occasion, but had somehow avoided uttering aloud on this trip up until this point. In previous times, it had signified less complex emotions, i.e. the ridiculously extreme pain of stubbing her toe on the kitchen table or the annoyance of forgetting an important file for work at home. This time, however, "fuck" encompassed so many things, so many more ways she had managed to "fuck up": drinking more than she should have while admitting to Severus Snape that she had been living a hollow existence because, among other things, she had failed to save his life; throwing herself all over him as he chivalrously escorted her to her room, where she had clutched his hand longingly in a manner she was sure he had found unpleasant. Wasn't it bad enough that she had outed him as alive, possibly shattering any sense of privacy he may have had?

Groaning, Hermione slid back under the sheets, feeling that headache returning as swiftly as it had departed. He hadn't seemed too put out by it all last night, just a bit bemused really, but maybe he was waiting, choosing a subtler course of action. Then it struck her: the potion. And she, the biggest idiot of them all, drinking it down without pause, assuming his intentions. Really, if this was how he was going to off her, she deserved it.

But one minute turned to two, ten to fifteen, and then twenty minutes had elapsed after the potion had been ingested. Finding herself yet to expire, Hermione got out of bed. Standing under the punishing pressure of the shower head, Hermione conceded that she was more likely to die of embarrassment than by Severus Snape's hand, and for all of their sakes, she would just have to suck it up and get on with things. After all, he owed her nothing.

"I saw you two down at the bar last night. You and Snape, I mean." Thomas had, thankfully, swallowed the mouthful of eggs he had been chewing before beginning this statement.

Hermione, however, hadn't. Releasing a strangled cough as she felt a bit of egg travel down her windpipe, she bent her head to cough discreetly over her plate as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Sorry!" Thomas apologized, handing her a napkin.

Taking it from him gratefully, she disposed of the wandering egg and pushed her plate away, no longer hungry. She couldn't help thinking at this moment that they might be the most awkward people alive.

"I didn't stay or... or hear anything," Thomas added, sensing Hermione's unease.

"It was nothing," Hermione replied after gulping down half of her glass of orange juice. "We were just, er, catching up." Thomas raised an eyebrow and Hermione capitulated. "All right, we were... settling things. I think..." She paused to nibble on her lip slightly. "I think that we're all on the same page now."

Thomas nodded soberly in response, but then smirked slightly. "I'm forced to admit that I will miss the verbal sparring. You've got quite a sharp tongue, Inspector."

Hermione rolled her eyes and playfully slapped Thomas on his shoulder. This kid was becoming way too comfortable with her.

"So, why do you think he's so put off by this Wright bloke?" Thomas asked.

Hermione put down her glass and shrugged.

"I haven't the slightest. I don't even recognize the name. Perhaps he's an old school rival," Hermione replied nonchalantly, but then she leaned forward. "What I do wonder is why a wizard is working for a Muggle government agency? I suppose there's technically no rule against it, but is he living as a Muggle completely?"

The pair were given no time to ponder the question as a random flash of light disoriented them momentarily. Glancing in its direction, they found themselves the audience to quite a show.

Snape stood just outside of the pub in full view of its many street-facing windows. While most of the breakfast crowd was too consumed by their own business to take notice, a few had joined Hermione and Thomas in watching the ongoing confrontation.

If it had been anyone else, the word *confrontation* might have been a stretch. Snape wasn't gesticulating wildly or shouting himself hoarse. It was more of a controlled fury, one which had him advancing on the diminutive photographer in much the same way he had cornered Hermione only two days before. Though his volume couldn't possibly be higher than a whisper, judging by the sneer twisting his features, threats were being made. And then, without protest, the trembling photographer handed Snape his camera and backed away, hands held up in surrender. As if to show that a bit of the more violent Snape still existed, the small audience watched as, without ceremony, Snape simply dropped the camera. The crunch of plastic and glass cracking was just audible from within the pub.

Turning to face Thomas once more, Hermione found that he wore a look of uncertainty mirroring her own. However, before either could comment, they heard the door to the pub bang open.

"How is it he can billow in a pair of trousers and an overcoat?" Hermione muttered as she observed Snape's approach. When he arrived silently at their table, Thomas stood and pulled out a chair. Throwing Thomas a curious glance, Snape sat down.

"Thomas, go get the detective a cup of coffee," Hermione directed urgently, sensing Snape wouldn't want Thomas to be privy to the inevitable conversation. Her suspicions were confirmed as Snape didn't protest, sitting back with a huff of irritation.

Twisting her hands in her lap, Hermione remained reluctant to look him in the eye. He had lived despite her inaction, and yet, she had still managed to make his life a little worse.

"Did I mention that I was sorry last night? Because I am truly so..."

"You did," Snape interrupted succinctly.

Hermione let out a puff of breath and sank slightly in her chair.

"Thank you for the potion, by the way. It really helped this morning," she said, hoping that despite her miserable attempt at a smile, he could at least sense the range of gratitude she was trying to express.

"I've found it useful in the past," he drawled, though it was clear his focus was elsewhere.

Guessing where his thoughts lay, she asked, "Was the photographer waiting for you this morning, then?"

"Right outside my flat door." Snape paused and then added, "Or at least, as close as my wards would allow him. I did manage to shake the little buggler off until Capitol Street, but I suspect he already knew my destination." Hermione found herself on the other end of a very pointed look.

"Right," Hermione replied, looking down at her forgotten plate again. "Well, I suppose you've permanently rid yourself of him. Smashing his camera may have been a bit dramatic, though..."

"There will be more," Snape predicted ominously. He was right, of course. All they needed were the Portkeys to be secured back home, and there would be an invasion of British journalists.

Looking up from her plate, she found herself caught in Snape's stare. There was a weariness there she didn't recognize, one of a man who just couldn't seem to escape his past. His face seemed more lined, heavier.

Guilt directed her own eyes back down towards the table, her stare following the length of his forearms settled on the tabletop, the two joined at the ends by clasped hands. A nagging desire to take his hands in hers gnawed at her, but she shoved it down. Perhaps that was why she found herself saying, "About last night..." She drifted off here, not exactly sure what she was getting at; whether she was apologizing again or trying to admit something she didn't completely understand at the moment. But she had caught his attention; his dark eyes firmly focused on her, his motionless hands suddenly clenching oddly.

Clunk.

Thomas had set a cream-colored ceramic mug in front of Severus, completely oblivious that he may have been interrupting... something.

Snape cleared his throat and gave Thomas a nod. "Thank you... Thomas."

Thomas looked positively gleeful, a smile spreading over his whole face. Noting this, Hermione couldn't help but smile a little herself, hoping that this time her appreciation was more evident.

"Hope I didn't interrupt anything," Thomas said as he took his seat again.

"Nothing too important," Hermione replied, silently grasping for a subject. "We were just discussing..."

"The Malfoys," Snape supplied before taking a sip of his coffee.

"Er, yes... them," Hermione agreed, puzzled. "What was it again that we were discussing, Detective?"

"I had inquired about Lucius' motives."

"Motives?" Hermione echoed, completely unsure where he was going with this conversation.

"Yes, *motives!*" He said the word more insistently this time, as if talking to the hearing impaired or possibly just someone particularly thick. "I understand that he's the boogeyman to your lot, but I think we're all forced to admit he's more sophisticated than that."

Hermione reddened slightly, an acknowledgement of how accurate his statement was, and replied with her second best guess. "Well, I just assumed it was for the reparation money."

It had been nearly five years since the Malfoys had been pardoned. Narcissa and Draco, however reluctantly, had played key roles in the Order's overall success, after all. Truly, no one had wanted to pardon Lucius Malfoy, possibly least of all Narcissa, but she had done her wifely duty and begged that he not be sent back to Azkaban. What she hadn't mentioned was that she would be skipping town immediately following their release, leaving the scheming bastard to his own devices.

"What was the final sum?" Snape probed. "All I saw in the papers was a vague enumeration of costs."

"I'm not sure anyone was privy to the total," Hermione answered thoughtfully. "At least part of it was to fund the castle clean-up as well as repairs due to other terrorism planned at Malfoy Manor. As I'm sure you can imagine, even the Malfoy fortune couldn't repay all of that." In truth, the whole thing left the Malfoys as the financial scapegoat for great chunks of the war.

"And I assume his investments have gone stale?" Snape inquired.

"Well, it's just like the elves, isn't it?" Thomas pointed out. "No one wants to go into business with a former Death Eater. And this time Lucius Malfoy's home was ground zero for all of the activity."

"Narcissa and Draco are gone, too," Hermione added. "She took what little of her Black inheritance was available and ran off to the French Riviera, a docile Draco in tow."

"He might have just waited to sell my story to the rags. I'm sure Rita Skeeter would have bankrolled an entire Pureblood revolution just to get her hands on such a juicy scoop," Snape deadpanned before swallowing the dregs of his coffee.

Hermione shared a look of amusement with Thomas but thought better of commenting aloud.

"Well," he continued after placing down his mug, "our appointment is in half an hour, and it seems Muggle public transportation is out of the question. We'll just have to Apparate together."

Without further comment, Snape left the table, leaving Hermione and Thomas scrambling to keep up. Upon reaching an empty hallway, he grimaced slightly before outstretching his hands on either side of his body. Hurrying to catch up, Hermione quickly grabbed his right hand before reddening again. Was he thinking about last night too? The thought made her feel awkwardly adolescent. Thankfully, she didn't have much time to ponder this, feeling the familiar squeeze of Apparition.

The grounds of the British Embassy were far more impressive than the claustrophobic corridors of the American Ministry of Magic. The ambassador's residence alone put the Ministry to shame. A pillared brick building with large sash windows and stone engravings, it sat at the center of the old chancery complex, separated from the modern embassy. A plainer, but much larger, building with great gaping windows carved into its clean brick walls, the main embassy building was set apart from its neighbors on Embassy Row by the Union Jack rippling in front. Their destination, the old chancery, belonged to the former era: a darkened brick building topped by several squat chimneys rising from the highest edge of its hipped roof.

As it turned out, Mr. Wright did not work for the United Kingdom's diplomatic mission directly, but for the British Council, an organization with the aim of increasing awareness about British creativity and culture, among other things. Thus, it would be quite easy for him to provide Lucius Malfoy with the proper paperwork to easily ship priceless *artwork*, or at least, Hermione had surmised as much as the three traversed the empty hallway.

Thomas shuffled quietly on the other side of Snape, taking in the various pieces of art decorating the walls, but Snape seemed to be more and more harassed with every step forward. Though she didn't dare to stare openly, she thought she might have seen his nostrils flare slightly and his lips rise minutely in a sneer-like fashion. It appeared that with every new thought, a prickle of irritation rankled Snape's generally cool demeanor.

"I suppose he's rather important," Hermione ventured, hoping to provoke him enough to confess his disagreement with the man. "Isn't that what they say about a corner office?"

"Hmph."

Better than no answer at all, Hermione supposed before trying again in a more straightforward manner. "Is there something you don't like about Mr. Wright, Detective?"

Snape didn't even turn his head. "The brightest witch of your age, indeed."

Finding herself feeling childishly impatient, Hermione huffed, "Will you at least tell us what it is before we meet the man?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Julian Wright had a strangely welcoming attitude that Hermione didn't trust. It wasn't as if she didn't already have a list of reasons to find him unsavory, but there seemed to be a Slughorn-like calculation to his friendly greeting as well. He might have tried to be less obvious when he gave Hermione a once over, more so when he did the same to Thomas. And despite being several inches taller, he couldn't seem to quite meet Snape's gaze, though there were few who could.

"Ah, Severus, come in, come in!" he had demanded jovially when he threw open the door to his large corner office. The group was welcomed into a wood-paneled room, outfitted with a bursting bookcase, and burgundy leather armchairs. A large desk sat in front of a grand floor-to-ceiling window, Muggle pictures sitting atop it. It seemed that Wright had shaken hands with many great men and saw it fit to photograph each and every instance.

"Sit down, sit down," Wright directed his guest with a flourish towards the armchairs. He elected to take a seat in one as well, stupidly, in Hermione's opinion, abandoning the safety of his desk. Crossing one long leg over the other, he addressed Snape again. "Severus, it's been a dreadfully long time, hasn't it? In truth, if I were perfectly honest, I might have thought you to be..."

"Dead?" Severus suggested venomously.

"Hmm, yes, well," Wright stuttered delicately as he examined a faraway spot on the rug. "You can imagine, then, what a pleasant surprise this is. Please, please, introduce me to your colleagues."

"I'm Inspector Granger, Mr. Wright," Hermione piped up, preferring to avoid a Snape introduction. "I represent the International Council of Wizards. And this is my apprentice, Thomas."

Thomas smiled politely at the gentleman, but even he seemed to be wary.

"Lovely to meet you both," Wright replied with a smile, though his eyes continued to wander over to Snape. "Now, what kind of host would I be if I didn't offer you refreshment? Tea, anyone?"

"Perhaps it would be best to postpone the niceties in favor of resolving this visit quickly." Snape's hands were gripping the armchair with enough force to rip the upholstery.

"Of course, of course," Wright repeated with an edge apparent in his forced casual tone. "Who would have thought? Severus Snape, Head Auror. Quite a surprise indeed." His own hands were clasped together in his lap, his fingers braided.

"How is it that you know the detective, Mr. Wright?" Hermione asked, cognizant of her slight impertinence but unable to keep her curiosity at bay.

"Well, we were both in Slytherin as lads. In the same year, even," Wright recalled with a thoughtful tone.

"As well as Death Eaters," Snape added casually.

Hermione had to actively fight against the urge to gasp. Merlin, what was this place where former Death Eaters were Head Aurors and officials in Muggle organizations? Yes, she trusted Snape, but this man? He had conniving written all over him.

"You... You're a Death Eater?" Hermione questioned, her eyes drawn to his left sleeve.

"That was a very long time ago, my dear," Wright pointed out forcefully, though his eyes were now latched to Snape's. "And I certainly was out when I realized what it was all about."

"Or rather, when your efforts weren't paying off. Became a little too messy for you, didn't it, Julian? Not enough upward mobility?" In contrast to his flinching anger when they had arrived, Snape appeared to be as cool as a cucumber as Wright wriggled in his seat.

"Oh, Severus, didn't we both arrive here with hopes of a clean slate?"

Now that she could watch him openly, it was difficult to miss the flare of Snape's nostrils. Hermione cleared her throat.

"Quite right, er, Mr. Wright. So why don't we refocus on the reason for our visit?" Hermione redirected carefully. "It is our understanding that you supplied Lucius Malfoy with several permits for the purpose of transporting artwork from his private collection."

Relaxing slightly, Wright replied, "Yes, valuable items indeed. Said they're twisting the screws back at home. The poor gent, he's only trying turn over a new leaf."

"Did he detail his plans for the artwork?" Hermione asked, her note quill poised.

"He mentioned that he would be selling the items to a young witch at the Smithsonian," Wright relayed. He then added quickly, "For her private collection, of course!"

Eyeing Wright with open hostility, Snape cut to the chase. "Were you aware, then, that he was also utilizing those permits in the transport of house-elves across state borders?"

Wright's own eyes widened visibly by the suggestion. "I... er... of course..."

"You are aware, Julian, that smuggling creatures for the purpose of illegal sale carries heavy penalties, aren't you?" The question was parsed word by word by Snape's unhurried speech.

Wright's hands were shaking slightly now, gripping each other in a white-knuckled fashion. "I never realized... I never knew..."

"And how much was he paying for the permits, Julian?" Snape interrogated before Hermione could even open her mouth.

Wright was significantly paler now, his face shining with perspiration. Judging by his flappable manner, it was clear why he was never cut out for the Death Eater lifestyle. "A favor for a friend, Severus. You must know that I would never knowingly..."

"Perhaps the least you could do at this moment is to provide us with a contact." The suggestion was thrown out less accusingly than Snape's previous questions, a life preserve thrown to a drowning man.

"A... a contact?" Wright sputtered.

"Don't worry; it's not Lucius I'm after. After all, he wouldn't stick around long enough once you've tipped him off," Snape assured Wright, who seemed no more relaxed by the revelation. "The witch may be useful, though."

"Yes, of course," Wright finally muttered, standing from his armchair and distractedly striding towards his desk. After shuffling through a number of papers, he returned to the circle of armchairs with a single sheet in hand. As if trying to regain some of his dignity, he handed it to Hermione with a flourish.

Scanning the paper, Hermione read aloud, "Anna Stephens, Curator. The Smithsonian American Art Museum."

Severus stood abruptly, a gesture signifying it was time to leave. "Thank you for your cooperation, Julian. Always pleasant to catch up with old *friends*."

Wright looked less pleased regarding this get-together, but bowed slightly nonetheless. "Yes, pleasant meeting with you all."

And with that, the three were shown the door.

"Assuming Julian has some sense of self-preservation, he'll allow us a slight head start before notifying Lucius of our visit."

They were now walking towards the gates of the embassy, heads bent to avoid the searing glare of the midday sun. Snape seemed pleased with how the meeting had gone, but Hermione just couldn't shake her outrage that Wright was even allowed in that position to begin with.

"Doesn't it bother you at all that a former Death Eater is working within the walls of a Muggle institution?" Hermione asked, unable to keep her voice level. From the way Snape impatiently rolled his eyes, it was clear he wasn't.

"Julian Wright is a shameless, spineless, self-promoting civil servant. Though he's never admitted it outright, I'm quite positive the man only joined the Death Eaters for the

social opportunities he thought it offered. As I said inside, the minute the business became a bit too bloody for his liking, he decided it wasn't for him and he 'did a bunk', as they say."

Hermione shook her head despite his explanation. "But, he has access to all of these diplomatic and political tools. Should he choose to act on the inklings of his youth..."

"Did you not see his shrine to his own achievements?" Snape asked exasperatedly. "This man seems to be very satisfied with his Muggle life. He probably couldn't Summon a feather, should he choose." Seeing that Hermione was prepared to protest further, Snape reminded her, "What is important now is that we see this Miss Stephens before Lucius has a chance to speak to her first."

The conversation closed, Snape's strides became longer, much to Hermione's irritation. Jogging slightly to catch up, Hermione watched as Thomas fell in step with Snape.

"Masterful interrogations skills, sir," Thomas complimented.

Perhaps sensing Hermione's annoyance, Snape smirked. "Why, thank you, Thomas."

"Brownnoser," Hermione muttered as she followed closely behind them.

A/N: Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

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There were literally dozens of them in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Children chasing each other up and down the marble tiled stairs, the treads of their trainers only just gaining traction. Children gathered closely on long wooden benches, one child always seated precariously at each end. Children following a museum staff member, pencils gripped tightly as they scribbled unintelligible notes in their muddled penmanship. Some were as small as five or six, sanctioned to holding the hand of a buddy as they waddled wide-eyed through the large hallways, a confused curiosity furrowing their tiny brows as they took in the immense portraits of U.S. Presidents, almost life-size in their gaze. Many more were much older though, copying the informational cards sitting next to paintings of expansive landscapes and abstract arrays of squares.

"You're certain she's on this floor?" Snape asked for the umpteenth time, his jaw barely unclenching, his thin lips moving only slightly more.

Hermione sighed knowingly. He was not employing some patented double agent technique as one who only knew Snape through the tabloids might guess. No, it was clear that being around so many children was an unnerving experience for him. It was different from the ticking jaw he exhibited prior to meeting with Wright. Physically, the difference was close to minuscule, but emotionally, the reasons could not be more opposite.

"Are the children making you nervous, Detective?" Hermione asked in a hushed tone, walking slightly closer to him in order to keep Thomas out of earshot.

"Only that I might have to suffer the accidental stains of their grubby hands," Snape muttered, flinching away slightly as two of the younger children ran between them.

"Makes a Hogsmeade weekend seem like a holiday, doesn't it?" Hermione agreed, watching as their disheveled teacher clip-clopped by in her platform Mary Janes. The ends of her black pencil skirt clearly had not been spared the "grubby hands" treatment.

"You don't know the half of it," Snape replied tersely, a look of disgust passing over his features.

Perhaps, but Hermione was certain she could puzzle it out. Watching the children dodge to and fro between displays, she remembered first seeing her battered classmates the night she had arrived at Hogwarts before the battle; the long gash along Neville's cheek, his swollen eye, his tattered robes. And it was left to Snape to make sure that they didn't receive worse.

Watching Snape's careful focus, his eyes trained on some distant point beyond them, she felt her right hand twitch again, nearly following through before better judgment paused its progression towards Snape's left.

The hallway ended in chaos, the rest of the path blocked by a gold corded rope hung between two metal posts, keeping the public from becoming stranded in the piles of cardboard, plastic and Styrofoam that littered the patterned marble floors. Others had ventured in, however, clad in acid-washed jeans and frayed gray t-shirts, plastic construction hats fitted around their heads and large safety goggles strapped to their faces. The high-pitched squeals of screwdrivers were only overtaken by the rhythmic knocks of hammers as LCD screens were fastened to the blank white walls, and Plexiglas display cases were assembled. A few of the men stood on ladders, adjusting overhead spotlights, running them through a rotation of colors. And there amongst them, like a feeble wildflower among weeds, stood Anna Stephens.

The trio didn't enter the construction zone at first; as if afraid their sudden movements might startle Anna into flight; they instead remained silently watching her while she snarled at the men, castigating their every move in a terribly loud attempt at an undertone. The sight was almost comical, especially since it appeared from their vantage point that she might only reach Hermione's nose in height. Her entire body was narrow, her limbs thin and brittle-looking. The lumpy black cardigan she wore seemed heavy on her, causing her closely-set shoulders to hunch under its weight. Her ashy blonde locks were gathered at the back of her head in a strict bun, the hairstyle bobbing slightly with every disapproving shake of her head.

"Well, aren't we going to approach her?" Thomas inquired impatiently. Severus only gave a sharp shake of his head, and Hermione, for once, heeded his order.

However, they hadn't gone unnoticed. One of the workers glanced over at them instead of watching the screen he was mounting, the device nearly slipping out of his grip. This did not escape Anna's glare.

"This equipment is worth thousands of dollars, you idiot! Unless you can afford to replace it," Anna snapped, and the look she gave him indicated that she highly doubted that he could, "stop looking around and watch what you're doing!"

The worker returned to his task, grumbling a retort under his breath.

"I can *still* hear you," Anna warned him before turning around to see what had caught his attention. Her hawk-like gaze swept over them, and then, without hesitation, she made a shooing gesture, her wrists raised parallel to the ground as her hand swept upwards, an audible "shoo" leaving her lips before turning her back on them once again.

Unsurprisingly, this bolstered Snape into action. "We will approach now," he commanded in a low tone. Exchanging looks, Hermione and Thomas followed as Snape approached the diminutive woman, and yes, he was somehow billowing.

"Ms. Stephens?" Snape inquired coldly.

Anna turned at the sound of her name, her look of contempt mirroring the one worn by Snape. "I'm sorry, it seems I wasn't clear. This area is under refurbishment, or hadn't you noticed? The rope at the entrance indicates that you are to bypass this room and move on to the next exhibit." Her high-pitched, girlish tone carried the false friendliness of the mean girl on an American sitcom, and the manner in which she stretched out each word indicated that she thought them at least a little slow.

Sneer in place, Snape casually reached into his coat. Hermione shut her eyes. *I knew it was only a matter of time before he'd hex someone. Wasn't betting that I wouldn't be the cause though.*

Hermione's eyes fluttered open to behold a sight only a mite more surprising. Snape had presented Anna with gold badge. Though she couldn't read the inscription from her vantage point, the manner in which the color drained from Stephens' face indicated that it was at least known to Americans as the badge of an Auror.

"Fine," Anna snapped impatiently, as if she had simply been waiting on him. "We'll take this to my office. Too much noise here, anyway."

Hermione glanced back one last time, finding it difficult to ignore the looks of relief shared by the assembled workers, apparently responding to Anna's brisk steps in the other direction with a "good riddance."

Anna led the group only a few feet down the hall before leading them through a door marked "Staff Only" and down the flight of stairs that they met on the other side of it. Once out of the staircase, they turned down a long hallway of offices. Throughout their progress, Anna continued to "mumble" to herself, a disparaging rant about video games as art becoming the main theme of her diatribe. Hermione could only guess from the monitors she saw that this was in reference to the exhibition Anna was setting up for.

Finally, near the end of the hall, was Anna's office. It seemed plain enough upon first gaze, furnished with a desk, two opposing bookshelves and a few stiff, wooden chairs for visitors. In fact, the walls were blank, suspiciously so. Wouldn't an art curator have at least a few prints? Not even a decorative vase occupied the room.

Once inside, Anna waved them towards a group of chairs, still muttering about the indignity of her current assignment, completely unaware of the way Snape gave the room a calculated once-over. When she failed to end her rant, Snape made his annoyance known.

"Enough!"

The word echoed sharply in the colorless room. Thomas could barely contain his smirk. Anna, however, was not amused, but she didn't appear angry either. Hermione watched the young woman sink slightly in her chair, her tiny frame somehow seeming smaller as her head ducked minutely. The look of chastisement painted on her face, her reddened cheeks and downward facing gaze made Anna appear younger than Hermione had originally guessed. In truth, it was likely she was probably only a few years older than Hermione and perhaps just as green. But, much like Hermione, she wouldn't be cowed.

After only a moment of cowardice, she sat up again, a charming smile forming on her lips. "I'm sorry for my abruptness out there," she apologized. "It's just the total and complete incompetence I'm forced to deal with."

Hermione tried to meet Severus' eye, but he was clearly avoiding her amused looks.

Squaring her shoulders, Anna continued, "Let me introduce myself formally. My name is Anna Stephens, and I serve as a curator for traveling exhibitions for this museum; though, I guess you already knew that." She extended her hand politely.

"I am Detective Severus Snape, Head Auror and Investigator for the Ministry of Magic," Snape replied, ignoring the extended hand. "And this is Ms. Hermione Granger," he continued with a nod towards Hermione. "An inspector from the I.C.W's Office of Magical Creature Regulation and Concealment."

"And my apprentice, Thomas," Hermione hastily added when Anna looked over at Thomas pointedly.

Thomas wasn't paying attention, though, and instead seemed quite absorbed with the blank wall beside him. Before Hermione could nudge Thomas to pay attention, Anna asked, "And what can I help you with today?" It seemed their wordy titles were enough to force Anna to muster up a little more courtesy than before.

Snape opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a sound, Anna let out a shriek.

"Don't touch that!" she growled at Thomas, whose fingertips hovered an inch from the wall. Hermione grinned inwardly as Thomas donned a look of innocence, his eyes even widening in confused surprise.

"I'm not touching anything," Thomas replied innocently, his hand still poised towards the wall. "I mean, it's a blank wall, isn't it?"

Hermione trained her eyes on the spot where Thomas' fingertips hovered, and then she saw it, the slight indentation pressed against his right index finger, its source invisible.

"Ms. Stephens," Snape drawled tiredly, playing along with Thomas, "we really don't have the time for this charade. If there is anything to reveal, it would be wise to do so now."

Glaring at Thomas, Anna sighed and then reached a hand into her lumpy black cardigan, withdrawing a sleek wooden wand. It took only one snap of her wrist to reveal the hidden paintings which covered nearly all of the white space.

It became obvious very quickly why these paintings had been hidden. While the dark scenes of empty dungeons with manacles hanging loosely from the stone walls were tame enough, it was the scenes of destruction, desolate landscapes of charred homes, people who were clearly Muggles begging for mercy at the feet of large men in cloaks that were disturbing. Perhaps worst of all, a reproduction of the statue which had filled the Ministry atrium during the war, the throne of bodies just as grotesque on paper, held a place of honor across her desk, as if it were something she enjoyed glancing up at as she wrote a memo. Hermione's stomach performed a flip-flop after she caught a glimpse of it, and Thomas, too young to know its reality, covered his mouth, his eyes widened in true horror. Snape, however, had Anna firmly pinned with his eyes.

"You have... *interesting* taste in art, Ms. Stephens," Hermione finally managed. She couldn't quite work out if she was furious with the woman or was simply disgusted. Either way, their close proximity suddenly felt extremely unnerving.

"I know it's not everyone's cup of tea," Anna acknowledged, looking slightly embarrassed. "But I find the genre to be quite..."

"Captivating?" Hermione supplied, her tone straining for neutrality.

"Um, yes. *Captivating*," Anna agreed reluctantly.

"They certainly are familiar," Snape suddenly voiced, though he hadn't let his eyes stray from Anna since the reveal. "A source has informed us you've been acquiring artwork from a dealer out of Great Britain, a Mr. Lucius Malfoy."

Anna swallowed hard, but persevered. "A 'source'? I assure you, none of this has been under the table. Everything has been aboveboard and even embassy certified. I... I have the receipts to prove it."

At this point, Anna had yanked open the top drawer of her desk and began rearranging the neat piles of paper within. It took her a minute, but she did produce the permits Malfoy had secured through Wright, pushing them towards the investigators proudly. Snape gave the slips a cursory glance but did not take them.

"It's none of our concern how you obtained the artwork," he said smoothly. "Have you ever seen a house-elf, Ms. Stephens?"

Anna scrambled to gather her receipts from the desk, unmistakably puzzled by this turn in the conversation.

"I've seen them in history books, yes. And, well, some of the artwork depicts... I've never seen one in person, though." She looked strangely unsettled, distracted even.

"Ms. Stephens," Hermione said carefully, "your cooperation would be greatly appreciated. After all, we wouldn't want to take up your time with a home visit..."

This last statement certainly resonated with Anna, and Hermione had to hold back from shuddering at the thought of what other "art" she might be housing.

"I might have... there was something unusual..." Anna trailed off silently.

"Yes?" Snape asked impatiently.

Sighing, Anna continued, "In one of the shipments, there was more than just... paintings."

"We don't have all day, Ms. Stephens. Spit it out."

"Elves, all right! They were unconscious or sleeping, I don't know, at the bottom of the crate. It was like a hidden compartment or something. I don't know, okay?" Her voice had become shrill and she had stood up, as if she were moments from leaping out the window behind her. "The delivery man was taking out the painting and it had disturbed a board at the bottom of the crate and I saw them. He covered them up just as quickly and didn't say a word. I guess we just pretended that neither of us saw anything."

Even though she had paused, something about the way her eyes were darting around established she knew more than she was saying.

"I am not a patient man, Ms. Stephens," Snape persisted.

"Harrell. It was the other name on the delivery list. Margaret Harrell." With this pause, she searched their eyes for understanding. Although Hermione's and Thomas' portrayed none, Snape had lifted a single eyebrow.

"I assume you're referring to the head of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

Anna finally threw up her hands in frustration. "Look, I don't know. But, she's the only Margaret Harrell I know of. And you must admit, Detective, there's not a lot of *us* in this town." The way she said *us* made Hermione's skin crawl.

Severus seemed to consider this information for a moment before standing, Hermione and Thomas following suit. "Very well, that'll be enough for now. Thank you for your begrudging cooperation. However, there's still one matter to be settled before we take our leave." Unsheathing his wand, he leaned over the Anna's desk, pressing its tip to her temple.

"But, wait, I don't understand," Anna sputtered, her eyes darting from Severus to Hermione. Despite the slimy feeling the woman gave her, Hermione couldn't ignore the fear in her eyes. It was just too familiar.

"Detective, I'm not sure if..."

"Do not finish that statement, Granger! We agreed before we arrived that this was necessary to keep Lucius one step behind!" Snape was now clutching the young woman's arm to prevent her from squirming.

"I know, but I'm not sure how I can explain this to my..."

"You will find a way," Snape snarled before facing the woman again, lining up his wand once more. "*Obliviate*." The incantation left Snape's lips as a whisper, and Anna's hazel eyes became unfocused and hazy, her body swaying limply in Snape's grip. He released her arm seconds later, allowing her body to slump down into her office chair.

As the trio took their leave, they suddenly heard Anna mutter behind them, "What just happened?" This was followed quickly by, "Wait, who are you? Get back here! What are you doing in my office?" None of them bothered to look back.

Once they reached the open air of the busy Washington D.C. streets, Snape let Hermione have it.

"Did we not have an understanding about how things would proceed once we interviewed her?" Snape demanded. Thomas was conveniently peering at nearby advertisement.

"Yes, we did," Hermione admitted, finding herself quite flustered by the situation. "But once we were in there... Didn't you see the look on her face?"

"You're feeling sorry for the woman who enjoys images of Muggles, not dissimilar to your own parents, being tortured?"

Hermione groaned with frustration and shook her head. "Do not bring my parents into this, Snape! It just seemed wrong, all right? To use a Memory Charm against her will, for her to have no idea what was being done to her. It must be against some protocol."

Snape looked like he wanted to say more, but after giving her an odd look, he let his glare drop. Was it a look of understanding that had clouded his features so briefly? Hermione wanted, *needed* for him to understand. He was the only one who could.

If he did, he certainly didn't voice it aloud. However, when he did speak again, his tone was softer, his stare less hard. "Well, it's done. She'll be none the wiser and neither will Lucius. For now, at least."

Hermione sighed, her shoulders dropping slightly. "It's coming up on five," she finally said after consulting her watch. "Shall we wrap for the day? I assume we won't find Margaret Harrell in her office at this hour."

"No, we can't afford to lose any time, especially with the impending media circus." The idea seemed to inspire weariness in him as his shoulder dropped as well.

Hermione grimaced. "Right. Well, do you know where she lives?"

"Yes," Snape replied simply, and just as before, began walking away without a word, leaving Hermione and Thomas trotting to catch up.

While they walked in silence, Hermione saw Anna's face again in her head, the familiar look of fear. She shook her head, as if wiping the image away. She didn't have time to dwell on it.

A/N: Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Try as she could, Hermione couldn't keep herself afloat in the midst of the drowning thoughts awakened by the Memory Charm. She had managed to shake herself of Anna's image, but then, it wasn't Anna she was so concerned about, was it? She could feel her feet take wandering steps against the side walk, and in the back of her mind she knew they continued to propel her forward. However, she wasn't truly jolted into reality until Snape took her hand. He gripped it firmly, his larger hand nearly crushing her smaller one, pulling her insistently. It took only a second for Hermione to realize that he had just prevented her from blindly walking into oncoming traffic.

"Sorry," Hermione apologized, pausing her progress to regain her bearings. It was as if someone had released the mute button, and the whining of breaks and the rumbling of engines suddenly could be heard over her deafening thoughts.

"It's fine," Snape replied gruffly. He released her hand gently, almost lingering.

And there it was again, that look. He was *concerned*? It should have been an affirmative statement, but for some reason, uncertainty kept the intonation from holding still.

They continued, but Thomas was walking right beside her now. The look of concern he wore was unquestionable.

"How much do they pay you at that Ministry?" It was an impertinent question, but Hermione couldn't help it. The building looming overhead cleared her of other distracting thoughts for the moment. The house was just... big. Huge. Not as big as Malfoy Manor, but for a civil servant, even the head of a department...

"The house isn't *that* ostentatious."

Snape was correct on that point. The manicured lawn was devoid of ornate bushes or colorful flowers. The blanket of green was only divided by a simple stone walkway leading up to the navy blue front door. The home's exterior was made of a deep red brick with three windows facing onto the street from each of its top two stories. Of course, there were also the two thin ivory columns which supported the equally white portico sitting three stories up.

"Ostentatious? This house is enormous. And in this city! I'm sure it has to be worth at least..."

"Was this really what you wanted to discuss at this moment?" Snape asked irritably.

Hermione paused to stare up at the looming brick house. "No."

"Margaret's husband was Muggle. Worked in finance or something of that sort before he passed away a year or so ago. I assume it is mainly on his wages that they could afford to purchase such an *enormous* house. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

Hermione considered the explanation. "Yes."

"Good. Now, as Margaret is my colleague, I think it would be best if you and Thomas led the questions."

Were her ears deceiving her, or did Thomas just clap in glee?

"I will lead the questioning, and Thomas, you may follow if I feel it's appropriate."

Thomas looked no more deflated by this. "Shall I watch for a secret sign? A wink or a nod or something with your fingers?"

"No, none of those," Hermione replied, roping him in. "In fact, any of those might be a sign that I was suffering from a seizure of some sort and required medical attention. I will keep it simple and ask, 'Thomas, do you have any questions?'"

"Right, right. That sounds good." Thomas nodded rapidly in agreement.

Hermione wondered silently if Snape kept doses of Calming Draught somewhere in that sweeping coat of his.

"Well, as long as we're all prepared..." Severus drawled, approaching the door.

"Yes, yes. Go ahead and knock, please," Hermione prompted, collecting her thoughts. "Though she must be mad if there are no wards on this..."

"Enormous house?"

Margaret Harrell's mousy brown hair was cropped close to her head, the hairstyle of a woman who might have bothered with some sort of styling before, but who had little time to worry with it now. For some reason, this detail caught Hermione's attention first, as if it told the entire story without introduction. Other details ... the hastily put together sweatpants and silk button-down combination, the coal-colored under-eye blotch of not quite removed mascara, the kind but put-upon smile ... put meat on the bones. And then there were the barking dog of diminutive height and the two young children of little patience to add color.

Closing the door slightly, she could be heard pleading with the children to "take Ruffles upstairs to play." When she opened the door again, it was to the clicking nails of retreating paws and the flat-footed slaps of retreating feet.

Smiling tiredly, Margaret finally continued, "Rest assured. We do have wards around the property, and apparently they're well hidden." There was no bite to her explanation, just warm amusement. "Now, Severus, I rarely see you in the office, much less out, so excuse my surprise. Would you and your... associates like to come in?"

Severus nodded and accepted the offer with, "Thank you, Margaret," before entering the house through the open door. Hermione followed him closely, gazing around for anything suspicious. However, only the supreme tidiness of the home gave her any pause.

Margaret seated them in a room just down the hall, which Hermione presumed to be the formal sitting room. It was decorated completely in ecru, down to the matching couch, armchairs and walls. The floors were a glossy wood, but also covered with pillowy rugs, giving the room a formal but cozy feel. There were no stray toys or clothing, not even a framed photograph.

Hermione and Thomas took a seat on the couch, while Severus and Margaret seated themselves in armchairs on either side of them.

Margaret didn't appear particularly tense, yawning slightly. "I'm sorry," she said, still covering her yawn with her hand. "You know how it is; you try to go to bed early and then one thing or another comes up." Smiling, she turned to Hermione and Thomas. "So, how may I help you?"

"Well, I'm Hermione Granger," Hermione supplied, still judging how she would go about this. "And this is Thomas."

Thomas gave a silent wave, clearly determined to stick to the script.

Instead of giving her title as well, Hermione decided to take things in a different direction first. "Please excuse my rudeness earlier. I don't usually openly gape, but your house is just so beautiful, Mrs. Harrell."

"Thank you," Margaret replied kindly, "And please, call me Margaret."

"Yes, of course, Margaret," Hermione replied in kind. "Were those your children earlier? They seemed lovely." Hermione knew she was laying it on thick, but once she saw the way Margaret's eyes sparkled at the children's mention, she knew she was on the right track.

"Yes, Molly and Jason. They can be a handful at times, especially with my duties at the Ministry, but they really are great kids. They've been amazingly brave through, well, everything." She had stopped just short of revealing her husband's death, but Hermione figured she had revealed just enough for now.

"Well, I can see you have a busy night ahead, so we'll try to make this quick. Thomas and I are actually from the I.C.W. Specifically, the Office of Magical Creature Regulation and Concealment. Have you heard anything about our ongoing investigation?"

Margaret didn't miss a beat. "Nothing specific, no. There are rumors, of course. But, Severus here runs a tight ship. No leaks in his department, right Severus?"

Given his barely perceptible nod, Hermione assumed that Snape was not often found around the office water cooler.

"However, I did read that ridiculous story in the *Herald* yesterday. I cannot believe the audacity of some reporters," Margaret added.

Hermione carefully steered the conversation back on topic. "Yes, well, due to that bit of spotlight, it's very important that we conclude our investigation as quickly as possible. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

"Not at all. I'm not sure how much help I'll be, but go for it." Again Margaret seemed very much at ease, and Hermione was beginning to wonder if they had the wrong person.

"Great," Hermione replied enthusiastically, hoping her upbeat response would keep Margaret unaware of their suspicions. "I suppose we'll start with your job. Could you describe your position?"

"Well, as I'm sure Severus here has told you, I lead the Improper Use of Magic office. As you can imagine, it's quite hectic. There's always some underage wizard or witch testing their limits, and then the cases just increase in seriousness exponentially from there. I tell you, the things I've seen!" Margaret paused to chuckle slightly. "Given its size, we have many bureaus spread out across the country, so a lot of my job is making sure the field offices are keeping up with the workload, sometimes handling the most pressing cases myself."

Hermione gave her a thoughtful look. "Goodness that does sound hectic. Does your job require a lot of travel then?"

Margaret's cheerful smile dimmed slightly. "Not *a lot*, but yes, I'd say more than average. It can be difficult, but what can you do? People love to test their boundaries!" She chuckled again, and Hermione smiled, though she found little funny.

"It must make it difficult to raise a young family," Hermione said, trying to imbue her voice with sympathy. Then she leaned forward and added in a confidential tone, "Especially by yourself. Severus told me about... your loss."

Leaning back, Hermione took in Margaret's demeanor as it changed rather quickly. Slightly pallid, Margaret's eyes swept over the other three, clearly deciding something.

"I certainly don't enjoy it," she stated quietly. "It's hard to leave them. I never imagined that I would have to work again after having them." It appeared that she was suddenly mesmerized with the rug below her feet, watching her toes flex into the soft fibers instead of making eye contact with any of them. "And then I lost Greg. It's good I had the education, the drive, but my passion is... it's for my kids, Ms. Granger."

Hermione took a deep breath and then took a leap. "It can be so dangerous for children these days. I know on the Muggle telly it's always some kidnapping or the other. And we know from our investigation that you have no close family in the area. Who do you trust with the children, Margaret?"

And there it was in Margaret's deep brown eyes, the look of recognition. Margaret leaned back in her armchair as Hermione denied herself the opportunity to exhale with relief. She had guessed correctly.

Margaret licked her lips, her right hand fiddling with her marriage band. She was the one to finally exhale. "You... you don't know what it's like," she began softly, her voice nearly hoarse with unexpressed emotion. "My children, they're wizards, magical. It was obvious even as babies, their first signs. A Summoned cookie here, a floating toy there. They were like me. And my husband, dear Greg, he couldn't have been prouder. I was going to educate them myself until they were ready for a wizarding high school. But then Greg was in that car accident and... my plans changed."

Hermione bit her lip as she watch a tear roll down Margaret's cheek. She balled her fists, her nails sharp against the flesh of her palms.

"I had to send them to Muggle school, which was terrifying. What if they accidentally displayed something in class? And then there was the dilemma of who would watch

them while I was away with work. There aren't a lot of magical caretakers around here; most witches just stay home. And I couldn't, I wouldn't risk hiring a Muggle. Who knew what might happen. But then, magically you might say, I was presented with a solution, and I had no choice. I had to take it."

Despite Margaret's conviction, more tears were brimming to follow the first. She took a hiccupping breath, and then she was crying in earnest.

"I knew the illegality of it. I knew it was wrong. But you have to understand, I couldn't risk their harm. It's more than just exposing their magic, you know. Someone could really try to take advantage of them, to hurt them, bully them, even, for their abilities. I'm straddling two worlds here and I want to protect them in both, but I can't."

Margaret's anguish was palpable. Hermione was shaking. Just as Severus leaned over to pass Margaret a handkerchief, Hermione abruptly stood up.

"The-the elf," she stuttered, towering over the sobbing woman and feeling like she wanted to crawl out of her skin. "I want to speak to him or her, if they're here."

Margaret nodded, hiccupping a few more times. "In the kitchen. Mipsy's in the kitchen, just down the hall."

Hermione nodded, and then turned to look back at Thomas. "Your turn," she instructed simply, leaving him flabbergasted as she exited.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Hermione pressed herself against the cool wall of the hallway and closed her eyes. The images in her head were vivid but slightly disjointed, cut together like a projection reel. The anguish so clear in Margaret mirrored the look on her mother's face when Hermione had told her the reality of what she and her friends would be doing their seventh year. In that moment, she couldn't face her mother's worry. She had needed to stay strong ... the Memory Charm was difficult ... and it was impossible to focus with her mom's sniffing sobs, her father's pained and confused expression. So she had just done it, using whatever resolve she still had, and even as their confused expressions dissolved into disbelief and maybe even terror, she had whispered, "Obliviate."

Remembering that night, Hermione let out a strangled sob alone in the hallway, but quickly scolded herself internally. After eight long years, her guilt was still suffocating, but there was no time to wallow. As always, she had a job to do. And thus, just as she had when her legislation had been thrown out, when Ron had broken things off, when she had found herself traversing the world completely alone, she pushed her feelings aside and got on with it.

"Well, it seems that the elf is treated well," Hermione relayed as she, Thomas, and Snape progressed towards the Apparition point. "She's just pleased to be of use again. Her previous owner had died without any kind of heir, so one of Malfoy's people picked her up at an estate auction."

Neither Snape nor Thomas responded verbally, just continued to look at her as if she might suddenly burst into flames.

Chagrined at being handled with kid gloves, Hermione ignored them and continued. "I suppose all of this puts us in a strange position. I certainly don't want to be the one photographed wrenching the elf from her new home."

"It's not just that," Thomas pointed out. He had the decency to look at the ground as he spoke. "There are the magical implications, of course. That's assuming some kind of property binding has occurred. But, even more importantly, despite the law, it seems Margaret has a real case for keeping the elf."

Hermione didn't respond immediately. If there was one thing that the war had taught her, it was that no issue was black or white. Hermione found herself becoming overwhelmed with gray at every turn.

Reaching the Apparition point, Hermione turned towards Snape for the first time since they left the Harrell home. She watched him open his mouth to say something and hurried to cut him off. "Eight A.M. tomorrow? I imagine that will give us enough time to sort out all of the specifics. I've got a batch of the pre-made stuff if you don't, by the way." It all tumbled out of her mouth, almost without punctuation. She just couldn't help thinking that she didn't want to hear what Snape had to say about... well, they both knew what about.

"Fine," he muttered neutrally, though his jaw began to tick again ever so slightly.

"I hope she doesn't back out," Hermione said, almost more to herself. "I would have taken the elf right then otherwise." She hated how callous she sounded, but it was true. Margaret had promised to help set a trap for Malfoy, and at this moment, she could only focus on the black and white. Malfoy was running an illegal elf smuggling ring. Open and shut.

Snape looked as if he wanted to say more, but he was always more capable of restraint than Hermione. So it was in silence that she and Thomas clasped hands and left him behind.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Thomas voiced the question carefully, as if he had already given the matter some thought. And he certainly had the time; the pair had already been standing outside of Hermione's hotel room for at least a minute or two.

In that span of time, Hermione had raised her hand to the doorknob several times, barely missing the handle before letting it fall back to her side. If she went into her room, she knew what would be waiting for her. All of her thoughts and memories; all of the gray.

Letting her hand drop uselessly at her side once more, she sighed. "Perhaps a walk is in order."

"Oh, well, let me just change my shoes," Thomas offered.

"No! I mean, no, I just need to wander a bit. Think some things over. You know, clear my head."

Hermione tried again to ignore the way Thomas was examining her, as if he were debating between letting her go and casting a Full Body-Bind on her and tucking her into bed.

"Right, well, be careful," he allowed finally, before retreating down the hall to his own room.

Despite her true intention of taking a walk, Hermione found herself pulling up in a cab in front of the American Ministry of Magic only a half an hour later. There were no wards, as she had guessed, so she simply let herself in, making her way through the darkened office complex with ease. The only sound to be heard was the dull click of her kitten heels against concrete, but she was concentrating more on her destination. Past Stephens' office and around a corner, several persistent steps towards the end of the hallway, and she had arrived.

Twisting the knob with one hand and gently pushing the door with the other, Hermione slowly opened the closet partway. It was darker inside the closet than out in the empty hallway, so she retrieved her wand from inside her suit jacket and silently watched as the wand's tip began to glow. The light was feeble, but enough to illuminate the sleeping elves, six or so gathered across one cot. Guiding her wand higher, the soft light revealed a tidy storeroom, certainly much tidier than the day before. The elves were probably bored, restless. Hermione could relate.

No more satisfied than when she arrived, Hermione closed the door, careful to deafen the sound of the clicking lock. Leaning against the closed door, Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes. And then she sniffled. And blinked. And a strangled sound erupted from her throat, her resolve threadbare. And then she was crying. Big gasping breaths, full body shudders, her face most likely transforming into the ugliest grimace. Tears as well, of course, streaming down her face, soaking her cheeks, her curtaining hair, her good suit jacket.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione screamed shrilly. Maybe deep down she had hoped he would show up, but she really hadn't expected him, certainly not as soon as she had succumbed to her

weakness.

"It's me." It sounded funny when he said it. Snape's attempt at reassuring had a peculiar uncertainty to it, almost as if he were asking a question. Was it him?

"Yes, I know it's you," Hermione moaned. She hadn't meant for her response to sound forlorn, it was just difficult to make anything sound light mid-sob.

Severus didn't seem to realize this though, as he next said, "I'm sorry. I'll leave you to..."

"No! I... is there somewhere here we could talk?"

She heard no response. Hermione sniffled, hastily wiping away a bead of mucous from her reddening nose and thankful for the obscurity. Then she heard Snape clear his throat, a warning that he would be speaking again.

"We can speak in the break room. Follow me."

Hermione could make out his outline, a black object proceeding down the hall, and as she had done that entire day, she followed him.

Hermione could barely open her eyes in the brightly lit staff break room. Snape had awakened the fluorescent bulbs wandlessly once they had entered and had left a blind Hermione to squint around as her eyes adjusted to the sudden impact. Almost looking through her lashes, she spotted Snape seated stiffly on a tattered moss-colored couch against the far wall. Choosing quickly between the far end of the aforementioned couch and the nearby fold-out chair, Hermione perched herself just as stiffly only one cushion over.

"Were you worried that we were mistreating the elves?" Snape asked quietly, his tone weary. "Or perhaps you questioned their safety? Just because you were admitted into the building, it does not mean we do not have wards. They've simply been altered to recognize you."

Hermione nodded her understanding, and then added, "No... I mean, that wasn't what I was thinking. Or, at least, that isn't why I'm here." She fell silent. It was one thing for Snape to find her sobbing in front of a closet full of elves; it was another matter entirely to explain herself, so she changed the subject. "Er, what brings you to the office at this hour?"

"There are only so many alterations one can make to the security of a Muggle building. I could ward my flat, yes, but the rest of the building... it seems the media invasion has begun." He was being oddly gentle with her again. Perhaps he knew that Hermione felt bad enough as it was without hearing about his having to sleep in his office and had decided for once to take pity on her.

Unfortunately for him, and really anyone in earshot, it only served to trigger Hermione's sobs again. Loud, moaning sobs, her face gathered in her hands, loose snot mixing with salty tears, runaway tendrils caught in the chaos. Though she couldn't seem to stop, she was mortified by the high pitched whine she kept emitting. Her mortification increased two fold when she felt Snape's heavy hand on her shoulder, precariously placed, just on the edge of the shoulder blade with a clear escape route in sight.

"Miss Granger... Hermione... it's no trouble... no need to... upset yourself." Had Hermione had any control at that moment, she might have laughed. Was he taking comforting lessons from Thomas? Or perhaps Ron was teaching a distance course. The difference was that this was Severus Snape comforting her, and that difference alone made her stop crying.

Sitting up and finally revealing what she guessed was the disastrous result of mixing tears and makeup, Hermione took a deep, but quivering breath. She could feel the empty sobs still vibrating her chest, but she was careful to keep breathing deeply. As she felt Snape's hand tentatively slink off of her shoulder, she made another quick decision and grabbed it. To his credit, Snape didn't pull it away, only sat there, suddenly taking an interest in his black leather boots.

"I am sorry about all of the trouble I've caused you." She paused to smile slightly. "That's quite an apology, I know. The way I've worded it, you see, it can encompass even my earliest infractions. From robe burning to outing for the media, I've tried to make it simple enough."

Snape was still quite focused on his boots, still shiny from yesterday's cleaning. However, she intuitively knew he was actively listening.

"That felt so easy, apologizing to you like that. I've spent so many nights rewording it, adding and subtracting words and thoughts, playing with the tone, the theme. Yet, that last reincarnation was the closest I've come to getting it right during this entire trip. And to think, I hadn't even imagined getting the chance to apologize even once."

She placed his hand in her lap, laying it flat against her skirt-covered thighs. Flopped there, palm-side up, it was easy to forget it was attached to the brooding man beside her. She stretched out the fingers and examined the lines cut into his flesh. All she could remember from Divination was where the life line was, that weeping line closest to the thumb. Given the size of his hand, Snape's was twice the size of Hermione's. They could have guessed his amazing survival based on that clue alone.

"Then there are my parents. Wendell and Monica Wilkins, they're called now, I believe. That was the identity I tried to give them, at least." Hermione nibbled on the interior of her lip, dragging her fingers across Snape's calloused ones. "I could apologize to them at any time, really. I would have to fix their memory for it to mean anything, but their ignorance could provide an opportunity to practice it." She wrinkled her nose. "That thought disgusts me. Actually, it disgusts me even more that I've never practiced my apologies to them in my head. Not like yours. It would mean I was practicing to face them, that I truly had plans to stop being a coward."

Hermione looked over at Snape, he was still looking at his boots, but he allowed his eyes to sweep sideways and meet hers for a second casting them downward again.

"Their faces were just like Anna's, shocked by their daughter, maybe even appalled by her actions. They never really felt comfortable with magic. As a child, I thought they knew everything there was to know about everything. But just in that moment, when I told them all that Harry, Ron and I would be doing, they looked so lost and helpless. And there I was, using it against them." Hermione closed her eyes. "I can't regret saving them. But I can't stop regretting my treatment of them before that. I never took the time to properly explain everything. They never knew..."

Snape knew what she hadn't shared with her parents, of that Hermione was certain. So instead of finishing that thought, she turned her body to face his, never relinquishing his hand. "These regrets are so heavy, Severus." She couldn't call him Snape, not right now. "How I failed you, how I failed my parents, my behavior afterwards. Even those things I kept trying to fix, my friendships, hell the rights of elves, none of them benefitted from this dead horse I've been dragging around."

"Then you need to bury it in the ground," Snape finally said. He had effectively planted his eyes on Hermione's. "I won't lie to you, regrets don't become lighter the more years you carry them. In fact, in my experience, they only seem to gain sympathy weight."

Hermione snorted, a wet, snotty snort causing her to wipe her nose again. "Well, I suppose I can assume you've forgiven me, as you're yet to insult me for the hour."

Snape actually smiled, wryly, but still. "I do believe that was resolved a day or so ago. We are letting bygones be bygones, correct?"

"Yes," Hermione affirmed, smiling slightly herself. "I suppose now there's just my parents then. I'll have to see them, won't I? I know I'm making it sound like a chore, but I really do want to see them. It's just... how will I ever explain... everything?"

"Slowly," Severus replied seriously. "Few regrets can ever really be fixed properly, but you have the opportunity, Hermione. And knowing you, you won't rest until you've fixed it. It won't be easy but..."

"...I'll never know if I don't try," Hermione finished with a sigh. She had known all along that she would have to face them one day, but with each new investigation, it just seemed easier to put it off. Maybe they were happier now, with another daughter, even, but Hermione knew she couldn't keep living like she had been. She had to know for sure. Anyway, given the way things had been going, she didn't imagine there would be any new investigations for her after this.

Looking up at Snape again, Hermione managed a sad smile. "Thank you for listening. I know you didn't have to, nor, I'm sure, did you want to, but it has really helped. I've

been bottling it up for so long, I suppose. Ron was never a proper listener, and I didn't want to burden Harry. Thinking about it now, it was still foolish not to talk to them about it. It has been nice talking to you, though."

It was Snape's turn to snort. "I'm certain you're the first to have ever said that, but I will take the compliment nonetheless."

Hermione yawned, finally feeling relaxed enough to sleep. The thought of schlepping back to the hotel room was definitely unappealing, but that left her with only one other option. "Er, this is sort of a strange request, but would you mind terribly if I slept on this couch tonight? A bit lazy, I know, but I'm completely knackered."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but acceded. Rising from the couch, he asked, "Do you require any..."

"Oh, no," Hermione quickly answered. "No, I'll be fine."

And then an embarrassing realization hit her. "Oh, you weren't planning on... sleeping here, were you?" She should have added a clause to that apology, a pre-apology for future offenses. No wonder she had failed so terribly at writing laws.

To her surprise, Snape smirked. "I wouldn't be caught dead attempting to sleep on that thing. There is an air mattress in my office."

"Oh," Hermione responded simply, somehow still feeling embarrassed by the discussion. "Right, well, I suppose it's goodnight, then."

"You'll have to unhand me first." Snape finished the statement by lifting his hand slightly, still caught in the grip of both of hers.

It's amazing that I haven't managed to succumb to mortification by this point in my life. "Sorry," she apologized softly as she let his hand slip from her grip.

A small swish from Snape's wand and the lights were off. Hermione stretched out on the couch, falling asleep to the sound of Snape's receding footsteps for the second time this trip. And if she wasn't mistaken, she might have heard him say, "It was my pleasure, Hermione."

A/N: Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Hermione's line, 'Even those things I kept trying to fix, my friendships, hell the rights of elves, none of them benefitted from this dead horse I've been dragging around,' and Snape's reply, 'Then you need to bury it in the ground,' are both references to the lyrics of Florence + the Machine's "Shake It Out."

Please review!

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Hermione refused to open her eyes. No clattering of dishes, splashing of water, or scraping of chairs could lure her away from the comfortable cocoon of sleep. She clutched on to its silky cloak, attempting to wrap herself completely despite its retreat. She delved further into the recesses of her consciousness, chasing tendrils of a dream, the plot of which she remembered less with every moment. All she had left now were the sensations, the warmth and the security, the clean smell of soap, the outline of his face, his hooked nose and scraggly hair. The real thing was only just a few feet away, perhaps too embarrassed to wake her directly, but she still wasn't sure which was dream Snape and which was real.

"Granger, I know you're awake. Time is of the essence... please."

Right, I'm Granger again. I suppose he did say please, though. Lifting her arms above her head, she stretched lethargically and then sat up, squinting in the light. Keenly aware that her hair must be every which way, she patted it down uselessly before attempting to straighten her wrinkled blouse. At least she had had the foresight to remove her suit jacket the night before, but her matching skirt had not been so lucky, and had ended up more creased than flat.

Giving up on her self-appraisal, she glanced around the room, her eyes still barely open, and found a steaming mug mid-air and rapidly approaching her. Reaching for it, she could already smell the distinct scent of coffee, thank Merlin. Bracing herself for its burn, she took a sip.

"You are a saint," Hermione praised groggily, taking deep whiffs of the aroma while the drink cooled, her body conditioned to awake when merely in its presence.

"So I've been told," came the deep baritone from across the room. It was a low, gravelly grumble, but Snape sounded more amused than annoyed.

"What time is it?" Hermione asked before taking another sip.

"About half past six," Snape replied, approaching her on the couch, but electing to seat himself in the adjacent armchair. "Everyone usually comes in around seven, so we only have about ten minutes or so to..."

"Disappear?" Hermione volunteered sarcastically, unconsciously giving her hair one last pat as his stare landed on her.

"Precisely," Snape agreed, taking drag from his own cup. "But before then, I would like to... discuss... something."

"Discuss," Hermione squeaked. In her head, the no-nonsense, all business Hermione had just slapped the awkward one who kept emerging when she was alone with Snape.

"Er, yes, the meeting today... with Lucius."

Was he flustered? Yes, Hermione realized with slight satisfaction, *he is. But why now? Is it because he really wanted to discuss...*

"The meeting is set for ten, correct?" Snape questioned.

Hermione startled slightly, losing her train of thought. "Right, yes. Ten o'clock on the dot."

"Good," Severus responded thoughtfully. "It would be best for us to meet back here at nine, then. We won't need to administer the Polyjuice immediately, but a last run-through of everything might be necessary." He paused and sighed, as if preparing for an argument. "I know you would prefer Thomas, but I really think one of my agents would be better suited..."

"I agree Thomas is not an ideal candidate," Hermione allowed. "But even in the short amount of time I've spent with him, I think we've built up a rapport that will make us more convincing as husband and wife."

"Yes, but Lucius Malfoy is no idiot..."

"Neither is Thomas," Hermione reasoned. "I agree that he's been a bit naively enthusiastic at times. However, I think he's proven to be quite useful and a lot sharper than we've given him credit for. Anyway, I'm sure Lucius has seen enough pushy wives to believe our dynamic." She was smiling as she said that last bit, but Snape was not equally assured.

"Should there be a wand fight..." He paused abruptly to hold up a hand, quieting Hermione's argument. "...Lucius will not care if he's in a Muggle establishment. The man has little left, but just enough to take some outrageous risks. Should there be violence, I want someone experienced out there to protect you."

It was Hermione's turn to sigh. "Regardless of what you think of my technique and instincts, I am more than capable of defending myself, and you would do well to realize that."

Snape raised an eyebrow, but then slumped a little in his seat. "I suppose I should stop treating you like a child, then."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "That would be welcomed... Severus."

At the sound of his first name, Snape glanced up from his mug, their eyes meeting. And for a strange couple of seconds, they held each other's stare, not a flicker of malice between them. But before they could explore what truly was there, the door to the break room banged open.

"Oh, uh, sorry," the American bureaucrat stuttered, a brown paper bag in hand. "Just wanted to put away my lunch."

"It's fine," the pair said in unison, immediately averting their eyes from each other. After reaching around the couch to retrieve her nearly forgotten suit jacket, Hermione stood, her coffee mug still clutched in one hand. So too did Severus, his grip on his mug mirroring her own.

"Er," Hermione mumbled, trying to find the words, any words, to make the situation less awkward.

"I can take care of that," Snape finally said, reaching for her mug.

"Yes, thank you," she replied breathlessly. The transaction was carried out carefully, as if she were handing him a newborn. When it was safely in Snape's possession, Hermione cleared her throat and said, "Well, off I go, then. You know, until... nine."

"Until nine," Snape said with a nod, a mug in each hand, seemingly frozen in place.

Too flustered to ask if there were anti-Apparition spells, Hermione began to turn in place, hoping to keep her stray thoughts on the interior of her hotel room.

"So, I... er... I work for the Department of International Magical Cooperation... and you..."

"I'm with the Department of Magical Games and Sports. We met at an international Quidditch match," Hermione replied, pinching the bridge of her nose. She and Thomas were sitting in an empty corner of the pub, their breakfast mostly untouched. If Thomas had noticed that Hermione had not returned to the hotel the night before, he made no mention of it. It was more likely that he had spent the entire evening agonizing about the next morning. "Focus, Thomas. I've just spent a good deal of time defending you to Snape, so please don't choke on me now."

"Are you sure? I mean, does it really need to be me? I'm only a trainee, after all, an apprentice, a nobody, a..."

"Thomas, take a deep breath," Hermione directed. Satisfied with the sight of Thomas inhaling and exhaling, Hermione continued. "You are not a nobody. You are an intelligent, skilled, well-prepared inspector-in-training. Well, I'm not entirely positive about the whole 'well-prepared' bit, but that's why we are going over this right now."

Thomas only gulped, appearing too nauseated to be pleased with the praise.

"I mean it, Thomas. You have been a real asset during this investigation, and this meeting with Malfoy, it's like the final exam."

Somehow, Thomas had managed to become even paler after that statement.

Reaching across the table and giving Thomas' shoulder a reassuring squeeze, Hermione held his gaze. "Listen to me, Thomas. I know I wasn't thrilled to be partnered with you a week ago. To be perfectly honest, I was livid. But I've come to see your strengths. Forget about the script and the particulars of our fictional relationship. You have great instincts; trust them. I know I do. That's why I want you in there with me."

Thomas took another deep breath and allowed himself to smile shakily. "It's all led up to this, I guess," he said with a sigh. It took one more deep breath for him to straighten his shoulders and lift his head. "Right, let's do this, then."

Hermione repressed the urge to hug him and gave his shoulder one more affectionate squeeze. "Here we go."

Her long black hair was swept up into a tight ponytail, causing her to feel as if her hair line was actively receding. The narrow black pumps she wore pinched her toes, the navy blue dress seemed to restrict all movement of her arms and legs, and even her engagement ring felt wrongly sized. She was no longer Hermione Granger, but Melissa Summers, one of the many event organizers for the Department of Magical Games and Sports and fiancée to Craig Lewis, a diplomat for the Department for International Magical Cooperation. Truthfully, neither of these individuals actually existed. All details were fictional, save for the physical appearances created from the stolen hairs of unsuspecting Muggles.

"Well, how do I look?" Hermione gave a little twirl for her faux fiancé and the rest of Snape's team. Even her American accent felt ill-fitting.

"A bit... strapped in?" Thomas replied hesitantly. His new forehead creased in worry, his brown comb-over undisturbed by the movement.

"Yes, well, she's a bit burly, isn't she?" Hermione complained. Why was it that she always seemed to get the short straw when it came to Polyjuice transformations?

"Well, we wouldn't want to injure your vanity," Snape said sardonically from another side of the room.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Whatever had happened before she had left earlier that morning, it was all business now. *As it should be*, Hermione reminded herself. But she still couldn't help throwing him sideways glances from time to time, hoping to reaffirm that she hadn't imagined the whole thing.

"Fine," Hermione said, still annoyed. "We're transformed and the meeting is in fifteen minutes. Shall we head out?"

"A review of the plan once more before we leave," Snape said. The room's occupants audibly groaned but were silenced quite quickly by one of Snape's glares. "All right, then. You two," he said, glancing over at the disguised Hermione and Thomas, "will enter the restaurant approximately five minutes before the meeting time. Stick to the agreed upon script and try to obtain a complete confession, including information on the origin of the elves and the means of transport, and make sure there is an actual transfer of money." Turning toward the rest of the crowd, made up of ten or so Aurors, he continued, "We will secure the premises, ensure that no one will be able to Apparate into or out of the building, monitor the activities within, and prepare to protect the Muggle occupants should the interaction become violent."

Hermione watched around the room as the gathered Aurors nodded tiredly. It seemed to be a completely routine situation for them. She wondered if that's how Ron and Harry felt about their jobs now, almost bored by the mundane act of "securing the premises." Maybe it was a relief.

As she continued to scan the crowd, her eyes found Snape's again. He locked his eyes on her as well, and the look he gave her was fierce. She hadn't imagined anything.

Hermione and Thomas, or rather Melissa and Craig, sat rigidly in a booth at a small café. Its theming was "French," but it bore all the hallmarks of your average quick service franchise, including a stylized logo and generic menu selection. Lucius was already five minutes late, and inwardly, Hermione was beginning to worry. Thomas' worry, however, was completely on display.

"There's still time to back out, you know," he pleaded, his voice much deeper than his true pitch.

"This is not the time for this, Thomas. Lucius will be here any second," Hermione replied, staring at the door. She was beginning to second-guess her decision to have him along.

"Okay, okay," he said, wringing his hands. "Can we at least practice the..."

"Shh! Here he comes," Hermione whispered.

Standing in the doorway and scanning the room was an almost unrecognizable Lucius Malfoy. It wasn't necessarily his physical appearance that rendered him hard to place. His hair was still blonde, though balding in patches. His cold eyes were still grey, though hollow, dark circles underlined them. Even his pointed face remained, though somehow more pointed, giving him an almost wolf-like, hungry look. What was strikingly different, however, was his aura: less confident, more unkempt. It seemed to affect his posture, his movements. The large silver cane certainly didn't help. The stately Lucius Malfoy who Hermione had known was a thing of the past.

As his eyes lighted on the couple, Lucius' thin lips pulled into a smile. Hermione held back the urge to cringe. His icy smiles had always inspired a sort of dread in Hermione as an adolescent, but this one was almost slimy. He might as well have been rubbing his hands together. Watching him approach their table, Hermione steeled herself. It was show time.

"The Lewis', I presume," Lucius greeted them, extending his hand to each of them in turn. A closer examination showed Lucius to be even more deteriorated than previously assumed, with yellowing fingernails and teeth to complete his appearance. However, as always, he was dressed neatly, his jacket crisp.

"Well, nearly," Hermione said as they shook hands. "It'll be just another month before I'm officially Mrs. Lewis." She beamed at Thomas, who smiled back appropriately. So far so good.

"Congratulations," Lucius said as he sat down across from them. "I was married once. It was... a comfort. She had everything, my wife. She still does..." Lucius drifted off slightly, a sour look gracing his sharp features. He managed to control himself, however, asking, "Would you mind if I placed some protective spells around the table? To maintain our privacy?"

"Please," Thomas agreed calmly.

Lucius allowed another slimy smile, giving the couple another peek at his stained teeth. Hermione recognized *Muffliato* among the mix as she watched Lucius imperceptibly move his cane in several elaborate twists under the table.

With the procedure finished, Lucius returned the cane to its upright position and leaned back in his rigid plastic chair. "Now then, how may I help you two?"

Hermione glanced over at Thomas, and he nodded back encouragingly, just as they had practiced.

"Let's see," Hermione began timidly, glancing at her hands slightly. "Oh, well this is almost embarrassing to admit, but I'm horrible with household spells. Catastrophic, really. And, you know, with the wedding coming up and wanting to have children as soon as possible, I was worried. So, I was just chatting with Margaret, um, *Margaret Harrell*. And she said that you might have a solution..."

She glanced up at Lucius hopefully. He remained silent, his fingers interlaced atop the table.

"I would be delighted to help you," he began casually, lifting his right ankle to cross his left knee. "However, I will need you to be more explicit about the type of help you'll need."

Hermione, wearing her feigned embarrassment well, turned beseechingly towards Thomas, who nodded back, patting her folded hands.

"What my fiancée means to say is that Margaret told her you could get us an elf," Thomas said bluntly.

Slimy smile number three featured some of Lucius' blackened molars. "Well, as they say, it seems you have come to the right place." Leaning forward onto his elbows, Lucius brought his face close enough that Hermione could smell the alcohol on his breath. "I won't deceive you; the price is quite high, given the risk I take on bringing the creature into the country. But I promise, the service will more than pay for itself."

Thomas and Hermione nodded fervently, allowing excitement to illuminate their expressions.

"Can we ask you a few questions, you know, before we agree to anything?" Thomas asked.

"Yes, of course," Lucius replied airily, his hand beckoning their interrogation.

Thomas nodded to Hermione, who took up her timidity once more.

"Um, well, I guess we were curious about the *nationality* of the elves. You know, do they speak proper English? I know countries all over the world keep house-elves, but we would *really* prefer an English-speaking one."

Though she didn't show it, Hermione filled with disgust at Lucius' look of understanding.

"Yes, I completely understand," Lucius replied sympathetically. "And I can assure you, your elf will certainly speak English, the Queen's English, in fact." He chuckled darkly.

"Oh, wow, you mean our elf will be from England?" Hermione exclaimed eagerly, her black ponytail bobbing.

"Most likely," Lucius promised. "Anything else?"

It was Thomas' turn to lean in to the table.

"How will the elf arrive here?" he asked in an undertone. At Lucius' suspicious glance, he quickly added, "I only ask because my position gives me access to certain... *privileges.*"

Lucius chuckled darkly again. "Ah, yes. The privileges of status." It was an odd, brooding statement, one that made Hermione wonder if it wasn't just his body that was deteriorating. "No," he continued, "I have my own sources, and in any case, the elf is already on U.S. soil."

Thomas gave him a speculative glance. "Sources outside of the Ministry?"

Lucius just waved his hand, as if dismissing the subject. "A friend in the British Embassy."

Thomas turned to Hermione. To Lucius, the look they shared might have appeared to be a man asking his fiancée if she was ready to make a decision, but Thomas was really asking Hermione if the last statement was enough. Hermione smiled and gave him a nod.

"Okay, well, I think that's everything," Thomas said to Lucius. "Let's talk numbers."

Lucius reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a slip of paper. Pushing it to the couple it read, *\$10,000*. "I know it seems a bit high, but like I said, there's quite a bit of risk in creature transport."

Thomas ran a hand through his hair. "Do you need the money now?"

"It would be best," Lucius allowed. "I have run into a bit of... a roadblock, you see. Must go underground for a time. In fact, I had planned to have already left, but Margaret really has stuck her neck out for me. I owe her the favor."

"I don't know... I'm not sure if we can afford..."

"Honey!" Hermione broke in.

"All right, all right," Thomas grumbled, fishing a checkbook out of his pocket. "Ten... Grand... U.S.," he quoted as he wrote out the check.

Ripping it from the binding, he pushed the check towards Lucius, who couldn't snap it up fast enough.

"When would you like the elf?" Lucius asked distractedly as his eyes scanned the check.

"Right now would be best," Hermione replied, taking out her inspector's badge and throwing it down on the table.

Lucius looked up from the check and simply rolled his eyes. "Oh, bother. I had hoped you two were legitimate customers. Luckily," he said as slid his wand from the top of his cane, "I was prepared for all eventualities."

The scene might have been comical to any Muggle who happened to glance over: three adults staring at each other intently, wooden rods gripped in their right hand, no more than a few inches of which were visible over the table.

"Here are your options, Malfoy," Hermione said, carefully tipping her wand in his direction. "You can surrender to us, reveal your sellers, and gain some clemency for your crimes, or you can put up a fight, cause quite a bit of destruction, not to mention hours of paperwork and Memory Charms, and still be arrested, and no clemency. It's up to you."

Malfoy's dark chuckle became a belly laugh. "Clemency? Would this clemency be similar to the millions of Galleons I currently owe the British Ministry as Voldemort's scapegoat? At this point, I beg you not to have any mercy on me, Miss Granger." Noting her surprise, he added, "Yes, I know that it's you. You've read the papers, haven't you?" He smiled cruelly. "Not sure who this idiot is," he continued, nodding at Thomas, "but I'm willing to kill you both to get you out of my hair."

"Your old friend is outside waiting to arrest you, Lucius," Hermione reminded him. "I'm sure he'd be more willing to be lenient than I would. Wouldn't it be better to try your luck?"

Lucius' look became venomous. "Severus Snape is no friend of mine. *That traitor.* And in any case, I'm done bowing and scraping. It was fine when I was getting something out of it, pandering to those blood traitors in the government. But I have nothing to gain anymore. I have *nothing.*" Standing, he pointed his wand at Hermione in full view of restaurant. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to attend to before I get out of this wretched city. But first," and now his wand was pointed at Hermione, "I've been meaning to take care of you for a while..."

To the casual Muggle patron, what happened next might have seemed like a large explosion, what with the door bursting to pieces, the appearance of scorch marks along the wall and the overturning of all of the tables to the left side of the cafe, but truly, it was just the crash of several spinning plates, at least, metaphorically.

Before Lucius could quite get his spell out, Hermione had tried to disarm him, but her spell was misdirected when she saw Severus slamming through the restaurant door at that very moment. Lucius was not deterred, however, following through with his attempt at Hermione just as Snape had cast a spell in his direction. Fortunately, Thomas had thrown his body over Hermione, causing her chair to flip backwards as his weight threw it off balance. Unfortunately, Thomas found himself in the line of fire, and Hermione, trapped under him, was left to watch as a red flash of light illuminated his trembling body.

What happened next might have been less mysterious to the nearby Muggles. Lucius turned towards Severus, anger creasing his gaunt face. Without greeting, he began casting curse after curse indiscriminately, while screaming Muggles scattered to the back of the room. As salt shakers and chairs alike burst from the impact of missed targets, at least five more Aurors appeared through the entrance of the restaurant, wands poised. In the end, it took only seconds, and one final Stunner to the chest, to take down a clearly unhinged Lucius.

As the other Aurors attended to Lucius and the frightened Muggles, Snape charged towards where Hermione and Thomas had been sitting.

A bit disoriented from her fall, Hermione could only barely make out Snape's approaching form. However, she did distinctly feel as Thomas' body was moved from atop hers.

"Hermione? Are you conscious?" Snape asked commandingly.

Instead of answering, Hermione rolled over towards Thomas. "Thomas?" she called, noticing his body seemed limp. When no reply came, she scrambled on to her knees, leaning over Thomas. Shaking him desperately at first, she released him only to grab her wand and cast the Reviving Spell, hoping that he was only Stunned. But, his body remained limp, his eyes closed.

"Thomas!" Hermione cried again insistently, as if he simply would rise to consciousness, if only to obey her commands.

There was no response.

A/N: A bit of a cliffhanger...

Thank you to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, for their corrections and suggestions.

Please review!

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 10

Inspector Hermione Granger may travel the world, but her job is less than glamorous. Disenchanted with her work, her new assignment brings two surprises that may change her mind: the discovery of a clandestine smuggling ring, and perhaps even more surprising, the appearance of a very much alive Severus Snape.

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Hermione shivered on the concrete floor. Despite the boiling heat outside, the hallway remained glacial, almost like sitting in gigantic refrigerator. None too surprising, she supposed, given where she sat. She felt a crackling vent blow another gust from above. An icicle, that's what she felt like: icy, inside and out; numb. Gathering her knees to her chest, she pulled her now-too-large black cardigan around her bare calves.

"Would you like my coat?"

For once, Hermione wasn't startled by his sudden appearance. Instead of launching herself at him and burying her face in his narrow chest, as she so desperately wanted, she simply nodded despondently. The coat was heavy, but its lining was silky and warm as Snape... *Severus*... delicately laid it over the front of her curled-up body, from feet to shoulders, careful to tuck the upturned collar under her chin. Sighing, Hermione pulled her hands through the sleeves before folding them over her knees again.

"Have they forced Lucius to speak yet?" she asked, her voice small but firm.

"We don't have to talk about this now," Severus replied, standing beside her.

Hermione gazed at his shiny leather shoes.

"I want to," she insisted, finally daring to look up at him. "I want to know that what happened to Thomas... that it was worth... all of this."

Sighing from above, Severus paced a step or two before stopping beside her once again. Then, grumbling, he slowly sank to the floor, seating himself to her right.

"No wonder you're so cold," he remarked as he met the concrete, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his arms over his chest.

Only a few inches away from him, Hermione could smell his comfortingly clean scent.

"Lucius remains only barely conscious. The Stunner wasn't a severe blow, but as noted in his dramatic monologue, he doesn't have much to live for. In any case, it seems his health was deteriorating prior to the encounter."

Hermione bristled. "So it was all for nothing? We'll get no information from him?"

"Not entirely," Severus said calmly. "In his deliriums, we've been able to sort out the location of his Secret-Kept residence, as well as the names of a few families he had yet to contact. As undesirable as the outcome is, he's possibly giving more information than he would have in a healthy state."

"I suppose I should be reciting some article or statute in regard to the treatment of prisoners right now, but I don't have it in me at the moment," Hermione replied, feeling only slightly more relieved. She turned away from him and looked towards her left. The door at the end of the hallway remained shut.

From beside her, Hermione heard as Severus groaned, or rather growled, in frustration, his calm façade disintegrating. "You can't possibly blame yourself," he argued.

"Who else is there to blame, then? You even warned me about having him in. Merlin, he was only an apprentice! I must have been mad!"

Severus opened his mouth to argue, but Hermione went on, barely taking a breath.

"Now he's ... Well, he's over there," she said, waving her arm in the direction of the door down the hall. "So tell me, Severus, who else is there to blame? I forced him out there with me, and he wasn't ready. And now... now..." She was too winded to finish the sentence, and Snape took advantage of it.

"Look at me, Hermione."

Hermione stubbornly turned away. She was being childish, but it was hard not to when she already felt so small. Just another regret, another weight, another step backwards.

"Hermione," Snape chided as he wrenched her hands from their place around her knees and took them in his own without warning.

Surprised, Hermione turned her head.

"Thank you," he said with satisfaction, ignoring the way she stared at their joined hands. "Now, I will only say this once. It is ridiculous to blame yourself for any of this. As I'm sure you noticed during your brief discussion with him, Lucius was mad, and any encounter with him would have likely resulted in casualties. Furthermore, it's a dishonor to Thomas' heroism to reprimand yourself for this."

Hermione nodded dumbly, considering his words... and the way his hands seemed to be keeping her fingers warm. "You're right, Severus. I'm being ridiculous. It's just..."

"Yes, you are," Severus agreed, cutting off Hermione's next statement. "There's nothing to be gained by dwelling on it. You have learned from the legislation debacle, yes? And your parents, they're alive, aren't they? *I'm alive, aren't I?*"

Oh yes, he was. Hermione blushed. "Yes, but..."

"Look at the elves you've saved so far, and most likely, the ones we'll find in the upcoming days. And Thomas! He was at the very least bumbling when he came to you. Naïve and wide-eyed. Look at how you influenced him. He came into his own under your guidance. And yes, I know now he's..."

"Okay, yes. Thomas somehow benefited from being around me while I was having a mental breakdown, but..."

"I won't let you find some other excuse to beat yourself up. Everyone makes mistakes. Some bigger than others... far bigger. But there's taking responsibility for your actions, and there's drowning in them. I will not allow you to drown!"

And the way he gripped her hands now let her know that he wouldn't. The feeling that this brought washed over her, and for the first time she felt secure. Yes, secure that there was someone to catch her should she slip, but also security in herself. She had always only done what she felt was right, and if she were perfectly honest, her heart had never led her astray.

Perhaps that was why, at possibly one of the worst moments ever, Hermione could feel herself being pulled closer to Severus. Not by his hands, but by an energy, one that had been growing since that night at the pub. It was dizzying, all of these things she was feeling, for Thomas, for herself, for Severus. It was nearly too much, but even her good sense couldn't halt the progress of her head as it moved closer to Severus'.

As their eyes met, his stare read, "Right now?" And he was right, this wasn't the time, but...

"He can see you now. Um, if you're ready." The door down the hall had opened, and Thomas' attending Healer stood awkwardly only a few feet away.

Thank Merlin, Hermione thought gratefully as she stood up. She wanted to kiss Severus, *really* wanted to, but not there, not then. Looking down her front at Severus' backward-facing coat, she couldn't help but notice that she was no longer freezing. Knowing her face must be red, she took it off hastily, folding it before handing it back.

"Keep it," he said, putting his hand up. "You might need it in there."

"You're not coming?" Hermione asked, putting the coat back on.

"Later, perhaps. I think you two might have some things to discuss."

Nodding, Hermione started down the hallway, pulling his coat tightly around her.

"You're all right, then?"

If Hermione wasn't so pleased to see him awake and breathing, she might have punched Thomas in the shoulder. She couldn't be terribly upset with him, though. His loyalty knew no bounds.

"Yes, I'm fine, silly," she admonished playfully. She resisted the urge to ruffle his sweaty hair. She certainly didn't want to patronize him. "It's you we were all worried about."

Thomas grinned back tiredly. He lay reclining against a pillow, a hospital gown draped over him. It had been a long twenty-four hours.

"He'll be as good as new in a day or so. He just needs his rest," Healer Alvarez said from the other side of the room. He was busy marking up Thomas' chart, though the smile tugging at his lips told Hermione that he had heard their interaction.

"Do you know what it is, then? That Malfoy cursed him with, I mean," Hermione questioned, unconsciously resting a protective hand on Thomas' shoulder.

"Looks to be one of Mr. Malfoy's own creations, a powerful Stunning Spell of some sort," Healer Alvarez replied, reading from Thomas' chart. "It was probably blunted by Mr. Malfoy's weakened state, but it still managed to do enough damage, I'd say."

"But the unconsciousness and the fever..." As she trailed off, Hermione thought of the sight of Thomas lying there in the rubble of the café, only a faint pulse to assure them that he still held onto life, though tenuously. Even after the Healers were able to revive him, he was burning up with a horrible fever that threatened finish the job.

"Well, like I said, it seems to be an original, so I'm not sure we'll ever truly know all of its effects, but its impact seemed to have ruptured something and sent Thomas' organs into shock. That's certainly what caused the fever, among other things."

Hermione looked over at Thomas. *Poor, noble Thomas*. He was slightly peaky, his copper-colored fringe slick against his forehead, but he was still smiling up at her, silently saying, *It's okay; I'm okay*.

"Not to worry, though. He's definitely out of the woods. Only took a few elixirs, some surgical spell work to repair damage to vital organs, and lot of fluids. And your well wishes, of course."

Hermione nodded in agreement, pulling Severus' coat even closer.

Healer Alvarez made one final mark to the chart and pinned it to the door. "Right, well, I'll leave you two. Not too long, though. He still needs his rest."

"Yes, of course. Thank you... so much," Hermione couldn't help adding. Healer Alvarez smiled, giving them a slight salute before exiting the room, closing the door behind him.

"So, you're wearing *Snape's coat*," Thomas said casually, managing to smirk.

Hermione couldn't help rolling her eyes. "Really, that is what you want to talk about after all of this?"

"Hermione, I know what you're going to say. I've known you for a little less than a week, and I know. It's not your fault."

Hermione crossed her arms. "Thomas, you begged me to get you out of it. I should have listened to you."

"But I was fine!" Thomas protested, his voice both raised and hoarse.

"Yes, you were," Hermione replied calmly, trying to settle him again. "You were brilliant, Thomas, you honestly were. I'm so proud of you. And I am terribly thankful that you saved me from that curse."

Thomas lay back a bit, folding his hands over his chest. "I'm glad I did too. I don't even know what I was thinking, really. Just reacting, I guess."

"I told you your instincts would steer you in the right direction," Hermione said, allowing herself to brush back his bangs a little. It had been an intense week for the both of them, but they had certainly bonded.

"I don't know what I'm going to tell my family, or Cheryl, even. Maybe nothing. It'll probably just frighten them," Thomas said with a sigh.

"You'll tell them that you're a hero, or I will," Hermione replied softly. "Keeping secrets from them will only create bigger problems later on. Trust me, I know."

Thomas smiled. "Yes, I suppose you do. Now that coat..."

"Can't you focus on anything else?" Hermione asked exasperatedly.

"Hey," Thomas answered in his defense. "I have been watching you two bickering this entire trip. I've also seen the way you two look at each other when the other one isn't looking. I am perfectly in the right here."

Sighing, Hermione gave in to her impulse and ruffled his copper-colored hair. "Fine. You'll be disappointed to hear that the offer of the coat and light handholding has been the extent of it."

Thomas sighed as well, swatting her hand from his hair. "Well, you don't have very long, do you? Make a move."

Hermione laughed at his enthusiasm. "I'm sorry, have you met Severus Snape? He's not exactly the most receptive person."

"Yes, well, he certainly isn't going to kiss you first," Thomas pointed out, pulling the white hospital blanket over his chest and yawning.

No kidding, Hermione thought unhappily as she stood. "Looks like you're ready for a nap, Thomas. I'll let you get some rest," she said aloud, rising from the seat at his bedside and making her way to the door.

As she reached for the doorknob, she heard Thomas say from his hospital bed, "I would do it again, you know. Jump in front of that curse, I mean."

Turning slightly to face him, Hermione gave Thomas a sad smile. "I know, Thomas. That's part of why I know you'll be a fantastic inspector."

Hermione almost felt at home as she clip-clopped down the drab hallway of the U.S. Ministry of Magic. The click of heels against the unadorned concrete floors must have announced her approach, leading Severus to peek out from Bob Stephens' office. Stepping out into the hallway to greet her, he was careful to close the door behind him.

"Oh, it's bad news isn't it?" Hermione groaned, noticing the strange look on Severus' face. "It's not the elves, I hope. Or is it Lucius? Have his delirious confessions led us on a wild goose chase?"

Severus remained tight-lipped.

Hermione paled slightly. "I'm canned, aren't I? The head of the department is in there preparing to throw me out of the I.C.W." She had entertained fantasies of leaving the job, but in all of them she had had something else lined up already. Would they send her off somewhere else as the Ministry had only a few years ago?

"You should go inside and find out," Severus replied, ever cryptic. But before she could open the door, he blocked her with his arm. "And when you do...find out, that is...I would like to speak with you afterwards," he requested, subsequently removing his arm and leaving Hermione to face whatever awaited her alone.

Stephens' office looked the same as it had during their first meeting. The Re'em's migration route had a few more dots, the Bigfoot map had a few more x's, and the Jobberknoll was busy preening from his perch. However, there was the addition of a large house-elf fact sheet tacked just above the Bigfoot map.

"Ah, Granger, you're here!" Stephens roared from behind his desk, catching sight of her even before she had cleared the entrance. "Please, take a seat."

Hermione sat in the familiar leather armchair across from Stephens, eyeing the room curiously. It appeared that they were the only two occupying it, so perhaps her dismissal wasn't imminent.

"I guess first I should say how pleased I am that Thomas is going to have a full recovery," Stephens began grimly, glancing over at the Bigfoot map that had so impressed Thomas when they had arrived. "However, I am also pleased to hear we captured Lucius Malfoy. While I regret that we may lose him in the coming days, from what Snape has reported, his information has been sound and useful in uncovering more elves. Now, the question becomes what are we going to do with them all?"

Hermione nodded silently. So far none of this had come as a surprise. Though she had spent the last two days at the hospital with Thomas, Severus had kept her apprised of the investigation. The Harrells were certainly not the only family in the D.C. area in possession of an elf, and even on the day of the confrontation with Malfoy, more were being shipped into the country.

"So, that is where you come in, Hermione," Stephens continued. "Tell me, what would you do about this situation?"

It was a simple enough question with a far more complicated answer. Under I.C.W. protocol, she was required to advise Stephens to round up all the elves, no matter the quality of their living situation, and quarantine them for a period of at least a month. At that time, it would be required that the elves be shipped back to their country of origin, in this case the U.K., where a government official would handle the creatures.

"The next step in the process would be quarantine," Hermione replied robotically.

"Yeah, I know what the I.C.W. would suggest, but what I want to know is what *you* would do."

Hermione gaped at the meaty man across from her. It wasn't as if she didn't already know what *she* would do, and it certainly didn't have anything to do with protocol. She could see flashes of her proposed legislation, the original legislation, in action. It would be a way to employ the elves without excusing abuse. Humane and fair treatment without creating another black market. She saw Margaret Harrell and Mipsy, poster children for how it could work. But it wasn't her position to share her opinion on the matter.

"I'm not really at liberty to tell you what I would do," Hermione reminded him, the weight of her badge suddenly noticeable. "Not in this capacity, at least."

"I figured," Stephens conceded, leaning back in his leather office chair. "That's why I'm prepared to hire you."

"Pardon?" Hermione asked, completely blindsided. Her expectation had been that she would be losing a job, not offered another. "You want to... *hire...me*?"

"You're passionate, Granger. Hell of a lot more passionate than the rest of these bureaucratic drones," Stephens said as he gestured towards the hallway. "I'm sure the inspector's lifestyle is exciting, what with all the traveling, but I could really use someone familiar with the existing legislation to sort this out."

Hermione leaned back in her chair. There it was, a way out, and possibly one better than she had previously imagined. It wasn't in England, but she could learn to like it here. It was certainly better than living out of a suitcase, traveling to every other far-flung village. There would also be no livestock corralling as far as she could see, and wasn't that the biggest bonus of it all?

Of course, there was the unsettled benefit, the one who wished to speak to her immediately after this meeting. At least now she knew why.

"I... I'm flattered," Hermione confessed, still thinking over everything that had just been thrown at her.

"Don't worry, you have a few days to decide," Stephens assured her. "And Snape mentioned you might want a few weeks off to settle some matters back home, and I'm prepared to offer them to you before you start the assignment."

Oh, that. There were things to settle, memories to retrieve, horrors to relive. But she could not, would not, put it off any longer.

"I will consider your offer carefully and give you my answer tomorrow," Hermione finally promised. "It's certainly enticing. I just need to talk to someone first."

Severus' office was devoid of creepy crawlies, pickled organs, and blackened glassware. This alone put Hermione more at ease as she entered. There were still

characteristic black drapes, strange, dark-detecting instruments, and shelves and shelves of books, many of which seemed better left untouched, but Hermione could still appreciate these, especially the latter.

Severus looked up from his paperwork, appearing not at all surprised to find her there. "Take a seat," he commanded more than offered, indicating that she should seat herself in the armless wooden chair in front of his desk.

"I'd rather stand, if you don't mind," Hermione replied, walking behind the chair and leaning forward on the back rest.

Hermione watched as disappointment flickered in his gaze. "Right, I'll take that to mean you've turned down Stephens' offer." His tone was emotionless, but his eyes were not.

"No, I haven't turned it down," Hermione countered, watching him carefully.

"You've accepted?"

"I haven't decided," she answered, her heart racing.

"Oh, well," Severus replied. Though it was minute, every flicker of emotion was minute, this was the still the most flustered and confused Hermione had ever seen him. "It's certainly a decision one must make carefully."

"Honestly, I think I've all but made it. I just need to confirm one last thing." As she said this, Hermione moved from behind the chair, carefully making her way behind his desk.

"Yes?" Severus asked, clearly unnerved by the unfolding events.

He swiveled in his chair to face her where she stood, behind his desk, staring at him quite intently. Wordlessly (though a rather loud pep talk was on rotation in her head) she reached forward, taking his two hands in hers and pulling him his feet. Why he was allowing her to direct him so was a mystery, but Hermione wouldn't complain.

Standing over her, only an inch or so between them, Severus seemed to be at least twenty feet tall. However would she reach his lips? Dropping his hands, she flattened hers against his chest. What would she do now, grip the fabric of his good dress shirt and pull him down towards her? The idea was both horrifying and electrifying.

Inhaling, she dared to look up at him, and suddenly there was no question. As if she had done it a million times, she gathered wads of the black fabric in her two fists and pulled him towards her, their lips meeting softly only seconds later. This kiss was certainly a deal breaker.

While neither could account for the amount of time they spent like this, even years later Hermione would still remember how it had felt when his arms slipped around her waist, pulling her close, and how her hands had slithered up his chest and around his neck, finally tangling in his long black hair. It wasn't perfect, noses occasionally bashing, but it wouldn't take long before they were perfectly in sync.

Soon, however, Hermione felt her lungs begin to protest, as well as the balls of her feet. Lowering herself away from him, she was pleased to note that his arms hadn't left her waist.

"And now?" Severus asked softly, staring down at her through his curtain of hair.

"And now I have decided to stay," she answered, resting her head against his shoulder.

"Good," she heard Severus reply, and she couldn't help smiling to herself. There was, however, something else.

Reluctantly lifting her head from his shoulder, she looked up at him again. "I'll have to leave for a few weeks, though. I realize it's you I have to thank for them, but I thought this might be a good time to remind you."

"Would you like me to accompany you?" he offered generously, his arms tightening around her.

"Thank you for the offer," Hermione said, reaching up to cup his cheek with her hand. "But I really do have to do this on my own. And I know I can. Especially knowing you'll be here waiting for me."

She tried to keep the question out of her voice, but Severus answered it anyway. "Of course."

Satisfied, she laid her head against his shoulder again. Hermione Granger and Severus Snape; who would have thought?

Thomas was significantly less distracted during this trip through the airport. His focus was mainly on the ground before him. Hermione tried not to stare. She felt horrible that she would be abandoning Thomas like this. Especially after everything they had been through.

As soon as they reached the gate, an almost imperceptible gape in the terminal wall, Hermione wrapped Thomas into a bone-crushing hug.

"Oh, Thomas. Promise you'll write! Really, if you have any questions about anything, or if Wong is a crap trainer, or if you need any advice. Oh, I just feel awful about this," Hermione fretted, failing to notice the way Thomas was squirming.

"Er, Hermione, this hug's a bit tight..."

"You're choking the boy," Severus warned.

Hermione relinquished her death grip on Thomas reluctantly, straightening his shirt collar as she pulled away.

"Sorry, Thomas," she apologized, giving him some space. "Can you imagine, though? Would you have guessed last week that I would be this upset about you leaving?" She was smiling despite her slightly teary eyes.

"I honestly can't say I would have guessed any of this," Thomas replied with a chuckle. "But I'll be fine. I had a great first trainer."

Hermione could only nod, trying hard to keep herself together.

The Portkey clerk gave the five minute warning soon after, forcing Hermione to quickly give Thomas one last hug before he was through the gate and on the tarmac.

Giving Severus a sad smile, she led him to a nearby set of seats. Her Portkey was next.

"Do you have all of the notes I gave you?" Severus asked when they sat. As he had since they first kissed days before, he tucked her right hand into his left.

"Yes, I have your notes and the other research I've collected. Honestly, reversing the memory charm might be the easiest part," Hermione replied, leaning into him slightly.

Severus squeezed her hand. "You'll feel better after it's done."

"I think so too," Hermione said with a smile. "Oh, I cannot believe all of this has happened in such a short amount of time."

"The separation will give you time to think it over. Decide if it's what you really want." Though he didn't specify, Hermione inferred that he was referring to more than just the new job.

"Or it might just confirm what I already feel," Hermione pointed out.

Severus didn't reply, removing his hand from hers and stretching his arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

Hermione would be spending at least three weeks in Australia, hopefully using most of it to reconnect with her parents. It would be a start at least. After that, she would be spending a week packing up whatever was left in England and visiting with her friends. She wasn't sure how she would tell them about Severus; perhaps they would just have to take a trip and see for themselves.

When her five minute warning arrived, Hermione leaned over to kiss Severus, something they had taken to quite quickly. A few minutes later, she was out on the roasting tarmac, an old newspaper in hand. As she reflected on the last week, she could not think of one thing she regretted. The feeling was freeing.

A/N: And that's it...

Thank you so much to my hardworking beta, justine 34, and my equally hardworking Brit-picker, magicalpresence, who have patiently stuck with me as I took forever to finish this story. Their suggestions and corrections truly made the difference.

And thank you, readers and reviewers, for sticking it out with me as well! I really hope that you found this chapter to be a satisfying conclusion to the story.

Lastly, **Please review!** As this is the last chapter, I would really appreciate any comments, even if it's constructive criticism, so that I can improve my writing in the future.