

Framing Hermione

by Pyttan

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

17th of August 1998

Chapter 1 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

A thank you goes out to my lovely Beta AmyLouise. I also want to thank Celta_Diabolica who cheered me on. I also would like to thank Death_ofme who came up with the excellent prompt that I used to write this story. The prompt will be posted at the end of the last chapter.

1. 17th of August 1998

"It isn't fair," Harry said, presenting his desultory, general and correct opinion, which also had the added benefit of applying to almost everything in life.

While he talked, he was waving at Madam Rosmerta. She, like everyone else these days, responded to him immediately: She smiled and raised a questioning eyebrow over by the bar. He grabbed the second, empty bottle of Cherry Schnapps the six of them had shared and held it up for her to see. Then he showed her two fingers. Madame Rosmerta laughed, shook her head, waved her wand and floated six bottles of Butterbeer to their table instead.

It was just as well. It was undignified to drink Cherry Schnapps. Besides, Neville was too happy as it was, Ron was cross-eyed, Ginny was asleep curled up against Harry's shoulder, Luna was looking more mellow than usual—and that was saying something—and Harry was getting more energetic with each shot of Cherry Schnapps he drank. And Merlin, right now an energetic Harry was something she didn't have the strength and patience to deal with.

Hermione was tired.

"What isn't fair?" she asked, despite her misgivings.

Stupid to ask, because the question was sure to generate an answer, and the answer would need a comment, then there would be a comment on the comment, and then the whole conversation would turn into who knew what.

"We've been fixing things forever," said Harry, slurring a little as he spoke. "Since we started school in fact. First we had to fix Voldemort—"

"You fixed Voldemort good," said Ron. "Here's to you, mate." He clinked his bottle of Butterbeer against Harry's. Harry rolled his eyes but drank anyway, and then continued, "And now we've helped to rebuild the castle, fix the grounds and—"

"Not the Ministry," said Neville. "Because it's on the bottom of our priority list." He was slurring when he spoke, just as Harry did, she discovered.

"Yeah, I wonder how Percy and Schacklebolt are doing. The poor sods," said Ron, making Hermione giggle. This time they all clinked their bottles, except for the sleeping Ginny.

"—But as far as I know, Professor Snape still hasn't got a portrait, which is unfair," said Harry.

Harry was on a crusade again, then. Thank Merlin, it was a minor one. If Harry wanted a Snape-portrait hung at Hogwarts, Harry was going to get a Snape-portrait hung at Hogwarts. This quest wasn't likely to kill him or anyone else in the vicinity, so she didn't need to worry. She took another swig of her Butterbeer. Thank Merlin, they were out of Cherry Schnapps. Why Flitwick had chosen to buy them that particular beverage to celebrate finishing the repairs of Hogwarts, she'd never know.

"I asked Professor McGonagall," said Luna, who, as unexpected as it seemed, was the most coherent of them. "The portraits aren't commissioned, you know. They just show up when the Headmaster dies. She said that he isn't going to get one since he abandoned the school when he ran from the duel." She gave Hermione a melancholy look. "It doesn't seem right, somehow."

Something was wrong with what Luna had just said, but Hermione couldn't quite figure it out.

"Yeah," said Harry. "But it's like you said, it's not fair. He didn't—"

That was it! Now she remembered.

"That's not what *Hogwarts: A History* says," said Hermione, taking care to articulate. It didn't go all that well, she could hear that, but she carried on anyway. "It says something similar, though"

Harry and Ron, for once in their lives, paid attention to her mentioning the book. So she decided to hold out on them. She sipped her Butterbeer and enjoyed the rare moment. She'd make them beg for it.

"What does it say?" asked Neville, ruining her moment with an efficiency that made her understand why Snape, when alive, had seemed ready to strangle him at times.

"To be precise—"

"Which you always are," said Luna, in that earnest, deadpan kind of way she had. Hermione couldn't come up with anything smart to counter with—thank you, Flitwick, for the Cherry Schnapps—so she decided to ignore her and carry on.

"To be precise, it states, and I quote: 'A Headmaster who doesn't act in the best interest of the school will not have a portrait appear on his behalf.'"

Ron's eyes narrowed in the way they did when he was up to something playing wizard chess. "That's a huge difference, isn't it?" he said. "Running from the duel shouldn't have disqualified him from having one."

"Do you remember anything else?" asked Harry.

Hermione couldn't help it: She scoffed at him.

"Of course I do. I quote, again: 'one of the tasks of the newly appointed Headmaster—'"

"Or Headmistress," Ron cut in.

Hermione ignored him.

"—is to pick the place where his or her portrait will be hung when they die."

"Does the book say whether the portrait must be hung in the Headmaster's office?" asked Ron.

Hermione thought about it.

"No. But it does say that the portraits are to be placed somewhere within Hogwarts Castle."

Harry frowned.

"But where is it, then?" he asked.

"Well," said Luna. "He didn't like being a teacher very much, and he didn't like children." She paused and frowned. "I don't think he liked people."

"So, he wouldn't want his portrait around people," said Harry.

Hermione remembered something else.

"The book also said that the portrait of the former Headmaster helps and guides the new one through the process."

"And that would be Professor Dumbledore! We can ask him," said Harry, then laughed and seemed to relax, taking a swig out of his bottle.

Luna looked thoughtful.

"What are you going to do with the portrait if you find it?" she asked Harry.

"Put it in the Headmaster's office where it can be seen." Harry didn't even hesitate in his answer.

"That's not a very nice thing to do. Not if he didn't want it where there's people, sometimes even children, around."

"But his name should be cleared, right? So the portrait needs to be hung where it can be seen."

Hermione snickered.

"But it's great! Don't you see? If we find it, it'll be like killing two birds with one stone. We get the Wizarding world to acknowledge how much he did for all of us, and no one can use the portrait argument against him—"

"What's the second?" asked Ron.

"If you hadn't interrupted me, you would know already."

Harry sighed.

"Would you two just stop it! Hermione, continue, please."

Hermione looked at her friends.

"And, since he still was a right bastard to all of us when we were in school, I think we could term it as a rather kind and friendly way of getting back at him."

Ron was the first one who laughed. Then they all did. Except Luna, who looked worried.

19th of August 1998

Chapter 2 of 23

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2. 19th of August 1998

Headmistress McGonagall looked up from the copy of *Hogwarts: A History* that lay open on the desk in front of her. Her gaze slid from one painting of a former Headmaster to the next; some snoozing in their frames, and others, like Professor Dumbledore, awake and very interested in the proceedings. Her gaze slid over Harry and Ron too and then came to a stop when she reached Hermione.

"It's an interesting theory. Well worth pursuing, I would think."

"And I think not." The cold, clear voice wasn't hard to recognise since it was the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black speaking. "Whether the *children's* theory is correct or not has yet to be proven. Nevertheless, you should take into account, Headmistress, the wishes of Headmaster Snape. No matter how dearly I would appreciate the company of another Slytherin, an intelligent conversationalist ..." Phineas Nigellus Black made a dismissive gesture towards the assembled portraits in the room and gave the picture of Professor Dumbledore a vicious glare, "I'm still of the firm opinion that it's the Headmaster's prerogative to choose the location of his own portrait. And also if he wishes to let the world know about its location." He finished the statement with another quelling look in Professor Dumbledore's direction.

Hermione wanted to jump up and down with glee. This time it would have served Phineas Nigellus Black much better to have kept quiet or to feign sleep, because he had just given away the fact that there was a portrait of Professor Snape to be found. And better yet, so did Professor Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling at her. In addition to the twinkle, he was also smiling at her and winking over the rim of his glasses.

Harry spoke first.

"Professor Dumbledore, you were the one who helped Professor Snape with the arrangements concerning his portrait."

"Indeed I was. I do think he chose to place it very well too, considering his special requirements."

A hissing sound came from Headmaster Black's painting.

"You are not suppose to tell them, Albus."

"Tell them what, Phineas? I haven't told them anything they didn't already know." Dumbledore smiled his benign smile again and twinkled at Headmaster Black. Black however, didn't twinkle at all, and was now reminding Hermione of Sirius at his scruffiest and most insane. She couldn't help wondering if duels were possible in magical paintings. They probably were.

Painted carnage was not an attractive idea.

"So, where did Snape put his?" asked Ron. Hermione felt like hitting him on the back of his head with something hard. Subtle they were not, the Weasley clan.

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to divulge the whereabouts of Severus' painting. He made me promise," said Dumbledore.

"He didn't like to teach, he didn't like kids, and he wasn't too fond of people..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"What about friends? Someone that wouldn't let the location slip, that we could ask?" said Ron.

"No use asking someone that won't give the location away," said Harry, still looking thoughtful.

Hermione tried to think of a plausible place where it might be. Then she realised that Headmistress McGonagall was staring at the wall beside Dumbledore's portrait, rather than at his portrait.

"Professor McGonagall?"

Professor McGonagall smiled, looking at peace in a way that Hermione had never seen before.

"We'll find it. I'll enlist the staff, and we'll start the search immediately."

20th of August 1998

Chapter 3 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

3. 20th of August 1998

They had searched for the painting of Professor Snape all day yesterday without finding it. They had looked everywhere that seemed plausible: The dungeon, the Room of Requirement—burnt out as it still was—and the library, without finding it. Today they had resorted to searching the unlikely places: the kitchen, the owlery and even the toilets, which had amused Moaning Myrtle no end. It also gave Myrtle the opportunity to give Harry a couple of lewd suggestions that had made his ears, and probably the rest of him, blush.

Now it was getting close to lunchtime, and they still hadn't found anything. And since Professor Dumbledore was still refusing to give them even the smallest hint or lead, they had split up so they could search a bigger area. That's when she'd remembered the East Wing on the ground floor. There were few classrooms here and a lot of corridors. Corridors she, Ron and Harry had never explored and that most people, students and teachers alike, tended to ignore. It was as good a place as any for her to search.

The doors in the corridor were unwilling to let her through; they opened for her only after she threatened to take their keys away as punishment, and behind them she encountered long, winding corridors.

But at the end of the last one was a huge oak door. She had to stand on her tiptoes to reach the handle.

It was locked, but an *Alohomora* took care of that problem. The door gave an ominous squeak as it opened, swinging inwards.

The room inside was dark. She couldn't see anything, and her stomach contracted at the thought of what might be hidden in a blacked-out room that, if the size of the door was anything to go by, was roughly the size of Westminster Abbey. Maybe bigger. She swallowed the lump in her throat and held her wand a bit harder as she lifted it.

She threw the *Lumos* without making a sound in case something horrible hiding in the darkness was listening and prepared the next spell in case fighting would be necessary.

What little she could see of the room was empty. She took a couple of tentative steps inside. The whole room, even the parts she couldn't see, was probably empty if the echo of her steps was anything to go by.

She walked deeper into the room, and she still couldn't see or even hear anything worrying. No giant spiders, no growling, slobbering Fluffy, no snake or other random monsters, not even of the human kind.

But as she walked even further into the room, dimly lit by the light from her wand, she could see a large, dark shadow on the far wall. Her heart sped up. Maybe, just maybe this was it. She walked toward it, holding up her wand so the glowing tip illuminated more and more of the dark shape as she moved closer.

The portrait was lovely. Especially considering the object of it.

Severus Snape was sitting in an armchair with his head resting against one of its sides. His right arm was on the armrest while the other was dangling over the side of the chair that was closest to her. He was holding his wand. He didn't snore, but she could hear his slow breaths as his chest rose and fell in time with his breathing.

He looked much better than she remembered. He looked healthier, and for some reason, she felt her eyes tear up on seeing that the artist had put a lot of work into the background of the painting.

One of the walls in the picture had bookcases that stretched from the floor to the roof. The shelves were filled with books. She couldn't read the titles, but there were titles painted—with minuscule letters—on the back of every single book.

Through a door in the back of the painting, she could see a big four-poster bed covered with a beautiful spread in jewel colours.

She hadn't realised that she had lifted her hand until she saw it touch the canvas where Severus Snape's cheek was painted.

Nothing happened.

Severus Snape slept on, and the curtains hanging close to an open balcony door on the picture fluttered as if the wind outside had taken hold of them.

And all she was touching was dry paint. She could feel the cool surface of the paint and the small ridges of the brush strokes against her fingers. And that brought it home: Severus Snape was dead, and would never stride through the corridors of Hogwarts, robes billowing, again. He was gone, and so were Fred, Remus and Tonks.

The pang of pain in her chest made her knees fold.

Lying curled on the hard marble floor, in an empty room at the farthest end of Hogwarts, with her hands covering her face, Hermione, who hadn't cried even once after the battle, listened to the hollow echoes of her own sobs.

15th of August 2014

Chapter 4 of 23

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4. 15th of August 2014

Severus pretended to sleep as Mrs Weasley, née Granger, arrived at the Headmistress' office for her interview.

Before she'd arrived, he had made a studious effort at displaying total and utter disinterest when Minerva told him that she was interviewing the chit for the position of Professor in Ancient Runes.

He didn't want Minerva to know how much he wanted her to hire the interfering, self-satisfied little dolly.

Hermione Weasley, who didn't know when to leave things of no concern of hers alone. He would teach her, though. Because now she was here. And since she and Minerva had become friends after the chit left school, this interview was a mere formality, only performed as a way to hide the blatant favouritism on Minerva's part.

Potter would have been better, of course, but Hermione Weasley would do just fine for what he had in mind.

And he had been lucky. The two women had placed themselves in front of the fireplace. Between them stood a table with a tray laden with sandwiches, cookies and a pot of tea. And best of all, they sat with their sides toward him. He didn't even have to feign sleep while listening in on their conversation.

"I was surprised when I saw your application, dear. I have to admit that I expected you to make a career within the Ministry. You never did give me cause to believe otherwise."

Minerva turned the parchments Hermione had given her over and perused them once more. "You are doing very well there. I'm even under the impression that Minister Shacklebolt has every intention of promoting you, wanting you on his staff."

Hermione drew a breath deep enough for even Severus to hear, and the sigh made Minerva look up at her guest.

"When I decided to start working at the Ministry, it was because Shacklebolt convinced me I was needed there. I went along with his idea because it seemed meaningful at the time." She was absently twirling a strand of hair around her fingers, choosing her words with care. "However, I feel a need to do something else. Teaching would be a very nice change of pace. I would get the chance of concentrating on Ancient Runes, not only my favourite subject, but also something I still have a deep personal interest in, and I would also be doing something meaningful—teaching." Her voice trailed off.

Merlin, such an abysmal liar the woman was!

Severus could see Minerva straighten her back even more, impossible as it seemed, as she was already sitting ramrod straight.

"So, it wouldn't have anything to do with Draco Malfoy becoming the secretary of one of the senior members of the Wizengamot?" Minerva asked.

Severus bit his tongue so he wouldn't laugh out loud at the crestfallen face of Hermione Weasley.

"Please. I might be your future employer, but we are friends. I would appreciate knowing what has happened that makes you want to leave."

Hermione bit her lower lip, seemed to hesitate, and then started to speak.

"During the time I have worked at the Ministry, I only managed to push through a couple of laws that protect the rights of Magical Creatures. I eventually learnt to leave the same Magical Creatures well enough alone. That's the reasons for my assumed popularity among them. The latter made me more popular than the first, in case you wondered." She lifted her cup but seemed to forget to drink from it. "Then there are the endless battles to abolish the the pro-pure-blood laws ... I'm starting to lose hope, to be honest. When I discovered that the Malfoys, once again, are back in grace, and at the same time realised I was hired as one of the token Muggle-borns, I decided it was time to leave." She shrugged. "When you told me this post was available, I applied."

The Weasley woman sounded discouraged, which was pleasing. If she was as wrecked as she sounded, it would be easy enough to bring her down. Maybe even too easy. Served her right for being stupid enough to start working at the Ministry.

"Then there's Ron and the kids. I want to spend more time with them. So, would you want an old, jaded student ... friend on your staff?" She sounded defensive now.

He had heard something about that: She had two children now, if Minerva's and Filius' gossip was correct, and it usually was.

Minerva nodded. "I understand. Thank you for your honesty. And you don't want to live at Hogwarts, I presume?" She made a neat stack of the parchments and put them back in the leather folder they had come in. "I'll need to keep these. I trust you've got copies?" Hermione smiled and nodded. "You will have to do the nightly rounds, you understand, even if you choose not to live here. Is that acceptable to you?"

The girl perked up; that was obvious. "Yes. Yes, it is. I was counting on that being a necessity," she said.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, then. I'm very happy to have you, you know. I wanted you to join earlier, but you never bit when I tried to get you to apply."

Hermione Weasley laughed, looking more relaxed now.

"I didn't want to put you in an awkward position with us being friends."

Minerva's whole posture expressed exasperation.

"Please. I've been angling for an application from you for years."

Severus closed his eyes and feigned sleep as they, giggling—giggling, for Merlin's sake—rose and walked out of the room, chatting now that their business was concluded.

But still, Severus felt like whooping. He had done it once before in his life: When he had discovered that Lily Evans, the prettiest girl in the neighborhood, was a witch. It wasn't the same kind of whooping. Not the same kind of happiness. But it was close enough.

He would get a small measure of revenge. Because he could make Peeves seem reasonable.

"Severus."

Minerva had returned, and her voice cut through his musings with the efficiency of a slicing hex. He was proud of the fact that he didn't even flinch.

"Don't bother. I know you're awake."

He opened his eyes and gave her a studious yawn.

"Minerva," he said, imitating Albus' jovial way of greeting, but pulling out chosen vowels in the way he knew annoyed her no end. "How are you this fine day?"

Minerva sniffed and made a disgusted moue.

"Very well, thank you," she answered, her voice oozing false politeness. "I just wanted you to know I have just hired a new Professor in Ancient Runes."

He cocked a deliberate eyebrow at her.

"Really? And whom did you decide on?"

Minerva was getting tired of the game. He could see that.

"Hermione Weasley. Of course," she said and turned her back on him.

"Oh." He paused until Minerva turned to him again. "Well. She might be more adept at Ancient Runes than she was at Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, I suppose."

Minerva gave him a narrowed glance over the rim of her glasses.

"That's all you have to say?"

"I can't imagine what I might add. It's not as if I have to speak to her or be in any kind of contact with her."

Minerva was pursing her lips, and her eyes narrowed. She was suspicious then. As she started to speak, he pulled out his gold pocket watch and looked at it.

"I'm afraid I have a previous appointment. I'll have to leave now." With that he rose and left his frame, showing up again one frame over where Phineas Nigellus Black was waiting for him.

"Ah, Severus, there you are," he said and gave Minerva a haughty look. "Join me in the reading room where we can discuss things in private."

30th of October 2014

Chapter 5 of 23

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5. 30th of October 2014

9.00 am: Third year class in Ancient Runes

"You may take your seats." Hermione watched as the third year students pulled out their chairs and seated themselves. The sound of chairs dragging on the stone floor was bouncing off the stone walls, creating a blast of ear-numbing racket. Thankfully, as with all blasts, it was short-lived.

Hermione went over to her desk and spelled a piece of chalk so that it hung suspended, shivering in the air before the blackboard, ready to start writing.

She looked at the class and smiled.

"Now, can anyone tell me what we went through in our previous lesson?"

The silence in the class room was as ear numbing as the noise had been before. Blank faces were staring back at her. Others were looking away from her in obvious attempts to avoid eye contact and thereby the question. Not a single hand was raised.

"Trying to teach again are we, Professor Weasley?"

And of course, here he was, like every other week, the bane of her existence; and he, as usual, had no compunction about speaking up.

"How is that working out for you? Your students look somewhat ... What is that word I'm looking for? Let me see ... vacant? Yes, vacant; that's the exact word."

She could stab the painting with a pair scissors she supposed. A pity she didn't have any.

"Headmaster Snape," said Hermione, looking up at the painting on the opposite wall, trying to keep her temper under control. "Did you decide to visit for a reason, or ..."

She let the rest of the unfinished sentence hang in the air between them.

The portrait of Severus Snape gave her a malevolent stare in return.

"I just keep myself busy visiting the new professors, making sure that they manage their work. Then, of course, if I find it necessary, I report my findings back to the Board of Governors." Then the portrait smiled. The artist had really managed to catch both the colour and the wonkiness of his teeth in an admirable way.

"Fine," she said, hearing how snappish she sounded. "You're welcome to stay. However, I will not have you calling students names."

A muscle in his cheek made an ominous little movement, but in the end, he just smirked at her. Not only did he smirk, he smiled, which wasn't good.

"Well. I suppose it isn't too much to ask. I can promise you that I will not call the students names."

The smile was not good. She just knew it, and the promise ... but she needed to get on with her lesson.

"Good," she said and gave the portrait a short nod.

She took a deep breath and smiled at the class.

"Take up your book *Ancient Runes Made Easy* and look at the Rune Numbers, and then we count together."

1.00 pm: Headmistress McGonagall's office

"Before the lesson was over, he'd given every single child in the room a byname based on their weak points." Hermione tried to fight off the headache that was hiding just behind her left eyeball, and of course, failed in the attempt. She pressed her eyes together, thereby shutting out the light and easing the pain just a little bit.

Minerva's lips were pursed so hard her mouth was almost invisible. "How bad was it this time?"

"He named Miss Hodgekins in Third year the Demiguise!"

Minerva gave Hermione a pained look. "He didn't! He wouldn't be that cruel."

"He did, and he is."

Minerva stood. "I'll have a word with him. I'm not sure if that will do any good though. He was always ... wilful."

25th of September 2015

Chapter 6 of 23

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6. 25th of September 2015

9.00 am: *Third year class in Ancient Runes*

Giggles erupted in the classroom the moment she stepped inside. The students had their backs turned to her and were looking at the far wall where the portrait frame Snape had used every single week she'd been teaching at Hogwarts hung.

"... and even more amusing, Professor Granger mixed up ..."

Oh, Merlin! He just couldn't! He wouldn't!

"... the words Ehwaz, who you all, of course, already know means Partnership, with Eihwaz, that means Defense." Severus Snape chuckled in a way that he must have stolen straight from Dumbledore's mannerism titled *What Method Best Used When Luring Poor Unsuspecting Idiots In* And he was looking straight at her while chuckling. And he was smiling from ear to ear while doing it.

It wasn't attractive.

"Well, it seems that we have to interrupt our little chat. Professor Granger has arrived. We can continue our ... exchange at a later date." And he all but winked at them. The students nodded at the portrait with an enthusiasm she would never have believed if she hadn't seen it, and then they returned to their benches while giggling and giving her surreptitious looks.

"You did bring your Rune Dictionaries?" asked Severus. "Just in case you feel the need to double check something ... for some reason."

The class erupted in new giggles.

6.00 pm: *The Burrow*

"You're looking a bit peaky, Hermione. Are you feeling well?" said Molly and gave her an expectant look. Hermione was tempted to answer her with a straight 'No, I'm not pregnant again'. That would at least take care of the single-minded probing that would follow if she didn't, and Molly got it into her head that Hermione was avoiding the question.

Ron swallowed the food he'd been chewing, and instead of taking another bite, he smiled at Hermione and then turned to his mother.

"We're not pregnant again, Mum. I promise, if we decide on having another kid, you'll be the first to know when the deed is done."

Merlin, how she loved him sometimes. Ron was a true master when it came to fighting bluntness with bluntness. Not a mean feat, to outstrip the rest of the Weasley clan in that area, but he did it and with a good margin too. She smiled back at him when he winked at her.

Molly's face fell.

"Oh. Well, I just thought ..." She looked at Hermione again. "But she does look a bit peaky. Arthur, doesn't she look peaky?"

Arthur looked up from his plate where he had been in the process of catching a couple of stray peas with his fork, frowned and nodded.

"Yes, dear. Quite. Hermione, are you sure you're feeling well?"

Ron looked more closely at Hermione, and this time he frowned too.

"Something wrong?" he asked. "We can go home if you want to. This lot won't mind."

And they wouldn't, thankfully.

"It was a hard day at work, that's all. I've got a bit of a headache." She didn't want to talk about it, not really.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Is Snape's portrait still giving you grief?" he asked.

"Snape's portrait?" asked Molly and Arthur at the same time, and Hermione glared at Ron.

"Yes. He seems set on making a nuisance of himself."

Arthur frowned and gave her a worried look. "You did tell Minerva? Surely she can reason with him."

Hermione huffed. "He isn't a reasonable man. Painting." She shook her head to clear it. She wasn't quite sure what he was. He didn't seem like a painting. "Or something. And Minerva's been sick, so I didn't want to bother her. I was worried about her for a while."

Ron smiled. "Minerva's tougher than she looks, you know that."

But Ron hadn't seen Minerva since she fell ill.

"Don't worry," said Molly and reached over to pat Hermione's hand. "Minerva has, at the very least, twenty good years or so more."

Hermione fought off her worry and smiled.

"Yeah. I suppose you're right," she said.

But she still wouldn't add to Minerva's burdens by complaining about an obnoxious portrait. She'd deal with it herself.

17th of October 2016

Chapter 7 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

7. 17th of October 2016

9.00 am: Sixth year class in Ancient Runes

She looked at the class and couldn't help smiling. The class of sixth-years were working on the assignment she'd just given them, and they seemed enthusiastic about it, too.

"Translating Muggle fairy tales into Ancient Runes. How exceedingly predictable of you. I used to set higher standards even for the pupils I considered indifferent at best and brainless at worst."

Snape.

He must have realised he'd been missing this particular group of students. She had wondered. And now he was here to make them all suffer.

"I'm afraid I don't have time to chat. We could talk after the lesson, maybe?" she asked, trying hard to sound courteous.

The portrait of Severus Snape sneered at her. And ignored her question.

"And why would you choose such inane texts? Is it the ever-fanciful happily-ever-afters that appeal to you, I wonder?" He gave her a malicious look. "On the other hand, one can't help but understand. Being married to Ronald Weasley, having made a good start on the traditional brood of Weasley children—to plague the hapless Wizarding Britain in due course, no doubt—and working full-time as a teacher at Hogwarts on top of all that, even I can understand this rather pathetic attempt at having some love and romance in your life. I can also see how a story like Hansel and Gretel appeals. Two children, put out in the woods by their parents to die ..."

He couldn't have said what she thought he had. Not even him. Her legs felt wobbly and unruly as she took two steps closer to the painting. He had undermined her in every single class she had. Not only had he been rude and mocked the students, now he was having a go at her family.

She'd drawn her wand before she'd even realised what she was doing, and then she heard someone's shrill voice—her voice—shriek *Reducto* at an earsplitting volume.

She realised her mistake too late. The fact that she had not thrown the hex wordlessly had warned the mean bastard. The second before the spell hit she saw his eyes widen, and he threw himself sideways out of the frame.

The next moment charred pieces of wood from the frame were spread over the classroom, while little pieces of torn canvas, like absurd colourful and charred snowflakes, fell over her and the students.

Hermione looked at the class after surveying what was left of the painting. The room was silent. Most of the students were looking at her with dropped jaws, and a few were covering their mouths with their hands. She stuck out her lower lip and blew a stray piece of canvas out of her face.

"Finish your assignments. There will be no further disturbances."

13.00 pm Headmistress McGonagall's office

"You obliterated the painting, with me still in it! It was pure luck I managed to get out of it in time," Snape said, giving her a haughty look down his nose. His bony, huge nose. "I could have been damaged beyond repair," he added with a sniff.

"And that would have been a problem, why?" she asked. She hated him. Hated, detested and despised him.

Minerva, who had been pacing the office, robe flaring, stopped and gave Hermione a surprised look.

"Hermione, this isn't like you!" Minerva was trying to sound her old self; Hermione could hear that, and she felt ashamed. Minerva looked tired and pale, and she hadn't meant to add to her burdens since managing the school seemed to take so much out of her these days.

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper." She took a couple of deep breaths, feeling her pulse starting to slow down.

Minerva gave Snape's portrait an annoyed look over the rim of her glasses.

"I understand, Hermione, I really do, but you can't do a thing like that, no matter how dire the provocation. He is one of the Headmasters, and a well respected one at that ... surprising as it feels sometimes." Minerva gave Snape another annoyed glance. "I'm sure Severus will apolo—"

Snape ignored her. "I think I might need to bring this to the attention of the Board of Governors."

Something in Hermione snapped at Snape's words. It was a small snap, a snap that was hardly noticeable, but it was enough to set all civility filters she had out of working order.

"You just do that. In fact, please do!" She heard herself shriek the words. "Every effing week for over two years you have been sitting in that bloody frame, making snide remarks, harassing the students and undermining me, and I'll be glad to meet with them!" Minerva sank down in an armchair, looking even paler now, and Hermione again tried to calm down, but didn't manage very well.

She strode up to his painting and poked it with her wand. "You will stop it, or I will come after you with turpentine." And now she could hear that she was roaring at the top of her lungs instead of shrieking. She spun around, yanked the door of Minerva's office open and left, slamming the door shut behind her.

She could hear him laugh even through the door. The bastard.

30th of September 2018

Chapter 8 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

8. 30th of September 2018

Minerva entered the office, and something about her air made Severus uneasy. Because he knew, the same way he had always known, without ever been able to put a name on that particular ability of his, that something was wrong.

And in this case something was terribly wrong. He looked closer and felt his limbs go heavy: Minerva McGonagall was sitting ramrod straight, with tears streaming down her face, while staring at something on her desk, her hands shaking badly enough for it to be visible even to him.

He hesitated only for a moment before asking. It was Minerva after all, and he didn't need to be oblique when wanting information.

"What has happened?"

Minerva didn't stop crying; she only wiped the tears off her face before answering.

"I'm trying to find my quill."

"Minerva, that wasn't what he asked." The low, careful comment came from Albus's portrait frame. He was worried too; Severus could see that in the way he moved: seemingly trying to work himself free of the canvas.

With a shaky inhalation, Minerva leaned her head back against the back of her chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Ronald Weasley is dead. He was killed driving a car, of all the stupid, stupid things."

Ronald Weasley? The one single person that had managed to survive more idiotic injuries than any student he could remember. And there was so many things he could have said as a response to what Minerva had said:

"Not all that surprising. We all saw what his driving abilities did to the Whomping Willow."

"Well, it was bound to be a reason he played Keeper rather than Seeker."

Or, why not the simple:

"It's called 'natural selection'."

But Minerva's despair and Albus's crestfallen face held him back.

"The car was hit by a truck," said Minerva, and then she cried again.

"Do you know how Hermione is taking it?" asked Albus. "And Molly and Arthur?"

"No. I've just found out what had happened." Minerva shook her head.

"We need to go to her," said Albus, whose eyes were blank with tears, and he looked older than he had when Minerva entered the room. "We need to offer them our comfort and support. And maybe they can offer us some too."

Minerva nodded her agreement, and Severus could see—actually see—how she would go along with everything the old man suggested, even knowing what she did. Severus felt his flesh crawling to the extent that he wanted to claw at his body.

It would be Albus who would seek Hermione Weasley out, dragging Minerva along with him. He would offer her his platitudes; his own brand of miserable, useless words of wisdom that didn't help in any way and only served to make you more desolate, since they also forced you to hide your anger and sorrow.

And what would that do to Hermione Weasley?

She, who together with that dimwitted pair of boys had managed to survive the Dark Lord, would be offered backhanded words of comfort, forcing her to slog on with life, bearing it only because of the duties those words would impose on her.

"I'll go." He found himself talking without making the decision to speak.

It was pleasing to see Albus gaping at him in surprise though, so he gave him a deliberate sneer and a glare, just to show him he had no intention of letting him do it.

"Severus," said Minerva. "I will not let you—"

"You can't stop me." He cut her off, and not surprising considering the circumstance, it was easy enough. "You both know that between the three of us, I'm the one best equipped to deal with her, even though I find her choice of husband abysmal, verging on the distasteful."

"How you even have the gall to say that, I have no idea!" Minerva blasted the words at him. "You, who have terrorized her from the first day she set foot in this school."

Albus's face changed. It morphed into the menacing mask he wore when needed, directing it at him, forgetting maybe that Severus had seen it before. "Indeed, Severus. I

don't know how you expect us to believe that you would offer her comfort? You never liked her." His last accusatory sentence was accompanied with the blue glitter in his eyes that had nothing to do with the twinkle that was usually present.

"No matter what you two say, I'm still the only one of us who has lost my love to an unnecessary and meaningless death which could have been prevented." Albus's portrait paled, and Severus turned to Minerva.

"Hermione Weasley teaches the students moderately well. For the common good ..." Minerva made a sound very close to a growl, while Albus paled even more. "We want Hermione Weasley to come through this as unscathed as possible."

He met Albus's eyes straight on.

"Your special brand of coaxing people into doing what you wish them to has no place here."

Albus smiled. The smile was sad, surprisingly.

"I never realised how angry you were at me. In my defence, I thought you on the verge of doing yourself harm."

Severus didn't want to listen. It had been his lowest point, and he had never emerged from it. Not really.

"Maybe you are right," Albus continued. "Maybe you are the one that should go. Anger is a way to cope, and it's very likely you will make her furious." Albus would have sounded whimsical if it hadn't been for the underlying tone of sorrow.

Severus couldn't help smirking as Minerva turned her anger on Albus this time.

"He'll make it worse. And I want her back here as soon as possible."

"How very compassionate of you, Minerva." Severus was pleased to see he made her blush with what he hoped was shame.

"I didn't mean it that way, and you know it," she said, shamefaced. "And you even said so yourself."

"But I don't call myself her friend. I'll take her classes until she is ready to return." Severus rose and straightened his robe.

Minerva shook her head. She didn't like losing the initiative, the old crone, she never had.

"No, that wouldn't work, I—"

"I have followed her classes for years. I know exactly how she teaches."

"You're a portrait!"

"Binns is a ghost. What is your point?"

"Minerva," said Albus. "Let him do this."

At that moment Minerva looked decades older than she had just a moment ago, diminished even. Then she nodded, and without saying anything more, she sat down again.

Severus, ignoring Albus's encouraging nod in his direction, left his frame and went to seek out a painting from which he could talk to Hermione Weasley.

1st of October 2018

Chapter 9 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

9. 1st of October 2018

He had been stupid not to take into account that childhood habits die hard, and in these circumstances, they died very rarely, if at all. Being a portrait seemed to have made him lose the edge of his deductive reasoning powers. The woman had always sought comfort with or among books. It should have been obvious that this was where he would find her eventually, so why he hadn't placed himself in the library and waited for the inevitable to happen, was beyond him. Thank Merlin for Madam Pince.

Hermione looked as if she had been to Hades and back again; she was sitting slumped in her chair, just staring in front of her; her hair pulled back in an messy pony tail, skin blotchy from crying and with dark rings underneath her eyes, blue veins showing through the skin.

"Headmistress McGonagall sent me," he said, deciding to hide behind Minerva's name.

"Why would she send you?" She didn't change position or look up at him, and her voice didn't even carry any animosity.

Shock most likely.

"You're just here to gloat."

"You would have preferred to listen to the platitudes of Albus', then? Or why not have Minerva trying to put on her version of the stiff upper lip as the means not to cry all over you? Between Molly and the rest of the Weasleys, I would have imagined that you had had enough of both the crying and the upper lips. Isn't that why you're sitting here?"

"At least they liked Ron ... us." He watched as a tear started its way down her cheek, but it got lost in the moistness of its predecessors and disappeared into nothingness

halfway down.

Maybe Minerva and Albus had been right. Maybe he should leave this particular mess alone.

Then he remembered how Albus had behaved and what he had said as he told Severus that Lily had died. The mere thought made his stomach do a painful lurch again. He also remembered how he'd wished himself miles away from it all, and how easily led and manipulated he had been.

She needed someone to snap her out of the sadness.

"What was it now that Albus said when he broke the news of Lily's death to me ... ah! Now I remember. Something about if I had really loved her, my way forward was clear, and of course, as his *coup de foudre*, chose to point out that it was my duty to not let her death be in vain. Is that what you want to hear? That you must bravely move ahead because that would have been what your dead beloved would have wanted, and indeed, wished for?"

She looked up at the painting he inhabited, eyes black.

"I've been fed that nonsense ever since it happened," she said. Her voice quavered with anger, or maybe sadness, he wasn't sure. He gave her a slow nod in acknowledgement, hoping she would continue.

"Molly is crying all over me when I'm there, sobbing her heart out. Arthur just seems lost and keeps tinkering with that ridiculous collection of plugs he has. And both of them rave on about how we need to find comfort and move on together." She flew to her feet and flailed her hands as if she wanted to get rid of a nasty potion stuck to them. "What 'together' are they talking about? I'm alone. I can't confide in anyone because they have all fallen apart! All because Ron was *stupid* enough to drive that car without learning to drive it properly." The next second she covered her mouth with both hands, eyes wide.

"Very thoughtless of him," Severus said, but this time he made sure none of his acid came through. If she was already angry enough to let a comment like that slip, he didn't need to fuel that particular fire.

She made a despondent shrug. "I don't even know if I'm going to be able to keep our house—"

"If it turns out you can't, Hogwarts will house you and your children. The school always does in cases like these."

Her mouth was still open as if she were going to continue speaking, and her chest was heaving. But then she snapped her mouth shut and sank down on the chair again.

Good. One of her worries gone then.

"What about Potter?" he asked.

She rubbed her face with both hands and ended the movement by pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes. She let them stay there.

"He's being Harry."

He scoffed.

"That would be quiet, brooding—emulating the strong silent type, yes?"

She laughed then. A shrieking, angry laugh.

"Harry doesn't emulate anything or anyone. He is the definition of the strong silent type, you snide bastard. He has enough to deal with, trying to take care of Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys. He doesn't need to add me to the crowd weighing him down. He's as badly off as I am."

A couple of sixth-year Slytherins had entered the library and were now being forced to leave by Madame Pince. When the boys were outside, she turned and looked at Severus with a curt nod.

The dragon would keep the students away from them. They would have continued privacy.

"How are your children taking it?"

Hermione seemed to shrink where she sat.

"Badly." The word was almost a whisper.

In the corner of his eyes, he could see the same sixth years trying to enter the library again. They were whispering and throwing Hermione surreptitious looks. They knew what had happened, the morbid little twits, and wanted to have a good look at the misery of their professor. He made eye contact with one of them and bared his teeth. The boy took one step back on seeing him, thus backing into Madame Pince, who had sneaked up behind them. The collision made the boy almost jump out of his robes. With a firm grip over the back of the culprits' necks, she guided them out of the library.

He turned his attention back to Hermione again.

"Get them back to school again."

She looked horrified at his comment.

"No, they need to be—"

"Where everyone is mourning? Where Molly cries all over them? Where everyone is tip-toeing around them, and where there is no one that can manage taking care of them and their grieving? If you'll excuse me for saying this, I do think Filius and Longbottom are far better equipped than you and Molly are to take care of them."

She flew at the painting, and in an instant, she was standing almost with her nose pressed against the canvas.

"Don't you dare assume that you know what is best for my children!" She was almost spitting the words at him, with a hard, hoarse voice he had never expected from her. "How could you know? A teacher like you, who hated the children you taught."

He took her on, meeting her eyes, trying to bore his way into them with his own.

"Because after my mother died, I was relieved when I was finally sent back here. Because here things were normal. I could do things I liked and enjoyed without feeling guilty or being shouted at."

That slayed her, he could see that. She backed away from the wall where he hung and hugged herself.

"I'll think about it." He almost didn't hear the words. But if she thought about it, she would realise he was right.

"Do so, and please sit down. Madame Pince will let you stay as long as you wish. I will discuss your future lodgings with the Headmistress."

"You don't have to—"

"There are a lot of things I never had to do. Yet I did them anyway. This task is easy enough for me to achieve."

25th of December 2018

Chapter 10 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

10. 25th of December 2018

She Flooed into Minerva's office, carrying the big unwieldy package with her.

The office was dimly lit and had a vague, abandoned air to it, and in a way it was, since Minerva had been with her and the Weasleys for New Year's Eve. Most of the portraits seemed to be asleep in their frames. She could hear the even breathing from the sleeping Headmasters and Headmistresses, and every now and then, a muffled snore.

She turned to the crate she'd just left, and with a flick of her wand and a whispered *Incendio*, she lit a fire. She used the flame to light a candle and wandered around lighting more until the room was filled with flickering flames.

This was it, then. She was going to get her head ripped off her neck, but she would do this. He deserved it, even if he was a portrait and not alive any more. She went to stand in front of his empty portrait and took two deep breaths.

"Headmaster Snape?"

Nothing.

She tried again, louder this time.

"Headmaster Snape? Please? I would appreciate it if you could give me a moment."

She could hear something from within the painting. A rustling sound, and then the door in the back of the painting opened and Severus Snape stepped out, wearing slippers and with a pair of reading glasses hanging low on his nose.

He could change clothes? Like a cut-out doll?

She discovered her jaw had dropped and put it back where it belonged with a snap. Snape, now standing so close that she could only see his face and upper body because of the frame, sneered at her.

"Does Minerva know that you have broken into her office?"

"Yes. I mean no. I asked her permission before I came. I—I wanted to speak to you."

He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked an annoyed eyebrow at her.

"I can't see what you would want. So, would you please get it over with so that I can go back to doing things I actually want to do?"

So far it wasn't as bad as she'd imagined. She would do it, now.

"I wanted to say thank you." She blurted out the words, but never mind. At least she'd got them out.

Snape froze. He stood there in his frame, unmoving and as straight-backed as Minerva.

"For everything. For saving us, for giving Harry your memories, for giving your life for us ... and helping me out. I never said thank you then. I never ... but I want to now. You were right about the kids too, by the way. They are much better off here." She started to pull the paper off the gift she'd brought, the rough brown wrapping paper difficult to rip. And she didn't seem able to stop babbling. "I talked to Dean, and he said this will work and—"

"Dean?" Snape was staring at her, and her fight with the wrapping paper, with a look on his face she would have termed confused if it had been sitting on any other face than his.

"Dean Thomas. You must remember him. He was in my year, and he was really good at drawing. He was at the Malfoy Manor when ..."

She shouldn't have mentioned that. Snape's face went expressionless in an instant.

"Anyway, he is an artist now." She pressed on. "He paints portraits, both Muggle and Wizard ones. He's really good, and he said that this will work, that he's got it to work before, and I wanted to say thanks, and this was the only thing I could come up with." Her stomach knotted and her skin was heating, and perspiration was making her clothes stick to her body. She didn't dare to look at him and ripped at the bloody paper that might as well be made of armour plate for all the progress she was making.

Then finally, with a last vicious rip, she managed to remove it.

She put it against the wall, stepped back and waved her wand. The *Wingardium Leviosa* lifted it from the floor. She floated it upwards until it was next to Snape's painting. A quick glance told her that he was at least following the movement of the painting with some interest. She turned her concentration back to the painting she had brought, since she felt the spell starting to slip.

She flicked her wand once again and spelled the painting onto the wall.

"I didn't really know if you had access to a library here, but ... I hope you'll find something you'll want to read. Something interesting." She stepped back and watched as

Snape strode over to the side of his portrait that was closest to the painting she had given him. He opened what looked like a door and then stepped into the picture she'd brought for him.

She watched him as he surveyed the room, how he walked to one of the bookshelves and touched the books.

"He has painted the Bodleian Library for you. We thought—I mean we figured, he and I— that since it is a Muggle library, there was bound to be something in it you haven't read before."

Snape looked up at her with a vacant look on his face.

"You gave me a library?" he asked, incredulity written in his face. And Hermione smiled, while pushing her lips together to stop her mouth from trembling.

"I didn't know how to thank you," she said.

He nodded without looking at her. His attention rested on the books alone now. One of the aisles seemed to grab his attention, and he disappeared into it and out of sight, forgetting her.

She'd made it. She and Dean had succeeded. And she felt almost happy for the first time since Ron's death.

5th of March 2019

Chapter 11 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

11. 5th of March 2019

Severus was watching the chessboard, not quite believing what he was seeing: Hermione Weasley's grasp of chess was abysmal, and how a reasonably intelligent woman hich she was could be so *bad* at the game was nothing less than baffling.

He would try again, though. He had tried before, but now he would force her to make the right move.

"Tower C8 to C6," he said, creating a fork for her, and as a result, the tower he had just moved turned its head and glared at Severus and shook its fist at him. Severus glared back, and that made it settle down, grumbling and muttering something incoherent.

Now she could either take his queen or the tower he had just moved. Either move would ensure that he would be rendered checkmated within four or five moves. She just couldn't fail this time.

She looked down at the board. "He was such a good chess-player. He taught me," Hermione said, while her hand hovered over the knight.

Severus caught himself holding his breath. Yes, that was it. She was learning, finally. "Who did?" asked Severus, knowing whom she was talking about, but not wanting her to think about him.

"Ron, of course. Until that chess game in our first year, I'd thought he was a bit of twit. Brave, but still a twit. Then it turned out he was smart. Strategic smart. I was ever so impressed."

She tilted her head, smiled, and pulled her hand back from the knight.

"You can't fool me, you know," she said. "You can't have my queen."

And with that, she removed one of his pawns and opened herself up to be checkmated in two moves. And this time he did it. He just couldn't bare to continue this travesty of a chess game any longer.

"Obviously I can, and without even trying." He stared at the chessboard. One of his rooks and a pawn were undignified enough to give their opponents the two-fingered salute. It was probably Ronald Weasley's old set she was using. "Please tell me that you are, at the very least, able to see what you just did to yourself."

The dismayed, wide-eyed look she gave him must have been something she had designed to make Ronald Weasley fall at her feet. But then it was replaced with a mulish one, and she pursed her lips and looked at the chessboard again.

It was taking her much too long to find her mistake.

"You cannot even see where you went wrong, can you?"

She looked up at him and smiled, not at all embarrassed now, as he'd been expecting. "Ron always did say I was terrible at chess. He said the chess part of my brain must have shrivelled up and died from too much reading and too little time spent playing board games with older siblings. At least, that was his theory."

"And homespun does not even start to describe it," he said.

She rose and went to the fireplace, putting more wood on the fading embers.

"Did you play a lot of board games when you were little?" she asked.

The fire roared to life again, and two fire lizards came scuttling up from the embers and started to play on the burning sticks of wood.

"Yes, often. Not much else to do but read and play games where I lived. And why did you just do that?"

She looked up from the fire, two wrinkles visible between her eyebrows. "Did what?"

"The fire. You could have used magic. It's impolite to turn your back on a conversation like you just did."

She giggled and turned her back on him again, poking about in the fire and making the lizards go frantic with glee when the flames burnt higher into the chimney.

"I never got out of the habit," she said, as she returned to her seat opposite the frame he was currently inhabiting. "It's a Muggelborn thing, I reckon. It's obvious when to use some things, like protective spells, Transfiguration and D.A.D.A. When there isn't any practical equivalent in Muggle terms. It's the Charms I tend to forget about sometimes. I just act as if I have no magic. It used to annoy Ron terribly." Her voice trailed off into nothing.

She was talking about Ron Weasley again. Which was unacceptable, since Severus was there with her.

"I learnt chess from my maternal grandfather," he said. "I played a lot with ... a friend, and then with my housemates at Hogwarts."

She gave him an absent look. The following question wasn't entirely incongruous, but almost, and it made all the muscles in his body bunch up as they once had before going into a fight.

"How did you deal with losing Lily Evans?"

No one had ever asked him that. Not even Albus. But he could be honest now. He was a portrait after all, and the living couldn't touch him.

"I set out to get revenge. First on James Potter. Then on the Dark Lord. I thought you had made that rather simple deduction a long time ago."

The lizards seemed to be playing a game of chicken now umping out on the cold stone floor, running as far as they were able, and then running back into the fire again.

"What would you have done if there had been no one to punish?"

Like it was for her? The ones to blame all dead in the same accident.

"I have no idea. Insanity might have been the result."

She barked a laugh. A nasty, crude laugh.

"I'm not allowed to go insane. I've got children to think of." She rose and went over to the window. Her back was to him, shoulders tense, spine stiff.

Looking at that stiff neck and tense shoulders, he wondered if he would have been better off with a family of his own, even if the woman had not been Lily.

Probably not.

"At least you have something of him left. I had nothing at all."

Then he rose and left the painting.

5th of May 2019

Chapter 12 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

12. 5th of May 2019

"Where are those brats of yours?" he asked, because for once she was sitting curled in an armchair reading, as opposed to doing daily chores and taking care of her demanding children.

She lowered her book into her lap and looked up at him with pursed lips. "They aren't brats. You just don't like children, that's all."

"Still, where are they? Have you come to your senses and sent them off to summer school at Beauxbatons?"

He gave the tottering pile of books beside her armchair a pointed look. Several of the titles looked familiar.

She scoffed. "You can be so annoying sometimes. I suppose I should be happy you didn't say Durmstrang with the argument that they need toughening up."

He gave her a deliberate eye roll. "Please. Weasley offspring, as a general rule, are born as tough as they come. Unleashing a toughened-up variety of the species on an unsuspecting society would be cruel."

This time she rolled her eyes at him, but her lips were twitching. "You are cruel, so that would please you no end." She wagged her finger at him. "You'd have loved having the twins in Slytherin House. You would have let them get away with anything and everything if you'd got them. Your very own two-man army of destruction and chaos. Not to mention the best Beaters." Then she relented. "I sent Hugo and Rose to mother and father a couple of days early. I have things that need finishing, and I think they are better off with them."

Severus decided that asking why she would send the children to her parents rather than the Weasleys wasn't a prudent way of proceeding, not since he wanted her company, bored as he was with the other portraits. And he couldn't help smirking when he looked closer at the books.

"Is *The Count of Monte Cristo*, by any chance, one of those things you feel the need to finish? I read it when I was a boy. I enjoyed it immensely."

She beamed at him, and something in his chest contracted at the sight.

"I love it too, and I also love *The Three Musketeers* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*." She gave him one of her excited looks that made her look twelve years old, wanting his approval.

"You have decent taste in books, I have to admit," he said. He detested *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, but he didn't need to tell her that. He was rewarded for his lie with one of those smiles. "How long are you going to be alone?"

"A week from today." She bit her lip and then seemed to decide. "I'll read it to you if you like *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

He had read it several times. He had it in one of his own bookshelves. And in the library she had given him.

"I would like to hear it again." He settled down on the armchair placed in the painting he was visiting. "I do hope you have a pleasant reading voice?"

She would have, if the sound of her laughter was anything to go by. Surprising. He'd never suspected she would be pleasant company. Or even remotely interesting or amusing. But she was, and since she still owed him for moving his portrait, it was only fair that she entertain him when the rest of the portraits seemed intent on boring him to death.

13th of November 2019

Chapter 13 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

13. 13th of November 2019

"We don't want to make things worse," said Harry.

Madam Pomfrey looked at them and the melancholy smile she gave him made a lump form in Hermione's throat.

"She's weak. But to be honest, that's neither here nor there any longer, and I think she would like some company for a while."

"We wanted to see her one last time before she dies, so it's nice that we may," said Luna.

Madam Pomfrey, the one least used to her, stared at Luna with her mouth ajar.

Luna tilted her head to one side as if she was listening to something and couldn't quite figure out what she was hearing.

"I said something I shouldn't have, didn't I?" she asked Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but don't worry about it. Everyone knows what's going on. It's just that people pretend not to know in an instance like this."

Luna nodded. "I can understand that. Death is difficult to handle, isn't it? I think it's because no one knows what happens afterwards. You might think, or believe, you know, but you can't be sure, can you?"

Hermione needed to cry to remove the lump, but Harry seemed unfazed.

"I suppose so. No use thinking too much about it, though." And with that Harry, Luna and Neville entered the hospital wing with Hermione and Ginny making up the rear. She was amazed how well they handled the situation. After all the losses in their lives, they should, at least to her mind, be balking at the emotional turmoil impending death always evoked, but when Minerva came into view lying in a bed at the end of the room, they smiled at her when all Hermione wanted to do was to fall apart and cry or start throwing things. Because Minerva McGonagall was so very thin now, with eyes that had sunk into their sockets and hair that was as white as the snowflakes falling outside the windows. She didn't want more death. She couldn't even stand the thought of it.

"Hullo," said Neville and sat down on one of the chairs next to the bed.

"Hi," said Harry. "Are you up to a visit, or do you want us to leave and come back some other time?"

Minerva looked all of them over and smiled, almost looking like her old self for a fraction of a second.

"Please stay. I think there are chairs for everyone."

13.00 pm

When Hermione returned to the room, bringing the tea tray, she heard Minerva laugh. The laugh was weak and breathless, but it was still a laugh.

"Really? The hat said that to you?" Minerva asked Neville when she'd stopped laughing.

Neville nodded and gave her a rueful smile. "I begged it not to place me in Hufflepuff. Gran would have been so upset. I would have got a Howler at the very least, and so would Professor Dumbledore. I always did think that the hat placed me in Gryffindor just to spare the lot of us a world of grief."

Minerva chuckled. Or rather croaked and shook her head. "Augusta can be quite overbearing at times."

"I know. I could have hugged you that time you sent her that letter about me being good at Charms." He stroked her hand. "Didn't dare to, though." And bless him for admitting that, because he made Minerva smile again.

Harry had been listening to Neville with avid interest. "I had no idea," he said. "The hat considered placing me in Slytherin. It even tried to convince me to chose Slytherin over Gryffindor. I panicked over that at one point."

"The hat threatened to put me in Gryffindor," said Minerva. "And made good on the threat, mind you, so it doesn't listen all that much to you, even if it might seem so."

"What? That didn't come out right, did it?" said Ginny.

Minerva gave her a stern look. "Of course it did. I'm sick, not feeble-minded."

"So, you were expected to go to ..." said Hermione, too interested now not to ask.

"Ravenclaw. Like my Mother and Father and every known relation of mine."

Hermione couldn't help smiling. "It contemplated sending me to Ravenclaw too."

"Was it bad when you told them?" Neville's face was drawn into a worried frown. "Did they disown you?" Neville blushed then, like he used to do in the old days, probably on account of the cocked eyebrow that Minerva delivered.

"Sorry," he said. "Silly question, I shouldn't—"

Minerva lowered the eyebrow. "Don't worry. They didn't. They were consternated, I suppose, rather than angry. My family always considered Gryffindors a brash lot."

"And they are. And you are not the least bit different from the rest of them." The slow drawl came from the painting depicting a meadow filled with spring blossoms and frolicking sheep hanging on the wall opposite Minerva's bed. In the middle of the painting was the addition of an astoundingly misplaced and scowling Severus Snape.

"Severus," said Minerva, her voice warm. "You're here!"

"They need to leave now, Minerva. You should be resting." The glare he sent their way made all of them scramble to their feet, in every way behaving like schoolchildren again.

"Severus," said Minerva, a pleading note in her voice. "It's been nice having them here. I would like them to stay for a while."

Severus looked heavenwards in exasperation.

"In that case, they can take turns. Especially since Filius has asked if he could see you too. You are not allowed to overdo things. Go to sleep. When you wake up again, I'll fetch one of this lot for you. If you eat something, I will kick the present idiot out of the room and bring in a new idiot for you. If you drink something, I will do the same, and if you take your potions like the pleasant old witch that you are not, I might bring you yet another one. Not that I see why you would want them, but I suppose it is too late to amend your poor taste in people."

Severus was right, and they should have realised it. Besides, the shifty look she caught him and Madam Pomfrey exchanging told her that she was the one who had fetched Snape when she'd realised they had taken her comment when they arrived too literally.

Madame Pomfrey had tried to get them to leave several times by now, but they hadn't listened. Hadn't wanted to.

So Severus was there to control the situation, which was good, since he was one of the very few that could reason with Minerva when she was overdoing things.

And even more damning to the lot of them, Minerva was now nodding her agreement.

"You're a fine one to talk about taste in people. But I'll do that then." And with that she gave them a wave, her thin hand shaking when she did.

They took shifts after that, with Filius and several other Professors joining them, including Sybill Trelawney, who, for once in her life, kept mumbling about good signs in the sky. That, more than anything, frightened Hermione almost out of her wits.

17th of November 2019

Chapter 14 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

14. 17th of November 2019

"Catnip," said Hermione, and the stone gargoyle—still bearing the scars of the Battle—gave her and Neville a melancholy look, a small bow, and slid aside with the discordant sound of marble scraping against marble.

The staircase looked so much steeper than she remembered, and when they started ascending, it was so much more demanding and much darker than she remembered.

"Why do you think Headmaster Snape asked us to come?" Neville asked from behind her.

"I have no idea." She worried about that. Fretted even. She had expected him to seek her out when Minerva died, but he hadn't. Then the note that had summoned her and Neville had arrived.

She hesitated before opening the door of the Headmistress' Office. It felt wrong to go inside now. Neville obviously felt the same way, because they both hesitated outside the door. Neville opened the door when Hermione nodded, and they entered anyway, just like the old days.

The portrait was there. It was fitted between Albus Dumbledore and Phineas Nigellus Black. Minerva was sleeping, and Hermione reached out to touch the painting in the same way she had once touched Severus' portrait.

"You are late."

Severus voice snapped the words at them, and Hermione jumped with fright, feeling a corresponding start from Neville, who was holding her hand.

"Severus." She could hear the pleading note in her voice. "You scared—" She cleared her throat. The dry constricted feeling didn't go away, so she tried coughing. That didn't work either, and she felt Neville's hand letting go of hers and supporting her elbow instead.

Severus gave them a look full of disdain and sneered at them. She blinked. It was like looking at a fun house mirror-image of the man she had come to know these last months. So familiar in all his hostility, yet not the Severus she now knew.

"Why did you want to see us?" asked Neville. He rarely reverted to the decisive persona he'd been displaying during the battle, but now he did.

Severus' face went blank then, and he smoothed down his robes and corrected his cuffs.

"I don't know if you are aware, but the acting Headmaster or Headmistress can give the Board of Directors his or her preferences for their successor. They may suggest up

to three names. Minerva used that opportunity in full. Filius was offered the position of Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday. He declined the offer."

"He said no?" Neville beat her to it by a fraction of a second. He was staring at Severus now, looking bewildered. "But I thought ... Why?"

Severus threw a quick glance at Hermione, which she was unable to decipher, then he looked at Neville again.

"He claims that he likes teaching. He was always strange that way. He prefers to be in the classroom to working with administration."

Neville started to wander around the room, looking at the sleeping portraits. Or the faking of sleep, as in the case with both Headmasters Dumbledore and Black, if Hermione's suspicions were correct. The truth was that several of the others were probably feigning too, she realised, as she looked more closely at the portraits.

"You are both here since she gave the Board your names in addition to Filius'. She gave me the task of informing you both about the offer that might be made. Knowing that, the Board, in turn, gave me the task of talking to, or interviewing if you prefer, the two of you."

Hermione felt her knees wobble, and she seated herself in one of the armchairs close to Severus' portrait. Neville didn't look in much better shape. He was supporting himself against the desk.

"I will discuss the post with each of you. What you will have to give up and what you might gain. As you may deduct from this, the Board hopes to avoid any feelings of disappointment and animosity being the result of one being chosen over the other."

Something jarred with Hermione. "Then why tell the two of us? Wouldn't it be better to just offer one of us the position and let the matter resolve itself?"

Severus cocked an eyebrow at her, and Merlin, how annoying he could be when he was being superior and difficult!

"We are at Hogwarts, you must remember. Gossip gets around." He gave the portraits in the room a meaningful look, and Hermione could have sworn several of them moved just a little bit.

"What if both of us want it, then?" asked Neville.

Severus shrugged and gave them a calculated look.

"Then the Board will have to make a decision. Not their strong suit at all. So, I would like to meet each one of you. I suggest that I start with you, Longbottom. We will meet in your chambers so as to avoid being overheard. You do have a painting?"

Neville nodded, and Severus rose and gave Neville one last look, ignoring Hermione. "I'll give you an hour or so to think it over before my visit." Severus rose and went to the back of his painting, opened a door, and left through it, leaving Neville and Hermione staring at the canvas.

17th of November 2019: Neville

Chapter 15 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

14. 17th of November 2019: Neville

He hadn't expected Neville Longbottom to have a taste for modern art. The painting he was forced to use was a study in vivid red, green and blue, and it depicted what might or might not be a grinning face, its only redeeming feature being that it didn't move.

Longbottom was standing with his back against him, mumbling something to a plant with long tentacles. The plant was green, mingled with glittering flecks of silver that threw reflexes around the room. Severus couldn't identify it, but that wasn't all that strange, since the boy and Hagrid had more in common than one might think at first glance.

"Professor Longbottom," Severus said, by way of declaring his arrival.

Longbottom flinched at the sound of his voice, but put down the watering pot he was holding, and then he walked over to the seat that he had obviously placed opposite the painting earlier. He looked calm, which was annoying.

"Headmaster Snape," said Neville and smiled.

The smile was a surprise. The boy had previously been either frightened or hostile toward him, but now he seemed relaxed enough.

"You startled me," he added.

"Pray excuse me. I did not intend to." Severus made a pause while watching a tentacle from the silver-glittering plant Longbottom had been petting earlier slither over the floor. "Have you come to a decision?"

Longbottom nodded.

The tentacle had reached Longbottom now, and he leant down and let it wind itself around his finger before straightening up again, taking it with him.

"I'm interested. Very much so."

Not unexpected, but still a problem. He needed Longbottom to step down by his own wish. So how to make him bow out. What arguments to use?

"Very good." Severus looked around in the painting and managed to find a blue blob to sit on. He sat down carefully, since it might be too soft and give away underneath him.

It was harder than marble and uncomfortable as Hades. "You are aware what the position entails?"

Neville gave him one of those open, honest looks he seemed to excel at, and that annoyed Severus no end. "I think so, but why don't you give me the details anyway?"

Good. Longbottom trusted him. It would make things easier.

"One of Hogwarts headmasters' and headmistresses' main focuses are to ensure that the school remains independent of the Ministry of Magic."

Longbottom's face shifted from the affable expression that went so well with his face and personality to the hard, unyielding one Severus had come to know so well during that last year. Then it used to make him angry. Now it only induced a vague feeling of regret.

"However, the Board of Governors are not independent of the Ministry. Which means that the Head of Hogwarts needs to keep them happy, and at the same time, on a very tight leash."

He gave Severus a small nod. "I understand."

It was a shame. Longbottom would have made a good Headmaster. Maybe even a great one.

"Then, of course, you will be responsible for the the teachers and the quality of the education. Some subjects are regulated and must be taught: Charms, Transfiguration, Potions and Herbology being four of them. Others like Muggle Studies and Divination are not, and the Headmaster or Headmistress has the capacity to remove those subjects altogether and bring in other subjects instead."

Longbottom nodded and made a small grimace. "Those things alone would take up a lot of my time," he said.

And here it was. Gryffindors were easy that way, always willing to hand you an opportunity.

"Yes. You would have to give up your work in Greenhouse 12, of course." He made sure the comment sounded like an absent-minded sidenote.

Longbottom's eyes widened, and his mouth moved without a sound coming out at first. Then he cleared his throat, managing to speak.

"But Pomona helped me—"

"To get in contact with Doctor Fern Keyes. Yes. Keyes was very impressed with your experiments on spores, I understand."

Longbottom's mouth was, again, working without a sound coming from it.

"Unless I was misinformed?" Severus leaned forward, trying to convey an interest for the subject that he didn't feel.

Longbottom looked at him and then at the tentacle that had curled itself around his arm. While they watched it, the tentacle worked its way to Longbottom's cheek, where it seemed to make a tentative try to figure out what Longbottom looked like.

"But surely Dumbledore did research?" asked Longbottom.

"Yes. But he didn't need much sleep. And he never had a family." He made a deliberate pause for effect as Longbottom frowned. "But you could always try, if you think you are up to the task."

Severus rose from the blue blob. His arse was aching.

"I take it I can tell the Board that you are interested in the position, and that you may start as soon as their decision is made?"

The tentacle chose that moment to cuddle up on Longbottom's shoulder, the way some absurd pet might have done. And he behaved just like the owner to said pet would have. He stroked it, and when he did, his face cleared.

"No, wait. I want to continue my research. I would be interested in the post as deputy Headmaster though, if that's an option open to me."

Severus kept his features bland.

"You are sure?" he asked. "It is not likely the offer will be made again. It is, more or less, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Longbottom smiled.

"So are my research and my kids. But I find it very flattering that Minerva suggested me. I didn't expect that."

Severus believed him. Longbottom was humble to a ridiculous extent.

17th of November 2019: Hermione

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Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

15. 17th of November 2019: Hermione

Thank Merlin for the painting in Hermione's quarters. It had an armchair with a footstool.

"Hermione?" he said, and sat down and put his feet up. Hermione's quarters were silent, which meant that the brats were in their respective dorms, rather than pestering their mother.

"Coming."

Hermione came out of the kitchen, carrying a mug containing something steaming. She was strange, refusing the services of the house-elves as far as it was possible

without causing offence.

"Is that tea?"

She scoffed at him. "Tea? I can't see why anyone would even want to drink tea. It tastes like someone took some hay, or, if we are discussing green tea, some grass, and boiled it in hot water."

Pure blasphemy; the woman had no tastebuds at all.

"I take it, it is coffee then?"

"Yes," she said, almost purring as she smiled at the contents of the mug. "Strong, black coffee."

Severus looked at the disgusting beverage. "If you are quite finished deifying the beverage, maybe we might begin?"

Hermione threw him a stern look. "I wasn't the one who brought the subject up. And yes, we can start." She sat down, back straight, looking at him. She showed such a lack of respect. Maybe he should scare her, just a bit. But the armchair was too comfortable.

"Have you come to a decision?" he asked instead.

"I'm interested, but ..." Hermione's voice trailed off, and she shook her head.

And why was he even surprised?

"Very well. Why do you hesitate? I might be able to help you come to a decision."

Hermione frowned and sipped the coffee before answering. "The children. It's such a big change and considering that their father—"

Severus quelled an urge to roll his eyes. But he should not complain. She had just given him some useful ammunition. He gave her a small nod, thus conceding her point.

"I understand. However, the position would mean a significant rise in salary. You might be able to afford to buy a house if you wish."

Her eyes flew to him, and she lowered her mug. Good. That got her attention. The question was whether he needed to wave something else in front of her to get her to take the bait, as it were.

"Is it that big a difference?" she asked and bit her lower lip.

"Yes." He deliberately pulled out the vowel and smiled.

For a moment her gaze clung to him, and her mouth opened without any sound coming out of it. Then, of course, she started thinking again. Always a dangerous thing when she did.

But it was amusing to watch her.

"It's also a fact that I'll have to deal with the Board of Governors," she said, less hesitant now; her voice carrying an underlying hardness that did not bode well. So, that was the real problem. She was still battle-weary since working at the Ministry. The question was how battle-weary.

"Why would that be a problem for you?"

Hermione sipped at her coffee and leaned back in her chair. And at that moment, she looked tired and much older than he was accustomed to. Then she met his eyes, and the look on her face—tense, with a sneer lurking in the corners of her mouth, and her gaze cold and steady—reminded him in an uncanny way of what Lily had looked like that dreadful day.

"Do I really have to tell you, Severus? You, of all people, who know it so well?"

He did know, yes. Not that he would admit to it being a problem. That would be counterproductive. He kept his face impassive.

"You are referring to the fact that the members are all purebloods, I take it."

She smiled, showing more teeth than was the norm with her.

"Indeed I am, Severus."

She sipped her coffee, holding the mug with both hands, and continuing to watch him as she did.

"You are worried that your heritage will carry negative connotations for the Board of Governors." He made it a statement rather than a question.

"I'm not worried. And I know it will. I was the token Muggleborn once, and I will not be that again."

He frowned. When had she stopped thinking?

"You would not be a token anything. You would be the Headmistress of Hogwarts. The position gives you the possibility, yes, but also the pleasure of manipulating, obstructing and ignoring the Board to your heart's content. Just look at how Albus and Minerva behaved."

Hermione actually snorted at him. He might be forgiven for what he had been, but nothing was forgotten. So how was he going to get past this? She was angry already, so he could not use her anger as leverage. He hesitated. Was it the right time to push the dagger in and turn? It would be hard to find a better moment, so he made a show of remembering something. "I forgot. I need to congratulate Draco."

He hoped she didn't have her wand handy, but he was fast. He had managed to duck once already.

Hermione frowned.

"Draco? Why would you congratulate him?" Her eyes narrowed at him. "And why would you bring his name up now?"

Clever. He admired that. And it made acting on his part redundant.

"He was voted onto the Board of Governors four months ago. Didn't you know?"

"What?" The word came out as an angry hiss, and seeing the look on her face, he fought to keep the smirk off his. He had her. He could feel it. Whatever he chose to do or say from here on, she would accept the position as Headmistress. He resumed the acting and played for an air of surprise and innocence this time. She would know that it was a lie on his part, and that would agitate her even further.

"I was sure Minerva had told you. She was quite pleased with his attitude. I think 'surprisingly easy to work with' were her exact words."

Hermione rose from her armchair and smoothed down her robe.

"You may tell the Board of Governors that I'm indeed interested in the position."

Severus caught himself smiling.

"I will do that," he answered.

Hermione Granger would get a portrait, then. He would, given time, have the companion he wanted.

30th of November 2019

Chapter 17 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

16. 30th of November 2019

"I did come to like the little Granger girl, you know." Phineas Nigellus Black looked at Severus over the rim of his tea cup. "Even if she is a Mu...Muggle-born. She is a very clever girl. And that barefaced insolence of hers...stealing my painting, carrying me around in that bag of hers...quite impressed me." He was smiling absently while he talked. "She could have made Slytherin House proud with that feat alone, but alas, her unfortunate..."

He cut his musings short when Severus caught his eyes and made a point of baring his teeth at the man.

"It is Headmistress Weasley now. Or did you forget?" Severus asked, meeting Phineas' eyes straight on, challenging him to continue. "And what were you just saying? Her unfortunate ... what?"

Phineas smirked.

"Sorting. I was referring to her unfortunate sorting. Gryffindor ..." He looked heavenwards. "I have no idea what is wrong with that hat."

He was sly, the elitist bugger, and when he continued speaking, looking innocent, Severus was tempted to use a well placed *Silencio* to shut him up.

"But now she has joined our ranks as the new Headmistress of Hogwarts. The youngest one we have had, excluding you, of course." He gave Severus a look under his eyelashes, probably imagining that Severus wouldn't notice. "And I'm under the impression that you are quite pleased with the Board of Governors' decision to make her the new Headmistress of Hogwarts."

And there it was: the reason for Phineas' little invitation. Severus put his teacup down and assumed a relaxed pose in his armchair. Phineas wanted to play and would not give up until Severus had at the very least given him the impression of turning over some worthy gossip. He might as well get comfortable, because this might take time.

"We had three acceptable candidates for the post, two of which decided that they had other priorities. Only one of them wanted the position: Hermione Weasley," Severus said, making sure nothing he said could be used in an obvious way.

Phineas rolled his eyes and groaned in mock despair. "Please. Don't even try. You chose the candidate you wanted, and you made it happen. The question is how you deterred young Longbottom. Did you, mayhap, tell him about your feelings about being a portrait? What was it you said? 'Much too close to the principle of the Horcrux to be comfortable' and then I seem to remember you adding something about 'a death turned into a half-life'." He gave Severus a look very much like the one a cat would give the mouse it was playing with.

Phineas was really nothing more than a much nastier and more sinister version of Albus.

Severus bought himself some time by refilling his teacup and took the opportunity to push down his simmering rage while doing it.

"If you really want to know what was discussed, the subjects of his research and his family came up. He was not willing to give either one of them less time, so in the end, he decided to turn the offer down. As far as my involvement went, I simply asked if he was willing to give up his research."

Phineas frowned and gave him a thoughtful look. Opened his mouth, only to close it again. And then his face cleared, and he waggled his index finger at Severus and tutted, now looking appreciative.

"You couldn't use the portrait argument, could you? Weasley and Longbottom might have compared notes at some point, and discussing it with one but not the other might have looked suspicious. The reality of being a portrait could have scared her off, especially if Longbottom had happened to mentioned it to her before the appointment was official." He threw his head back and roared with laughter while Severus clenched his jaw. The old fart even had to wipe his eyes after he had finished laughing.

"So, how did you manipulate Professor Weasley to accept, then, I have to wonder? She has been through a lot this last year, and that alone should have made her hesitate," Phineas said as he rose and started to pace the room with his hands locked together behind his back. He always gave Severus the impression that he had too much energy stored, and that he wasn't able to sit still for long periods of time.

"Manipulate? Such an ugly word to use. I pointed out some relevant facts for her to consider before making a decision."

Phineas laughed again and wandered over to the fireplace, leaning at the mantelpiece. "But what did you point out?"

And he could keep wondering, the nosy bugger. Let him guess to his heart's content.

"What would entice her to take the position?" Phineas tapped his lower lip with his index finger. "Ambition? Hm. No. She would have stayed at the Ministry if that was the case."

Severus shrugged, conceding the point. Seeing that, Phineas nodded.

"What about ideals as a motive? But she is forty now, or at least something in that vicinity, isn't she? And idealists tend to get disillusioned and jaded as time wears them

down. And she is worn down, if the interview with Minerva is anything to go by."

"You were listening in on them!" Severus took care to sound shocked, which only made Phineas smile. "And it is risky to draw conclusions on something that happened years ago," Severus continued.

Phineas was shrewd, and if he proceeded to draw conclusions at this speed, he would soon have figured it out.

Phineas shook his head. "If anything, disillusionment grows worse once the rot has set in. And that woman has more reason than most ..." His voice trailed off. And Severus could see when it happened. Phineas's eyes started to twinkle, in a way that was only second to Albus, and a smile, broad enough to rival one of Umbridge's, spread on his face.

"You bastard. One just has to admire you." Phineas sounded awed as he watched Severus. "You played the pureblood card, didn't you?"

Severus made sure his face stayed blank.

"Pureblood card? I have no idea what you mean by that," he answered.

Phineas gave Severus a look that was almost sentimental, fatherly even, which almost, but not quite, made Severus shudder where he sat.

"Of course you know," Phineas said, with an unaccustomed warmth, and for a horrible moment Severus thought Phineas was going to pat him on the head. "You played on the fact that the Board of Governors are all purebloods. Knowing what happened to the girl during the war and then at the Ministry, she would just hate the fact that they are still all purebloods, even the younger ones."

Severus huffed at him. "That was her main argument for not accepting, yes." He gave Phineas a deliberate and measuring look. "It is a good thing you weren't appointed to talk to the candidates. With that strategy you would have botched it, and we would have had no candidates left. And Merlin knows how long it would have taken the Board to come to a decision then."

Phineas didn't look rattled by Severus' comment in the least. "Yes. Yes. That was stupid of me. So what? The younger ones?" Phineas stiffened and then all but jumped up and down with glee, pointing at Severus. "Malfoy! The Malfoy boy. She stopped working at the Ministry when he started working there, and now ... as the Headmistress of Hogwarts, she would outrank him. She could cause him real trouble. Is she that devious, that vengeful?"

Severus refused to acknowledge that he had used Draco as leverage. But he could throw the man a bone. He had earned it, after all.

"Do you remember Rita Skeeter, by any chance?" asked Severus.

Phineas shuddered and wrinkled his nose. "Yes. That rather scary reporter."

"That's her. Do you know why she gave up her job at the Daily Prophet?"

Phineas was interested now. Severus could see it in the way his tongue darted out to wet his lower lip. Odd that Phineas had such an obvious giveaway.

"No," Phineas said as he shook his head.

"Hogwarts new Headmistress somehow found out that Skeeter was an unregistered Animagus. Instead of telling anyone...anyone, including Albus...she caught her and put her in a jar."

"A jar? What on earth was her Animagus form?" asked Phineas.

"A beetle. And as far as I have been able to figure out, it seems that Headmistress Weasley blackmailed her into resigning her job, the option being to stay in the jar indefinitely. So, as far as your question goes, I would say that she is, indeed, quite devious. I would also add that she has a tendency to carry grudges."

"Much like you, then." Phineas was smiling, looking at peace as he sat down. "And how old was she when all this took place? That was some time ago."

"The year of the Triwizard Tournament. She was fifteen."

"Who would have thought that I was going to feel pleased about a Muggle-born Gryffindor female being appointed Headmistress of Hogwarts?"

Severus scoffed. "No one," he answered.

Phineas threw his head back and laughed.

7th of February 2020

Chapter 18 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

17. 7th of February 2020

It was the last point on her agenda, and she watched Draco Malfoy putting his hands on the meeting table, intertwining his fingers and lowering his head as if he was praying. He kept his hair very short these days. It was a good choice, since it hid the fact that he was becoming bald.

"Headmistress Weasley—"

"Yes." Her way of acknowledging him had the added benefit of interrupting him, and she saw how he pressed his eyes together in what looked like exhaustion. Maybe it was, since the discussion had been going on for a while now. She could go on for hours more. Funny how Malfoy didn't seem to realise that in everything ending with the two of them facing off, she would outlast him. Even if it killed her.

"Please, this is a bad decision. And however strange it might seem to you or any other Muggle-born, the house-elves and the ones whom they serve are, in a sense,

codependents. The elves don't wish for freedom. They don't want it, not the way you seem to think they do." He looked and sounded sincere. He always did these days.

"Mr Malfoy, you seem to have forgotten Dobby."

If she didn't know better, she would have thought that Draco gave her a pained look.

"I haven't forgotten anything, Headmistress, but Dobby is—was—an aberration. Freeing the house-elves of Hogwarts is not a good idea. They will be distraught, thinking they have displeased you. That is a serious offence for them."

The rest of the Board of Governors were fidgeting, whispering among themselves, with expressions ranging from the annoyed to the worried.

"Headmistress." It was Fiona Craggmore this time. "Mr Malfoy has a point. House-elves who are given clothes and set free do not adapt well." Mrs Craggmore's worry was, without a doubt, very much sincere, and Hermione almost gave in. But then she caught Malfoy's nod in the corner of her eyes.

Hermione caught herself sighing. "I hoped I wouldn't have to bring this up, and I'm sorry, but I can't view you as unbiased. You are all purebloods. You are raised believing in the superiority of Wizardkind. The rights of Wizardkind."

Several of the Board members shook their heads, looking stunned by her statement. But then again, few were willing to open a subject like this, even this long after the war.

"I have taken precautions. I have talked to Head house-elf Kreacher. I have devised a magical contract that allows them to choose to leave services at Hogwarts at any time he or she wishes. Hogwarts has the right to dismiss a house-elf, but only if a new family is secured for the elf first." Several members of the Board looked as if they wanted to say something, so she held up her hand and continued. "They will also have the right to have two days off a week, if they so wish. All of them are to sign the contract before they are given clothes to ensure that the elves feel safe in agreeing to this."

Draco took a deep breath. "Please. Hermione!" He looked straight at her, and he was pleading, which was unexpected. She could feel the small hairs on her arms raising since, for some unknown reason, his pleading made her feel uneasy. "Everyone knows our history and why you are, quite understandably, unwilling to listen to me." What was he doing? And she couldn't help it; she just stood there, muscles frozen in anger. He wasn't allowed to refer to the war, and he had no right to remind her of that room in Malfoy Manor and what had happened there. She didn't care if she had reminded him first.

She brought out her wand, and with a swift wave, she piled her parchments together.

"This meeting has reached its end. The contracts will be signed the day after tomorrow."

As the Board members rose and filed out of the room, she took care to smile and speak to everyone before they left, making sure to smooth down the feathers she had ruffled.

Draco was waiting, lingering on, waiting for the rest of the Board to leave the room.

"At least talk to Severus first, Hermione. Please." He looked around the room, as if he were searching for something. "House-elves are not a stable breed. You have to admit that Kreacher and Dobby are balanced compared to the others, and that is saying something."

She drew a deep breath, trying to calm down.

"The elves will be set free. And I assure you that nothing will change for Scorpius. He will have the service to which he is accustomed."

Draco looked at her. "I just hope—" He made a disgusted moue, and then took on his customary and much more familiar haughty expression. "As you wish, Headmistress. Don't say I didn't warn you." His slow drawl was very like his mother's.

And with that, he turned on his heel and left the room. He didn't swagger anymore. He strode. Merlin, how she wished she could get over her distaste for him and his pureblood nonsense.

The evening of the 7th of February 2020

Chapter 19 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

18. The evening of the 7th of February 2020

Severus was bored. Hermione had been in the monthly meeting with the Board of Governors for the major part of the day, and now she was having her children at her quarters for the evening. And those children he combined gene pool of the Weasleys, the Grangers and whatever else was blended into them (goblins felt like a likely guess), was not conducive to offspring able to keep their mouths shut. Or even speak at a normal tone of voice. And they were going to stay with her overnight, which meant he was on his own. Not that it was anything new, since they always spent Friday night with her, leaving him on his own. A quick look around the office confirmed what he already knew: The rest of the portraits were asleep. But then again, they almost always were.

Was it the boredom of their half-lives? Depression, even? Were they closing out a reality where they were spectators rather than participants? Voyeurs of sorts. Phineas was a full fledged one at any rate, but Severus had the feeling that he had always enjoyed that particular proclivity and that little, if anything, had changed when he died and became a portrait. As it were, Severus didn't really want to know the exact details of Phineas' relationship with The Fat Lady.

And sleeping the days away was what he would do, eventually, wasn't it? When Hermione Weasley was no longer the Headmistress but a very old, sleeping lady a couple of portraits away from him, what would he have left then that was interesting enough to make him even want to stay awake? When the world around viewed the two of them as nothing more than old paintings of people whose stories could be found in the history books? Stories easy enough to forget, since they would still be told by Binns. And when the new Head of Hogwarts had no longer met either one of them in person, no one would even seek their advice. Why would they? The new Heads would turn to the newer portraits depicting those they once knew, and time was relentless. New politics, new people, new magic, and they e and Hermione couldn't be able to compete, living in this stagnant pond of ancient knowledge.

The frames of his painting started to push in on him, and as he got to his feet, he had to fight to keep his breathing even. He had to get out. He chose the path of paintings that would lead him through the corridors of Hogwarts where he had patrolled all those sleepless nights when he had been alive.

All those nights when he had returned from meetings giddy and pumped up on adrenaline, he had paced and sometimes run through the corridors, trying to get rid of the excess energy and anxiety.

He made his way to the painting at the entrance of the kitchen. He could have a snack there, and it was a good spot to apprehend hungry students out after curfew. He ate his way through one of the apples on the painting as he watched the corridor, but no students showed up.

The last resort was the kitchen, so he slipped into the still life depicting the Great Hall prepared for a feast of some sort.

The only source of light in the kitchen was the fireplace where the glow from the embers threw an orange light over the stonewalls and oak furniture. Severus looked around. Empty. Hogwarts seemed abandoned this night.

And then came the mumbling.

"... knowing she is bad." The unknown speaker fell silent again and then he heard scraping.

Interesting. Something was happening, after all. And who was bad? And what had 'she' done? Severus sidled into the shadows in the painting he was currently standing in, just as a precaution, hoping to hear more.

"I is not even needing to be punishing me, after."

A house-elf, then. He had never noticed them much when alive. They had been comfortable to have around. They cooked and spared him the trouble of cleaning up after himself, giving him much needed time to devise plans so he could survive just a little bit longer. Not that it had done him much good in the end.

More scraping; it was the familiar sound of a mortar. A fleeting thought touched on the subject of things you ground for someone bad, and he felt his skin start prickling. This could be ugly. He hadn't expected that. Did house-elves off each other?

He backed deeper into the shadows as he saw the small silhouette of an elf standing by one of the workbenches.

"7.30 breakfast. 12 o'clock lunch. 8 o'clock gathering in Great Hall for dinner, signing of contracts and clothing," the elf recited, and then started to hum a little song. "I is free elf, I is. I is not needing to be punishing myself, after."

Then the elf started again on the reciting, and this time Severus shivered. This was not good.

"7.30 breakfast. 12 o'clock lunch. 5 o'clock coffee for Headmistress, 8 o'clock gathering in Great Hall for no signing of contracts and no clothing ceremony."

The grinding sound became more violent, and that humming ... Bellatrix had done that too. After using the Crucio curse to make a kill, she had hummed a similar tuneless little melody while confirming that the victims were well and truly dead.

A trickle of cold started to leak into his veins at the realisation: The elf was talking about Hermione. And it was insane.

The reciting started again.

"7.30 breakfast. 12 o'clock lunch. 5 o'clock nasty coffee for Headmistress, 8 o'clock gathering in Great Hall, for not a clothing ceremony, but crying over Headmistress who is dead."

And then the humming again while the sound of the grinding never ceased. And then the reciting once again.

"7.30 breakfast. 12 o'clock lunch. 5 o'clock nasty coffee for Headmistress, 8 o'clock gathering in Great Hall for not a clothing ceremony but crying over Headmistress instead. I is saving them, I is. I knows how bad free feels like. With Headmistress gone, they is still Hogwarts house-elves. Still belonging. And I is not even having to be punishing myself. I isn't. Headmistress is bad, so I is doing Hogwarts a good service."

A free elf. There had been two at Hogwarts. Dobby he remembered: the odd one out. The one that wanted freedom. Lucius had been livid when Potter had somehow managed to free him. Even more livid when the creature had moved all of his loyalty onto the brat.

But the other ... for a short while the memory hung suspended somewhere at the edges of his mind. Then it came back to him: The one from the Crouch household. Albus had taken it to Hogwarts. It had not adapted well.

Worse than they had thought, obviously.

And it was going to kill Hermione? But why?

He tried to calm himself and went through what he knew. The constant repetition of 'clothing ceremony' was significant.

And Hermione's work at the Ministry of Magic had been securing the rights of magical creatures, and had it not been some silly project of hers in that vein when she was at school? The word 'vomit' floated through his mind.

But it wasn't vomit, but S.P.E.W.

The woman was trying to set the house-elves free again. And she was on the verge of killing herself doing it.

The night of 7th of February 2020

Chapter 20 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

19. The night of 7th of February 2020

As he continued to listen to the insane elf rambling to itself, all he could feel was hope. This was an opportunity, and the thoughts started to flit around in his head, like birds

caught in a box. And the birds had claws and beaks that ripped at him as they flapped around, trying to free themselves.

The sound from the mortar continued. An even-paced grind that would have pleased him if one of his Slytherin students had managed that kind of perfection in class. The hairs on his arms stood on end as he listened to it.

The plotting and manipulating to get her to accept the position as Headmistress had only guaranteed him having her in a portrait at Hogwarts when she died. He had expected it to be decades from now. He had expected friendship with someone he could stand to be around for longer than a couple of hours. But now she could die tomorrow—at the hands of an insane house-elf. She would die his age. The two youngest Heads of Hogwarts ever appointed, both dead within the year they were appointed. He could have more than the entertaining company and friendship of an old lady he liked. He could have a woman. A woman belonging to him alone.

He could leave now, return to his painting, and no one would ever know what he had found out.

The tuneless humming continued along with the sound from the mortar. He wished he could smell what was in it. With the thoroughness of the grinding the smell would be strong by now, and he would be able to identify the substance the elf intended to use.

He would have nothing to stand in his way this time. No James Potter, no Ron Weasley, no children and no bloody cause of any kind. She would be alone, except for him and a mismatched bunch of old Heads, strange portraits and paintings. Phineas and The Fat Lady appeared in his mind again, and he shuddered.

Severus had clenched his teeth together so hard, he could still feel the tension at the roots of them as he released his jaw. He needed to get out of there. He needed to ensure that the elf would not discover him. And he needed to think.

Hermione would be deprived of human touch if she died and ended up a portrait. She would not handle that well. He had seen her with Potter and Weasley. He had seen her with her children. She was affectionate. She hugged her family and friends.

He would be her closest friend then. Just him and her. Like with Lily for a short time.

He backed deeper into the painting and left and set course to the path of paintings hanging in the hall outside the kitchen. He needed to decide, but he couldn't think of anything but the possibilities, nothing but how much he wanted her dead.

He set a brisk pace along the path of paintings he had followed to the kitchen, but it wasn't enough. The pace didn't satisfy him. He walked faster but the rhythmic beat of his feet still wasn't enough.

The next moment he found himself running hard, the pictures blurring as he sprinted through them, not letting himself slow down even for the openings between them.

He overturned a table on his way through one of the paintings, and the ladies that had been seated around it squeaked and scattered.

He crashed through the passage and into the next painting. Dogs barking, horses neighing and a horn sounded.

A new passage.

A green meadow with fleeing sheep.

New passage.

A cellar filled with barrels and men in brown robes gaping as he ran past them.

New passage.

Children screaming and hiding behind the wide skirts of a young woman.

New passage.

He tasted blood and started to slow down. His thighs were burning. He staggered, was forced to stop, and almost doubled over trying to catch his breath. He supported himself against his thighs, looking down as he tried to breathe evenly.

His feet were surrounded by daffodils.

"Scoundrel!" The bellow, which was accompanied with a clanging noise he couldn't identify, came from somewhere behind him.

"Rogue! Did you imagine I would not recognise you, Black? That I would make the same mistake twice? I, Sir Cadogan, who has sworn to protect the school and everyone within from the likes of you!"

Cadogan, the idiot, was stupid enough to think that Severus was Sirius Black? Unbelievable. He drew his wand, still panting from exhaustion, and tried to straighten. But it was too late. He received a hard blow to the back of his neck. The pain bloomed underneath his skull and dug into his brain at the same time as it radiated along his spine, down to the folds of his legs. For the shortest of moments, he thought he had been hit by a *Cruciatus*.

And then he didn't feel anything at all.

The early morning of the 8th of February 2020

Chapter 21 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

20. The early morning of the 8th of February 2020

"Severus?" The voice was decisive and stern, and someone was patting his cheek with an annoying vigor. "Severus? Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes. Black spots moved in and out of his field of vision, and when he couldn't focus, he closed them again. The sounds around him were odd, as if he were sitting inside a metal barrel. He tried to lift his head but the shooting pain in his neck forced him to stay where he was.

"Severus!" This time he received a hard slap instead of the earlier patting. Phineas. It was Phineas trying to wake him.

"Stop it." He managed to grab his wrist, stopping him from inflicting more pain.

"Thank Merlin, you're awake again!" Phineas sounded relieved, which felt odd.

Severus forced his eyes open, staring up at something blue, again trying to find something to focus on. A silhouette came in to his field of vision. He squinted and then blinked a couple of times. And that did it: Phineas' features cleared.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Headmaster. I was convinced it was Sirius Black."

That voice. He recognised it. He tried to remember why he recognised it, and what had happened, but the dull, throbbing pain in his neck was sending spikes of pain into his skull and made it impossible to keep his mind in order. Phineas' face disappeared, and Severus was, again, staring at the blue above him.

"As you should be, Cadogan. What in the name of Salazar were you thinking? Even you must have known that, first of all, Sirius Black is dead; second, he doesn't have a portrait at Hogwarts and never will; and third, he was declared innocent of all charges! And I can't see how you made the mistake in the first place. They look nothing alike!"

"Well ... they are both tall, skinny and... and... and scruffy looking. Have a certain piratical air to them ... and they both neglect their hair."

"Even so, they are not even remotely similar!"

Severus had never heard Phineas bellow before. And his head might—like an egg that had been dropped on the floor—crack open from the experience.

"I'm terribly sorry!" Cadogan was whining, as if Phineas' bellowing wasn't enough to keep Severus down.

Severus wasn't staying. He turned on his stomach and got up on his hands and knees. He had to pause for a moment and wait for the nausea to settle before getting to his feet. The world tilted and swayed, but he managed to take a couple of steps on his own.

"Severus!" Phineas was at his side supporting him. "I intended to float you. You're in no condition to walk on your own."

"I will not be floated." He staggered and was forced to lean more heavily on Phineas, who was now roaring at Sir Cadogan to get out of their way since he was running around their feet offering his support while almost tripping them both up.

It was slow going as they weaved their way through the paintings. Severus staggered and tripped his way forward, the pains in his neck and head almost too much for him to bear.

"Severus, why did you, by all accounts, run like a mad man through the paintings last evening?" Phineas was panting as he spoke, and that made Severus realise that he was practically dragging him toward his own painting. "Not that Cadogan was coherent when he came and fetched me, but the other portraits were quite vocal about your rather destructive path through them."

Severus pressed his eyes together and tried to make the fog in his brain disappear. He gave up the attempt at remembering.

"I have no idea. Does it matter?" He heard his voice croaking the words at what seemed to be quite a distance away.

"You used to run when you were ... upset."

Phineas knew about? How did he know?

Severus cleared his throat, which made him hurt again. "How do you know about that?"

"I saw you. Albus said that you, well, that you needed the outlet and that I should leave it be. So I did."

His skin prickled from embarrassment to such a degree that he was able to disregard some of the pain, managing to straighten and not lean on Phineas to such a great extent any longer. But he was still tall enough to be able to catch his gaze.

"If something bothered you that much, it might just be important enough to try to remember."

He made sense. But he always did. For the most part. But when he nodded at Phineas, pain stabbed through his head again, just as brutally as before. When the pain had turned into a dull throbbing Severus tried to put his disjointed thoughts together again.

"I was trying to ... come to a decision about something, I think."

Phineas took a firmer grip around him and hoisted him higher.

"Not an easy decision then, I take it. Anything else?"

"Time. Not much time."

"Pardon?"

"The time frame. I did not have much time to decide."

Phineas shouldered his way through the door that lead into Severus' painting, dragging him along.

"You need rest." Phineas unceremoniously dumped Severus on his bed. The mattress and the soft pillows supported his aching neck and head in a way that made him feel almost normal again. The pain diminished enough for him to be able to relax, and he felt himself starting to drift off.

"I will stay, of course." Phineas' voice roused him again.

"I will manage."

"Cadogan hit you over the neck with a sword. It's a miracle that he didn't behead you in the process. I want to make sure you are all right."

"We are portraits. We don't die."

"Not from old age, no. But portraits sometimes stand empty, and the inhabitants never return. Didn't you ever wonder why? I do. And quite honestly, good company is rare, and you are the first portrait in decades I can stand for longer than a quarter of an hour."

Severus held back his chuckle. Phineas shouldn't have the satisfaction, and chuckling would in all likelihood hurt like Hades.

And then he fell asleep.

Afternoon of the 8th of February 2020

Chapter 22 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

21. Afternoon of the 8th of February 2020

Severus woke with a start, panting from the stress the nightmare had induced. It hadn't been the ordinary nightmare though where Nagini struck out at him, drowning him in blood and pain. This one had been different. It had started out the same way as always. The Dark Lord set Nagini on him, but then it changed. He wasn't the one being attacked, instead Hermione was. And Nagini wasn't Nagini. The snake had morphed into a house-elf and offered Hermione five o'clock coffee, and when she had smiled and received the offered cup, the elf had bared its fangs, and just like Nagini had done that day, the elf had dislocated its jaws and attacked, tearing chunks of Hermione's face away, turning it into a bloody mess.

Severus swallowed hard, remembering. The images in his head made him wonder about his mental state sometimes.

He looked past Phineas, who was sitting in an armchair beside his bed, soft snores escaping him. Behind him was the window where the colours of the sky ranged from a warm yellow, over orange, ending in different shades of pinks and lilac. Dusk then, and a beautiful afternoon. He'd been sleeping for a while.

He sat up, and gingerly put his feet on the floor while glancing at the clock on his bedside table. A quarter to five. Five. The number stuck in his mind. And why would it do that? Five? Five o'clock. What was the significance? What was happening at five o'clock? He didn't have to keep appointments any longer. The only time he bothered was when he had an opportunity to spend time with Hermione.

Hermione.

A house-elf attacking—offering coffee and then attacking Hermione.

Damnation! Not Hermione! He couldn't let it happen. No matter how much he wanted her dead.

Ten to five. It wasn't too late. Not yet. He threw himself from the bed and ran through his flat to the window looking onto the Headmistress' office.

Hermione was sitting in front of the fire holding a cup in her hand.

Too late! He was too late. Just like that other evening long ago.

"Don't drink it!" He heard his own roar; his shout startled Hermione, and she flinched hard enough for her to drop the cup.

The cup landed by her feet, rolled and then stopped as its handle met the plush carpet. Nothing stained the carpet. Nothing at all. The cup had already been emptied before it fell.

He struck his hand against the hard surface of the canvas.

"Did you drink it? Answer me! Did you drink it?"

Hermione got to her feet, staring at him as if he'd gone insane. Looking so very much like the frightened schoolgirl he used to teach.

"What on earth is the matter with you? Calm down." She wasn't upset at all. She looked incredulous, but nothing more.

He needed to get through to her, so he took a steadying breath and tried again.

"It is of the utmost importance: Have you drunk anything a house-elf has given you?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Winky brought me coffee a while ago." She gave him a tentative smile. "And very nice it was too. I think she is pleased about the fact that the rest of the house-elves are being set free. She seemed much more relaxed than usual."

He caught himself pushing at the unyielding canvas with both hands.

"Listen to me: she fed you poison to stop you from setting the elves free. Go to the cupboard containing the Pensieve. You need to get the Bezoar from the emergency—"

"No! She wouldn't do a thing like that. She might be a tiny bit strange, even for a house-elf, but she wouldn't—"

"She would, and she has!" He was roaring again, and Hermione took a step back from him, and worse, from the cupboard. "Please Hermione! The Bezoar will not harm you either way. Take it! If not for anything else, then for your children."

Her eyes widened at that, and then, in a flurry of vine-coloured robes, she ran for the cupboard, opening it with shaking hands and then, just as he let out a relieved breath, she staggered. She held on to the doors, and for a moment she stayed upright, but then her knees buckled and folded. As she fell on her knees, she put one hand on her throat, throwing him a desperate glance.

"Get the Bezoar!" He banged at the canvas as hard as he could.

In the corner of his eye he saw Phineas' shocked face.

Hermione lifted a shaking hand and fumbled inside the cupboard.

"Good girl. That is it."

The words left his lips at the same time as she gave him another glance—one of abject despair. Then she fell over.

She fell between the open doors of the cupboard and at first, the only thing his mind managed to take in was the Bezoar, lying on the floor beside her, close to her small white hand.

"Get it!"

Nothing happened. He banged at the canvas again. He noticed smears of blood on it, but didn't care.

"Get it and put the Bezoar in your mouth, Hermione."

"Severus. Stop it!" Phineas pushed his way between him and the canvas. "It's over. She's dead."

"Get out of my way." He tried to push Phineas away, but he had put both arms around Severus, leaving him no leverage to push or even hit.

"That was why you ran." It wasn't a question, Severus could hear that. "You found out somehow. And you have been wanting her for a while now."

Severus was on his knees in front of Phineas without knowing how he had got there.

"Yes."

"And then Cadogan struck you."

"I should have warned her at once."

Phineas was hunched down in front of him, patting his shoulder.

"You couldn't have known. Come. Get up." He helped Severus to his feet. "I saw Minerva run past. I'm sure she went to fetch help. Maybe it isn't too late, after all."

As if the whole thing was staged, the office door banged open at Phineas' words, and Madam Pomfrey and Longbottom burst through the door. In the end, Severus had to turn his back at the bedlam that broke out after that. Portraits shrieking, more people gathering in the office. Longbottom trying to take charge, even as tears were running down his cheeks. Poppy sobbing while trying to revive Hermione.

"I think it best if we leave. There is nothing we can do."

"It was my fault." Severus felt as if his body weighed a ton, and he had to concentrate to put one foot in front of the other.

Phineas, walking on his right side, put a hand on his shoulder. "The blasted house-elf is to blame, no one else."

"You tried," someone else said. Severus looked to his left. Albus was walking beside him too. He wondered when he had arrived. He hadn't noticed.

"I should have told her at once."

"Maybe. But we aren't perfect. And temptations are present in all of our minds much too often. We should know, you and I." Albus gave him a smile that looked tragic to Severus' mind. "And you did try."

"I was too late."

"Yes. You were. I'm so sorry."

1st of March 2020

Chapter 23 of 23

Ending up as one of the more prominent portraits at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a dull thing indeed, for a former double-spy. But there are ways to amuse oneself when boredom gets the better of you.

22. 1st of March 2020

He had been frightened—terrified even—because it had taken so long. For a while he and some of the other Heads had feared that she, for some reason, wouldn't get a portrait. But now, finally, it had appeared.

He swallowed hard, not daring to hope the door would be open between their paintings. He didn't deserve it after all. But when he pushed it, it swung open without a sound, and he could take the one step that would bring him to stand in Hermione's painting.

The interior in hers was nothing like the one in his own painting.

The walls here were washed, and the ceiling low with chunky, oak beams. The windows were small, but so many that the room was still filled with light. The curtains were so thin that they were see-through, thus letting an abundance of light into the room. Two plush armchairs in a restful mauve shade were placed opposite each other with a small table standing between them. A sofa for three in the same colour against a wall. An oak table matching the bookshelves.

A pleasant room. A room to spend time in, reading and conversing.

He couldn't help himself, seeing the chess game standing on the sideboard between the armchairs. He went over and looked more closely at it. It was made of green and red marble. And he surprised himself when he couldn't help chuckling at it. It felt reassuring to see it. To play chess with a very bad opponent felt oddly desirable.

Then he looked at the person he most wanted to see but had avoided looking at.

Hermione was sitting, or rather lying, in one of the armchairs, legs curled up on the seat, with her head placed on one of the armrests. Funny how he had never noticed that she was such a small person. She had never struck him as little, not when he had taught her at school, never as she taught Ancient Runes and not as the Headmistress—

but she was, he realised.

He sank down in the plush armchair opposite hers, not knowing what to do next. He'd been told he had slept for three months before waking up when his portrait had first appeared. He knew for a fact that Albus had slept for four and a half and Minerva for two. He also remembered that he had woken with a painful crick in his neck that had been very hard to get rid of, even with the help of potions.

She would hurt when she woke up, sleeping in that position. And she had all those curls in her face too. And she didn't even have a blanket.

He'd been frozen and stiff when he woke up, besides sleeping in an awkward position. And the old men and women in the rest of the portraits were old enough to have forgotten how miserable the awakening had been.

She needed to be moved somewhere comfortable, where she could get some proper rest. He rose and went over to her. He carefully removed her hair from her face. It was so very soft, surprisingly. He would have thought it to be coarse and stringy, but it was the opposite.

He scooped her up in his arms and went toward her bedroom. Her bedroom was pretty too, with walls coloured in a misty green. He put her down on the bed and reached for the first button on her robe. He pulled his hand back before he even touched.

She wasn't comfortable enough. But he couldn't undress her. Not without her knowing. It wouldn't be ... right. Dishonourable, and he didn't intend to start things out that way. He would be careful.

He would fetch Minerva and explain to her what needed to be done. She would help; he was sure.

But just not now. He sat down on the bed and looked at her. Her whole life had been such an utter tragedy. The better part of her childhood marred by the Dark Lord. Widowed much too early. Used in Ministry games, and in the end, murdered by an insane house-elf. He stroked her hair, removing some strands that had ended up in her face again, mostly because he wanted to touch her hair some more.

She would have to build up a new way of being now. And she could still meet her children, and eventually, her grandchildren. That would make her happy.

And she would have him to take care of her.

He would make sure that she had him present, whenever and in whichever capacity she needed him.

He was a patient man. He had learned that revenge took time. And so did other, less destructive, things. And they both had plenty of time to spend together.

He would make sure that they had plenty of time together.