

# The Scrivenshaft's Book

*by Piereadaes Muse*

Knowing she is dying a slow and humiliating death, Hermione begins writing to her daughter in the future. Written for Josette in the 2011 SSHG\_Exchange.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 4*

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Author's Note: This was originally written for Josette in the 2011 SSHG\_Exchange. I am extraordinarily grateful to her for the inspiring prompt and to the wonderful M, who has steadfastly supported me with her friendship (and, I might add, beta skills). Between the two of us, I hope the typos and rough sentences have been smoothed over. This is, as always, dedicated to M and to the new friends I've made through the Exchange.

Original Prompt: An exotic antidote research project—you pick who is in charge of the project and why. Bonus points for involving Neville in some herbological capacity.

Disclaimer: This is a work in homage to JKR's magical world and to AR's magnificent performance.

*May 21, 2010*

My darling Rose,

It is a beautiful day, and I am watching you running about the garden, throwing your Pygmy Puff into the air, laughing your beautiful laugh as you catch Apri. Do you still have him, I wonder? I would have to read up on the lifespan of Puffskeins. He was a present from your uncle George at your last birthday, and you've run around with him in your arms ever since. Although (nearly) every memory of you is my favorite memory, I am very fond of you trying to pronounce "Apricot" after asking (so very intelligently, I might add) what shade of colour your Pygmy Puff was. You can manage to say it properly now, but Apri is what he will always remain to us.

Yes, it is a beautiful afternoon. While you play, I am curled up under one of Grandma Molly's afghans in a lazy-back chair, christening this new journal I bought yesterday at Scrivenshaft's while out in Hogsmede with your aunt Ginny. It is a slim leather journal that adds pages as you reach the final few pages. This is a marvelous charm—usually I run out of room and fill in the margins and back cover of my research notebooks!

I have never kept a journal before—in school I was preoccupied with homework and adventures with Harry and your dad, and after joining the Ministry, I spent all my time researching and drafting legislation or convincing the public to support house-elves and werewolves. However, I have always had the talent of being more verbose than is required, so I expect I will rise to this challenge.

Why am I keeping a journal, and why is addressed to you? My mother suggested that, and I agreed—but it is so gorgeous outside, and I would rather spend my time with you. Tonight, I can bear this.

All my love,

Mum

Dearest Rosie,

I sit at our table, staring up at the night sky through the paned glass. We are not so far into the countryside that the stars are easily visible, and yet I try my hardest to catch a glimpse of their light, if only to illuminate my own mind. It is not often that I cannot express myself or create a plan, but

I'm dying, Rose.

There is no use waffling around. You have seen me on my crutches; you deduced that I was sick—clever girl—but your dad and I have done our best to keep our uncertainties from you.

I also know that you will be grilling your father for the details, and I am sure you already know how your dad can be about details. Yes, he's an Auror, but if it is not part of some overall strategy...

About a month ago, I began to lose feeling in the tips of my toes. I am sure your feet have fallen asleep before, and while there are all sorts of prickles and tingles in the feet, you are unable to walk steadily on them till the nerves subside. My symptoms are similar: first the nerves go haywire; then they vanish. It is surprisingly hard to walk when your hallux (your word of the day) is partially missing, according to your medulla (the next word of the day—if you haven't borrowed your Nana and Papa's anatomy book, now is the time to do so, dear). Although I appreciate the exercise gained from hobbling around on crutches, I have begun to wish I could pester your uncle Percy about obtaining a flying carpet.

Doctors! Yes, I visited St. Mungo's and a variety of Muggle doctors. They were all mystified—I believe there is no documented case where nerves begin to disintegrate almost instantaneously beginning at the furthest point away from the brain. Over this past month, I have lost feeling completely in my feet. Muggles have names for similar diseases: *Maladie de Charcot* (a general term), motor neurone disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease in America), etc. Yet these diseases cause neurons to degenerate in the brain or spinal cord, and I did get my head checked!

Just to be sure, I swallowed a Bezoar, had Dittany applied to my feet, and was checked for spellwork by the Healers. I take a nerve regeneration potion daily, but with an unknown agent eating away, the new nerves never get time to grow. At best, it has slowed the degeneration. Essence of Murtlap (that bowl I soaked my feet in tonight during supper) helps soothe the pain, and both my Healers and doctors prescribed physical therapy exercises, which I maintain daily. Still, despite all the books I am reading (taking a week's vacation from the Ministry has been lovely) and all the specialists I've seen, my nerve degeneration is spreading. By my calculations, I have between five and six months before it reaches my spine and vital organs.

I want you to know the truth, Rose, even if it will come to you years late. It is my worst fear that you will grow up without a mother, and so I wish you to have something of me. You are four years old, and I will be unable to be there with you physically as you grow.

Forgive the tearstains, my darling.

This journal is my gift to you; it's a chance to get to know your mother. For me, it's the opportunity to pass on the things I would have wanted to share with you. I will ask that this be kept for you until you are close to going to Hogwarts, or when you start demanding to know about me, whichever is sooner.

You are my greatest treasure.

Love,

Mum

## Part One

### *Chapter 2 of 4*

Knowing she is dying a slow and humiliating death, Hermione begins writing to her daughter in the future. Written for Josette in the 2011 SSHG\_Exchange.

*A/N: Special thanks to M for her alpha work and to Clairvoyant for her superior knowledge of grammar. They are awesome!*

*May 22, 2010*

Dear Rose,

I am still in disbelief over this day. Perhaps you have inherited my gift for near eidetic recollection, but writing it down will firmly establish this as reality. The two of us were enjoying our afternoon tea...we have developed quite the taste for blackcurrant...when your father arrived most unexpectedly.

"Ron!"

Your father should have been at the Ministry during this hour. Naturally, you were already in his arms as I struggled to pull myself from my chair.

"Hullo, sweetie. Hi, Hermione."

"Are you well? Is the Ministry collapsing?"

Ron laughed. "Do I need a reason to skip a day and visit my family?"

"Yes, if you are not Potter."

My breath caught. That voice...the slightest bit of rasp in it barely altered the memory of smooth tones, which caress and flay you simultaneously. Now I saw that you were peeking shyly over your dad's shoulder at his unseen companion.

Ron rolled his eyes as he stepped aside. "Not even Harry takes advantage of that perk."

Professor Snape stood in my doorway. Ron, of all people, had brought me Severus Snape.

It was a good thing I was unable to extract myself from the chair. I know I gaped at him, inwardly battling between shock and fury. The anger won.

"Ronald," I hissed, my eyes narrowing. Ron unconsciously set you down as he squared his shoulders, trying to hide you from my line of sight.

"Hermione," he replied, stepping close to me.

"We promised! All three of us!"

I am sure you have been told some of your dad's, Uncle Harry's, and my childhood and of the Battle of Hogwarts. One of my many regrets was leaving Severus Snape behind as he lay dying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. None of us had guessed his true loyalty until the memories began to pour out of those unfathomable eyes. Only Harry viewed them, of course, but he told Ron and I a little: how Professor Snape loved Harry's mum from childhood; how his growing friendship with future Death Eaters drove them apart; how he turned to Dumbledore when Voldemort condemned the Potters to death in order to undo the wrong he had committed by passing on the prophecy in the first place and became Dumbledore's spy for life.

The body had vanished by the time we had returned to the Shack, and your uncle became obsessed with honouring Professor Snape. There were no plans to hang a portrait in the Headmaster's Office (as Professor Snape had abandoned the post), and Harry adopted the portrait as his next crusade. We were about to go to the Wizengamot when Kingsley Shacklebolt (interim Minister at the time) called the three of us to his office.

Severus Snape was alive, he told us. No portrait would appear until his death, although Kingsley promised Harry that a portrait had been commissioned. We were also sworn to secrecy (as you've seen him, I can tell you all of this), as Professor Snape had no desire to return to the public spotlight. I cannot blame him either, with Wizarding Britain obsessed with the Dickensian anti-hero.

That is an amusing thought! Perhaps he finally understands how Harry truly feels about the press.

Although we swore before Kingsley not to reveal any details, Ron, Harry, and I made a private pact never to bother Severus Snape again. Yes, there was that awful book by Rita Skeeter about him...Harry gave another Quibbler interview to set straight Skeeter's assumptions. That woman is unbelievable. She vows to deliver actual facts, and then explains them with barbed suppositions. I am rather proud of catching her as a beetle...I'll tell you that story another time...but she's registered now, and I cannot blackmail her any more.

Other than that one interview, the three of us have done our best to honour Professor Snape's memory as if he were dead. I am sure you can understand my anger at your dad for betraying the privacy of a man to whom we owed everything and who had only asked to be left alone.

"Hermione." Ron's voice was low as well. "I know you are upset, but I had to see him! You know this is not a normal disease. Blimey, Hermione! You are the youngest head of the Administrative Office for the MLE ever...after a successful career in Magical Creatures. There are people fighting every bill you introduce to the Wizengamot...hasn't it occurred to you that someone might wish you dead?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, Ron."

"*Hermione!*" Ron wore a look of shocked exasperation on his face. Gallows humour didn't suit me, apparently.

"You are my best friend and the mother of our child. I am not going to let you give up! We can't say that we've seen everyone yet...Snape knows more about poisons and hexes than the entire Auror force combined! If finding a cure means breaking all my promises, I will."

Oh. Tears came to my eyes. "You really are the best ex-husband ever, Ronald," I whispered as he kissed the top of my head.

"Always the tone of surprise," he said dryly.

The clearing of a throat would have been embarrassing if I wasn't sure whether I was shocked more by the lack of a sneering comment on sensibility or by the sight of Professor Snape sitting back on his heels as he finished speaking with you!

Ron returned to standing normally, his hand still on my shoulder. "Rosie, do you want to show me your books?"

You dragged your dad away, leaving Professor Snape to observe me silently. He is a tall man, and the height difference brought back memories of him looming over my cauldron and sneering at the (usually) expected results. The last time I had seen him, he was bleeding to death, and I observed that being Headmaster had not been good to him. He had always been sallow and pale, but there he had looked positively gaunt.

Twelve years later, I would deduce that he had spent some time abroad. While he is not exactly tan, there is a bit of colour in his cheeks and a general air of good health. Being free of two masters is undoubtedly good medicine. His hair is better, too. Would he be the type to see a Muggle stylist, I wonder. It is cut now and frames his face quite nicely. He is still swathed in black. With his poise, he cuts a striking figure...not handsome, mind you, but strangely appealing.

Don't roll your eyes at me! I am a thirty-year-old divorcee, Rose. I can look and admire!

I did blush, though, when he raised one eyebrow; he had caught me staring. Although, he must have expected it...it is not everyday you meet someone you thought you would never encounter again. I sincerely hope he wasn't reading my mind (as he excels at Occlumency and Legilimency).

"Would you like a seat, sir?"

"No...thank you...I would prefer to stand, Mrs. Weasley." He studied me, leaving me rather exposed. Flustered, I tried to think of something refined to say, but all that came out was the rather inane:

"It is Granger, actually, since the divorce. And I am terribly sorry about the imposition..."

"There is no need to apologize, *Miss Granger*," he smoothly cut in. "Weasley could not have forced me to come here if he tried, although his finding my home and convincing me to listen demonstrates that he is no longer an imbecile. Your condition, and that alone, interests me."

That, Rose, is classic Snape. With a single inflection, he reduces me to a student and grudgingly compliments your dad even as he slights him. Your father must have been incredible...I'll have to drag the tale out of him!

"Well, I thank you for your fascination, then," I muttered. His lip curled.

"May I see the area in question?"

I carefully peeled off the two sets of handmade socks Grandma Molly knitted me, exposing my numb feet. Instantly, worries hit me. Did they smell from being enclosed in wool all day in the summer warmth? Would I consider them to be shapely or unattractive?

That was rather ridiculous of me.

Professor Snape was most professional, however, despite a slight sneer at my varnished toenails. He held a foot delicately with one hand, probing with the other, all the while asking about my pain threshold. Next, he moved his wand over them, muttering spells.

After about ten minutes or so, he put my feet down and turned to look out the back window.

"What have the specialists said?"

I recounted all the doctors and Healers we visited and their diagnoses. At the end, he shook his head.

"I found no trace of any known hex or creation of a Death Eater. Either you have a degenerative disease, Miss Granger, or you have absorbed an extremely creative poison."

"But the bezoar should have acted as an antidote!"

"You should remember your lessons better, Miss Granger. A poison can enter the body in more ways than ingestion. The bezoar would have counteracted any poison to enter your stomach, and clearly you are not paralysed there. There are more tests I can perform, but I must have time to prepare. I will owl you with the particulars. Good day, Miss Granger."

Once again, I struggled with my crutches but succeeded this time in propelling myself out of my chair. I hobbled after him as he made his way to the kitchen door.

"Wait...thank you!"

He paused, turning to observe me with unfathomable eyes.

"Your daughter is quite remarkable, Miss Granger. Tell me, have you trained her since infancy to be a know-it-all?"

My mouth fell open...was I flattered or offended? As I reflect back on it now...seeing his outer robe sweeping around as he strode out the door...I am leaning towards the former.

What on earth did you say to him?

Love as always,

Mum

May 23, 2010

Rose!!!

I am so proud of you!!! Of course, I am always proud of you. Never doubt that. Still, you are quite the accomplished young lady. May I first say that most four-year-olds cannot read yet, and today you read me a chapter from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe!* If that wasn't enough, you even asked what the words you stumbled over meant. Despite what Professor Snape said, I am not training you to be a know-it-all. Your father and I will always encourage you to ask questions and seek understanding of the world around you. We read to you because we want to open up your imagination. There are few Wizarding novels for children (or adults, as I've found), and so, I hope you will read as many Muggle books as you can. I will leave your dad a list in the hopes that he will continue our daily reading, or at least take you to Nana and Grandpa Granger's home for read-alouds. I'm not sure your dad would find the non-fiction we are also reading as interesting.

Although I am sometimes disparaging of your dad, Rose, he really is a wonderful man. We are better friends now than we were when we were married. He and Uncle Harry are revolutionizing the Auror Department, and your dad is finally getting recognition as the brilliant strategist that he is. He beat McGonagall's giant chess set in our first year, you know, but we forgot that over the years. Something about being a boy, I would wager, limited our perceptions of him. Over the past few years, however, he has demonstrated an ability to see patterns and relationships that most of us overlook. I somewhat disparage the lack of mathematics, literature, and critical thinking in Hogwarts' education. If I were to have lived longer, I would have campaigned for additional classes in the curriculum. Ron agrees with me that you should have a Muggle education before going to Hogwarts, and he has started talking about teaching you chess. Your dad loves you so much!

How typical of me to expound an idea in great detail.

You are not only a flourishing reader; today you turned Apri blue. Spontaneous magic is not uncommon to young children as you well know, but you *turned him back!* I have never heard before of an untrained witch or wizard reversing his or her own magic without help.

Never doubt your abilities, Rose. I was such an insecure girl, trying to prove myself through knowledge in a world reluctant to embrace me. You may be questioned, or question yourself, but never doubt that you can rise to the challenge.

No word from Professor Snape, yet.

Love you,

Mum

May 25, 2010

Just a quick note, Rose.

I hope you are okay at Grandma Molly's. We'll Floo-chat later. I am in St. Mungo's with your dad, Uncle Harry, and Luna. All I want to do is hold you in my arms and tell you it was not your fault. Running after you in grass on crutches is a recipe for disaster when you can't feel your feet; I'm lucky I only broke one ankle. It was a quick fix, but the Healers want me to stay overnight just to see if the injury or the healing process affects the nerve disintegration. I'm more than a little tired, but at least I didn't have to swallow Skele-Gro. Has Uncle Harry ever told you about Lockhart removing his bones?

Don't be upset, Rosie. I cannot wait to see you tomorrow!

I hope Professor Snape writes soon.

Love,

Mum

May 26, 2010

Dear Rose,

I am so happy to be back at home with you! I love hearing you chatter about playing with your cousins and helping Grandma Molly make pies. These past few weeks with you have been such a joy. I am somewhat torn between working and being a mother. My work is extremely important, as we try to eliminate prejudices from our world, but spending time watching and helping you grow is becoming the most important thing in my life. I can easily draw up timetables for my department to follow after I am gone. Many of my ideas are already drafted out, and my colleagues are equally committed to social justice. A timetable, on the other hand, is no way to raise a child.

Your father is right. I have given up hope. But the very act of spending what time I have left with the people I love has made me realise that giving up is not living. I want to teach you to ride a bicycle (even a witch should know how) in case you inherit my fear of flying, take you to museums, and run after you in the backyard without falling. I want to be a successful mother who also convinces purebloods that we Muggle-borns are just as talented and committed to a magical society.

I want to live. And so, my life must be brought back under my control. Therefore:

1. I will wait for Professor Snape's letter and diagnosis before committing myself to the grave.
2. Once I have received a diagnosis, I will visit libraries and research.
3. I will spend as much time as possible with my family and friends (although we are practically all related by now).
4. We will go on as many trips and do as many activities as possible.
5. I will temporarily go on leave as head of my department but hire myself as a consultant. I'm sure I could advise from the comforts of my sitting room.

I still might only have six months, but I will accept my body's current difficulties and learn to work around them until then. No disease is incurable; I haven't tried every cure yet.

What is taking Professor Snape so long?

Determinedly yours,

Mum

*May 27, 2010*

Darling Rosie,

Finally! We were eating breakfast in the kitchen when you spotted an owl landing in the window box. You are always so excited when the post arrives; I will have to remind your dad to send you lots of letters at school.

My fingers were shaking when I saw the familiar spiky handwriting on the envelope. Despite yesterday's resolution, I was still somewhat frightened by the possibilities of the future.

You kept pulling on my robe, asking whom the letter was from.

"It's from Professor Snape, dear," I told you, still staring at the unopened letter.

"Can he fix your legs?" You looked eager. Had he made as favourable an impression on you as you had on him?

I slit the letter with a finger. By now, you've learned to wait until after I've read a letter to ask for a summary rather than demand that I read it out loud.

As it is, I've copied it here for you.

*Miss Granger,*

*Please come tomorrow at noon. Weasley or Shacklebolt will be able to take you to my residence.*

SS

The nerve of that man! To assume I have no plans (our trip to the British Museum will have to wait) and that the deputy head of the Auror Department or the Minister of Magic is at my disposal! And he conveniently forgot an explanation as well.

"I don't know," I told you. "But if there is anyone who can, it is Professor Snape."

I do hope so. But for now, we are going to finger-paint. I have been told one is never too old to finger-paint; this will be my first experience as well!

Love,

Mum

*May 28, 2010*

Dear Rose,

Severus Snape may be a bastard. He may also be the most romantic anti-hero since Sydney Carton; I don't know. But he is the most brilliant mind I have ever encountered. Spending an afternoon with him (minus his temperament) is exhilarating. I am passionate about law, but after today, I could throw it all away for research. Then again, I would most likely discover some misrepresented group associated with it and put aside any research in order to fight for their rights. Today was fascinating, however, and I would love to have a chance to collaborate with Professor Snape again.

Ron was kind of enough to take the morning off from work; the three of us had a lovely breakfast before taking you to my parents for the afternoon. Ron and Uncle Harry know me better than anyone, and your dad could tell I was nervous after we gave you to your grandparents.

"I've been thinking about buying an automobile," he commented as we passed my father's car on the way to our Apparation point. I was lucky not to drop my crutches.

"Ronald!" I gasped. As a distraction, it was perfect. "You're not joking?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "I've had my eye on an Aston Martin ever since Harry introduced me to that Band fellow."

"*Bond*, Ron. Honestly, it's just like you to remember a sports car rather than the main character."

"I couldn't afford the Aston Martin on my salary now, anyway. But I've been thinking lately that it would be useful to be able to drive you and Rosie around."

I was touched.

"Dad's been tinkering with a hybrid engine, trying to use magic to make it... I don't understand it, but... green?"

I smiled. Trust your granddad to keep up with the latest Muggle fads. "Arthur is trying to reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere by the burning of gasoline. Many companies are trying to make hybrid or electric-powered vehicles. Many Muggles are concerned about the rising temperatures of the earth."

"Of course you would know. Dad offered to make some alterations...most of them are pretty reliable now, you know."

"Are you aware you'll have to take the driver's examination?"

"But I already know how to drive!" he protested.

"Yes, and the last time you did, you and Harry landed in the Whomping Willow."

Ron rolled his eyes, but smiled ruefully. "That was one hell of a landing. Fine. I'll take your ruddy test."

"You had better not Confund the examiner," I warned. Your dad put up his hands to ward me off.

"Bloody woman! Can't you trust me?" What a silly question.

"Thank you, Ron," I spoke softly.

He looked fondly at me. "Anything for you."

I had to ask. "Do you regret it?"

"The divorce?" He was surprised.

"Yes." With the way our lives and relationship had progressed, I needed to know. Ron was quiet as we crossed the street.

"No, I guess. We're better together when we're not in each other's hair. I mean, while making up was loads of fun..."

I smiled in agreement.

"I don't think we could have argued and had make-up sex (sorry Rose) the rest of our lives. At some point, we would have had an argument like in our third year, and there would be no traitorous rat to bring us back together. I'm glad we did get married, though."

"We have Rose," I answered. You were the highlight of our marriage.

"And naturally, having us for parents, we proved it's possible to parent better divorced than married."

I rolled my eyes. We reached our destination, and Ron stepped in front of me.

"Do you regret it?" he asked seriously.

Yes. No. If we didn't know each other as well, I could have fallen in love with him all over...your dad has finally grown up. But Ron was correct. The friendship we have developed over the past two years is stronger than any we had before and during our marriage.

"I love you," I told him.

"But you don't want to snog me any more," he finished, grinning.

"Professor Snape was right. You aren't an imbecile any more," I teased back.

"Speaking of which," he wrapped his arms around me and turned on one foot. The familiar squeezing overwhelmed the senses, and then we appeared under a gigantic willow, the sounds of running water nearby.

"Cambridge," Ron explained. "You were an Oxford girl, or else I'm sure you would have run into him eventually." I spent three years after the war at Oxford being tutored in law. Traditionally, Cambridge and Oxford are rivals, but I have never been particularly enthusiastic about the rivalry. Therefore, I felt no guilt in my sudden urge to drag Ron to the university's library after our visit!

"Snape's place isn't far from here. The walking hasn't tired you out yet?"

My arms were getting tired, I admitted, but I wasn't so much of an invalid that I required assistance. Ron guided me through the park towards a residential area. Professor Snape lives in a brick, two-story house in the Tudor style. Overgrown foliage obscured the neighbouring houses.

We paused in front of the house. I looked curiously at your dad.

"However did you find him?"

"I was damn lucky the house wasn't SecretKept; I would never have found Snape otherwise. As it was, I remembered Kingsley had mentioned that the Ministry would send him an annual stipend and give him his 'posthumous' Order of Merlin as thanks for his service. I popped into the Accounting Office and looked at the payrolls. It took days." Ron shuddered. "But I finally found a name not associated with any office...I checked...and copied the address listed. It was a bit of a gamble...especially because Snape was disguised when I met him...but I think he was so surprised that I, of all people, stood on his doorstep that he broke character immediately."

"Does Harry know what you are up to?" I couldn't imagine your uncle not noticing Ron's absences.

Ron nodded. "He tried to prevent me from going at first, too, but he is as anxious as I to find a cure. Technically, I should be on a case right now, but Harry is covering for me."

Once again, I found myself surprised by the strength of my friends' love. Treasure your friends, Rose; they are infinitely more valuable than a first edition *Hogwarts, a History*, which, you must understand, is priceless.

When we reached the house, Ron knocked firmly on the door. I was surprised to hear a volley of barks approaching from the other side. The idea of Professor Snape, who hated Sirius Black (whose Animagus form was a dog) with a passion, owning a dog seemed so far-fetched that I nearly told the aristocratic-looking blond opening the door that we had mistakenly chosen the wrong house.

"Miss Granger, Weasley. Please." Professor Snape's voice incongruously emerged from the strange body as he stepped aside to let us in. Immediately, we were set upon by a large, friendly Old English sheepdog.

"Down, Calla," he said firmly. The dog pulled her front paws off Ron's chest, and went to lean against her owner. With a flick of his wand, the Glamour fell away.

"Your tardiness has cost you a fresh pot of tea, but I'm sure you are still capable of casting a warming charm. If you will follow me." He led us through the hallway into a small library, Calla following at his feet. It was absolutely beautiful, with wood panelling and shelves and shelves of old books. I smiled in delight. Two chairs sat in front of a large mantel, a tea tray hovering mid-air between them. He gestured for your dad and me to take the seats while he took his place by the mantel like a Shakespearean stage actor.

I sipped the proffered Earl Grey tea, wondering whether we would be required to make small talk. The sheepdog lay curled in front of us, her eyes fixed on the biscuits Ron was removing from the tray. I looked up from my cup to see Professor Snape studying me.

"No doubt you have wondered at the delay," he began. "It has taken longer than I expected to determine the best way to proceed. The tests I propose have never been performed on a human before, and there were necessary preparations to ensure that they would be effective and safe. I am confident that you have been poisoned, Miss Granger; today I should be able to identify the method."

"What if the poison is undetectable?" Ron interjected. Professor Snape sneered.

"There is no such thing as an undetectable poison, Weasley. It may possess characteristics of invisibility, but that implies that the source or components of the poison have magical characteristics. Each individual magical specimen leaves behind a residue that characterizes the magical qualities of the source. I can extract that residue from Miss Granger and identify its characteristics."

I watched Professor Snape with interest, observing how easily he returned to lecturing. His subject was fascinating, but something about it tugged at my memory. When he paused, I jumped into the conversation.

"You're Royal Havisham!" Both Ron and Professor Snape turned to me with incredulity. I deduced that was one detail Ron had failed to share with me outside.

"Your reasoning?" Professor Snape challenged, one eyebrow raised.

"I read *Potions Quarterly*," I admitted. Ron rolled his eyes. "He's one of my favourite contributors...the article on identifying the individual qualities of potions ingredients and its application to improving and developing new potions was inspiring! You could have adopted the method of extracting magical residuals, but the pseudonym alludes to your former title." The Half-Blood Prince... a youth's defiant, desperate, and dramatic attempt to establish and justify his own worth and power.

He nodded reluctantly. "A stretch, but correct in essentials."

A proud smile lit my face only to be wiped away in concern.

"How can you be sure you are extracting the poison's residue? Surely there are magical traces from other sources that collect in the body."

"An astute question. You failed to mention the innate magic of an individual, which also posed a problem. If you remember my earlier postulate, each source has its individual characteristics. Fortunately, there are overall commonalities between sources that allow one to distinguish a plant from a wizard or an animal. Magical traces are...if you are as well read in Muggle science...similar to the DNA that makes up the body's structure.

"Furthermore, there is no better source for your own residue than your wand. As Weasley undoubtedly performed the Side-Along Apparition, I will be able to identify his residue on you by examining his own wand. Residuals also appear only in affected areas; therefore, it will be possible to identify the poison by its location. You spoke highly of *Havisham's* methods...I trust you will extend me the same courtesy?"

"Absolutely," I affirmed, incredulous that he would consider me so callous. "When can we begin?"

"Now, if you are through with the questions. Weasley..."

Ron looked up, his hands entwined in Calla's fur.

"There will be little need for your assistance. If you are so inclined," his voice was sceptical, "you are welcome to remain in the library. There are only benign texts on these shelves. I would hardly allow an Auror in here if it were otherwise."

Ron snorted. "I suppose you keep the others locked in your bedside cupboard?"

"How quickly you jump to conclusions," Professor Snape sneered. Strangely, I had a slight suspicion that this animosity covered up the tiniest bit of respect.

"Thanks, but I think I'll take a walk. Would she like to come along?" Ron gestured at Calla, who had perked up at the familiar word. Professor Snape hesitated, looking at the dog leaning contentedly against your father.

"Calla is at her own disposal," he said oddly. I swear he sounded wistful. "I believe this will take a half of an hour to complete, at which point I will need to collect a trace sample from your wand. The wards will recognize you when you return. I need not remind you that the rest of the house is off-limits?"

Ron shrugged. "Then I'm off. Good luck, Hermione. Want to go for a walk, Calla?"

I've never had a dog, but watching Calla dance to the door in her excitement makes me seriously consider getting you a puppy. Ron would be delighted, of course, but would the two of you be up to puppy care?

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape spoke softly. "Please follow me." It is somewhat strange, I must admit, to hear such courtesy from him. Is it that I am a grown woman with a child and a career? Or is it a token of respect for a dying girl? I cannot make him out. He uses sarcasm more effectively than his wand (and he is one of the most accomplished wizards I know) and yet considerably offers tea and says 'please.' But then again, he has made no gesture of friendship, nothing to understand him with except a vial full of memories, and even then, I make no claim to know him. Would I wish to?

Anyway, I was not thinking this as I followed him slowly back into the hallway. I actually was considering what Professor Snape would use to identify the characteristics of the residuals. My recollection of Professor Snape's article included a brief mention of ley lines, but I couldn't recall how they were used or if they were further explained at all. However, Professor Snape had already offered me a chance to ask questions, and I was unsure that there would be another opportunity. He is such an imposing figure, and I found myself unable to break the silence.

He stopped and turned. "Are you... capable of stairs?" Naturally, his laboratory would be below ground, in what used to be a cellar. How maladroit of us to have forgotten.

"Only if they are wide and deep. Even then, descending is usually difficult."

He frowned. "I am able to Apparate within these walls, but it would distort the readings. I'm afraid that is, if you are willing the best course would be for you to allow me to carry you downstairs."

I blushed. That was the most inelegant statement I have ever heard him utter. I believe I was embarrassed because he was, of all things, unsettled. And then, I had my first understanding. A spy must be in control of his faculties at all times (something, I will say, Professor Snape had not always maintained in the presence of your Uncle Harry) and be prepared, be able to adapt to any situation.

In the midst of his thorough preparations, Professor Snape had forgotten my inability to walk without crutches. It is one thing to pick up an injured person in a battle and carry them to safety, but to carry a woman in your arms through your own house must be seen as positively matrimonial or at least sexual. He was doubly embarrassed.

"Very well," I agreed, hoping his discomfiture would not sour his temperament. He swallowed and picked me up, leaving my crutches leaning against the wall. It was not romantic at all. Yes, he is much taller than me and smells very nicely, but mostly I was aware of the stiffness radiating from him. His arms were rigid as they held me, and I was more concerned that in his wish to seem as professional as possible I would be dropped.

We made it down the stairs without mishap, however, and I summoned my crutches as he set me down. We stood in front of a door, which had been installed when the cellar was converted into a laboratory, I assumed.

Professor Snape tapped his wand against the door in a pattern I won't repeat for the sake of his privacy and spoke a single word softly. The door opened, but I was surprised to see that the room did not look like a laboratory. It was dark inside, the light from the hallway spilling in to illuminate a heavy worktable. After we entered, he directed me towards the table and went around the room, lighting several sconces with matches he produced from his trouser pocket. I should mention that he had left off his robe in the library and wore a crisp white shirt over black trousers (another thing I had never seen before).

"What is this room?" I asked.

"My laboratory," he replied as he lit candles. "With some modifications, as you see. Usually, this procedure is done in a small container, but the subject is obviously different here. The environment must still be as free of magic as possible."

"How did you do that?" My curiosity won out over my hesitation.

"Burnt rosemary. Would you lie on the table?" I complied. Did you know that rosemary is often used to purify a place before doing an old working? By old, I mean druidic. There are some fascinating books on the druids and the evolution of practising magic at Hogwarts. Professor Binns liked to focus on the Goblin Wars, but Madame Pince had some wonderful suggestions of history books to read as supplemental material.

Professor Snape began moving his wand up and down my body, although several inches above it. The incantation was long, involving bits and pieces of various languages. He repeated it every couple of passes. It didn't feel particularly druidic, which made me wonder if he had invented the spell himself (not surprising at all).

I was surprised, though, when the first colours began to rise from my body. They reminded me of the aurora borealis, streams of particles glowing in various shades as they danced above me. Most prominent was a beautiful teal ribbon, brighter than the others. I also saw orange, lavender, rose, burgundy, brown, and green flash here and there. Looking up at Professor Snape, I saw a silver glow around his wand that I suspected was his own trace. Tears came to my eyes. Pure magic danced above me.

A few more colours rose, and then Professor Snape changed the incantation. Individual colours separated from the whirling mass, and his wand directed them to a vial. I felt disappointment in seeing them trapped inside the glasses. Finally, they were all contained, and Professor Snape slumped against the table, his forehead covered in sweat.

"Do you need something to drink?" I whispered. I, too, felt drained. He swiped at his face with a trembling hand.

"Whiskey, I think." He waved his wand, and two glasses appeared with a bottle. He filled them both and offered one to me. I am not a fan of hard liquor, but the whiskey burned through me and I felt somewhat better.

He drained half his glass before he explained, "You will need food to replenish your energy, but this will have to do until we leave the lab."

"Would I be correct in assuming that my own magic was extracted? If I remember correctly, you completely extracted the residuals from the potions ingredients in your paper."

"Yes. I was afraid that some of it might be drawn out with its residue."

I observed him, noting with concern the pallor of his cheeks.

"I wouldn't have expected it to be so exhausting."

"It is a complex procedure *only* being performed on a human for the first time," he snapped, but his exhaustion took away the bite. Sighing, he admitted, "The focus required to manipulate so many different residuals was more than I expected."

We continued to drink our whiskey in silence. I thought about the beautiful colours in the vials before us. I suspected or rather, I hoped that the teal residue was my own, due to its brilliance and quantity. Which vial contained my poison?

"What do we do next?"

"I require an extraction from yours and Weasley's wands. Your assistance will no longer be necessary after that. I will analyse the samples over the next few days."

So long! But I suppose it would take time to identify all the different residuals and determine their origin.

"If you are feeling refreshed, perhaps we could return upstairs and finish this?"

I nodded and manoeuvred myself off the table. He placed the vials in a small chest and set it on a counter I had not seen until now. He returned to my side.

"I will Apparate us now." He waited for my nod in consent before placing his hands on my upper arms and Apparating us to his library. Ron jumped up, his wand ready.

"Bloody hell! A little notice, please?"

"Impossible while Apparating, Weasley," Professor Snape sneered. Does his need to be derisive override his sense of humour?

"I will require you to cast *Priori Incantatem* on Weasley, Miss Granger."

"Oh! You are using the reverse spell effect to extract the residuals as Ron's spells appear!"

Professor Snape opened his mouth, most likely to make a comment on my exclamation, when Ron interrupted.

"Hang on. We just started doing *Priori* analysis during cases last year. *You* invented it?"

"Brilliant assumption, Weasley." He drawled. "Yes, my work is occasionally conscripted by Shackbolt for Ministry usage."

"It's bloody brilliant; that's what it is." Ron turned to me. "Remember how Crouch used Harry's wand to cast the Dark Mark? Before, Harry would have been arrested because his wand registered the curse. With Snape's spell, though, we can identify whether a different wizard used the wand by comparing the different magic colours that show during the spell. You're going to use it to find out what our magic looks like?"

"A crude explanation, but yes. Miss Granger, are you recovered enough or do you require further sustenance?"

I hadn't fainted yet, so I lined up my wand (I bought a new one after the war: elm, twelve inches, with a core of dragon heartstring) with Ron's and cast the spell. The shadow of a ball being summoned appeared, and Professor Snape began casting the Extraction Spell. Ron watched, entranced, as orange residues appeared in the air around the shadow and his wand, while I was delighted to see that my own residue was teal.

Professor Snape directed the residuals to two more vials.

"I will be in touch again shortly. Thank you for your time today. Good day." He swept back down the stairs towards the cellar. He is so infuriating at times! Ron shrugged, but escorted me outside.

"Abruptness isn't the same as unpleasantness. That much. Come on, there's a pub in town I saw that said something about that D stuff Snape mentioned."

"DNA, Ron."

We had a lovely lunch at the Anchor in the City Centre and then returned to spend the rest of the afternoon with my parents and you. It is nearly midnight, and I've rambled on for over an hour! I'd better get to bed if I'm going to be alert tomorrow when we visit the London Zoo!



Once again, I find myself waiting for Professor Snape's letter. It is annoyingly like waiting for a certain obtuse boy to notice you. Although he smells nicely... I'll stop now, I promise!

Loads of love from

Mum

*A/N: Thank you for reading. I hope you'll consider leaving a review!*

## Part Two

### Chapter 3 of 4

Knowing she is dying a slow and humiliating death, Hermione begins writing to her daughter in the future. Written for Josette in the 2011 SSHG\_Exchange.

*A/N: Now that the nightmare that was Last Quarter is over, I can resume editing the remaining chapters. My profound gratitude goes to M and to Clairvoyant, whose beta-skills are unrivaled. I hope you enjoy!*

*Disclaimer: I am merely playing in JKR's world.*

May 30, 2010

Dear Rose,

I promise not to exceed my parchment limit, as I was prone to doing at Hogwarts. Let's say I will stick to three subjects and attempt to be concise. I am, for lack of a better term, a lawyer, however. Even our briefs tend to be excessive! Still, I will try to be concise, as I'm expecting Professor Snape or his owl today. Writing to you is much better than pacing...which is difficult to do on crutches...around the house in nervous agitation.

We had a lovely time at the zoo yesterday! You especially loved the butterflies and the giraffes. They entranced me as well, but I was nearly moved to tears seeing one of the female gorillas carrying her little one. I've never had the need to read up extensively on gorillas, but I felt I understood her better than if I had read every monograph on the subject. I can never tell you that I love you too many times. Your Nana promised to stop at the library and pick up some books on African animals, though, so we can learn together.

Why am I taking all this time off with you? Usually, you spend the day at Nana's or Grandma Molly's playing with your cousins. You live with me, but your dad is here often enough that it is almost like living with two married parents. When I'm home, we read a lot together. My parents taught me...and I agree...that reading is the best way to learn about the world you cannot physically experience. However, being witches, we have a little more flexibility in our ability to realise improbable things. You are improving at forming your letters, and together we are starting to learn Spanish nouns (which I believe to be more suitable to developing your first foreign language skills than French). I have every confidence that your intellectual foundation is firmly established. I've also tried to give you a basic understanding of ethics, but I trust your family to guide you in that all your life.

Does that count as two subjects? I wanted to give you a bit of my perspective of our life before my condition. It is difficult to find the words to describe the joy and adventures being with you inspires.

Essentially, though, I have accumulated enough holiday and sick leave over the years that I was able to take the last three weeks off. I've spent the last four weeks seeing every specialist in the country and a few foreign ones as well. Ron, Harry, and I thought I should keep a low profile at work until we had a logical explanation. I spend my days playing and reading with you and corresponding by owl and the Floo Network with my co-workers. We have several big pieces of legislation in the final stages before submission to the Wizengamot. Soon, I will have to have my colleagues over for tea to plan strategy and approve the final edits.

Professor Weasley, my essay is complete, having kept to the guidelines and finished it before its due date (aka your rising). Wish me patience and luck today!

Whimsically yours,

Mum

P.S.: I know you wanted to go to the reptile house yesterday, but I just couldn't enter. I've been Petrified by a basilisk, nearly lost your grandpa to Voldemort's pet snake, and watched her attempt to kill Professor Snape. Sorry, darling, but I will only suffer their company if my life depends on it.

*Later*

Good news first, Rose.

Professor Snape isolated the poison. That's the only good news in the letter he sent me. I am outraged (I wasn't blasting weeds for your amusement only...it felt *good*). Someone is *succeeding* at killing me! I survived torture, manhunts, and battle before I left my teens, only to be brought down by an anonymous killer using a poison unknown even by the best Potions master in England?

Professor Snape has never encountered it before. There was little residue in the sample, which means it is very potent. All we've gleaned from the tests is that it is a plant and it is in Queensland. Queensland!!!! Did you know that Queensland's tropical rainforests possess one of the highest biodiversity levels in Australia? There are thousands of different plants in such small areas.

The characteristics of this poison do not match any other known magical neurotoxins. The source must have magical aptitude (either possess magical properties or an ability to interact with magic), however, as it is untraceable in the body (meaning my blood work did not show any unusual toxic levels).

Professor Snape suggested a research team be sent to Queensland and search for the plant. There is political reason to as well...Ministry employees will be at risk if there is no antidote and our enemy attempts to influence public policy by elimination. I am to meet with Kingsley to advise him of the situation and to set up a meeting for the three of us to determine who will accompany Professor Snape to Australia.

Why is he doing this? Is his intellectual curiosity so stimulated by this case that he would put aside all other work and travel for an indefinite time to Australia? It seems

such a thankless task. He couldn't have found out that I saved his life...

Even so, I find it difficult to understand his motives. Then again, when have I ever?

I've sent in an owl to meet with Kingsley at his earliest convenience. I'm sure the Minister could spare his lunch break to meet with an old comrade.

Lots of love,

Mum

P.S.: It occurs to me that, as life has gotten very interesting lately, I've neglected to share with you any motherly wisdom, or at least what your mum likes to eat! Well, I consider tea to be in a food group of its own (no doubt your father's influence), but I have also recently become fond of Thai cuisine. I feel more logical than wise, but my mother recently passed on to me a book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a member of the German resistance during the Second World War. He wrote that the "essence of optimism is that it takes no account of the present, but it is a source of inspiration, of vitality and hope where others have resigned; it enables a man to hold his head high, to claim the future for himself and not to abandon it to his enemy." What a lovely piece of advice...

June 1, 2010

Dear Rose,

I wish I could say I suffered from bipolar disorder (a Muggle psychological condition), but I'm afraid my rapid transitions from frustrated to relieved to excited to angry are to be entirely blamed on my trip to the Ministry today. My emotional state is just volatile enough that I will go on long rants about random issues if I don't stick to a strict, colour-coded version of the events:

8:45...Ginny collected you for a play date with Jamie and Al. I wore my best work clothes (which I have strangely missed over the past few weeks) and Flooed to the Atrium.

9:00...Met Susan Bones, Dorothy Prewett, Quintus Knightley, Mirabel Duval, and Imogene Abbot from the office (I have tea weekly with Mirabel, Dorothy, and Susan; do you remember them?). Entertained much sympathy and disappointment from them regarding my medical condition, which is spoken about in the most ambiguous of terms. I absolutely loved being back in the office and working on new legislation!

10:15...Notarized my will.

11:30...Meeting with Kingsley. Themis Brocklehurst, the head of MLE also present, so all mention of Professor Snape confined to references to Royal Havisham (Kingsley unsurprised, but seemingly displeased). Am informed that I am temporarily banned from any ministerial work, with paid leave, of course.

Banned, Rose!!!! Logic can go Reducto itself...I am to be kept from my (other) life's work because some psychopath has decided to kill me? If these are indeed my last six months, I want to be living a full life as a mother and passing equity laws. Instead, I am told that this attempt could be politically motivated and the only way to prevent other assassination attempts is to remove me from the equation!

I am not allowed to even be a consultant. I know being your mother is my first priority, but I care so much about civil justice! I was hunted not just for being Uncle Harry's friend but because I was a Muggle-born. There is so much still to do to promote tolerance and protect rights, and I will go stir-crazy watching from the sidelines.

Kingsley looked at me very intently when my tirade was finished and opened a file sitting on his desk.

"Hermione, I am sure you are aware that your department has been under fire from conservative lobbyists ever since you transferred from Magical Creatures to the MLE. They see you as the greatest threat to the status quo, and we agree since we approached you about this legislation in the first place."

"I have received threats before," I objected. Themis shook her head.

"Your post has been screened since you were hired, as is your colleagues'. There are fifteen letters addressed to you in that file that contained curses. I cannot, in good faith, risk your colleagues' lives by letting you continue to take part in this legislation."

Kingsley nodded. "Furthermore, this poison presents a high security risk for several reasons. Your assailant clearly has the resources and intellect necessary to possess this rare of a weapon and to choose a mysterious way of distributing it. We don't know if this is aimed solely at you or if a larger conspiracy is afoot. Frankly, I am concerned about the slow-moving nature of the poison. This smells of blackmail...put fear into Ministry employees that they could die a potentially slow and painful death. Individual employees could be forced into decisions if promised they wouldn't receive a dose."

"The Aurors will be put in charge of this investigation," Themis said. "This will be top priority and have the highest security clearance. Naturally, you will be asked to advise and cooperate with the investigation."

"The expedition to find a cure will be under the oversight of the Aurors in order to keep it out of the papers. I don't want this enemy to know they are losing their advantage," Kingsley added.

I frowned. "I hardly think an Auror would be appropriate to lead an Herbology expedition."

Kingsley smiled. "We have just the right man for the job. Themis, would you excuse us, please?"

We said our goodbyes, and Kingsley ordered lunch brought in. He looked disapproving.

"I received a letter from our friend two days ago, informing me of the situation. I must say I haven't received such a blistering lecture on the nature of security in my administration before. Apparently, I practically invited Ron to visit our friend."

"I *am* sorry," I apologized. Kingsley shook his head.

"Under the circumstances, I can hardly fault Ron for his behaviour. How are you holding up?"

"As best I can, given I've just been banned from my job." It was his turn to wince. "I'm just trying to live each day to its fullest and spend as much time with my family as possible."

"We will find a cure," he promised. "Royal has contacted friends in Queensland who will be able to assist, and I will pull every herbologist away from their projects if necessary. We will not give up on you!"

His confidence buoyed my spirits, although I still felt as though I had been fired. We spent the next half hour looking over potential members of the expedition and discussing logistics. Within the week, we will hopefully meet for the first time. Oh...Kingsley has picked the *perfect* man to lead the expedition.

This feels exactly like going behind Umbridge's back in my fifth year! But that still hasn't dissolved my anger.

Love from your

Mum

P.S.: I'm waiting again.

June 4, 2010

My dearest Rose,

Please forgive me for saying this, but I need a break. Running after you on crutches is no easy feat, and I wish all sorts of harm on your dad for giving you a toy broomstick. Thank Merlin you've not inherited my fear of flying. I love spending time with you, but it is all I do! I am unable to find a balance now that I cannot participate in the legislation, and I am getting nowhere with the book of magical plants in Australia.

We are going to my parents' house for a miniature holiday...you're not the only one who needs her mum right now.

I hope, whenever you are, that you still remember me fondly.

Mum

P.S.: I love you!

June 7, 2010

Dear Rose,

It is amazing what three days away from your regular life can do to renew the spirit. As I told your dad and Uncle Harry over lunch today, I think I now understand how Sirius Black felt, trapped by circumstances and unable to help the Order of the Phoenix at all. I disapproved of Sirius's recklessness, but I wonder if I would have acted any differently. Feeling useless is one of the most frustrating things in the world.

Harry let it slip that he will be in charge of the investigation here at home. While there is little evidence, I have the utmost confidence in Harry. He has the rare ability to face an impossible task and doggedly pursue it until it is mastered. But in the meantime, he is my steadfast friend, making me laugh by suggesting all sorts of outrageous tasks to help me feel useful. Tomorrow, the three of us are meeting the expedition for the first time at Kingsley's flat in London. Finally, we can make some progress!

I received a card today from Mirabel and her brother wishing me a speedy recovery. Mirabel spent all of this spring encouraging me to go out with Claude, although at the time I thought that I could have nothing in common with a herbologist. How ironic now!

Much love,

Mum

June 8, 2010

My dearest Rose,

I don't know what to think. I'm going to Australia! Not once did I imagine this happening. Part of me is jumping up and down in exultation and mentally drawing up lists of everything I need to get ready while the rest of me keeps coming back to the image of you dirt streaked and smiling as you presented me with the bouquet of flowers you really shouldn't have torn up from our garden. I don't know how I can be separated from you for potentially months!

Let me explain to you how this came about. Aunt Ginny offered to watch you tonight while your dad, Harry, and I went to London. That was awfully kind of Ginny...I am in awe of her ability to handle two young boys and a baby and work part time as a reporter. We were the first to arrive at Kingsley's flat in Chelsea. Although Kingsley lives alone, his flat is sophisticated and perfect for small parties.

Harry and Ron quickly engaged Kingsley in a discussion of the warding spells on the flat...the advantage to having a former Auror as the Minister of Magic is that it is impossible to spy on him in his own home.

"I assume your office is monitored, then?" I asked, remembering how we avoided mentioning Professor Snape by name. Kingsley possesses a very lovely sofa upon which I lounged.

"I practically asked for it, promising transparency in government. Hence, our covert meeting here."

Harry frowned. "I'm concerned that Hermione's absence will not go unnoticed by the press. Rita Skeeter in particular will be asking questions about her health."

"A fair point," Kingsley acknowledged. "We will have to create a cover story. Would you like to go observe the Bulgarian Ministry, Hermione? I'm certain we could convince Viktor Krum to vouch for your presence there."

"It would be lovely to see Viktor again, although I don't fancy hiding away very much," I replied. Any further discussion was interrupted by the subsequent arrivals of our compatriots.

First to arrive was Sinead O'Rourke, a Healer from St. Mungo's. She's a tall, auburn-haired woman still in her work robes. Any tiredness from a long shift was obscured by her easy-going manner, and the two of us quickly warmed to each other. A short while later, a stocky man dressed for trekking arrived, followed by my dear friend Neville Longbottom. All of us sat down on Kingsley's lovely sofas with glasses of wine and hors d'oeuvres, conversing in small groups.

"He's late," I muttered to Kingsley. He rolled his eyes.

"He has always loved making an entrance," he replied. I smiled in agreement. Both of us were wrong, however, for Professor Snape arrived quietly, Glamoured, in the company of a white-haired man.

"Royal! We were beginning to think you weren't coming!" Ron called, causing Harry to look quizzically at him. During the war, Kingsley's resistance name was Royal, and that no doubt contributed to Harry's confusion tonight. Professor Snape's companion smiled.

"That would be my fault. I'm afraid the time shift left me absolutely knackered. Evening, mates," he replied in tones of an Australian countryman. He looked to be a little younger than Professor McGonagall, but his manner reminded me of Teddy's father, Remus Lupin. When we were all seated, Kingsley thanked us for coming.

"I know you all have other responsibilities, but I thank you for the sacrifices you are making by joining this. Your work will be vital in preventing, but more likely combating, a significant threat to the health of this government. Hermione may have been the first to be attacked, but I fear she won't be the last. We have less than six months in which to address this situation, but I sincerely hope you won't have to be in the jungle for that long." There was some laughter.

"Tonight, we will talk strategy so that I can begin negotiations with the Australian prime minister. Perhaps we might begin by introducing ourselves?" The stocky man next to him stirred.

"Rolf Scamander. Usually, I'm a magizoologist, but I came home to visit my grandfather and was drafted by Kingsley to be your guide. Queensland is very interesting this time of year," Scamander added. He must be the grandson of Newt Scamander, author of *Magical Beasts and Where to Find Them*. I wonder if he knows Luna.

Harry was next. "I'm Harry. I work for the Auror office and will be leading the investigation here."

"Ron Weasley. Deputy to the guy next to me, and...well...actually, I don't have a legitimate reason to be here." More than one of us rolled their eyes. "But in a way, it's kind of my fault that you are all here, so thanks."

I shook my head. "He's my ex-husband, and I think it's sweet he worries so much. I am Hermione Granger, but it's really my fault that you get to go to warm, sunny Australia. I know this is a long shot, but I really appreciate all of your sacrifices." Ron gave my hand a squeeze.

"We'll thank you now before we're worrying about crocodiles," Sinead teased. "My name is Sinead O'Rourke. I work at St. Mungo's in Potions and Plant Poisoning."

"Neil Erhling. My wife Adelaide and I are private researchers in Queensland. I specialize in ley line magic and will, therefore, be assisting in several capacities. My wife and I are also opening up our home as a base for the expedition. I've known this man," referring to Professor Snape sitting next to him, "nearly a decade."

Professor Snape flicked his gaze to Kingsley, who nodded.

"I must ask you all for your complete discretion," Kingsley asked calmly. There were some confused faces, but all assented. Harry's eyes widened, and he whipped his head towards Professor Snape.

"Yes, Potter." Professor Snape removed his Glamour. Neville, sitting next to him, paled, but did not flinch. The room was silent. "My privacy is very dear to me, so I thank you all for your silence." Neil's eyes crinkled.

"Some of you know me as Royal Havisham. I am an independent Potions master and will be serving the same function on this trip. Mr. Longbottom." He nodded to Neville, who noticeably swallowed.

"Right. I'm Neville. I'm currently on leave from the Auror office and recently finished my Herbology apprenticeship." Neville was a far cry from the timid third year he used to be, but his gaze challenged the man next to him as he continued. "Kingsley has asked me to head the expedition."

Everyone who knew Neville watched Professor Snape for his reaction. A flicker of his eyelids was the only sign of surprise he gave, but I held my breath as he studied Neville. Finally, he gave a tiny but curt nod. Kingsley clapped his hands together.

"Very good. Now, Severus has determined that the most likely place you will find the poison is in..."

We talked logistics for over an hour. There are several tropical rainforests in Queensland that fit the ley line coordinates Professor Snape was able to determine from my residuals. I have to find out how he did that! There was discussion over which forest would be searched first; debate broke out over collection methods, and I sat back, enjoying the spectacle.

Meanwhile, Harry and Kingsley were discussing my list of enemies. Is it a sign of accomplishment to have your own personal enemies list? I suppose a good number of old Wizarding families (I really do not like the term 'pureblood') were there as were Marietta Edgecome (although I sent her a letter of apology after I learned Umbridge used Veritaserum on her), Rita Skeeter (unlikely that she'd wish to kill me when she can merely start another smear campaign), and Dolores Umbridge (in Azkaban). In short, too many people and not enough evidence.

When there was a lull in the conversation, I was surprised to hear my name.

"I think Hermione should come with you," Harry announced. All of us looked at him in surprise. Naturally, Professor Snape was the first to react.

"And how would Miss Granger be of service? The forest is no place for... someone in her condition." A *cripple*. I could almost hear him say it.

"You need a researcher," Harry argued. "Someone who can hunt through libraries and follow up obscure references. This is exactly what we lacked while searching for Horcruxes. And Hermione is the best person for the job. You need her!"

"*She* is right here," I objected. "I can't just get up and leave..."

"Harry makes a good point," Ron interjected. "This is exactly up your alley, Hermione. This could make it much easier to find the source of the poison! Besides, you've been frustrated for days, feeling useless."

"But Rose..."

"She can stay with me. I *am* her dad, after all."

Harry was right...we had no idea what we were looking for or where to find a Horcrux during the war. This task would be no different unless someone could find any sort of documentation. But to leave you behind and go off to Australia for an indeterminate amount of time... I trust Ron, though. He will take good care of you, or at least take you to his mother or mother-in-law.

I looked at Neville. "What do you think?"

He didn't hesitate. "We'd be clomping around the rainforest without any sort of direction if you didn't have our backs. I want you in Queensland. Any objections?"

Even Professor Snape assented. Neil Erhling graciously opened his home to me for the duration of the trip (Professor Snape shot him a look), and suddenly, I realized I was going to Australia again! As I sit here now, I realize that I actually am looking forward to it. I love learning about subjects I don't even know if I'll ever have a use for. But to leave you... it's breaking my heart.

I've never told you this before, but I modified my parents' memories and sent them to Australia before we left to search for Horcruxes. It was one of the hardest decisions I ever made, and I have to wonder if I am making a huge mistake removing myself from your life when there could be so little time left.

But it is done. I have a responsibility now to my new colleagues, and I want to help them find this cure as fast as possible so I can come home soon. I will be incredibly busy the next few days, packing and spending as much time with you as I can, so I expect your next letter will be written from Australia.

I love you so much!

Mum

*Thank you for reading! Part Three will be up in a few weeks.*

## Part Three

### Chapter 4 of 4

Knowing she is dying a slow and humiliating death, Hermione begins writing to her daughter in the future. Written for Josette in the 2011 SSHG\_Exchange.

*A/N: Thank you so much for all the reviews and your patience! Many thanks also go to M and to Clairvoyant for all their advice, encouragement, and grammar skills. I hope you enjoy!*

*June 14, 2010*

Dear Rose,

The little I've seen of Australia has already imprinted itself vividly in my mind. In the letter I'm sending you and your dad this week, I've tried to convey the jewel-like beauty of this land. That's not to say that England is not beautiful...the subtle differences in nature's palette make me feel more at home than these vivid, contrasting colours...nor that I wish to settle here permanently. But it *is* breathtaking. Last time, I was too concerned with finding my parents to fully appreciate this land.

I do wonder why we've never spent a holiday here before. From my bed at Keidas House, I can distantly see the meeting of the cloudless sky and the ocean. 'Keidas' is the Finnish word for oasis, a sentiment I echo. I wish you were here with me.

Although our Portkey departed last night (in an attempt to avoid any press), the time change means that we arrived extremely early this morning in Sydney. While Canberra is the capital of Australia, Sydney is the home of the Ministry of Magic. There are sub-branches in each of the states and territories, but the headquarters are in Sydney. We were "unofficially" greeted by the heads of the Department of Mysteries and the Department of Magical Transportation, who expressed the regrets of the Minister, who couldn't be here without drawing suspicion. I believe these two departments have oversight over our expedition because we have free rein to create Portkeys and have the credentials to be trekking in World Heritage sites.

From Sydney, we went directly to Keidas House, the home of Neil and Adelaide Erhling. Neil's parents emigrated from Finland before he was born and settled in Queensland, and I believe this is their original home. I'm not quite certain how far we are from Brisbane, but I do know that we are closer to the coast than the various rainforests. I'm amazed at how varied Queensland is...there is the Great Barrier Reef, the outback, and numerous tropical and temperate rainforests within this one state. Thank Merlin, we only have to deal with rainforests; then again, I don't know how they are going to find our poison's source in places of such incredible diversity.

It's midmorning, and we will be meeting soon to make last-minute preparations. I have yet to meet Adelaide Erhling, and I believe we will be travelling to the wizards' district in Brisbane to pick up supplies. I'm sure there will be so much to tell you later.

Thinking of you fondly,

Mum

*June 15, 2010*

My darling girl,

Well, the expedition has departed, and this enormous house is empty, save for Adelaide and me. I hope you and your dad are having a wonderful time looking after Calla! It was a surprise, I must admit, when Professor Snape requested that the two of you look after his dog. Would you be astonished if I told you I was slightly jealous that you've gained Professor Snape's approval in two meetings while I still feel somewhat like a schoolgirl trying to impress him? Nevertheless, I hope Calla is keeping you occupied and cheerful.

Professor Snape left with the expedition this morning, but he will be back shortly. As Potions master, he will spend most of his time in the lab here at Keidas House. I believe he wishes to observe Neville (who has been wonderful...he is so confident and sure of himself I highly doubt Professor Snape can intimidate him anymore) and ensure proper collection techniques. It was of some debate where to go first...the source's residuals revealed that it was extracted near a prominent ley line that just happens to run inland along the entire coast. Naturally, more than one rainforest resides along this line. However, the consensus is to begin in the south, in Lamington National Forest, and then work northward.

Meanwhile, Adelaide is taking me tomorrow to Targan Conservatory of Magic, Hogwarts' counterpart in Queensland. Adelaide Erhling might be the most extraordinary woman I've ever met. While she is shorter than me, she has such presence that I feel quite small next to her. However, she is such a warm-hearted and nurturing individual that I was immediately drawn to rather than intimidated by her. Adelaide, as she invited me to call her, is silver haired but looks much younger than someone her age. Neil adores her, and even Professor Snape is cordial in her presence. I will have to ask her how they met. Adelaide is also a brilliant witch; she is a former student of Nicholas Flamel and also worked with Dumbledore. Currently, she is studying how alchemists and physicists transmute metals differently. A Muggle physicist can create new particles from the collisions of old particles, but they can never produce a Sorcerer's Stone, she says. Adelaide wants to discover what magic really is, or at least, how it works.

Yes, Rose. I've died and gone to intellectual heaven! Adelaide has just made lunch for the two of us...and I haven't even told you about the wizards' district yet! Perhaps I will wait until Market Day...Adelaide told me that it is a sight unlike any you'd see in Diagon Alley.

Hope you are well!

Love,

Mum

*June 16, 2010*

Dear Rose,

I think I once wrote that it would take a life-or-death situation to find me willingly near a snake. Now I will be spending the next week or so in a school that honours snakes! I'm actually quite fascinated. The most prominent figure in Murri mythology is the "rainbow serpent," a giant snake that lives in the Australian waterways and reveals itself as a rainbow. It has the power to destroy and to heal, to name and to create. Such a complex character reminds me of how our own community viewed Slytherins rather

single-mindedly and failed to recognize their many qualities. It is also apparent to me that we are much more aware of prejudice directed towards us than our own intolerances.

Adelaide Apparated us to the school this morning. Targan is located somewhere in the interior before it becomes the outback. After seeing a snake embellishing the school gates, I was somewhat nervous, which was rather silly of me, as it is a beautiful school run by a wonderful staff. Targan is one of the names for the rainbow serpent, I learned, and is commemorated quite tastefully in the design. I especially love the indigenous artwork decorating the school. Targan is not a castle but a series of bungalows situated in a grove of trees. The children wear short gauzy robes that seem to be the fashion in the warm weather (winter here is nothing like our winters) and are separated into Houses like Hogwarts. Adelaide explained that Houses are randomly assigned and change every two years. Australian wizards are not so concerned about coming from a Muggle background; instead, relations between Murri and non-native Australians have been a source of conflict. I am trying not to be distracted from my own task, but I have a new desire to study the integration of indigenous shamanism into wizard lore.

We met briefly with the deputy headmaster and then proceeded to the library. Adelaide is an old friend of the current librarian, a wizard by the name of Ferdinand Harrell. Unlike Madam Pince, who treated every student as a potential liability, Master Harrell is an enthusiast. If you ask for a book on northeastern Australian flora, you will receive at least two with an accompanying list of sources to cross-reference and other tomes of interest.

I took the proffered books and settled down at a desk near the south wall. The library itself is, amazingly, made of glass, yet protects the books from light and heat damage. My desk looks out over an elaborate fountain crowned by a stone serpent erupting from the water. Ordinarily, I might feel exposed in a glass room, but I loved the continuity from the room into the outdoors. Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect, followed a similar philosophy, I believe.

I expect I will be here for more than a week. Targan possesses a large collection of books exploring native plants and potions, and I will probably read them (or at least skim) cover to cover until I can create a classification system to narrow down what the team is looking for in Lamington Forest.

Market Day is Friday...I will have a letter out for you hopefully soon. I've already written 13 inches of parchment...Professor Snape would say I'm being excessive again.

Loads of love,

Mum

*June 18, 2010*

Dear Rose,

Market Day will have to wait. This morning, I put in a few hours of reading at Targan and then came home for lunch. Research is actually a very complicated process. Some subjects are so specific that there are only a few treatises, but most of the time, it is a long, tiresome process. I have very few leads...I am looking for:

- i. a magical plant in Queensland that is
- ii. most likely located along the longest ley line in the state and
- iii. most likely containing a neurotoxin.

I like to create a classification system in order to bring some sense of control to an otherwise chaotic reading session. So far, I've begun familiarizing myself with native magical flora and am also reading some theses on identifying Muggle properties in plants. The fields of potions and herbology have only recently begun integrating Muggle research into their own fields. The fact is a plant is still a plant whether it has magic or not. Honestly, I'm feeling overwhelmed. This morning, I came to the realization that I would only be able to move forward once I understood the expedition's methods.

What a fortuitous thing, then, that I was surprised by Neville while finishing my letter to you and your dad.

"Neville!" I cried out. He grinned at me.

"Surprised to see me so soon?"

"Of course. We weren't expecting you until next week!"

"Snape wanted to bring back some early samples and brew some more salve. Neil ran afoul of some Devil's Snare tracing a line into a cave and got pretty banged up before we were able to extract him."

"Devil's Snare?" I repeated, wondering how Adelaide was taking it. She'd confided in me the other night that she had her concerns, letting her husband go off into the rainforests (he's done most of his work in the outback), but respected his enthusiasm too much to forbid it.

"Yeah. Lamington is really cool and foggy...it reminds me of that dinosaur movie Ron discovered. There are lots of waterfalls and parrots. We're not expecting to find a huge variety of plants here...mostly trees and ferns...but we want to rule them out all the same."

"How do you like leading an expedition?" I conjured another chair, which Neville took. He stretched out his legs with a sigh.

"It's fine. Everyone really respects each other...even Snape, although he's not much of a talker...and most of the time there's no need to assert my authority. Rolf guides us, and Sinead and I handle the plants. Snape's been teaching us these quick diagnostic spells that identify magical plants much quicker than the traditional methods. Neil has them perfected already...makes sense, as he helped develop the theory behind them...and he's also taking measurements of the ley lines. I don't quite understand everything he's doing, but it's like he's making a magical survey. You'll have to ask him."

I'm not quite a fan of camping anymore, although I would love to take you out at least once before... anyway, I briefly wished that I could go with them.

Neville asked me about the research. I complained about the difficulty in setting parameters, and he made some suggestions.

"I would talk to Snape as well," he added. "He's going to stay here and run tests while we collect samples."

"What's your impression of him?"

"He is imposing but not intimidating. He hasn't tried to make any snide remarks about my authority, but you get the sense he's always watching and judging. Frankly, it's a good thing he and Neil get along well; when we were learning the spells, Neil knew what questions to ask in order to help us master them. Otherwise, I'm sure Snape would have flayed me alive when I couldn't get them to work at first."

"I'm sure you've earned his respect, in one way or another."

He shrugged. "Listen, I just wanted to see how you are doing before I go write a letter to Hannah. She's been incredible, letting me take off like this. How are the..." He gestured towards my legs.

"They've been a bit sore today. It's starting to work itself into my calves." Research has kept my mind off my legs, except when I do my exercises. I've taken to reciting my favourite texts by memory in order to concentrate on something else.

Neville grimaced in sympathy. "We're working as hard as we can. We'll find it."

I smiled in thanks.

After Neville left, I sealed my letter and went downstairs to borrow Adelaide's parrot, Marcel. Eastern Australians tend to use parrots rather than owls to deliver post...Harry received a couple letters from Sirius this way when we were at Hogwarts. Sinead and I met on the way and went to have tea in the kitchen. Rolf, Neil, and Adelaide were already there, munching on biscuits. Tea was wonderful, and conversation easily flowed between us all. Rolf is quiet and serious...not vague, like I originally thought...but has a brilliant sense of humour while Sinead deftly draws ideas out of her companions.

We shared our independent projects with each other, weighing in new ideas or concerns. Neil explained that his interest in ley lines originated in the Murri ideas of "pastage," or Dreamtime. The Murri believe the lines are "turingas," paths created by the gods and revitalized throughout the year by energies. Murri shamans used them to send messages, which influenced Neil's hypothesis that ley lines serve as a coordinate system for magical output. Turinga coordinates can determine Portkey destinations without needing to personally know and visualize the destination. The Australian government is actually financing our expedition so that Neil can map out the rainforests.

I had more questions about the turinga analysis, but Neil referred me to Professor Snape. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to corner him, as he stayed in his lab brewing all night and made only a brief appearance at supper. Since he will be remaining here while the expedition returns to Lamington tomorrow, I hope he will be amenable to my asking questions. Your dad would call that a "fat chance"...Professor Snape's favourite name for me was, after all, "insufferable know-it-all."

That reminds me: there is *nothing* wrong with learning as much as you can. I just urge you to be responsible with your knowledge. Our ability to communicate is one of our greatest strengths. Professor Snape was right; my eagerness to demonstrate my abilities cost others chances to prove themselves. Always consider how the information you wish to share will influence the people and events that surround you. On the other hand, never be afraid to say, "I love you."

And I do!

Mum

*June 20, 2010*

Dear Rose,

I am a fraud. Your dad and uncle touted my abilities as a researcher, but how could I expect myself to jump into a field I have not seriously studied since Hogwarts and produce the expected results? I'm staring at five piles of books stacked around me and cannot fathom how I'm going to find an answer.

Chin up, I keep telling myself. Look for patterns. Take Neville's suggestion of classifying plants by their function and properties and keep chiselling away at the shapeless granite before me. There has to be a sculpture in there.

My mind keeps coming back to you. Are you and your dad getting along? How is his cooking? Is Calla keeping you company? Are you missing me? I listen for your laughter, waiting for you to tug me towards your most recent discovery, and go to bed missing our daily read-aloud.

Darling, what am I doing here? Clearly, I am of little use to anyone.

Keidas House feels empty now that the expedition has departed again. Adelaide and Professor Snape have remained in their laboratories all weekend, no doubt engrossed in their own work. I rarely see them except at meals, and even then, Professor Snape avoids my entreaties into conversation. There has been no opportunity to seek his advice without disturbing him in his lab...something I dare not do.

As for myself, I travel between Targan and Keidas House daily. Mostly, I read and take notes on plant anthologies, looking for some clue that might lead me towards the source. Today, I decided to address my classification problem by organizing geographically by forest, but it, too, is a slow and tedious route. If only more wizards knew about neurotoxins! Most plant descriptions are limited to physical appearance, handling procedures, and common usage. I'm not usually prone to dark humour, but it seems fitting to me that there are few mentions of poisons...it would spoil their effect.

What's more, I cannot bring myself to enjoy all the interesting detours my research uncovers! There is no joy in this task, only frustration.

This is not the portrayal of your mother I wish you to see. If only I could wave my wand and intuitively know the answers I seek...then again, I've never put any stock in Divination.

Your dad would tell me to quit whinging...he's right, too.

Love,

Mum

*June 22, 2010*

Dear Rose,

My favourite part of Keidas House is the veranda overlooking the south side of the house. In the morning, I slip outside with a cup of Darjeeling (Adelaide has not had the privilege yet of trying blackcurrant...when we go to the market this week I will try to find some for her) and watch the birds fly about the yard. Queensland is home to over 600 species of *avis*, each with a distinct plumage and voice. If I'm lucky, I even spot a koala lounging in the nearby eucalyptus grove.

I came home exhausted from another fruitless day at Targan. My spirits lifted, however, when I found the letter waiting for me. Your dad's familiar handwriting adorned the epistle, and I hobbled out to the veranda to enjoy it. Because it faces south, it receives a fair amount of sunlight even in the evening. I settled in my favourite Adirondack chair and began to read the letter.

The birds had mostly settled down; there were only a few bursts of squawks and song accompanying my laughter. Ron had written a very funny account of Calla stealing a drumstick from his plate one night and his attempt to retrieve it from her. I was very glad to hear he'd settled well into *my* house and your routine. The toy broomstick comment did not escape my notice, however, and I promise to send him a stern warning to be careful. On the other hand, I would be very happy if you didn't inherit my fear of flying. This was the surprise he promised at the end of the letter:

*Dear Mum*

*I miss you and so does Calla. Its fun playing with Daddy but he doesnt read like you. When are you coming home? Tell Mr. Snape Calla is well and likes me telling her stories.*

*Love*

*Rose*

I loved your surprise! Your first letter...every painstakingly written word was beautiful and every missed apostrophe endearing. How long had you laboured at it? Quickly, however, my pride became tears. You missed me. How I wanted to run on legs that didn't work towards the nearest Floo and come straight home.

Twilight came, but I was only aware of my heart hurting, the only sound my sobs.

"Are you unwell?" Professor Snape stood in the entryway. I tried to speak, but the lump in my throat prevented me from contradicting him. My desolation overrode any embarrassment I felt in being discovered by him. Surprisingly, he shut the door to the veranda and silently took the chair next to mine. I could see his face in my peripheral, stoic but not unkind.

I finally found my voice in between sobs. "No, just distressed."

"That is obvious," he spoke with a hint of amusement, but the tone was gentle. "Have you received unpleasant news?"

"No...I..." I faced him, only to find him waiting patiently, no trace of mockery in his expression. I didn't know why he was out here or why he sought to comfort a grieving woman whom he drove to tears years ago. However, the words began tumbling out: my frustrations with research, my fears of letting down the expedition, my need to be with my daughter.

The tears continued to slide down my cheeks as I told Professor Snape all of this. When I finished, my head hung in despair. Even the chipped varnish I wore on my toenails was a sign of my disgrace.

"Naturally, you are correct." My head jerked up to meet his impassive gaze. "Is that what you wish me to tell you? That while your love of your daughter is admirable, your presence here clearly demeans your commitment to her?"

Mute, I listened to my most insistent insecurities vocalized by the sardonic man beside me. Of course he was correct. Leaving you behind was a mistake...how could I have put my own interests ahead of you?

"Quit this ridiculous self-flagellation!" he snapped, clearly reading my mind and thus startling me out of my tears.

"You wished to feel useful. That is the natural reaction of any patient kept from their usual activities. And so you are here. Do not flatter yourself...you would not be here if you were not truly needed. Longbottom barely outclasses you at his own subject, with your proclivities for swallowing every book you come across."

He frowned. "Although," he added as he stood up and loomed over me, "I suppose your work contains more analysis and original thought than those regurgitated monstrosities you used to throw at me. That is beside the point, however." He looked angry now. "During Lupin's year as a teacher, I heard that your boggart represented your fear of failure. Will you let down an entire team who is counting on you for direction, whose members have thrown away their lives for the next few months, because you are experiencing a disappointing start? Let me tell you, Miss Granger, these things never come easily."

He stopped pacing. "No child should be left without a mother," he said quietly. "Would you really trade a lifetime for a few months with Rose?"

I stared at him, transfixed by his intense expression. Finally, I spoke.

"When you put it that way, I really am a dunderhead." His lips twisted wryly. I swiped at the tear tracks as he returned to his seat.

"Everyone knew my boggart was Professor McGonagall telling me I failed everything?" I suddenly asked. He smirked.

"Highlight of the staff meeting," he replied. I turned red.

"Do you think I have a chance?"

"No," he said flatly. We were silent.

"But my initial impressions of your classmates have been erroneous; there is no reason why I should not be mistaken now," he continued. "Perhaps the time has come to stop proving your abilities to yourself and to simply act."

"Thank you," I whispered. "In law, we are taught to examine the situation from multiple perspectives. I...I forgot..."

A peculiar look came over his face as I trailed off. With a sigh, he rubbed a hand over his face.

"Guilt," he spoke quietly, "is the most powerful of all masters." He unfolded his tall frame and strode to the door.

"Please..." I bit out as his slim fingers curved around the handle. He whirled around, eyes wide and nostrils flared. Belatedly, I remembered that those same words had brought about the death of another. How cruel of me to remind him after he had shown me such consideration.

"Call me Hermione," I offered weakly. His face relaxed infinitesimally, and he inclined his head.

"Goodnight," I called after his retreating form.

*Perhaps the time has come to stop proving your abilities to yourself and to simply act.*

I keep returning to that moment, wondering about the man who sat next to me, who listened and offered his own form of comfort, who exposed his soul briefly for the sake of a woman he barely knew.

I thank him from the bottom of my heart. Where there's life, there's hope...I am going to die in five months, Rose, unless I prove Professor Snape wrong. He's laid down the gauntlet...on purpose, I'm sure...and I am determined to succeed.

I almost feel guilty that in order to rise to his challenge, your dad won't be the only one breaking our promise to value Professor Snape's privacy.

All my love,

Mum

June 23, 2010

Dear Rose,

If I applied new varnish to my toes and wore my nicest work clothes, it was because I wanted to feel confident, not just to impress Professor Snape. Normally, he makes an appearance before I have finished my morning ablutions, but I dressed with more speed than usual in order to catch him before he disappeared into his lab for the day. As such, I nearly lost him as I turned into the main corridor.

"Professor Snape!" I called, causing him to pause at the far corner. He turned, a resigned look on his face as he watched me hobble towards him.

"Yes, Miss...Hermione," he corrected himself. The sound of my name coming from his thin lips caused my mind to blank momentarily.

"Good morning." I winced. The look he gave me was quizzical, impatient, and reserved for miscreants trying to explain themselves.

"Yes," he repeated, drawing out the word. I blushed.

"Last night...I wished to say thank you. For your kindness." Emboldened by his answering nod, I continued. "Is there anything I can do...help brew potions? Assist in any



analysis?"

"Your thanks do not require an additional offer of servitude." He replied. "Unless you are... relinquishing your duties elsewhere?"

"No, no!" I hastened to assure him. How quickly I'd lost control of the conversation! "The offer stands by itself. However, I am in need of your assistance if I am to get anywhere with my own research."

"I see... Very well, then, you may accompany me to my lab." I struggled to keep up with him as he swept down a hallway. How I hate crutches! It is much easier to navigate the stairs at Keidas House than at his house in Cambridge, so I was able to temporarily avoid further embarrassment.

Professor Snape's lab was on the ground floor of Keidas House. Several cauldrons stood in the middle of the room with stasis charms over them, and a series of large glass bell jars containing various specimens lined one of the counters. On the opposite counter was what appeared to be an empty terrarium. Professor Snape transfigured a stool into a straight-backed wooden chair and offered it to me.

"Before we begin," he said as he turned to the closest counter and began sharpening a knife...I swallowed nervously. "I would remind you that I am no longer your professor and do not require you to address me as such. My surname will suffice."

"But that sounds so disrespectful!" I objected. No doubt you've noticed I always referred to him by his full title...it's a habit I haven't lost since school.

"Severus, then. You are my colleague now," he said impatiently. My eyes widened. How ironic that he recognizes me as such when I feel childish!

"Thank you," I said sincerely. He made a gesture of dismissal.

"You expressed a frustration with your research last night. What methods have you tried?" He began to dice some hellebore.

"Categorization by location, function, and magical properties," I recited.

"A logical beginning. Have you begun to cross-reference categories?" His hands deftly worked through the pile of flowers next to him.

"No, I..."

"Why ever not?" he demanded.

I wilted slightly. "There are so many native species I haven't been able to categorize them all yet."

He spun around, brandishing his knife. "You've never used the Search Spell?" Confused, I shook my head. His eyes widened. "All those extra references in your essays...do you mean you read them all?"

"Most of them. Sometimes there were tables of contents I could refer to."

Severus (why is writing his name so thrilling?) shook his head in disbelief. "I did you a partial disservice, then," he said mysteriously. "The Search Spell allows you to find a specific word or phrase."

"Like a search engine!"

"Precisely, only the spell works on a single book at a time. The incantation is *Ostendo Sum Libri*," he demonstrated the wand movement, "and then you immediately say the topic or phrase you wish to find."

"Thank you!" I repeated. Once again, he made a dismissive gesture; only this time, it was done gently.

"Is there anything else you wish to ask me?"

"Yes!" I jumped at the invitation. "How do you determine the different characteristics of the residuals? If I know what characteristics you use, I can add them to my matrix."

"You hardly need to know the first to answer the second." He pointed out. I smiled sheepishly.

"I've wanted to know how you do it since you collected my residuals."

He smirked. "And what if it is a trade secret?"

I must've looked disappointed enough because he gave a short, biting laugh. "Very well...as long as I don't find you've written the incantations down anywhere."

Severus retrieved a glass vial filled with clay-coloured residue from a cold chest and emptied it into the terrarium. The residue was from a flutterbloom collected in Lamington Forest. The series of spells he proceeded to cast (and that I shall not repeat) on the residue are derived from the theory of magical imprinting. Golden Snitches have flesh memories, which identify the first person to touch it. Similarly, the makeup of the plant and the conditions it grew in imprint on the plant's residuals. Severus identified not only the ley line imprint but also the quality of the soil the flutterbloom grew in, the amount of nutrients it received, and in what ways it could be used magically.

Severus is revolutionizing the field of potions development. It was a revelation watching him in his element...both intensely focused and tender with his movements. He was also surprisingly open to my questions, answering them readily. Although he spoke to me as an equal, I wondered if he saw me as an adult physically. My body has more curves in it from pregnancy, and my hair is cut in such a way (thanks to a Muggle stylist) that the bushiness has condensed into curls (by the way, Rose, if your hair is similar to mine, don't brush it!...you will only add to the frizz). Of course, he has made no mention of it. I don't mean to imply that I want him to be attracted to me! Simply, that I see him through an adult's eyes now and wonder if he does the same. I'm not making sense even to myself.

Maybe I do find his voice and hands sensual, his face striking...

Enough of that! It is sufficient to say that I have some new ideas to apply to my methods and that Severus was civil, if not pleasant. The Search Spell is a miraculous invention for times like these (usually I enjoy working my way through an entire book), and all in all, today has been the highlight of the trip!

Love you lots,

Mum

June 26, 2010

Dear Rose,

I've spent the last few days furiously making my way through Targan's herbology collection. The Search Spell allows me to follow a paper trail for each individual topic rather than read entry after entry in the hopes of finding connections. My matrix is coming along quite nicely, and I expect to be making some Arithmancy calculations soon.

We visited the market in Brisbane yesterday...all the exotic sights and smells threatened to overwhelm my senses! I wrote a long letter describing it to you and your dad and included a lovely bracelet I bought from a Torres Straight Islander for you. Although I couldn't find any blackcurrant tea (I asked your nana to send me some), I picked up a nice local blend.

The expedition also returned this morning with more samples for Severus to analyse. They are enjoying their "bushwalking," as Neil says, and took the opportunity to jump off a waterfall this past week! Insane.

Severus caught me at lunch. "If you still wish to be serviceable, I am in need of some assistance," he murmured. I was delighted to be of help. The last few days we have had very little contact except at meals...although he has done me the civility of acknowledging my presence, unlike before.

I expect I will be very busy over the next few days. We are promised a grand seafood dinner tonight, and I will be busy preparing ingredients for those potions being replenished. It is gratifying to be trusted by a Potions master to prepare his ingredients!

Oh, and today I saw a wallaby hop across the yard! I wish you could have seen her...although I'm sure you would have begged me to take her home and I would have had the great misfortune to refuse you.

Will you still love me despite not bringing home a wallaby?

Mum

*June 30, 2010*

Dear Rose,

Five days ago, I would have laughed if you had told me I could walk into Severus' laboratory while he was working and announce that we were looking in the wrong part of Queensland without facing a physical or verbal ejection. As such, he merely raised an eyebrow and continued to lean over a terrarium, extracting residue from a specimen. I settled into the chair he'd left transfixed since I began helping him Sunday, my hands fingering my work robe in anticipation.

When the soft green residue was completely encased within a thin glass vial, he turned toward me.

"You are going to fall out of that chair if you keep fidgeting. Here," he sent a small, dirty bronze cauldron my way, "keep your hands busy while you elaborate."

I rolled my eyes, but summoned a rag and some cleaner. Severus' lips twitched again in that wry expression I'd come to interpret as the closest thing he had to a smile, and he began cleaning his own workspace.

"What brought about that conclusion?" he asked. I tore my eyes from the disarming sight of my former imposing teacher scrubbing away and focused on my own task.

"I ran some Arithmancy calculations on my matrix compared to the readings you gave me from the source yesterday. There is an 8.7% likelihood of finding the source in Lamington Forest. I kept running over the characteristics, trying to find out what we were missing."

"And?" He prompted me as I focused all my attention on a particularly gritty spot. Good. He was intrigued.

"We've been looking too much at individual characteristics...moisture, soil content, and magical proximity."

"Increasing the number of variables reduces the number of likely candidates, though."

"Yes, but an overall condition can be missed if a single variable is missing."

"Hermione..." he warned.

"Climate, Severus! We checked moisture and soil content but not air temperature. Lamington Forest is a temperate forest; it's too cool!"

An expletive left his mouth. "That was particularly idiotic of me," he said with an edge of irritation. Severus set aside his cleaning, Summoning clean parchment. I continued to scrub at my cauldron, accompanied by the scratching of a quill as he worked furiously beside me. Severus remained focused on his task even as I began to finish cleaning the counter space around him.

"Do you need any more assistance?" I asked.

"Go away," he replied absent-mindedly. I smiled and left.

Severus worked through dinner, and Adelaide took a plate down to him before joining me on the veranda. The last few days we have spent our evenings out enjoying the twilight. Winters in Queensland are very warm and dry whereas summer is the wet season. I extended the invitation to Severus the previous day, but he'd declined. It was just as well; Adelaide and I spent the entire time talking about our children and grandchildren. She has two sons and five granddaughters who live in Sydney and Mumbai. Talking with her has helped me adjust to our separation. I miss you lots, Rose, and I hope you find comfort in your family whenever you are.

Hugs and kisses,

Mum

*July 1, 2010*

Happy July, Rose!

We had a rare rainstorm this morning to welcome the new month! I was at the Targan Library when it struck. The long trails of water streaming down the glass walls were an impressive sight. The humidity's effect on my hair was not.

Severus remained in his lab long after I went to bed and was already in it this morning. I imagine he is creating a new analysis spell to determine temperature. Confident in my results, I began researching Wizarding accounts of the various subtropical rainforests in Queensland. To my surprise, Lamington National Park contains both temperate and subtropical rainforests. Other likely candidates were the Eungella and Daintree Rainforests in northern Queensland.

The lab was locked when I returned this afternoon to Keidas House. Adelaide assured me that he was eating and was almost finished with the new analysis. I was surprised, however, when he joined us on the veranda this evening. There was more activity among the birds than usual, perhaps to make up for the day's drenching. Adelaide and I were sipping our tea and enjoying the impromptu concert when the door to the veranda opened and Severus stepped through.

"Good evening," he said as he nodded to the two of us, revealing a bottle of wine and three glasses in his hands. I did a poor job concealing my surprise, causing him to smirk as he poured me a glass of Viognier.

Adelaide gently inquired into his activities. Severus savoured his glass before turning to me.

"You were correct. The source indeed came from a warmer region than a temperate forest. We will have to send word to Longbottom."

"Not necessarily," I interjected. "I've been remiss in thinking of Lamington Park as one forest when it is in fact several different types of forests."

"But the subtropical forests in Lamington are farther from the ley line and are less likely to match the potency readings," he contradicted. "I take it you began looking at suitable locations today?"

I recited the various forests I had come across today. Adelaide told us what little she knew of them, and then we put aside the subject until the expedition returns. I imagine we will see them late tomorrow.

My glass was more than half-empty when I asked Adelaide and Severus to tell me how they met. Severus snorted.

"He merely acts disgruntled." Adelaide gave him a look. "I think your pride has sufficiently recovered since then. We actually conversed via letters, oh, nearly twenty years ago when our research interests crossed paths. Albus facilitated our correspondence."

I snuck a glance at Severus, whose face was expressionless as Adelaide narrated.

"We didn't actually meet until a joint alchemy-potions convention nine years ago in Cairo," she continued. "You'd been travelling for a few years then?"

She directed that at Severus, who nodded in assent.

"I have a gift for identifying Glamours and quickly saw through Severus's. We'd lost contact about the time you English began having your... political problems again, but I wished to introduce myself."

Severus gave a sharp laugh. "You call pulling me into a side hallway and wandlessly disarming me an introduction?"

"I merely wished to inform you in private that I knew who you were and thought Albus had used you horribly. I only disarmed you because you'd immediately backed me into a wall."

"And I was only reacting to a perceived threat because a strange old woman had yanked me into a dark corridor and cancelled my means of concealment. And, after you offered me your... friendship, you saw fit to inform me that I was in need of a hair..." He broke off, glaring at me. I did my best to hide my smile.

"You *do* look much healthier now," Adelaide observed. The look he gave her was both indignant and long suffering. Despite their first meeting, they clearly had great respect, if not fondness, for each other.

We lapsed into a pleasant silence, listening to soft tat-a-tat of raindrops falling from the eucalyptus grove into the ferns below. Adelaide presently pleaded tiredness and left the two of us to our own thoughts. I was bursting to know what all Severus had done after the war but valued my privacy enough to know when to respect his. I must have fallen asleep outside because I woke up later in the dark and found myself mysteriously in my room. My inability to sleep keeps me up, writing to you and thinking about the man who carried me inside. Isn't it interesting that most of his kindness happens under the cover of darkness, physically and metaphorically?

Love,

Mum

July 4, 2010

Some American tourists are lighting fireworks down on the beach. Today is their Independence Day...are you aware that most English history books gloss over the American Revolution? I find it especially fascinating given the Americans' own reluctance to acknowledge the less glorified aspects of U.S. imperialism both historically and currently.

Keidas House has been invaded by maps! Charts detailing topography, watersheds, ley lines, species, and population cover every surface in the kitchen and sitting rooms. Neville, Rolf, Neil, and Sinead arrived two days ago, and since then, we've engaged in numerous debates trying to determine where to search next. The final decision will be Neville's, of course, but everyone has his or her own opinion.

Neville and Sinead are disappointed to be leaving Lamington. They discovered a plant with a black, sponge-like flower they're jokingly calling *Ortexus squishee*, as it has the peculiar tendency to absorb anything that touches it. Severus has promised to analyse it in order to determine possible uses.

It is difficult to find solitude with the expedition here. Tonight, I managed to escape out to the veranda and found Severus already there. I turned around to leave without disturbing him, disappointed, only to hear his soft voice.

"Is my presence so disturbing?" His mild voice censures just as well as his acidic tones.

"No!" I said a little more forcefully than I intended. "I didn't wish to disturb your..."

"If you can find the power to refrain from speaking... about anything remotely connected to a forest, I will forgive you." Was he teasing me?

His pauses contain more meanings within them sometimes than the sentence itself...I found myself back in his classroom being ordered to remain silent. When I was eight years old, I heard a Bach suite for piano and decided I wanted to be a composer. This was after I set my sights on a Nobel Prize. My parents indulged all my interests by taking me to the library. When I attempted to read a text on composing, I came across a rule: there is an art to composing silence equal to the art of crafting notes in between. It came to me then that listening to Severus speak was not that far off from listening to Bach.

Once again, we found companionship in silence, except for the distant booms of firecrackers. As I was about to depart for bed, your postscript flashed in my mind, and I hastened to give Severus your message. He chuckled...chuckled!!! And said you were a good girl. And then ignored my demand to know how you impressed him! Prat. I'm glad he thinks highly of you, despite all this.

All my love and irritation,

Mum

July 7, 2010

Dear Rose,

As much as I love my dear colleagues, I am thankful for the peace and quiet now that they've left. We settled on exploring Eungella (pronounced yun-guh-luh) National Park first. It is a mountainous park...very inaccessible...and due to its isolation from other rainforests, hosts several unique species of animals and plants not found anywhere else. I'm extremely jealous to be unable to walk with them...Eungella is famous for its platypuses!

My own duties are similar to last week's: I spend my mornings and part of the afternoon at Targan, researching magical plant species in the Daintree and Eungella Rainforests, and help Severus in the lab until dinner. We tend to work in companionable silence, our infrequent conversations usually limited to the tasks at hand. I like to think that we are learning to perceive each other without the dressings of our past life. Also, he is less likely to sneer at me if I don't speak at all.

Severus and I continue to tactfully overlook our mutual appreciation for evenings on the veranda and simply make room for the latecomer. Our tacit rule is that whoever arrives first chooses the beverage. Until last night, I was content to sit quietly with him and absorb the nocturnal sounds. Setting down my teacup, I felt emboldened to satisfy my curiosity.

"Where did you travel afterwards?"

My voice dissipated into the night, and I feared I had ruined our quiet companionship. It was an innocent question, but what could it lead to? Neither of us wished to pry into

each other's history, but one answered question would set a precedent for more.

Severus looked into his teacup and, after a long moment, sighed. "No doubt you have been waiting to ask that for days."

"Sometimes even I find myself insufferable," I replied, rewarded with a breath of laughter.

"Very well, since your curiosity won't kill you this time. You already know I was in Egypt nine years ago..." He told me about visiting Japan, Borneo, India, and Argentina. Investigating rare potions and learning to prepare ingredients in different ways. Meeting Neil and becoming fascinated with ley lines.

"I followed Neil around the outback as he surveyed ley lines for two years. When you feel you are about to discover something significant, you cannot help but remain."

"And you discovered the subtle science of potion-making," I said softly, entranced by the intensity barely contained in the man next to me. He gave me a considering look.

"It was a memorable speech," I explained.

"When did you return to England?" I prompted, discomfited by his continued scrutiny. His narrative had been interrupted, however, and it took a few minutes to prepare a neutral answer.

"I wished to begin creating new experimental techniques. England was... convenient."

"So is Australia," I pointed out.

"You're prying, Hermione," he warned. I threw him an exasperated look.

"I think I've been doing that all evening."

"Insufferable..."

"We've already established that, I think. And clearly, I don't know it all, as I am endeavouring to come to know you better."

We stared at each other askance. I'd definitely ruined our companionship.

"I apologise," I said softly, struggling to remove myself from my chair. "You've been very kind to me, and I've been nothing if not disrespectful."

"Sit down." His voice was flat. I dropped to my seat, crutches clattering to the floor. He returned my nervous look impassively.

"You are... correct."

I nodded, waiting for more censure.

"Australia was also convenient." To my surprise, he continued, no sign of rage in his voice.

"Shacklebolt had promised me an annual sum, however, which could allow me to start a private business while pursuing my experiments. And after four years of travel, I wished to establish a home. England, despite its... characters, is still... dear to me." He sipped his tea, grimacing when he found it cold.

I didn't know what to say except thank you: for giving up his home temporarily, for his unspoken forgiveness, for his attempt to acknowledge and return my companionship. We returned to our silent contemplations until I was too tired to remain outside. Severus graciously handed me my crutches as I rose.

"You realise that it will be my turn next to be inquisitor," he informed me. My delight at this peace offering was counterbalanced by my recollection of the horrible Umbridge. Thank Merlin, she is safely in Azkaban and unable to do anyone harm.

"As long as you leave off the kittens and Veritaserum." I shuddered. He merely looked amused.

"I make no promises." And he swept down the hallway once I'd passed through the veranda doorway.

I'm not quite sure yet, Rose, but I think we are friends now. I'm not sure I deserve it, but I am sincerely thankful he is not holding a grudge. Then again, his teasing threat at the end might prove otherwise...

Love from your

Mum

*July 9, 2010*

Dear Rose,

Adelaide joined us the past two nights on the veranda, so I've been able to dodge any personal questions from Severus. I'm not afraid to reveal myself, although my initial tendency is to keep things private. But Severus' willingness to continue, despite any personal discomfiture the other night, changed everything. If he, who is so deft at ambiguity, can entrust me with his truths, I cannot shirk my own responsibility. Nevertheless, we haven't discussed personal matters in the lab...perhaps evening is the magical hour in which all truths are revealed (never mind that the brothers Grimm claimed otherwise).

Nor is Adelaide's presence unwelcome. It is easy to converse with her; even Severus is almost chatty. Wednesday's conversation revolved around advancements in Muggle sciences (they are achieving results that rival some magical devices, but at a detriment to the environment), and Thursday's a lament at the poor quality of Wizarding fiction (does the ability to wield magic limit the imagination?). We also argued over the banishment of Dementors from Azkaban and whether the new safeguards and human security would be as effective at controlling prisoners. I would be content to sit back and listen to Adelaide and Severus debate; that they voluntarily ask and challenge my opinions is tantamount to any Order of Merlin or Nobel Prize!

And I swear I caught Severus stuffing a Sudoku puzzle into his trouser pocket this afternoon!

I hope you know I love you more than anything else and encourage you to not let your dad take any more Chocolate Frog cards than you are willing to part with. I'm being rather silly, aren't I? The truth is I'm feeling rather chuffed having just read a delightful letter from you and your dad.

Cheers,

Mum

*July 10, 2010*

Dear Rose,

Any trepidation I might've felt when meeting Severus last night was nullified by my cheerfulness after reading your letter. We were alone, and I was about to be questioned by one of the most fearsome people in all of England.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "A successful day?"

I smiled brilliantly. "Reasonably. I received a letter from Ron and Rose."

He nodded and frowned. "It is... curious that you and Weasley remain so... close after your divorce."

And so the inquisition had begun. If I didn't owe him anything, I certainly owe you the full story.

"We actually didn't rush into marriage after the war," I began as he poured me a small glass of brandy. The liquid's unfamiliar fire burned my throat, but gave me confidence. "Although we'd certainly been dancing around each other those last few years. Things were said, feelings shared, and suddenly, we were a couple. Immediately after the war, we travelled to Melbourne to reverse my parents' Memory Charms but were unsuccessful the first time. I didn't know enough, so I returned to Hogwarts to take my NEWTs. Professor Flitwick was able to help me fix my parents' memories while Ron and Harry were at the Auror Academy. Both of us joined the Ministry and were busy for the first few years with the cleanup.

"Harry, Ron, and I owed quite a bit of money to Gringotts for... damages... "

"I heard about the dragon."

"Yes, well, we were lucky, in a horrible way, for Voldemort..."

Severus grabbed at his forearm reflexively.

"...Killed quite a few goblins as a result. Those remaining took their anger out on the entire Wizarding community rather than just the three of us and, in addition to our fine, taxed all of us to use their vaults while repairs were being made."

"You treat the matter rather callously."

I shrugged. "I don't shed tears for them, if that's what you mean. They clung to their own form of neutrality while playing the two sides against each other."

"As did I." He was voluntarily bringing up his own part in the war?

I shook my head. "No...you were forced to maintain your cover! You did your best to protect the students from the Carrows. What I dislike about the goblins is their refusal to reason, their inability to empathize or have morals. Perhaps there are some in their code of conduct, but they have yet to admit that."

"And yet you were willing to pay for their damages."

"Of course! We had destroyed quite a bit of the establishment in our escape. It was our responsibility to help rebuild."

He sneered. "They have enough gold to rebuild on their own."

I shrugged. It didn't make any difference to me. Actually, that is a lie...there is a very sensitive line in wizard-goblin politics you do not want to cross.

"I imagine they were trying to reassert their influence post war," I mused. We argued politics for a few minutes before Severus brought us back to our original subject.

"You and Weasley put off getting married because of a goblin debt?"

"In a sense. We wanted our own house, and it took us six years to pay off the debt and earn enough money to afford both a house and a wedding. The first year was wonderful, although we continued to argue several times a week. Making up was always worth it, though, so we didn't consider it a detriment to our marriage. In hindsight, I realise that we didn't live well together in close quarters, letting our grievances fester into resentment.

"The second year, I found out I was pregnant. It was a shock, as Ron and I wanted to wait to have children, and so our fights were influenced by our fears of balancing parenthood and our careers and my hormones. But when Rose was born..." I smiled in remembrance. You were the most beautiful creature I had ever beheld. And still are!

"Those first months with Rose were the happiest of our marriage. Ron never suggested that I quit working, although I did take a few months off. We were too enthralled being parents to argue. However, all too soon we started to bicker again.

"One day, I think shortly after our third anniversary, we started fighting. I don't even remember why we grew angry enough to pull our wands on each other because Rose started crying. We'd forgotten she was in the kitchen with us and were horrified to think she might have been hurt. That was the first time we sat down and truly shared our thoughts with each other.

"Just like that, we decided we couldn't stay married. How long would the attraction last before all we did was fight? Our parents thought that splitting would be worse for Rose, but we disagreed. Neither of us could bear the thought of hurting her physically or emotionally because we knew growing up with constantly fighting parents would do that. And we were right. We've become such close friends now that we aren't married, and Rose is growing up knowing her parents love her and have great respect for each other."

"And you've never decided to... become close again, now that you are friends?" His voice was incredulous. All of a sudden, I remembered that he was a man who'd loved the same woman obsessively his whole life. If he had had the chance to reunite, to rebuild with Lily Evans before she became Lily Potter...

"Once, I would have been very tempted," I replied carefully. "But we are strong enough friends to know we cannot keep a spark going. Love must be a mixture of attraction and companionship to endure. Our relationship has always existed at the opposite extremes."

"That is very wise of you."

"I grew up," I replied. He looked me over in such a way I blushed.

"Yes," he said, a look of confusion on his face. "That would appear to be so."

That was the extent of last night. I've spent the morning writing this account and was supposed to be at Targan an hour ago. I need to confirm some suspicions about my research before taking them to Severus. He can tear apart my theories easily if I do not cover every angle, and he always seems to find an additional complaint.

I hope you understand your parents a little more now. We love you dearly!

Mum

*July 12, 2010*

Dear Rose,

How could I be so stupid? I can't even begin to describe my frustration...the answer to my suspicions has been in front of me ever since Severus extracted the poison's residuals! Unable to pace, I wrote question after question down on parchment, trying to find that elusive key. This morning, exhausted from a long day yesterday helping Severus extract residuals from the latest specimens, I awoke with a realisation.

I've been acting like a witch, not a Muggle. Magic solves everything, yes? How painfully false! Magic cannot prevent people from discrimination or evil. The absence of Love, which I do recognize now as the most powerful, most mysterious force, is, in my opinion, the most destructive force of all. But I digress.

I've approached this problem with the mindset of a witch: there is a magical aspect to the problem; therefore, the solution must be magical as well. Consider this, however: I have known since the beginning that my problem was neurological, and Severus confirmed it was a poison drawn from a plant. Therefore, it is a neurotoxin. We are in agreement. My research focused on identifying plants with magical uses that might match the characteristics provided by Severus because the neurotoxin acts invisibly...a magical act. Point two. I have since then scoured nearly the entire herbology collection at Targan and have been unable to provide any assistance besides a few suggestions of plants to examine, which have since proved to be different than our source.

I have tried to discover whether a plant could possibly be an identical match to the sample rather than search for a plant known to have a neurotoxin...my attempt was thwarted by the lack of Muggle biochemistry in herbology and potions, and I abandoned that avenue quickly.

My answer, so obvious now, is simply this: could the mystery plant be a completely non-magical plant?

I'm going to go down to Severus's lab and tell him my theory. This could change everything!

With lots of love and hope,

Mum

*Later*

Remember what I told you already, Rose? Severus takes great relish in poking holes in other's postulates. I'm sure he derives some pleasure in proving someone's idiocy, but the real reason, I've come to understand, is that a potioneer's life is always at risk when experimenting. If one part of a theory is not completely sound and the potioneer is unaware of the potential risks, they are lucky not to die painfully.

I'm quite put out because Severus told me my theory was preposterous.

"You are not thinking," he ridiculed me. "You are clearly ignoring the neurotoxin's magical properties."

I raised my hands in exasperation. "I'm tired of looking at a plant with magical properties and wondering whether it might contain a neurotoxin or not!"

"You are tired," he sneered. "How... quaint." I flushed in anger.

"Severus, we've not had a single match yet in a month's worth of effort! My work is superfluous right now, as you are disproving every suggestion I have, every specimen the team brings in. You might think this is completely impossible, but it is worth pursuing. The scope of our analysis could be cut down significantly."

"Then do it!" He snapped. My head jerked up, startled. He sighed and began more gently this time. "Hermione, this is why you are here. The rest of us do not have the time to follow outrageous leads."

I bristled at the insinuation.

"If you are correct and discover an answer to this paradox, then perhaps Lupin accurately judged you. Besides, I have never been able to control your use of *time*."

The glitter of his eyes and the sneer on his lips insinuated something much greater than his command of me in the classroom. Oh dear. Here's a bit of our history I have yet to share with you. In our third year at Hogwarts, Harry's godfather Sirius Black broke out of Azkaban in order to find Peter Pettigrew...James', Lily's, Lupin's and Sirius' friend who had betrayed the Potters to Voldemort and framed Sirius for the deed. Harry, Ron, and I learned of Sirius' innocence shortly before Severus came to capture him. Severus blamed Sirius for a childhood assault and the murder of his greatest friend and was "responsible" for capturing him. I hope Severus doesn't hold a grudge for the three of us knocking him out while he attempted to capture Sirius and for later robbing him of an Order of Merlin when we used my Time-Turner to go back in time and help Sirius escape on the hippogriff Buckbeak!

I made my escape from the lab in order to avoid (for now) any confrontation about my third year. My intention now is to seek out Adelaide and determine how to find a decent Muggle library. I am determined to prove Severus wrong and, just maybe, win his approbation.

Love from your stubborn

Mum

P.S.: If you are anything like me, you'll complain that I've left out all sorts of pertinent information in my narration, such as Lupin revealing his lycanthropy and the Dementors' attack, but there isn't enough time today to tell such a complicated story. I'm sure your father or uncle will be happy to oblige your curiosity. However, I will tell you why I could travel back in time. I decided to take every class offered to third years, and Professor McGonagall provided me a Time-Turner in order to take classes offered at the same time. A word of advice: *do not* sign up for more classes than you can manage without resorting to going back in time! One of my mistakes was to believe that I had to know everything at once. You have an entire lifetime to learn...don't be afraid to put some things aside for when you will wish you could learn something new!

*July 14, 2010*

Dear Rose,

It's very early...I have not slept comfortably at all. Yesterday, Adelaide took me to the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane. While I infinitely prefer the Bodleian Library, the modern architecture of the State Library was quite... remarkable. Oh dear. I'm beginning to sound like Severus!

I spent the first part of my day examining books about neurotoxins. *Mind-altering and Poisonous Plants of the World* was not helpful at all...I really doubt *Cannabis* is responsible for my condition. After a few similar books, I abandoned that angle and began looking for local accounts of neurological conditions. The librarians were helpful in finding old newspaper articles that explored such problems. It was late afternoon when I discovered a farmer's letter to the editor complaining about his cattle's zamia staggers. I actually laughed at the term, thinking it was slang for some kind of drunkenness, before I read the reply. The editor referred to a prominent Australian scientist who confirmed that there was no cure for it if the cattle already displayed loss of mobility in their lower limbs.

Loss of mobility in their lower limbs...Rose, for a second I thought someone had given me a cow's disease! Immediately, I began a new search on my computer where I'd been viewing the old articles (the Internet is incredible...wizards have nothing like it) for zamia staggers, but came up with nothing in the catalogue! Fortunately, I performed a Google search and found a definition on a highly suspect encyclopaedia called 'Wikipedia.' And I thought only wizards came up with ridiculous names!

The definition: *Zamia staggers is a form of cycad toxicosis, a term for the fatal nervous disease affecting cattle where they browse on the leaves or fruit of cycads. It is characterised by irreversible paralysis of the hind legs because of the degeneration of the spinal cord. It is caused by a toxin, often called cycasin or macrozamin, a  $\beta$ -glycoside (the sugar of which is primeverose) of methylazoxymethanol (MAM), and which is found in all cycad genera. Following ingestion the sugar is removed by bacterial glycosidase in the gut, with the MAM being absorbed. The metabolized toxin produces tumours of the liver, kidney, intestine and brain after a latent period which may be a year or longer. The disease has been known in Australia since the 1860s and was the subject of a Queensland Government investigation during the 1890s.*

Thankfully there are some differences, as the x-rays from the hospital did not reveal any tumours and I know I did not digest any poison. On the other hand, here I have a

plant with no magical properties that causes nerve degeneration! My plan today is to investigate the cycad plant more thoroughly.

When I told Severus this last night, his face grew dark. "If this is possible, your assailant has a particularly nasty sense of humour."

I was confused. How could he know that?

"It is my nature to be suspicious of everything." He frowned. "This individual carefully chose a poison and method unknown. Someone that meticulous with the application must have a symbolic message implied."

"But what would that be?"

Severus leaned forward. "Use that prodigious mind of yours! What have you been working on these past months?"

"Kingsley suspected this might be an attack on the magical equity laws I was writing," I said slowly. "This individual obviously does not want Muggle-borns to have the same..." I paused, my mouth wide in disgust. "But that's horrible!"

Severus grimaced. "Deriving a poison from a condition famous for killing livestock is a rather... blatant declaration of their opinion of you or your work."

I shuddered. "But why go to such trouble to conceal the work if I was expected to discover the meaning all the same?"

Severus chose his words carefully. "I imagine that they wished you to be aware of the symbolism as you died a very slow and, in the end, humiliating death. I agree that this is a very likely source, but if we cannot determine what is influencing its unusual magical properties, then I will be unable to design an antidote that addresses all of its aspects. I'm afraid they intend you to die frustrated with that knowledge."

After some moments of silence, Severus cleared his throat.

"I will do everything in my power to prevent this end," he promised to my surprise. "But if I cannot find a solution, there... are ways to make... the end comfortable."

My eyes filled with tears. I shook my head fiercely. "I will not ask you to bear that burden, Severus! You have done so much for us already."

He looked away. "It is never enough," he murmured. I vehemently disagreed, but he shushed me with a bitter smile.

"I lived, Hermione. My death would have been proof of my atonement, but you poured a vial of Dittany on my throat so that you could give Potter a container for my memories."

I froze. So he had known my secret all along! All these years, I was afraid a life debt might exist between us, and I never wanted him to be tied to another person.

"You're wrong," I said forcefully. "On both accounts. You, of all people, have more than atoned completely. Can you not see that you were gifted a chance to live a life for yourself now?"

He scornfully raised an eyebrow. "And so you decided to be merciful?"

"No! I... I had no knowledge of your loyalties. All I knew, watching you," my voice broke, "was that no one deserved to die like that. We all had nightmares of that night afterwards! When Harry needed a vial, my hand closed around the Dittany. It was instinct," I finished lamely.

Pathetically, I asked in the silence, "Do you hate me for what I did?"

A pause.

"Don't be a dunderhead, Miss Granger." He added gently, "I had no knowledge of your role until recently. Any anger I felt in those first months after the war has since turned to resignation. I did not have to drink unicorn blood to live a half and cursed life."

My shock turned to anger. "What a waste," I said coldly.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked dangerously.

"A waste. You, Severus, are an addict! You cling to guilt like a drunkard! I've never known you to not nurse a grudge. But that is no way to live! Don't you think Lily..." His eyes were full of rage. "... would want you to forgive yourself?" And as quickly as it came, my anger evaporated, leaving me with a sick feeling. I knew I had just crossed a line.

Severus stood up and stalked away.

Rose, that man has become my closest friend these past few weeks. We work comfortably together, and I look forward every night to our time on the veranda. However, I could no longer sit back and see him punish himself for the crimes we've already forgiven, even at the cost of his friendship!

Why does this hurt so much?

Love from your

Mum

*A/N: Thank you for reading!*