

Learning Curve

by Melenka

Hermione makes a terrible mistake and turns to Professor Snape for help.

A Mistake is a Lesson not yet Learned

Chapter 1 of 5

Hermione makes a terrible mistake and turns to Professor Snape for help.

□

It was meant to be an academic exercise. Hermione was good at those, stellar in fact. When she'd found the book in Paris, she'd assumed it was utter tripe. One could not *Learn to be an Animagus in Ten Simple Steps* not even if one was French. The book was barely legible, and even then it was hardly readable. Hermione had ignored the flowery poetry in the margin and stuck to the printed text. If nothing else, studying the tome had provided a distraction from her last year at Hogwarts.

Not that they were actually at Hogwarts, of course. The damage caused to the school during the war had rendered it unusable. Repairs were expected to take at least a year. The school had temporarily been relocated to Megginch Castle, partly because the occupants were easily convinced to go on holiday (by what method, no one dared ask) but more, Hermione thought, because its smaller size would make less obvious how few students returned to finish out their education. Hermione, naturally, could not rest without taking her N.E.W.T.s.

Which is exactly what I should have been focusing on, instead of mucking about with silly French texts.

She sighed. Or she would have, were it possible in her current state. What emerged was more of a yawn, followed by three short sneezes. She stalked from one end of her room to the other, then back again. She stretched, shoulders dropping as she reached in front of her, back arching sinuously, bum and tail reaching for the ceiling. Her claws caught in the rug, so she sharpened them there until she realized what she was doing.

"Damn and blast!" she attempted to say. What came out was a cross between a hiss and a yowl.

The book had failed to note that, once in animal form, it became entirely impossible for one to reverse the spell that had brought about the transformation. This would explain why it normally took years of study for one to become an Animagus. Also why it was a good idea to let someone know you were attempting to circumvent all that training.

Ron and Harry would have laughed themselves sick over her predicament. Providing, of course, they had realized that the enormous cat in the room was Hermione. Most likely, they would have popped their heads in, mistaken her for a kneazle, stolen her chocolate, and gone off in search of entertainment. Even at their best, they did not have the imagination to see the truly bizarre when it was directly in front of them. Unless, of course, it was trying to kill them. They'd become rather adept at spotting that.

Her best bet would have been to go to Professor McGonagall straight away. A true Animagus, the headmistress would almost certainly recognize Hermione and be able to reverse her transformation. The lecture that followed would be devastating. At the very least, McGonagall would forever think less of Hermione for attempting such a short-cut. At the very worst, the Headmistress could consider the transgression worthy of expulsion. Which meant Hermione had exactly three days to figure out how to get out of her current predicament. When everyone came back from the Christmas holiday, she would surely be found out.

Had the spell worked as planned, Hermione might have been seen as innovative and daring, but as she was stuck in the form of what she believed to be a Scottish wildcat, revealing herself would be humiliating in the extreme. She'd read somewhere that there were less than four hundred Scottish wildcats living outside of captivity. She

doubted anyone but Hagrid would know that. She looked enough like an oversized housecat that she should avoid notice.

The solution was simple. If she was to be humiliated anyway, she might as well go to the person who knew how best to crush her. One powerful leap took her to the open window. Another took her to the balcony below. One more leap and she was on the ground. The last leap would be the hardest. She ran around the side of the building and looked for a way into the dungeon rooms of Professor Severus Snape.

It was actually only half-underground, but saying he lived in the cellar lacked the dignity due a once-famous villain. Or a famous once-villain turned tragic victim turned miraculously healed war hero. To the best of her knowledge, he'd told no one how he managed to live after his dramatic and very obvious death. All she knew was that he'd refused accolades and returned to teaching Potions. Anyone overheard gossiping about it soon found themselves spending weekends helping Filch sweep up what remained of Hogwarts.

Hermione trotted down the back stairs and through the covered alcove outside the kitchen. The door stood open, letting warmth and delicious scents float out.

"Hello, Miss Hermione," chirped Hurrie. She was small, even for a house-elf, but always cheerful. "Going for a stroll is you?"

Hermione blinked at the elf, opened her mouth to speak, remembered she had lost the ability, and decided a nod was the best response.

"Hurrie will leave the door open a crack, then." She went back to rolling out pastry on several boards at once.

Since Hermione had no way to explain to Hurrie that her current form was a terrible mistake, nor any way to ask the elf to be circumspect in mentioning the encounter, she slipped away and hoped for the best.

Snow crunched under her paws, but for once, being outside in winter did not make her shiver. There were some benefits to her current form even if it was inconvenient to be stuck in it. Wind ruffled her fur as she ran for the secluded library Professor Snape had claimed as his personal chambers. It could not be accessed from the castle, but rather was across the courtyard and down a flight of stairs. She paused at the top, realizing she had no way to knock. Instead, she made her way to the arched windows that faced away from the castle.

The room was not at all what she would have expected, with the exception of the green walls. A fire burned low in the fireplace at one end. Nearby, a comfortable chair sat next to a small table piled with books. On another, several scrolls were held open by an assortment of small statues and one empty vase. Under the window, several blankets draped over the back and arm of a worn couch. The entire room looked airy but welcoming. Unfortunately, there was no one in it.

Hermione sat down to figure out what she should do next, but her normal clarity escaped her. She knew the danger of staying in animal form too long, but it had only been three days. A very trying three days, during which she had scrounged for food in the kitchen when the house-elves were asleep and otherwise attempted to avoid notice by remaining in her room. At some point, her door had been closed, though she did not know by whom. Frustrated and hungry, she had taken solace in the fact that she had retained the ability to read. *Not that it did me any good.* Turning the pages had been difficult, and no matter how many times she read the passages about making the change, she had not been able to determine how one was supposed to undo the spell.

The chill began to permeate her thick fur, assisted by yet another round of falling snow. She shook it off, then went back to watching the empty room. What seemed an eternity later, Professor Snape finally made his appearance. She blinked the snow out of her eyes and stared. In the entire time she had known him, she had never seen him like this. He wore a white shirt with loose sleeves and tied cuffs. It was open at the neck, the barest hint of dark hair visible where the laces hung loose. For all its fullness, it did not hide the breadth of his chest just a bit wider than expected, nor the taper of his long torso, where it tucked into a pair of pants that fit a bit too well. He was not handsome, nor had he ever been, but he had a certain grace of movement. Now she knew why. Under all that black, and despite his war injuries, the man was undeniably healthy.

She shook her head, and the borrowed form continued the shiver to the tip of her tail. It occurred to her that she had never really thought of him as a man. Not the way she did now, at any rate. *Don't be foolish.* He was her professor. She was not taking Potions this year, but that did not change his authority over her. That prompted another untoward thought followed by another involuntary shiver. She convinced herself it was the cold.

He turned to leave, and she realized she might have ruined her chance to get into that room and, somehow, convince him to help her. So, she did the only thing she could think of. She yowled.

He spun, wand in hand, eyes narrowed. She raised one paw to the glass and attempted to look as pathetic as possible. It was not much of a stretch. She opened her eyes wide, gave a plaintive meow, and pressed her body against the window. He kept his wand pointed at her as he approached. She desperately tried to appear as innocent as possible and hoped her cat features did not reveal exactly what she thought, without meaning to, about the way he stalked toward her.

Honestly! she chided herself, but the problem was that the cat in her was being entirely honest in a way Hermione the witch could never be.

"And what have we here?" His deep tones were muffled by the glass between them.

"Mrat?"

"What fool allowed you to roam about in such dreadful weather?" he mused. "Simply unconscionable."

"Mrrrow!" She cursed her now limited vocabulary, then gave an exaggerated shiver.

"Cold and alone and here at my window to petition for warmth. How charming." He smiled grimly. "I dislike charms. And interruptions."

She prayed he did not dislike cats.

"I suppose I cannot let you freeze to death. Someone might care." It was clear that someone would not be him. "I would never hear the end of it."

Decided, he strode to the door on the opposite side of the room. Hermione was mesmerized by the flow of fabric across his back, the muscles in his legs and... well, everywhere, really. Lean muscle, to be sure, but there was nothing wrong with that.

"If you actually wish to commit suicide by Scottish winter, by all means, stay where you are."

As if to illustrate his point, a fierce wind raked over her. She leapt toward the stairs, still surprised by how much ground her new body could cover, then continued leaping until she thumped against his door. *Must work on the landing.* She fell into the room, then righted herself and, so as to be convincing, licked her shoulder as if she'd meant to land in a graceless heap. The gesture was strangely comforting, so she continued to clean her fur. It was not at all because she was afraid to look at him.

"Poor little kitty." There was no warmth in his tone. "Whatever shall I do with you now?"

She could think of any number of things, but none of them were appropriate. Or possible, things being what they were. She made a circuit of the room, looking for any means by which she might communicate with him who she was and what she needed. She leapt up onto the chair and nosed at the books.

He righted them and then, much to her surprise, lifted her up until her eyes were level with his. Her back legs dangled, a most uncomfortable position, but fighting him would gain her nothing.

"You are not a good cat. No one has collared you or taught you proper manners. Perhaps I shall see to that. In the meantime, I must come up with a name for you." His gaze traveled up and down her mostly limp form. "As I suspected, a female."

She was very glad she could not blush. Not that there was anything untoward about his perusal of a cat, even if that cat happened to contain a severely embarrassed witch. Once he found out who she was, he would torment her with this evening. Possibly for the rest of her life.

He smiled, the least reassuring thing he could do. "I shall call you Fluff. Not original, but I doubt you will be with me long enough to learn to answer when I call for you."

Hermione hissed.

He pulled her close to his body, arms locked around her legs so she could not scratch him. "Now, now. Is that any way to treat your new master, Fluff?" His hand came down heavy as he stroked her from head to tail.

She growled.

He continued to stroke her firmly. "You'll get used to my touch soon enough. I could tame you in record time, if you allowed yourself to trust me." His fingers played with the sensitive spot behind her ear.

Without consulting her at all, a purr rumbled through her. She did not want to purr! She did not want the weight of his hands on her. She most certainly did not want him to fondle her fur.

She could not convince herself of any of it.

"Oh, damn." The words mangled into a mewling sound.

"That's it, Fluff. Relax and enjoy the attention." He sat down and loosened his grip on her.

She bolted into the corner, the fur on her back standing straight on end.

"Interesting markings," he said. "A solid black stripe, thick, blunt tail, touches of cream on the underbelly."

He'd run his hands over that, too. The witch inside her had died of mortification. The cat had positively reveled in it.

"Quite a rare specimen, aren't you? I doubt you've let anyone touch you before. Well, no one who knew what they had in their hands. I am certain there have been those who have tried to grab you, fumbled about in an attempt to capture the wildcat. Your kind is difficult to find, much less hold onto. Yet you enter my room and show almost no fear of me. Rare indeed."

He rose but made no move to capture her. She maintained a safe distance. Without thinking, she began cleaning her fur again. It really was a most efficient way to bathe. She choked on the thought.

"If you hack up a hairball on my carpet, I shall be extremely displeased."

She ignored him and saw to her tail.

"Fluff," he called.

She glared at him.

"As I thought, not in the least biddable." He poured himself a glass of firewhisky, downed it, then addressed her again. "As I do not have your particular talent, I am going to shower. Try not to destroy anything while I'm occupied."

As he walked down the hall, she heard him mutter. "Talking to a cat, how absurd."

For sunnythirty3, who gave a most excellent prompt.

Small Discoveries

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione sees something she should not and finds some advantage to her current shape.

□

Hermione raced around the room, cataloging potential means of communication and discarding each one in turn. A lack of opposable thumbs meant writing was beyond her capability. She'd already proven that she was unable to cast spells while in this form. She jumped up on the tale holding the flattened scroll and perused it anyway. Her tail knocked off one of the corner weights. It landed with a crash.

Looking at his impressive array of books some she'd been told were no longer in existence she decided knocking them off the shelf in an attempt to find a solution would be both wrong and dangerous. Besides, once she was returned to her true form, he would exact some sort of vengeance for the destruction.

She found herself rubbing her face against the side of the chair, simply because it smelled like him. The chill that racked her had nothing to do with the snow piling up against the windows. If she stayed in this form too long, she would cease to be Hermione. The idea of spending the rest of her life as a wildcat named Fluff was more than she could bear. She had to find a way to tell him who she was.

Having exhausted her options in the library, she went to see what else the suite could offer. There was no hall to speak of, just another small room dominated by a bed that should have been too large for the space but wasn't. A battered armoire stood in the corner, one door slightly ajar. There was no table or nightstand. She wondered if he slept with his wand in his hand.

The door on the opposite side of the room began to open, steam escaping into the small space. Hermione panicked and dove for the armoire, only too late realizing that finding a cat in his room would be of no concern to him. Still, he would someday know it had been her, and she shuddered to think what he'd make of that. She pressed herself into the corner behind his coat. It smelled of wood smoke, herbs, and a few noxious chemicals that made her sensitive cat nose twitch.

She heard him moving around the room and froze when his footsteps drew near. Of course he would need the armoire. She ought to have hidden under the bed. Or, better yet, left the room entirely. Why could she not think properly? She tried to make herself even smaller and prayed he would not need his coat.

The rattle of hangers on the bar frayed her nerves. The stress was too much. If she was going to be discovered, she'd prefer to see it coming. She inched sideways and peered through the tiny space between the coat and the back of the armoire.

It took everything she had to remain still. She could do nothing about how wide her eyes opened when she saw his naked torso. At least he still wore a towel wrapped around his waist. That was a relief. Or so she told herself. His skin was pale, which was no surprise at all. He eschewed the sun even when he was covered neck to toes. His throat was still red and a bit lumpy from the snakebite, though not at all as awful as it should be. *Because what he should be is dead.* She was glad he wasn't, though she would never tell him so, and he likely wouldn't care if she ever did.

His neck was the worst, but hardly the only scar. Burn marks were probably from potions gone awry. Every discipline had its price. She wondered why he hadn't had them healed, then thought of the evidence of early mistakes that dotted her hands, too. Sometimes, it was good to have a reminder. He had several long, straight scars, only slightly visible, most likely from the first war. Death Eaters were not keen on healing, even one of their own.

He pulled something off a hook, then turned his back, leaving the armoire open. She leaned out to watch him walk away. Candlelight fell across his shoulders, and she hissed softly. A network of thin, silver lines ran over his back, far older than all the others. They whispered of regular abuse. She felt queasy looking at them, as if she'd read his private journal. She buried her head in the fold of his coat, glad she could not cry.

Unfortunately, she was still able to sneeze and, after a few moments with her nose pressed up against acrid wool, she did so. Several times. Loudly.

She waited for him to haul her out of the armoire. When nothing happened, she extracted herself. The room was empty, but not for long. As his footsteps drew nearer, she launched herself across the room, landed badly, and slid beneath the bed seconds before he appeared in the doorway. She was too far under the bed to see more than his bare feet.

His hand fastened around her neck, but instead of dragging her out, he lifted a finger to stroke behind her ear. "You may wish to avoid dusty corners, Fluff. They play havoc with your ability to breathe properly."

She let him draw her out, which he did far more gently than she deserved. To her relief, he was wearing a thick robe. He removed the dust from her back and whiskers, then left her to her own devices. Had she been a real cat, the gesture would have been a fine way to build trust. Of course, if she'd been a real Scottish wildcat, she never would have come near him on her own and would be utterly impossible to tame. Luckily, he didn't know that. She left the room, sure there was nothing in it that would allow her to communicate with him.

As he banked the coals for the night, Hermione explored the tiny space that passed for a kitchenette. Snape never dined with the students. Considering how pained he'd seemed during meals at Hogwarts, she could not blame him for wanting to avoid them. He had only one of each dish, which meant he did not eat with the staff, either, at least not here. For some reason, that pleased her. Not that it was any of her business what he did in his rooms or with whom, of course. It was simply that few visitors meant less chance of her being discovered before she could convince him to help her.

"I do not think you should be here," Snape said.

You have no idea how true that is. She squeaked as he picked her up.

"Your curiosity has already done some damage, though the statue was of little value. To be safe, however, you'll have to sleep with me tonight. There is nothing in my room for you to destroy."

This is not good! She struggled to get away. For one thing, her current system ought to be mostly nocturnal, though she'd hardly slept at all in the past three days. For another, she had thought to spend the evening hours perusing his shelves in hopes of finding a volume that might help her cause. Surely he would forgive one or two books out of place, once he understood why it had been necessary. Most of all, she did not want to be trapped in his bedchamber while he disrobed, as she was entirely certain she would not have the sense to look away, and she'd already seen more of him than was proper. The idea of sleeping next to him was dreadful.

She was getting more adept at lying to herself but was not quite up to denial yet. With time, she might be able to pretend the entire experience had never happened, providing she found a way to stop dreaming. Her subconscious would take this out and bat it around like a ball, unless she begged him to remove her memories. Explaining why that should be necessary would be worse than remembering, so she resigned herself to a life of minor torment.

"I will not harm you," he said, exasperated.

She took comfort in the tone. A compassionate Snape did not surprise her as much as it once would have, but her worldview would be forever shattered if he actually turned agreeable. Of course, he thought her a cat, which surely helped. When he found out what and more importantly who she truly was, there would be nothing pleasant about him.

In the meantime, she had no option but to obey. She stalked past him, tail stiff, and entered his room with an air of affront. Crookshanks had been a fine teacher on the disdain of cats. She sat in the corner, her back to the bed, and methodically began cleaning her paws. It was such an engrossing task that she did not jump at all when he closed the door.

"Sleep where you will," he said to the accompanying rustle of covers, "but the floor becomes ice-cold overnight." He blew out the candle and said no more.

Hermione explored the bathroom. It smelled of spruce and moss and something ancient she could not name. The combination might well have been a signature. She had never noticed it before, but it smelled exactly as Severus Snape ought to. Of course, she had never been a cat before, save for that unfortunate incident with the polyjuice. Even then, she had not been so close to him, much less in a situation that merited cataloging his scents. Such things as the distinct smell of him or the powerful grace of his movements had made no impression when she was a child. Only his voice, which had always resonated in her dreams—nightmares, mostly.

She was no longer a child. Unfortunately, at the moment, she was also not a woman. Had she been, she'd have had no call to hang about in his rooms wondering where she might purchase that same soap once she'd left school. It would hardly do to go around smelling like him while she finished her studies. His senses had always been sharp, and she would not like to be grilled about her new grooming routine. He might simply smirk at her, which would be no more enjoyable and likely would last far longer than an interrogation. No, the search for that particular soap would have to wait. She did not think she would forget its scent.

He had told the truth about the floor. Even her padded feet stung with the chill of it. She wondered how he could stand it, then remembered that he'd endured far worse than cold feet. She looked up at the bed and huffed the cat equivalent of a sigh. There could be no harm in curling up at the foot of the bed. His breath was even, save for an occasional snore, so he would not know she'd accepted his invitation. Several more minutes of convincing herself that it would be entirely safe to lie at the feet of Severus Snape and considering her past, several minutes was fairly swift and she had curled up as tight as her cat body would allow.

This is my only chance. The thought snapped her out of near-sleep. *Only chance to what?* She knew the answer. *Stupid cat brain.* It was easier to blame the form than accept her own curiosity.

She inched up the bed with extreme care. One wrong move, and he'd awaken. Since she was not a normal part of his world, he might hex her without thinking. She could only handle one curse at a time, especially when she had no way to defend herself. She stopped when her head drew even with his chest. The hand not clutching his wand rested on the pillow above his head. She inched a bit farther up, then settled in to watch him sleep.

Nothing creepy about this at all. The thought passed quickly.

The romances were wrong; sleeping did not automatically make someone more beautiful. The lack of tension did nothing to soften the hard angles of his face. She was not disappointed. He'd always had the most interesting features. She had avoided staring at him out of sheer terror, not because she'd found him unattractive, though she supposed he probably was. Everyone said so. Even he thought it. She did not give a fig for what others thought. She could happily look on his face forever and never get bored. As he was unlikely to allow her to gaze at him endlessly, she decided to make the most of what time she had.

So intent was she on drinking in the sight and scent of him, she relaxed against his side without realizing it. His arm snaked around her. As she waited for him to open his eyes, to realize who and what she was, to bring an end to what might have been a perfect night save for that whole being stuck as a cat bit she fought down panic while simultaneously preparing to flee.

"Hush, kitten," he mumbled. "S'alright." Then he promptly returned to snoring. His arm went slack, though his fingers continued to play in her fur. It felt just good enough to be disconcerting.

She gave up, gave in, let herself enjoy his touch. At least he would not remember this part in the morning. She rubbed her cheek against his ribs, then rested her head on his chest. There was no longer any reason to deny herself the full experience or as full as she could get as a cat. As herself, this sort of intimacy with him was not in the realm of possibilities.

She had always seen him as her professor first, so this new way of thinking was not exactly comfortable. Unfortunately, she was having the damndest time contemplating anything else. The thought of being stretched out next to him in her true form made her wriggle.

He stroked her in time with his breathing. It might have been more soothing if she'd been a woman. Or perhaps soothing was not the right word. She began to purr, an ability she was sure to miss when things were set to rights. He pulled her onto his chest, still sleeping, and continued to pet her.

Oh, why not? She tucked her head into the curve where his neck met his shoulder, and promptly fell asleep to the steady beat of his heart.

Contemplating the Problem

Chapter 3 of 5

The cat is out of the bag...

□

When Severus awoke, the cat was not in the room. He looked at the closed door, then under the bed. No cat. He should not care. It was merely a cat and not even his cat but he found that in a matter of hours, he'd begun to feel as if it had always been there, beneath his notice but somehow comforting in its constancy. He pulled on his robe and went into his tiny bathroom.

The cat perched on the sink, staring at its reflection in the mirror.

"Admiring yourself, Fluff?"

The startled feline jumped straight into the air, realized its mistake, scrambled for purchase where there was none, and landed in a heap on the floor. In the manner of cats everywhere, it attempted to restore dignity by giving him an affronted stare and pretending it had intended the entire ungainly performance. He rewarded it with a slow clap. It stomped out of the room a thing he'd not thought possible for a feline tail twitching in agitation. He could not stop his chuckle, though it had the exact effect one would expect. The cat stiffened and turned to regard him with undisguised ire, reminding him the cat was, without a doubt, female.

"Your ego will recover, Fluff." He felt foolish using the cat's name, but Hagrid had always done the same for the monstrous creatures he kept, and despite the oaf's general idiocy, he usually managed to befriend the beasts.

While he dressed, Fluff sat facing the door, refusing to look his way regardless of his cajoling or mockery. She was a pretty cat, her brown tabby fur thicker than most winter coats. He'd thought she resembled a Scottish wildcat, but had changed his mind. Not only were they famously reclusive, but a true wildcat would not have accepted his hospitality. It certainly would not have snuggled up to him and slept on his chest.

The memory of her soft fur and warm breath lingered on his skin. He wondered how he might convince her to stay. Providing, of course, she did not belong to someone else. He did not think any of the current crop of fools was so clueless as to leave his or her familiar in a strange castle during the holidays, but he had seen a remarkable array of stupidity in his lifetime, so it was not beyond imagining.

"You have been patient, not something your kind is known for, so I will hurry." He left his coat where it hung and let her out of the room.

She raced across the library, then turned to regard him.

"Ah, yes. I should have thought of that." He opened the door. "Come back when you're done, and I'll see what can be managed for breakfast."

He hoped the cat would return, which was ludicrous. He did not keep pets.

A scan of the tiny larder proved that his promise to feed her would go unmet. His stomach rumbled in sympathy. A quick trip to the castle kitchen would solve the problem, but he was afraid Fluff would return while he was gone and believe herself abandoned. He tried to convince himself that it would not matter to him if she wandered off.

"Liar," he muttered. While he was astoundingly good at lying to others, he was utter shite at deluding himself. It might hurt to admit he was lonely, but it was the truth.

He sometimes wondered if it might have been wiser to insist upon dying. Not that he had been given a choice. He had been unable to voice his objection to being returned to the world of the living, but he doubted his opinion would have mattered one way or another, not least because he had no idea who was responsible for his untimely rescue.

He pushed a button on the wall, activating an annoyingly useful Muggle device. In seconds there was a tentative knock on his door. The house-elves had learned not to pop into his quarters. He had been told the poor little wretch who'd made that mistake was recovering, albeit slowly. He might have felt more regret had he not been quite clear about his privacy when he had agreed to return to the school to teach one last year. He owed Minerva that and any number of other things, some of which she remained unaware. Severus smiled grimly. He was a patient man.

The house-elf, on the other hand, was not. The second knock was louder. He flung open the door.

Hurrie stood on the doorstep, saucer-like eyes even wider than usual. She recovered swiftly. "You called for Hurrie, professor sir?"

"I require breakfast and lunch. And before you ask again I do not wish to join the others."

She scuffed her feet. "No, sir. Hurrie knows, sir. Is there anything special you wants Hurrie to make?"

"The usual will be fine, but add a plate of kippers."

Hurrie wrinkled her nose but nodded. The cat chose that moment to slip through the door, deftly avoiding the elf before rushing around the corner and out of sight. It was somewhat amusing.

The house-elf looked up with a smile. "You is wanting a litter box for Miss Hermione, as well?"

"What did you say?" he asked softly.

"Hurrie did not mean to be forward, sir. Hurrie could take her back to the castle, if you prefers."

"No." It came out harsher than he'd intended.

Hurrie shrank from him.

He took a breath, then let it out slowly. "That will not be necessary. Bring me food for two days, a collar, and a cat brush." He continued to list items both common and rare.

The house-elf scrunched up her face, which he had noted she did whenever his instructions were the least bit complex. Apparently, it helped her remember, as she had never failed to produce exactly what he requested.

"Miss Granger and I are conducting an experiment. Tell no one she is here. We are not to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir," Hurrie replied meekly, then disappeared with a pop.

Severus closed the door and tried desperately to get a handle on his anger. After all he had sacrificed, the terrible things he had done to keep those horrid children alive he had **died** for them they still thought to play cruel tricks. He smiled, as a cold not born of winter settled into his bones. Revenge was not only familiar, it had been a cherished pastime. Whatever Hermione had thought to gain from this particular prank, he would make certain she paid for it.

The majority of his private library was hidden and would remain so until he was absolutely certain of his personal safety. Some of those volumes should not be allowed out into the world. Trusting the Ministry to round up every Death Eater was the height of folly. Some would hide and others escape. In both cases, they would come for him, in part because of his book collection, but mostly for the cache his death would bring. He relished the idea of that challenge only slightly more than the one at hand.

Not being particularly rare or dangerous, the book he needed was near the top of the floor-to-ceiling shelves. He brought it down with a flick of his wand, then settled in to find the appropriate spell. By the time Hurrie returned with his supplies, he had identified exactly the right lesson to teach a young witch that she was not as clever as she believed.

"Fluff," he crooned. "Come see what I have for you."

The cat *Hermione*, he corrected himself trotted out as if she were entirely innocent. He set down a bowl of water, which she attempted to drink in a catlike manner without much success. She had better luck with the kippers. Considering how little she cared for them when not in her ridiculous disguise, he was surprised by the loud purr that accompanied her otherwise quiet dining. He found his own appetite had fled, so he watched her out of the corner of his eye and waited. A few moments later, she wobbled across the room, then sank down on the rug and promptly fell asleep.

It was unkind and unfair to have drugged her, but it was not unlike him. He was, after all, the best Potions master in an age possibly two and an expert at espionage. He was also practical. A cat, even one who was not good at being a cat, rarely accepts a collar without protest. The time spent wearing this particular collar would bother Hermione when he returned her to her natural state. That would be the first part of the lesson. It occurred to him that he might have asked for a leash, then rejected the idea. That would seem odd to anyone who had spent time around cats. They were notoriously resistant to being led.

"I expect the same of you," he murmured to the sleeping witch, "but it will make little difference."

When she awoke, she looked around with unfocused eyes, then froze. He sat in his chair, enjoying her reaction to the collar. First, she shook her head, as if the silver band would magically fly off. Rubbing it against the edge of a cabinet yielded no better result. He smiled when she tried to push at it first one paw, then both obviously frustrated by her lack of opposable thumbs.

"Leave it be, Fluff. It's for your own good. I would hate for someone to think you were all alone in this world. You are mine, now and always." He did not imagine the panicked look in her eyes before she fled the room.

He brought her back with a flick of his wand. Her attempts at resistance left several impressive gouges in the wood. What followed was a series of meows, punctuated by hissing and a long growl. It had the tone of a lengthy stream of profanity. She had managed to keep a lid on her anger during most of her tenure at Hogwarts, so perhaps her cat-self was more honest about her reaction to being collared. Of course, had she not come to him in disguise, she would have no reason to protest her treatment at his hands.

She should have considered that before deciding to play this game. He had not yet figured out what she hoped to gain.

"I intend to domesticate you, though I can see you are less than pleased by the idea. You will come to appreciate all I can do for you." He leaned over and stroked her from head to tail.

She took a swipe at his hand.

He hauled her onto his lap. "Is that any way to behave, when all I've done is shown you a kindness? You ought to be more grateful."

She dug her claws into his leg. He ignored the pain and picked up the brush. Several minutes later, a purr forced its way through her strangled protests, and he knew he had won. She could not stop the rumble of satisfaction once it began. The brushstrokes brought her feline nature to the forefront. She stopped struggling and slumped across his knees.

"That was not so difficult." He slid his finger under her chin and stroked down her neck, tilting her head up every time she tried to look away from him. "I suspect you enjoy the fight. It helps you justify surrender." He saw clearly the witch inside the cat's stricken look.

He dumped her off his lap before sympathy could set in. She curled up and buried her face in the rug.

"I wonder what you would say to me, if you could form words," he said over his shoulder. "Some idiot must have created such a spell, though I've never seen it."

He put together a plate of food he had no intention of eating. "Should I give you a voice? You could beg for the next treat. Or perhaps tell me your secret cat desires in the hope that I will fulfill them."

She crept closer, cautious yet unable to resist the chance he might let her speak for herself. At least that was the motivation he presumed for her. Reading women had never been easy, and cats were practically impossible.

"I doubt you could tell me anything I wished to hear." He moved away from her, partly to watch her crawl toward him again.

It would be more satisfying were she in her true form. That was most decidedly **not** an acceptable line of thinking, but he had the devil of a time pushing it down. He left the plate on the table, went into his room, and closed the door.

The bed was still rumpled from the night before. He clenched his fist. She had invaded his bed without invitation *Not true*. He had asked her to join him. Granted, he had thought her nothing more than a cat. She had waited until he slept or appeared to before she came to him. If it had been for warmth alone, she would have been satisfied to sleep at the foot of the bed.

"She was curious," he whispered. "Why?" He had no delusions about his appeal. Mostly, his flawed face had ceased to bother him. It went well with his cynicism and pain. There was no logical reason that a young woman would find him even marginally attractive, and it did not matter if she did, because he was in no way drawn to her.

"Desperate lies are still lies." He could at least acknowledge her allure. She was young, sharp, and not unpleasant to look upon, if not conventionally pretty. None of that had mattered to him before. He paced the room, trying to figure out what had changed.

She was of age now, which meant little. He had done many terrible things in his time, but taking advantage of a student had always been off-limits. Age was not the factor; power was, and he was not so base as to assert his over children, except in the classroom. Or when compelled to do so by wizards more cruel than he had ever managed to be.

Five or ten years might make a difference in how he viewed Hermione, but he could not be sure. She would always be a student of some sort. She could no more give up learning than she could decide not to breathe. That was part of her appeal. Her curious mind had followed interesting paths. He had no reason to think she would not continue on them, whether he witnessed the journeys or not. If nothing else, her excursions would not bore him.

"Nor would she ask me to share them." He went to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. He had once thought mirrors should fracture rather than reflect his image. Then he had discovered that revealing his damaged soul was much the same.

And there it was.

He found her more intriguing now because she, too, was damaged. He did not know if she was aware of it, but the cracks were there if one knew where to look. She might hold them together, mend and soldier on, but she could just as easily shatter. He did not want to be the one to break her.

Not in that way. The thought did not quite rise to the level of lie, so he chose to ignore it and focus on the problem at hand.

Hermione had never been the one to initiate pranks. In fact, she had rarely taken part in them, being far too serious far too young. It was one of the reasons he had both enjoyed and reviled her in his classes. His initial reaction had been based on her association with Potter and Weasley, though she had been more accessory than instigator. That sort of foolishness would never be her forte. Hence, a childish joke was not her reason for showing up outside his window.

If she had come to spy on him, she'd been terribly sloppy. He had let her in, though. More puzzling, he'd thought to keep her. If Hurrie had not let slip his new pet's true identity, how long would Hermione have continued the charade? That brought up another point he could not reconcile with Hermione's careful nature. Considering her experiences during the war, she was unlikely to be so cavalier as to leave the secret of her identity with a juvenile house-elf.

The question of her motivation could be answered by transforming her back into a witch, providing he could determine how she was maintaining her current shape. Since she was not an Animagus, registered or otherwise, it was simply more expedient to cause her enough discomfort that she would attempt to reverse the spell herself. Her efforts would give him the information necessary to undo her foolish disguise.

That he would enjoy immensely an afternoon devoted to her minor torment was a given.

Understanding

Chapter 4 of 5

Despite threats, paralyzing fear, and the inability to speak, Hermione attempts to explain what happened to her.

□

Hermione focused intently on the disarray before her. It had been easy to knock the box of toothpicks from the counter. Manipulating them into some semblance of words was proving far more difficult than she had expected. Her paws were not suited to the task, and the tufts of hair between her toes moved the tiny bits of wood away from the proper trajectory as often as towards it. Claws had proven entirely useless for the task, and her whiskers made it impossible for use her nose to line up the toothpicks. At the moment, she had the beginning of an H, an E that looked like a C (those middle pieces were maddeningly difficult to line up), and an almost serviceable L.

"Help," she said in a rather plaintive mewl. It did nothing to address the troublesome matter of how to create a P that was not twice as tall as the other letters. She doubted penmanship or stickmanship would be held against her, but it rankled nonetheless.

"What is going on here?" thundered Snape.

Hermione spun to face him, just as she would have if she'd been caught in the halls after curfew. Her tail lashed from one side to the other, scattering the toothpicks even further. She turned to see that her carefully formed almost-letters had disappeared into the chaos. A toothpick jammed into her left paw, causing her to yowl and back up. Directly into the legs of Professor Snape.

Injury to insult, then.

As if on cue, he swore at her. Then he hauled her up by the scruff of her neck, which was more uncomfortable than she would have imagined, and flipped her over. She hissed and struggled to get away.

"Idiot," he hissed back. "You'll make a bad situation worse."

She could not even begin to conceive of a worse situation than the one she was currently in, upside down in the arms of an angry man who had never had any love for her and might have actually hated her. Not that she wanted him to love her. Not really. Not the way a man... *Oh, hell.* She did **not** love Severus Snape, even if she did like the way it felt to rest against his chest while he dug splinters out of her paw.

His touch was tender, despite his anger over the mess she'd made of his house. She would do worse in her quest to explain her situation. She did not dare to hope he would understand, much less forgive her. He never had been the sort to let go of slights, real or perceived. From what she'd known of his history, and learned from the marks on his back, she could hardly blame him for taking solace in revenge. To escape being the target of his wrath deserved or not she would have to go very far away.

Probably for the best anyway, since I can't keep my eyes off him. That was bound to become an issue for the remainder of the term. Unless she stayed a cat, in which case she would not only be allowed to watch him as long and often as she liked, she would eventually lose her memories of why it should matter. She simply had to find a way to convince him to help her, consequences be damned. A life spent looking over her shoulder was better than one spent licking it.

He plopped her on the chair and went to sweep the floor. She only peered over the armrest once and was rewarded by the sight of him bending over to dispose of the last toothpicks. *Shameless.* She realized it was true; she felt no shame at all watching his backside. By the time he returned to stare down his prodigious nose at her, she was curled up and cleaning her aching paw.

"I shall have to teach you some manners," he said ominously.

She chose to respond as any other cat would by paying him no heed.

He flicked her ear. "Ignoring me is never a good idea. I have a thousand ways to make you take notice. At least nine hundred of them are terribly unpleasant."

Cats are unable to blanch, or she might have done so. Instead, she returned his glower with what she hoped was a look of utter boredom. That was how Crookshanks always regarded her when she chastised him.

Her assumed apathy vanished when he produced a cage.

She clambered up the back of the chair, paused briefly to get her balance, and made a desperate leap for the table. Had she been a real cat, she would have made the jump easily. Being new to this body, she misjudged and ended up hanging off the edge, her claws digging furrows in the soft wood as she slowly lost her fight with gravity.

His laughter did the rest. Shaking with anger and a healthy dose of fear, she crashed to the ground.

"You are an absolute disgrace to your kind," he said.

She scrambled to get away from him, only to realize she was out of space to run. She managed a sliding turn around the cabinet, then streaked toward his room, cat instincts blinding her to the fact that she knew of no way out. As she was unable to barricade herself in, she did the only thing she could think of. She wriggled her way under the claw-foot tub, closed her eyes, and pretended to be invisible.

He did not pursue her, which was a relief until the waiting became unbearable. He had to know where she was, so why was he not extracting her?

Because he knows you have nowhere to go. While she was glad logical function had returned, she did not like the result thereof. Attempting to evade him had never really worked. He only allowed it because he knew he would catch her eventually and without much effort. Resigned, she slunk out of the bathroom and went to face her doom.

He had built a fire and was sitting in the armchair, book on his lap. The cage rested under his feet, as if he'd only ever meant it to be an ottoman. She picked a spot directly in front of him, sat down, and wrapped her tail around her back paws.

"You are an interesting creature." He placed the book face-down on the table. "You lack discipline while secretly longing for it. You fear confinement but not conflict. You are desperate for attention, even affection, while at the same time filled with mistrust. And the things that amuse you are a mystery to everyone around you. Perhaps I was wrong in my initial assessment. You are, in fact, a very good cat."

She did not move. Had she a voice, she would yet have remained speechless. Because he was absolutely right about all of it.

"Come to me." It was more request than command.

She approached him cautiously. He could put her in the cage, if he chose. Left long enough, she would stop fighting to reveal her true nature. By the time she reached his outstretched hand, she was crawling on her belly, head down. He brushed the top of her head with his long fingers.

"Poor, confused Hermione," he murmured.

She froze, twin urges to flee and vomit warring with a desperate desire to pretend she had not heard him use her real name.

"What has been done to you?"

She looked up, desperate to tell him anything, everything, if only he would fix her.

"Cat got your tongue?" He chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes, ears laid flat against her skull.

"You cursed yourself to this silence, and I have no idea how you managed it."

She blinked several times, trying to figure out how to explain. She stared pointedly at him, walked toward the bedroom, then returned to his side.

He frowned and said nothing.

She repeated the action, then made a clumsy attempt to point to herself. Cats, as a rule, cannot point, that being the purview of dogs, primates, and people. She pitched sideways, barely managing to keep her feet.

"If you cast the spell or triggered an object whilst drunk, then you have earned your suffering."

Had she been able, she would have screamed at his failure to understand her attempt at charades. She tried once more, but this time she ended her trajectory with a leap into his lap. Paws on his chest, she stared him in the eye. Then she stalked into the bedroom and waited for him to follow.

Oddly enough, he did. "You were in your chamber."

She flopped down on his bed with relief.

"So, that is where I will find the clue to this madness you've perpetrated."

She waved her tail lazily in assent.

"Perfect. I have no idea where you sleep." He paused for a moment. "With the exception of last night. I could hardly miss the weight of you on top of me nor the way you purred us both to slumber."

She buried her head in the covers, then realized they were still mussed from the night before. She backed up so quickly she fell right off the bed.

"We can discuss your penance for that intrusion another time." He removed his coat from the armoire.

She watched him fasten every button, mesmerized by his own transformation. When he was done, the man who had alternately comforted and harried her for amusement was gone, replaced by the implacable Professor Snape.

He scooped her up and tucked her under his arm. "Since I must assume you do not wish anyone to know about your spectacular failure, I will follow you home and see what can be done to salvage it." Even his voice had hardened.

When she did not struggle to liberate herself, he relaxed his grip. "You'll have your freedom once we reach the castle proper for just as long as it takes you to show me your folly. After that, you will tell me absolutely everything I wish to know, or I will turn you right back into a cat and drop you in the middle of the forest to fend for yourself."

She did not want to believe he would be so cruel, but she had yet to hear him utter an idle threat.

His coat was far softer than it looked, but she supposed that would be part of the illusion he maintained. The cat in her desperately wanted to rub against the fine wool. So did the witch, but she would never admit it aloud. She was in enough trouble without compounding it.

He deftly avoided notice as they made their way through the main rooms of the castle, though she'd be hard pressed to explain how a large man with a large cat could manage to go unseen without resorting to skulking. She'd expected him to set her down once inside, but he held onto her until they arrived in the wing that housed the students. He showed a flash of surprise when she turned at the end of the hall and made her way up a narrow flight of stairs to what had once been the servants' quarters.

She had not been able to lock her room when she left, so there was no need for spells. Professor Snape opened the door and waited. Hermione jumped up on her bed and dug under the pillow for the slim French tome that had ruined her life. She was convinced that the ramifications of performing that spell would haunt her for years to come.

He reached over her, read the title, and burst out laughing not the usual derisive snarl of dark humor, but a full-throated, chest-deep laugh. It went on for far too long. When he managed to bring himself under control, there were tears in his eyes and his breathing was labored.

"You are a complete idiot." He pronounced every word, his amusement making it impossible for vitriol to surface.

She hissed at him while she still could.

"Settle down, Fluff," he chided. "I am here to save you from your own stupidity. That was, after all, the reason you came to me, was it not?"

She gave the barest nod.

"Very well. I shall study this work of unparalleled genius and devise a way to undo what you've managed to accomplish."

She kneaded the pillow a few times and curled up on it.

He gave her the look that had always indicated she was being particularly daft. "Were I willing to be seen reading this poor excuse for a manual, I would hardly do so in a female student's chambers." He swept out of the room, expecting her to follow.

She gave her closet a longing glance, then trotted after him.

The Ties That Bind

Chapter 5 of 5

With the right amount of concentration and a great deal of intent, anything can be transformed.

□

Severus did not bother to carry Hermione out of the castle. He had only done so on the way because he did not want her to find help elsewhere. Now that he had the ridiculous book, she had little choice about returning with him. She would think it was some form of punishment and she would be partly right but he was much more concerned with his magical signature being found in her chamber, not to mention the possibility of being seen leaving her room.

At the moment, she was phalumping through snowdrifts behind him, likely in a huff. She'd spent the better part of her life that way, and he could not blame her for it. The world was full of irritations. The more intelligent and aware one was, the more obvious and insulting other people's willful ignorance became. From the first day at Hogwarts through to the end, she had aggravated him. Only now did he understand why. They were far too much alike for his comfort.

She bounded past him, having at last figured out the mechanics of being a cat. She cleared the stairs in a flying leap and landed softly by his door. It had taken her very little time to find her feet.

He shook the snow off his coat and onto hers. She shook her head and then the rest of her body, returning at least some of the flakes to him. He shooed her inside, hung his coat on a peg by the door, and gave himself over to making sense of an entirely nonsensical philosophy of magic.

Nine hours later, his head was pounding, and he would rather have gouged out his own eyes than re-read the convoluted arguments between the author's first and second personalities. Severus had identified a third and strongly suspected a fourth lurked around. He had no intention of digging deep enough to find it. He stood and stretched.

Hermione looked up at him.

"No solutions to be found tonight. Even I need to sleep." He left her staring at the banked fire.

He awoke with her curled at the foot of the bed. He had no reason, nor yet proof, that she had ventured from that corner of the mattress, but the thought persisted as he dressed and returned to the chore of creating a proper spell to free Hermione from her furry confines. First, he would feed her the second tin of kippers and perhaps remember to eat something himself.

Severus talked to himself as he wrote the spell, a comforting habit he'd held in check during his long career as a spy. At least he did not contradict himself the way the source material did. He had drawn diagrams and charts in an attempt to make sense of the "instructions" Hermione had followed. Or, rather, not followed exactly. Her ability to self-transform with only half a spell showed remarkable talent and strength. Perhaps one day he would tell her so, but he doubted it. He would most certainly admonish her to read **all** the text in the future. Important things could hide in poetry.

At last, he called her to him. She glanced at the windows in the library, turned around, and walked into his bedroom. No amount of cajoling could get her to return to the larger space, which told him she thought the spell would not work properly there. He did not know her reasons, but as she had done at least half of it before, and he had not, he placed a small table near the door and loaded it with the necessary components.

He sprinkled her liberally with rose water, mostly because he knew it would irritate her, but also because he was about to transform her into a witch who had not bathed in days. She reacted by shaking off the liquid, spraying drops across his walls and coverlet. It was entirely like a cat. He moved quickly through the physical steps, even though he believed them to be for show alone. Hermione watched him with a faith that was almost palpable.

"*Vincula Irritum!*" A disturbing spray of color shot from his wand and landed like embers in Hermione's fur. She did not seem bothered by them, but neither was she changed. He should have known the spell to break a forced bond was too simple. She had, after all, chosen to bind herself in the shape of a cat. Either that, or the spell had been negated by the enchantment he had worked into the collar.

He turned back to the table and flipped through the pertinent (if any of the drivel could be so called) pages. "Perhaps some version of *Fiat Tibi*."

"Perhaps you should have more confidence in your own abilities," Hermione said.

"Then I should be entirely unbearable, rather than obnoxiously competent, and foolish young women would not dare to presume upon good graces I'm widely believed to lack." He closed the book and turned to face her.

His focus narrowed to a place just over her shoulder, a safe place where she did not stand dressed only in the worn shirt he had cast off earlier. The only other choice would be to turn away, which might indicate that his reaction to her was that of a man to a woman rather than a cantankerous teacher to a young witch who was, quite obviously, no longer a child.

"Would you be so kind?" she asked, as if he should know what sort of kindness to show her.

"I thought I had been," he replied gruffly.

She sighed, then did it again. "I missed the ability to do that," she said. "For years, a deep sigh was the only thing that kept me from strangling the people around me."

He did not tell her that actually strangling them would not have been at all satisfying. In fact, he said nothing at all, merely kept staring at the wall without seeming to. He had become very good at not seeing things he wished to avoid remembering.

"I hate to ask one more favor of you, but would you mind terribly transforming this shirt into something else?"

"Such as?"

"Such as anything that won't cause a scandal when I leave your private quarters wearing it." She kept her voice neutral but he sensed her amusement.

"You are perfectly capable of taking care of it yourself."

"That may be true, but as the last spell I cast on myself did not work out well, and I'm having a hard enough time standing on two legs at the moment, I would really, really appreciate it if you would do the honors. Also, you may have noticed that I have no wand."

He finally looked at her. A flick of his wand and the thin shirt became a rather sturdy dress that covered her from neck to ankles. He was fairly sure his grandmother had worn something similar.

She gave a shaky laugh. "How good of you to make sure I am completely shrouded." She took one step, then pitched forward.

He caught her before she hit the floor and without thinking scooped her up as though she was a cat. A much larger cat, but still manageable. He laid her on the bed.

"I believe I have almost reached my limit of endurable humiliation," she said.

"I doubt that," he answered automatically.

"Do you hate me?" There was nothing pathetic in the question, merely curiosity.

He did not reply immediately. She would not trust a quick answer. "My feelings about you have varied, but I have never hated you."

"Are you still determined to make me suffer for this?" She waved her hand in a vague gesture that was meant to encompass her entire misadventure but instead highlighted the fact that she was stretched out in the middle of his bed. The severity of her gown made her not one whit less appealing.

"Whether you suffer or not will be up to you, but yes, I expect you to keep your part of the bargain."

"The negotiation was a bit one-sided," she complained.

"I was not the one in need of assistance," he countered.

"True." She took a calming breath. "Will it be terrible?"

"Most likely," he replied honestly. "But it will wait until you are done with your studies and I with teaching."

She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "I can accept that."

"You already have." He gave her his hand and helped her to stand.

She grew steadier with each step. "Will you tell Professor McGonagall about this?"

"Did you wish me to?"

Her eyes held the same panic she'd exhibited when faced with the cage. "No!"

"Then it shall remain between us." He let go of her hand but walked beside her to the door. "And I will keep that inane book to ensure it does not fall into the hands of another foolish student."

"I knew I made the right choice, coming to you."

He let the familiar mask of cold indifference settle into place and said nothing.

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, for everything."

"Get out." He turned away. A whisper of wool over ancient wood floors and the door closed behind her, the latch catching with a dull clunk.

He spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to eradicate the smell of roses from his bedroom. In five years, or ten, she would come to discuss his terms. If she still intrigued him, he would devise a different lesson. If she did not, or if she failed to return to him, he would release her. In the meantime, she would cease to exist for him.

After she returned his coat.

Hermione crawled into her bed, the scent of roses clinging to her hair and skin despite a long bath. She lay her head on a pillow wrapped in soft, black wool and smiled. He would be furious over the theft, though she would protest that she had only borrowed it to keep her warm on the way back to the castle. She would bring it to him in the morning, but she would sleep on it tonight.

Her fingers traced the edge of her jaw, just as he had when she was a cat, then down along her neck where she found a delicate collar of silver links. When she could not locate the latch by touch, she went to her mirror. No closure revealed itself. Neither was it affected by any release spell she knew.

"He **collared** me," she hissed. For a moment, the mirror showed the specter of a cat.

She slipped on her soft boots and grabbed his coat. When she jammed her hands in the pockets, she discovered a neatly folded piece of paper in the left one. Her stomach turned at the sight of his measured script.

Dear Fluff,

By now you will have discovered my gift to you. I strongly suggest you leave it in place. Removing it will restore your feline form, and I am not certain I could devise another in time to keep you from losing yourself. You were fortunate I had on hand the necessary elements for this one.

I shall continue to research your problem, though I expect this particular challenge to take years. I encourage you to contemplate what I might find valuable enough to trade for a permanent remedy. Negotiation is far more enjoyable when both parties have something to offer.

She clenched the paper in her fist, then smoothed it out again to read his final words.

Do feel free to ask Professor McGonagall for assistance. I am certain she will have many opinions on the matter. I would be pleased to discuss it with her, should you desire.

In the meantime, wear it well, learn many things, and try your best to avoid French booksellers.

Your once and future master,

S

Hermione picked up her wand, removed every crease from the letter, folded it neatly, and popped it in her bag.

She took off his coat, laid it on the bed, and transformed it into a lovely purple cloak, just her size. He had, after all, told her to keep and wear his gift. If he had wished to have his property back, he should have been more specific. She picked up the two dozen buttons that had clattered to the floor. Those, she would return.

She got back into bed, extinguished the candles, and began to catalog the many ways she could repay the 'kindness' of Severus Snape.