

The Owl and the Raven

by Dreamy_Dragon

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

One

Chapter 1 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

□

Thud!

Hermione's head shot up from *The Solstice Murders*, her eyes darting around the room until she identified the window as the source of the noise. Placing her book on the table, she disentangled herself from the cosy blanket on the sofa to investigate.

She peered out of the window, but there was nothing to be seen other than the grey sky. Everything seemed to be calm and ordinary apart from the strong gale that shook the rowan in her garden and kept rattling the windows of her small cottage. Still, the noise had been odd, and it wasn't just the the wind. Grabbing her wand, Hermione threw on a cardigan before she went outside.

When she opened the door, she was immediately assaulted by a gust of cold wind. She shivered and squinted into the dim evening light. Again, nothing out of the ordinary was to be seen. Hermione drew her cardigan tighter around her and hurried to the back of the house where her living room window faced her small, walled-in garden. At the sight that greeted her, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Beneath the window, so close to the wall that it wasn't visible from inside the house, lay a large, black bird. It wasn't moving.

Hermione kept her wand raised in front of her as she approached the bird, trying to make as little noise as possible. It was too black for a magpie and too big for a crow. A raven, then. *Corvus Corax* her mind supplied helpfully. Very clever, very hard to tame, but if managed, a fierce and extremely faithful familiar.

Hermione crouched down to take a closer look. The raven lay completely motionless, only its feathers fluttering in the wind that was still howling. The bird seemed to be unconscious. Or dead. A quick diagnostic spell revealed that its heart was still beating and that it was breathing. Unconscious, then.

Hermione took off her cardigan. She folded it into a little nest before she used her wand to levitate the bird gently into it; then, she checked that its wings were not injured and were folded correctly against its body. She briefly contemplated using Levicorpus to get the bird inside, but decided against it. Better not take any unnecessary risk in the current weather. She shoved her wand into the waistband of her tracksuit bottoms, ignoring the image of Mad Eye Moody that flashed through her mind, before she picked up the raven in its nest just as rain began to pour down. Cradling bird and cardigan close to her chest, she ran back into the house.

Safely inside, she put the raven on the worktop in her kitchen to perform a quick drying and warming spell on it before she dried herself. Hermione checked again that the bird was breathing and that its heart was still beating. What else? There had been something in a leaflet about wildlife she'd picked up at the local village shop when she had moved here. But where had she put the damn thing?

After a bit of digging around, Hermione located it at the bottom of a pile of glossy brochures, flyers and leaflets that ranged from announcements of last year's village fair, timetables for the Muggle bus that ran from the square in front of the church, a flyer for a premiere at the wizarding National theatre, and the latest catalogue "Dare to be a

Goddess - It's Magic" from Lavender's lingerie shop, sent by first-class owl, courtesy of the owner herself. Hermione resisted the impulse to sort the whole pile whilst she was at it. After all, the raven's plight seemed a bit more urgent than clearing up waste-paper. Only then did it occur to her that she might as well have Accio'd the leaflet. Hermione shrugged before she scanned the printed information quickly. So far, she seemed to have done all right. There was only one thing left to check.

Back in the kitchen, she eyed the raven's beak. It looked impressive. Very. And sharp. Hermione went and put on pair of woollen gloves before she approached the bird again, hoping that it wouldn't choose this moment to wake up. As gently as possible, she pried open the raven's beak and inspected the oral cavity. Nothing blocked. Good. A sigh of relief escaped her as she took a step backwards.

Hermione glanced at the leaflet again. Breathing: check. Heartbeat: check. Airways not blocked: check. Scottish wildlife rescue suggested to leave the bird alone in a dark space to recover or, if possible, to take it to a vet.

'Hmmm,' said Hermione. 'The question here is: are you a magical or a non-magical bird?' She ran her wand over it. There were very faint traces of residual magic.

'Hmmm,' she said again. 'You could be a wizard's familiar. Or you could be a wild one who's hung out in a wizard's garden for a bit.'

On closer inspection, it looked very much like an ordinary raven. As far as Hermione could tell – having never been this close to a grown-up raven before – it was of average size if a bit on the slim side. Its beak looked as sharp as its plumage was glossy with the small exception of a line of feathers on one side of its neck. Even though the feathers around a raven's neck were supposed to be shaggy, these looked more ruffled than usual. Odd, but not conclusive evidence as to the bird's background.

'You know, you would save us both a lot of hassle if you woke up and went on your way,' Hermione said to the raven. 'Besides, I don't fancy taking you with me to Hogwarts tomorrow.'

She knew the leaflet said to leave an injured bird alone in the dark to recover, but she was also supposed to keep it warm. Besides, she couldn't bring herself to leave the raven alone in the chilly kitchen so she levitated it, together with its cardigan nest, over to the living room. She placed a cushion from the sofa close to the window and set the raven gently down on it. She fetched a bowl of water and put some owl treats, a few bits of bacon and a crumbled oatmeal biscuit on a plate. Then she left both next to the raven's cushion before she went into her bedroom to finish packing.

She had completed her lesson plans weeks ago, her teaching robes lay neatly folded on the foot of her bed, and several stacks of books were waiting to be shrunk to be put into her trunk. Still, by the time Hermione had sorted out the rest of her stuff for the next term, it was nearly midnight. Not least because she kept tip-toeing back into the living room to check on the raven.

All packing done, she made herself a cup of tea and settled back onto the sofa for a little pre-bedtime reading. At some point, the raven seemed to stir, but when she looked over to the corner by the window, it still appeared to be unconscious. Hermione checked on it again before she finally went to bed, but there was no change.

Hermione woke up to sunshine and a clear blue sky the next morning. The first thing she did was to shuffle into the living room. The raven was gone. It had drunk some water, eaten the bacon and the biscuit, but left the owl treats alone. Apparently, it had found the open window – warded against the weather and against human intrusion but not against a bird – without any problem. A wave of relief swept through Hermione, followed by a little pang of disappointment. Maybe it was time to think about finding a familiar again. But for now, she needed to get on with her morning, or she risked being late for the pre-start-of-term meeting the Headmistress had called.

This was originally written as a gift for sempraseverus in the sshg exchange on live journal.

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Last, but by no means least, many thanks to talesofsnape who very kindly and generously created the gorgeous banner for this story.

Two

Chapter 2 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

Hermione stuffed the last book on the already overflowing shelf before she collapsed into the armchair next to the window. For some reason, it had taken her a lot longer than she had anticipated to unpack her trunk and to get both her rooms and her office back into working order for the new term. At least Minerva had kept the pre-term staff meeting blissfully brief this morning. But then there hadn't been much to discuss really, even for someone as obsessed with details as Minerva.

As Hermione's gaze strayed out of the window and followed the graceful flight of an owl that was winging its way toward the Owlery, her thoughts returned to the raven. Where was it now? Was it all right? And what had it been looking for in her garden in the first place?

'Well, wherever you are, I hope you're OK,' she whispered, tearing her gaze away from the grounds and rose to get ready for dinner.

All in all, term started rather uneventfully. There were a few student pranks and squabbles, a couple of new Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products that had found their way into the school, some detentions assigned and the usual bunch of fifth and seventh years who were realising that now would be a good time to start working if they planned on passing their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

After the first week, Hermione thought that one of the many advantages of the post-Voldemort era was that she could look forward to a quiet and fairly uneventful term. The second week would prove her very, very wrong.

It began on Monday morning when four unsuspecting Hufflepuffs returned to their common room after breakfast and found themselves in Trelawney's Divination classroom instead.

After Sybill had recovered from her surprise, she told the unexpected visitors that she had been expecting them all along, of course. Unfortunately, her crystal ball remained rather foggy when asked to reveal the location of the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room, so the Hufflepuffs had to resort to wandering at random through the castle. The entrance to the common room was later discovered to have moved to the back of Septima's classroom.

A thorough investigation turned up nothing. Whilst it was a bit inconvenient for the Hufflepuffs to have to negotiate the Arithmancy classroom every time they wanted to

leave or enter their dormitory, no harm had been done; so everybody took it in stride and dismissed the whole incident as one of the castle's little quirks.

On Tuesday, all the greenhouses were filled with orchids. Another investigation failed to turn up anything. Neville shrugged, asked Minerva and Hermione to help him transfigure one of the tool sheds into a new greenhouse, adjusted the climatic conditions and moved his new treasures there. All his other plants were unharmed, residing happily in their former locations.

On Wednesday, the teachers found wine instead of their usual drinks in their goblets at dinner. To no one's surprise, the by now almost routine investigation didn't reveal anything; the wine proved to be not only not poisonous, but of very fine quality. As the goblets kept refilling themselves, a merry time was had by all, and Poppy wisely stocked up on Hangover potion for Thursday morning.

Lessons started on time on Thursday, though Neville, Bill and Angelina looked a little the worse for wear. Hermione had had the sense to stop drinking after a couple of goblets, mostly because a stack of essays was waiting for her back in her rooms. As a result, she didn't need any Hangover potion, but still wasn't in the best of moods. Something about the incidents ... as harmless as they seemed to be ... didn't sit quite right with her. She kept mulling them over as she spelled the instructions for the Aguamenti charm on the blackboard for her sixth years. After she had explained the theory and none of the students seemed to have any questions, she looked around the classroom. 'Who wants to have a go?'

To no one's surprise, the hand of a skinny Slytherin shot up.

'Very well, Mr Cavendish,' said Hermione.

The red-haired boy stood up and glanced at the blackboard again before he waved his wand in precisely the way Hermione had just demonstrated *Aguamenti!*

A shower of bright pink roses erupted from the tip of his wand, accompanied by "ahs" and "ohs" from the two other Slytherins, both girls, and not-so-discreet sniggering from the Ravenclaws, who made up the majority of the N.E.W.T.level Charms lesson.

'Very impressive, Mr Cavendish, but you seem to have confused *Aguamenti* with *Orchideous*,' Hermione remarked, her expression carefully neutral.

The boy turned nearly as pink as the roses still raining from his wand.

'Stop it. Now,' Hermione instructed him.

'I c-c-can't.' The surface of the desk was covered in roses, and yet more flowers were spilling from the wand's tip onto the floor.

'*Finite Incantatem*.' Hermione pointed her own wand towards the boy's desk.

Finally, the shower of roses stopped; the sniggering, however, didn't. Hermione fixed a beady eye on the row of Ravenclaw students, shutting them up without effort.

'Miss Tugwood, why don't you show us how it's done?' she addressed the girl whose derisive snorts had been the loudest.

The blonde rose with a smug expression. Without even looking at the blackboard, she waved her wand *Aguamenti!*

For a second, nothing happened. Then, blue, green, red and golden stars shot out of her wand. This time, her fellow Ravenclaws made appreciative noises whilst sniggers were heard from the Slytherin contingent.

Hermione's eyes narrowed; she ended the spell with a quick wave of her wand.

Miss Tugwood's expression had changed from smug to contrite, but Hermione wasn't fooled by it. 'Right, you lot. No more practical exercises for you today. Instead, we'll be talking about the theory of conjuring spells.'

There was an audible groan from the students' benches. Hermione chose to ignore it.

'I suggest you pay attention as your homework is going to be an essay on the differences between at least three commonly known conjuring charms. Mr Cavendish, Miss Tugwood, please come and see me after the lesson.'

Hermione made her way down to the staff room, mulling over the events of this morning. The rest of the lesson had passed without further incident. When she had interviewed Mr Cavendish and Miss Tugwood afterwards, both had claimed convincingly that they had tried for the water conjuring charm and had no idea what had gone wrong.

Prior Incantato had shown that yes, they had indeed attempted to cast *Aguamenti*. After some more questioning, Hermione had admonished them to concentrate more on the charm they were intending to do in future, reminded them of the essay and sent them off to their next lesson.

After they had shuffled off, Hermione had been about to clear her desk when a single black feather materialised out of thin air. She jumped nearly a foot backwards before she whipped out her wand and ran a series of Dark magic detection spells on it. It turned out to be nothing more than a genuine raven's feather: albeit a glossy, elegant looking one, the kind that made luxurious quills. In the end, she had put it on the shelf next to her desk where she kept all kinds of knick-knacks. As beautiful as the feather was, its appearance together with the rest of the seemingly harmless incidents had put her on edge.

She was still lost in thought when she reached the ground floor and walked along the corridor to the staff room. Turning around the corner, she found herself at the entrance to the kitchens. She stared at the painting with the fruit bowl. 'Must have taken a wrong turn,' she murmured retracing her steps.

This time, she made it to the staff room without detour. To her surprise, she found it almost empty. Odd. Usually, all the teachers congregated here between morning lessons to grab a quick cuppa and check their pigeonholes. Not today, apparently.

The only other person in the room was Horace Slughorn. Uncharacteristically for him, he wasn't occupying the most cosy armchair in front of the fire, but one of the rickety chairs at the careworn table in the middle of the room. He sat very still, his gaze fixed on some invisible spot in front of him.

As Hermione walked past him with her mug, she noticed that his usually ruddy complexion looked like a ghost's today and a sick ghost at that. 'All right, Horace?'

An indistinct mumble was the answer.

'Sorry, I didn't catch that.' Hermione ventured closer.

"It was terrible. Never seen anything like it," Horace whispered, not turning to look at her.

Hermione poured another cup of tea, added three sugar lumps and stirred before she pushed it into Horace's hand.

'Drink,' she said in her best teacher's voice.

Horace took a sip from his tea. After a second, he slowly seemed to become aware of his surroundings. 'Hermione. Didn't see you come in.'

'Horace, what *is* the matter with you?' Hermione asked.

He took another sip from his tea, apparently fortifying himself for what must be a truly horrendous tale. 'I had my fifth years brew a Calming Draught today,' he began.

'As I'm sure you know, it's a fairly standard potion that's bound to come up in their O.W.L. exam. I've had them practising the more common potions for a few weeks now, and last time, almost everyone had the Calming Draught down,' he paused as if searching for the right words to continue.

A sense of foreboding crept through Hermione. 'But not this time, I take it?'

'No, not this time.' Horace kept staring at the table. 'Everyone's potion was perfectly fine when I checked.' He raised his head to look at Hermione, an almost pleading expression in his eyes. 'You know I would never have a student try a potion that I haven't checked before, don't you?'

'Of course, Horace,' Hermione answered, and she meant it. Slughorn was many things, but he wasn't careless when it came to his students. 'What happened?'

'I asked them to test the potion, and...'

Hermione gave him an encouraging nod.

'...and it had turned into Euphoria Elixir. A rather strong one. Do you have any idea what happens when a bunch of fifteen-year-olds ingest that potion? It was mayhem. Utter mayhem. I'm becoming too old for this.' Horace's hand was still shaking as he took another sip of tea.

'You know what the oddest thing is? By the time I had whipped up an antidote, the effects had passed.'

The wheels in Hermione's brain threatened to go into overdrive. 'That's not the only thing that's weird here,' she said and proceeded to tell him about her own morning.

After Hermione had finished telling Horace about the events of that morning's Charms lesson, both continued to drink their tea in thoughtful silence.

'I wonder if these were the only strange occurrences this morning?' Hermione mused.

'No, it seems all lessons were disrupted,' Minerva's voice said from the doorway. 'Apparently, the crystal balls promised every single one of Sybill's third years long and exceedingly happy lives.'

Hermione turned around just in time to see a distinct glint of amusement on the Headmistress' usually stern face. 'Oh dear,' she murmured.

'I've called a staff meeting for this afternoon,' declared Minerva. 'Whatever this is, we had better get to the bottom of it before someone is harmed.'

Hermione cast a last look through her office. Everything looked neat and just as it should be: her quills were aligned just so, two stacks of essays waited to be marked, her lesson plan next to them. For once, she had made the effort of actually tidying up her desk. She grabbed a quill and a piece of parchment, threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace in her office and announced, 'Headmistress' office' before stepping into the green flames.

She reappeared with a "whoosh" on a patch of cold stone floor that clearly wasn't situated in Minerva's office. Hermione stood up and, without even thinking about it, used her wand to rid her person of any trace of soot before taking stock of her surroundings. She seemed to have appeared in another classroom. By the looks of it, it was one of the spare ones that were located all through the teaching floors of the castle.

'Now that is strange,' murmured Hermione, somehow less surprised than she should be. A glance out of the window showed that she was on the ground floor. Definitely not anywhere near the Headmistress' office.

She'd just stepped out into the corridor when a harassed-looking Neville turned round the corner. 'Hermione, what are you doing here?' he asked.

'*That* is an excellent question,' she replied. 'For some reason, my Floo didn't go to Minerva's office, but saw fit to dump me here.' She indicated the unused classroom with a tilt of her head. 'And you?'

'I seem to have got lost on my way to the staff meeting, too,' Neville admitted.

Hermione and Neville looked at each other. 'Weird,' they commented at the same time whilst Neville pulled out his wand.

Neville put his wand flat on the palm of his hand. *Point Me.*

The wand spun a few times before it stopped. Hermione tilted her head. 'I don't think that's north.'

When she cast the spell, the result was exactly the same. 'Hm,' she said.

'What now?'

Hermione looked at the wands again. 'Let's follow the magic,' she said.

They found the staircase that should have led them up to the seventh-floor corridor and the entrance to Minerva's office. It didn't. Instead, they ended up in front of the statue of Boris the Bewildered.

'Hmph. Bewildered is about right,' muttered Hermione as they trooped back downstairs.

They tried again and found themselves in front of the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Hermione drew a deep breath.

The third attempt led them to an abandoned hallway on the second floor. 'I don't think I've ever been here before,' Hermione said.

'Me neither,' Neville replied.

When they turned around, the stairs had disappeared. 'Oh, bollocks,' Hermione exclaimed.

'Do you think someone has cursed the stairs? Maybe we'll be stuck here forever.' There was a distinct note of panic in Neville's voice.

'Honestly...' Hermione began before she saw Neville's face. He was staring at the walls enclosing them, his face ghastly pale. 'We aren't stuck here. We'll find a way out,' she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. 'We've been through worse.'

Neville nodded.

Hermione pointed her wand at a spot of blank wall, concentrated on what she wanted to see and drew the pattern all teachers learnt as part of the "Rules, Regulations and Procedures" part of their contract.

However, no floor plan of the castle materialised on the wall. Instead, a drawing appeared. It showed a naked man and a woman locked in a passionate embrace. As Hermione and Neville looked, the woman took the top position, her bushy curls bouncing in tune with the other activities that were going on.

'Erm,' said Neville, his face the colour of a very ripe strawberry. 'I don't think that's a map of the castle.'

'I can see that,' Hermione snapped. She squinted at the image again and felt hot embarrassment spread through her. True, she hadn't had sex in a while, but she simply wasn't interested in Neville in that way.

'It's just... I don't think Hannah would like that very much,' Neville said in a small voice.

'Look, Neville, I've no idea where that image came from, and Hannah is a very lucky woman.' Hermione glared at the offending image on the wall.

The drawing vanished, and the staircase reappeared where the blank wall had been. Hermione and Neville quickly descended the stairs back to the ground floor. Their next attempt brought them to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmistress' office.

'Dunbarton,' Hermione stated the password. She was almost surprised to see the gargoyle leap aside to reveal the revolving staircase. She tilted her head. 'Do you suppose this will lead us to where we want to go?'

'Only one way to find out,' Neville replied, still not quite looking at her.

Hermione suppressed a sigh and followed him onto the staircase. A wave of relief washed through her when they found themselves in front of Minerva's door.

Her relief didn't last long.

'You were supposed to be here half-an-hour ago,' Minerva snarled, ostentatiously pulling out her pocket watch and looking at it. 'But at least you ~~were~~ are here. Which is more than I can say for your colleagues.'

'Sorry,' Hermione said. 'We got lost on the way.'

Minerva stared at her. 'You two have known this castle since you were eleven-years-old, so you'd better explain yourselves.'

When Hermione and Neville had finished their tale, Minerva looked thoughtful. 'It seems that so far no one has come to any serious harm,' she said. 'It it weren't for the scale of it, it could almost be a student prank.'

'I don't think it is, though.' Hermione ran over the events of the past day in her head again.

'I agree. It's too complicated for that.' Minerva sighed. 'We may as well make ourselves comfortable until the rest of my staff turns up.' She pointed to the chairs that were grouped around the conference table beneath one of the windows. Inviting the staff up to her office for meetings was another thing Minerva did differently from her predecessors. In fact, she was the first head of Hogwarts since Phineas Nigellus to hold regular staff meetings. Her predecessors had been more of the "drop the occasional note and deal with people individually" school.

'Did Bill find anything?' Neville asked.

Minerva shook her head. 'No. He searched the school again for traces of Dark magic or anything unusual this morning, but . He offered to stay, but since we don't seem to be in any immediate danger, I sent him home to be with Fleur instead.'

'When's the baby due again?'

'Tomorrow, so he'll be back next week, and Michael will do very well as a substitute defence teacher. In any case, I'd like to have this sorted as soon as possible before it becomes serious.' Minerva sighed. 'Until we know more, you might as well go back to work. I'll let you know if and when I find out anything.'

Hermione made it back to her office without further detours. After she had made herself a cup of tea, she started to mark the third-year essays, but her mind kept wandering back to the incidents. She stared at the parchment in front of her for a couple of minutes without really seeing anything whilst the events of the last week kept replaying themselves in her head. Minerva was right; it all seemed fairly harmless, almost like a student prank. "Almost" being the operative word here. Hermione put the two stacks of essays "marked" and "yet-to-read" aside and took a scroll of new, crisp parchment out of her desk drawer. Dipping her quill into the inkpot, she made a list of everything that had happened. In another column, she wrote down possible explanations.

She read again what she had written, then she pulled out her wand. At first, she merely tried different combinations, hoping that randomly juxtaposing the items on her list would yield a clue. It didn't. Then she tried the whole procedure using a couple of Arithmantic formulae. Again, nothing. Clearly, she needed more data. Hermione rolled her two lists into a neat scroll and grabbed several sheets of blank parchment and a couple of quills. Thus armed, she was about to go to the library when she noticed the raven perched on her windowsill.

Three

Chapter 3 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

Thus armed, she was about to go to the library when she noticed the raven perched on her windowsill.

Hermione put down her supplies before she went to the window to take a closer look, fully expecting the raven to fly away as she approached it. It didn't, but remained sitting and peered straight at her. Upon closer inspection, it looked remarkably similar to the raven from her garden: about the same height, a bit too slim and the same row of feathers sticking out at odd angles on one side of its neck. Could it really be the same bird? It seemed very unlikely, and yet...

An insistent ticking noise interrupted Hermione's train of thought. The raven had begun to peck at the window pane. Well-trained by generations of owls, Hermione opened the window. The raven fluttered inside and landed neatly in the middle of her desk, upsetting one of the essay stacks. Almost in slow motion, the pile toppled sideways, and then, one by one, the pieces of parchment slid to the floor. Hermione's eyes narrowed. 'You'd better have an important message for me,' she told the raven as she bent to

pick up the essays.

The raven tilted its head.

With the essays safely back on the desk and the raven right in front of her, Hermione noticed two things: there wasn't a message and unless she was very much mistaken it was the same raven. The odd row of feathers on one side of its neck was too significant to miss. 'That's a bit odd,' she said. 'You didn't come here by accident, did you?'

'Cr-r-ruck,' said the raven.

'What do you want?' Hermione asked.

'Cr-r-ruck.'

'Oh, look at me,' Hermione huffed. 'I'm talking to a raven. Seriously. I'd better get to the library.' She looked at the raven again. 'Shoo,' she said half-heartedly.

The raven hopped a few inches, then picked up one of her quills and dropped it on the floor.

'Yes, well, thank you very much.' She picked up her quill. 'I take you don't intend to leave, then?'

'Cr-r-ruck.'

'Yes, thought so.' She stared at the raven.

It stared right back at her.

At last, she came to a decision. 'Fine, suit yourself. You know where the open window is. Me, I'm going to the library. I've got some research to do.' With that, Hermione picked up her quills, lists and parchment again and marched off to the library.

Hermione closed the fourth book in a row with a snap. All the books she had scanned so far provided interesting facts about magical mishaps and accidents, but none held any clue to the recent incidents at Hogwarts. She stared at the stack of books in front of her. One of them had a black cover that almost looked like a bird's coat. Her thoughts returned to the raven. Odd, that it would turn up again. Provided it was the same raven, but it seemed a bit too much of a coincidence that two ravens would seek her out within a couple of weeks. Hermione was certain that it was the same raven. She couldn't explain it, but she knew. Which really posed more questions than anything else. How had it found her? And why had it come? Had it sought out her specifically. And again, why?

Before she could pursue her thoughts any further, her growling stomach reminded her that it was almost dinner time. She picked up her things and decided to make a detour to her office. Of course, it was only because she didn't plan on taking her notes to dinner. She didn't intend to check if the raven was still there. Not at all.

Hermione pushed open the door to her office and was greeted by a cold draught from the open window. The raven wasn't anywhere to be seen. Disappointment crept through her, quickly followed by a warm wave of relief as she spotted the raven sitting on the top shelf of her bookcase. 'There you are,' she greeted it, dropping her stack of parchment on the tabletop. 'I see you are still here.'

With a caw, the raven fluttered down onto her desk. If she hadn't known any better, Hermione would have sworn that it was studying her research notes from the library.

'Doesn't make much sense, does it?' she said. 'Trust me, even if you can read, none of it makes any sense.'

With that, she set off for dinner in the Great Hall.

Dinner turned out to be completely uneventful, which ... after the last few days ... made for a nice change. Yet, Hermione remained on edge, expecting something to happen at any moment. Around her, the other teachers appeared nervous, too. Rolanda Hooch kept gesturing wildly with her fork as she was talking, earning her a disapproving glare from Poppy when the second sprout in a row landed on the matron's plate.

'Sorry,' mumbled Rolanda, looking sheepish.

Neville ate hardly anything at all, but threw nervous glances around the Great Hall repeatedly. So did Minerva, who sat even more ramrod straight than usual in her Headmistress' chair. She, too, didn't seem to care too much about the food.

Hermione, on the other hand, was enjoying her pork chops. A year of not knowing where the next meal would come from had taught her to enjoy what food there was under any circumstances. As she speared another roast potato, it occurred to her that the raven would be hungry, too. What did ravens eat? He'd go out to hunt for his own food, wouldn't he? She leant over to Grubbly-Plank. 'Wilhelmina, what do ravens eat?'

Everyone among the staff knew about Hermione's penchant for all kinds of sometimes odd research, so without missing a beat, Wilhelmina answered, 'Carrion, berries, grain, smaller animals or birds. Versatile them, eat whatever they find. Magical ones are bit more picky. Need to know anything specific?'

'No. At least not at the moment. Thanks, Wilhelmina.'

Wilhelmina threw her a questioning look, but when Hermione didn't say anything more, she apparently decided not to pursue the topic further.

Hermione stared at her plate. Should she feed the raven? She'd obviously fed the late Crookshanks, but the raven wasn't her familiar. Maybe it preferred to hunt, anyway. But then, it couldn't hurt to offer it something. Also, carrion. Ewww. She quietly pocketed a pork chop and then left the table rather quickly after pudding.

The raven was still there when she returned to her office. It seemed not to have moved from its position on her desk. Hermione quickly transfigured a spare bit of parchment into a dish ... no grease stains on her desk, thank you very much ... and offered the pork chop to the raven, which it polished off in no time at all.

'Still hungry?'

'Cr-r-ruck.' The raven tilted its head.

'I suppose that means yes.' Hermione briefly contemplated going downstairs to the kitchens, but then decided against it. She snapped her fingers once, and the house-elf responsible for that wing of the castle appeared almost instantly.

'How can Blinky help?'

'Blinky, can you get me something to feed the raven, please? Some raw meat if you have it, and some cereal or fruit.'

There wasn't a reply. Instead, Hermione heard a tiny gasp, and she saw Blinky staring as if transfixed at the raven. The raven on its part was looking calmly back at her.

'Blinky?'

The elf snapped out of her trance. 'Yes, miss, right away, miss,' she said, disappearing with a soft "pop".

Blinky reappeared a few minutes later, carrying a plate with what looked like a very impressive fry-up. At first glance, Hermione noticed a couple of sausages, fried bacon, eggs and ... on the edge of the plate, neatly separated from the rest ... some grapes.

'Erm, Blinky, thank you, but...'

'Blinky knows what raven likes to eat,' the elf informed her. 'Also, he will need water.'

He? So, a male raven, then. Hermione wasn't sure whether this was supposed to be relevant in any sense, but she took note of the raven's gender, anyway. Also, judging by the speed and obvious relish with which the raven was snaffling its, no *his*, food, Blinky had been right.

'If the raven is still here tomorrow, can you make sure I have something to feed him, please?'

'Raven is staying,' Blinky said, the tone of her voice leaving no doubt as to the raven's intentions. 'Blinky will bring food.'

'Thank you.' After the day she'd had, the elf's certainty about the raven's plans seemed to be the least weird thing that had happened.

Once the elf had gone, and Hermione had given the raven some water, she finally tackled the essays she'd been planning to mark earlier in the day. Whatever else was going on here was no excuse to neglect her job. The raven had settled on her bookshelf and seemed quite content to watch her working. It was almost midnight by the time she tidied up her desk and rose to go to bed. With a caw, the raven swept down from the shelf. Hermione, feeling its weight settle on her shoulder, froze for a second. It was a very sharp beak, and it was very close to her face. But then, so far the raven hadn't shown any intention of harming her. She started walking slowly, her heart beating rather rapidly. The raven remained where it was. Slightly reassured, she made her way through the castle, the raven swaying on her shoulder. This late at night, the corridors were usually deserted, apart from the occasional ghost, but none of them seemed to be out and about tonight.

When they reached her rooms, the raven fluttered over to the sofa, took a place on its back and seemed to give his surroundings a once-over. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he flew through the open bedroom door. Hermione followed him in time to see him landing with a swoop on her bedside table where he picked up a pair of silver earrings and disappeared with them to the top of her wardrobe. Hermione's eyes narrowed. 'Oh, no, you don't. *Accio* earrings.'

The earrings landed in her outstretched hand. With an annoyed "caw", the raven hopped to the rim of her wardrobe and peered down at her. 'I like shiny things, too,' she told him. 'And these are *my* shiny things.'

If a raven could scowl, the one currently sitting in her bedroom would have done.

Hermione couldn't help but grin at the raven's miffed expression. 'Come down, and we'll find you a place to sleep. And some shinies.' She stored the earrings safely in a drawer of the bedside table before she walked back to the living room. She found a cardboard box, which she transfigured into a perch. A mug became a bowl; *Aguamenti* filled it with water.

No sign of the raven.

Hermione shook her head, still grinning. It looked like the raven wouldn't be pacified that easily. She pulled the cardboard box that contained her costume jewellery from the drawer of her bedside table. Riffing through it, she considered and dismissed a couple of pieces. The necklace with the red beads didn't look shiny enough to tempt a raven. Another necklace, this one made from glittering dark green, black and silver beads would have been more adequate, but it was one of her favourite pieces. Her hand dug deeper, reaching to the very bottom of the box.

'Ow.' She had pricked her finger. An inspection showed that there was no blood, so Hermione dug back in and pulled the offending object out. It was a brooch, its silver-coloured rings forming a flower adorned with dark purple and lavender beads. She stared at it. It was the brooch she had worn when...

Best not to go there.

Hermione stared at the brooch for a moment longer before she quickly buried it again at the bottom of the box and continued her search. After a bit more digging, she found the two glittering bangles she'd worn last Halloween and decided to offer them to the raven.

Apparently, she had kindled the raven's interest since he flew over to her, and she managed to lure him onto the perch. He turned around a few times as if to test its stability; then, he tilted his head and looked at Hermione.

'Satisfied?'

'Cr-r-ruck.' He hopped down onto the table next to the perch where Hermione had placed the bangles next to his water bowl. He seemed to inspect them closely before he picked them up and carried them to the spot on the table that was least visible from where Hermione was standing.

She smiled. 'I take it you like them, then.'

'Cr-r-ruck.'

Hermione decided to leave the raven to his own devices for a bit and to continue reading her new mystery novel. When she checked on him again before she went to bed, he was sitting on the perch, apparently sleeping, his head tucked beneath one of his wings.

Four

Chapter 4 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

The alarm-clock woke her far too early the following morning. Hermione hit the snooze button with a grunt. She did this several times so by the time she finally rolled out of bed, she was running late. Very late. She cast a longing glance at the shower, but a few quick cleaning charms would have to do today. Trying to find a clean teaching robe took another couple of valuable minutes. Finally dressed, she dashed into the living room, only to realise that she would have to make a stop at her office to fetch her teaching materials.

'Oh, bollocks.'

Hermione briefly considered improvising, but abandoned the idea immediately as her first class that morning was a fifth-year double period. That was before she noticed she had put on two different shoes. A beige ballerina on one foot and a black court shoe on the other, she hobbled back into her bedroom, nearly falling over when she tried to take the court shoe off while she was walking. Frantic searching through the bottom of her wardrobe provided a pair of matching black ankle boots. One last charm to hold her hair in place, and she was ready to go.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the raven happily munching away on what looked like the best titbits from the things Hogwarts offered for breakfast as she hurried out of the door.

The stairs turned out to be especially uncooperative that morning, always swinging in just the opposite direction from where she wanted to go. By the time Hermione arrived at her office, which seemed to have moved from the third to the fifth floor, she was not only thoroughly out of breath, but also really, *really* late and grumpy. She pulled out her watch. Definitely no time for a cup of coffee before the lesson. With an annoyed huff, she marched into the classroom.

To make things worse, her first class contained Gryffindors and Slytherins, which was a volatile combination at the best of times, but nobody had listened to her when she had suggested in a staff meeting to either have each lesson contain students from all houses or at least pair Slytherin with Ravenclaw rather than with Gryffindor. Today, however, her students were no match for their teacher, who was in A Very Foul Mood. By the end of the lesson, both Slytherin and Gryffindor found that they had considerably fewer house points than earlier that morning.

Fortunately for the rest of the school, Hermione had a free period after that. The first thing she did when she arrived back in her office was to ask Blinky for a cup of coffee. It arrived almost instantly with milk and sugar just as she liked it together with a plate that held two slices of toast with apricot jam. Several sips of coffee later, Hermione was slightly mollified. Only then did she notice the raven. He was sat on her bookshelf again, watching her. Hermione frowned. 'When did you get here?'

The raven just looked at her, then at the chaos on her desk, then back at her.

'If that is a comment on how I work, you'll be out on your scrawny, feathery arse quicker than you can say "caw",' Hermione said.

In response, the raven fluttered to a higher shelf.

Hermione shook her head. 'It almost seems like you understand me.'

'Cr-r-ruck,' said the raven.

'Hmmm,' said Hermione. 'You're a bit of an odd one, aren't you?'

The raven tilted his head.

'And by the way, the rooms seem to have moved around again.' She frowned, only now realising what exactly had bothered her earlier. However, when she went out into the corridor to check, both her office and her classroom were exactly where they had always been.

Either she had been too deprived of caffeine and too much in a hurry this morning and had thus imagined things or and Hermione was inclined to believe the latter the castle had played another of its little pranks.

'This is becoming tiresome,' she remarked to no one in particular before she noticed a couple of first years staring at her oddly. 'Don't you have somewhere to be?' she snarled, causing the students to retreat quickly.

By lunchtime, Hermione had almost convinced herself that she had imagined the floor thing, especially as the rest of her lessons had passed without any incident. When she left for the Great Hall, the raven fluttered down from what seemed to have become his preferred place on the bookshelf and settled on her shoulder again.

'Fancy meeting the rest of the school?' she teased him.

A "caw" was the answer.

'Come along, then,' Hermione said, setting off for the Great Hall, the raven riding on her shoulder. As usual before any meal, the corridors were teeming with students hurrying between classrooms, their dormitories and the Great Hall, but very few seemed to notice the raven sitting on their Charms teacher's shoulder.

The stairs seemed to be in a more cooperative mood than earlier, Hermione noticed as the one leading to the ground floor swung obligingly in her direction. She descended it, turned a corner and found herself in front of the Defence against the Dark Arts classroom.

She groaned. 'Not again.'

Barely quelling her annoyance, Hermione retraced her steps and chose another staircase, only to find herself back in the Charms corridor. With a sigh, she tried again. This time she made it to the entrance of the Great Hall.

'Third time's the charm, eh,' she murmured.

She caught snippets of conversation from the students that indicated that they too had taken a few detours before finding the Great Hall. The familiar niggling feeling about all the incidents reasserted itself. During all this time, the raven had been sitting quietly on her shoulder, seemingly happy to accompany her wherever she went. As Hermione entered the room, he suddenly seemed to stiffen, and she could feel his claws momentarily tighten on her flesh before he took off. He swept once around the vast room and then landed in an alcove right beneath the ceiling that allowed him to keep the whole hall in view. Hermione watched after him and shook her head slightly. "Odd" really didn't quite begin to describe the bird.

Upon reaching the High Table, she saw that the only other teachers present were Neville and Wilhelmina. 'Where is everyone?' she asked.

'No idea.' Wilhelmina shrugged. 'Been busy with the Thestrals. Came in through the back, and nobody's here. Thought I'd missed a note or something, but then Neville here tells me I didn't. Weird.'

'You can definitely say that,' Hermione answered, noting that the Care of Magical Creatures teacher seemed to be ruffled by the current events, too, as she rarely used so many words in one go.

Wilhelmina nodded, casting a look through the Great Hall.

'So how many attempts did it take you to get here?' Neville asked.

'Three,' Hermione said. 'You?'

Neville made a face. 'Five.'

'New familiar, Hermione?' Wilhelmina interjected, inclining her head in the direction of the raven, who was still perched on his lookout beneath the ceiling.

'I don't know. He sort of... found me.'

While Hermione proceeded to tell Wilhelmina about the raven, the tables filled up slowly with the missing students and teachers. Minerva arrived wearing a deep frown and by the time Hermione had finished her tale, nearly everyone was present and accounted for, and food had begun to appear on the tables.

'Like to take a look at your raven, some time.'

'Why?' Hermione asked, feeling oddly protective of the raven.

'Just a hunch,' said Wilhelmina.

Hermione said nothing, but cast a swift glance at the raven, who was still perched on his vantage point. His eyes swivelled in her direction, and she was sure that whatever Wilhelmina's "hunch" was, it was wrong.

Just before pudding appeared on the tables, Minerva stood up. The students started to notice only gradually. It was almost like a wave of silence was sweeping the Great Hall as the general chatter died down, and everyone turned their attention to the Headmistress. She waited until it was almost completely quiet...or as quiet as a vast room filled with students was likely to get. 'The first period after the lunch break is cancelled,' she announced.

Immediately, excited whispering began at all the house tables whilst the teachers looked at each other with bewildered expressions.

Minerva raised a hand. 'Silence. Prefects, you will escort your houses back to the common rooms. Everyone is to stay there until classes resume, and no one...' She cast a glance round the hall, briefly looking at one or two known troublemakers in particular, '...I repeat, no one is allowed out in the corridors or the grounds. Is that understood?'

There was general nodding at all tables before the whispering started again. This time, Minerva let it pass and turned to the staff. 'I'd like all of you to stay behind after lunch for an impromptu staff meeting. I've asked the ghosts to attend as well.'

The teachers exchanged looks. Apparently, they hadn't known about the staff meeting, either, Hermione concluded, as they all looked slightly confused; nobody seemed to be paying much attention to the plates of Spotted Dick that had just materialised.

The ghosts had started to float in during pudding, the Fat Friar and Nearly Headless Nick casting longing looks at the food. As soon as the tables were cleared and all the students had left the Great Hall, Minerva closed the doors with a flick of her wand before she waved the ghosts over to the High Table, conjuring extra chairs for them. The expressions on the ghosts' faces showed how much they appreciated the gesture, even though technically it made no difference to them.

'I've asked you to this meeting because, for once, we've all made it to the same place at the same time.'

There were a few sniggers around the table, though they quickly died down under the stern glare of the Headmistress.

Minerva continued, 'As you know, we've had a number of smaller incidents over the past week and...' She paused and glanced at the raven, who had fluttered down from his elevated position in the window alcove and was now perched on the end of the Slytherin table.

'-What is the raven doing here?' she asked.

Hermione said, 'He's with me.'

'Hm. In future, please let me know if you have a new familiar,' Minerva admonished her.

'He's not my...' Hermione began, but when she saw Minerva's look, she just said meekly, 'Yes, Headmistress.'

Minerva raised an eyebrow at Hermione's use of her official title, but apparently decided to let it pass. 'As I was saying, we have witnessed a number of incidents over the past week, and whilst each one seems harmless enough, we still need to investigate and preferably put a stop to them.'

There was general nodding around the table.

'I'm not sure they're all that harmless, actually,' Angelina said. 'I had a couple of very scared first years on my hands this morning. I had to spend most of today's lesson calming them down instead of teaching them how to Transfigure a match into a needle.'

Horace nodded. 'Yes, my second years were a lot more interested in discussing why they had ended up in the kitchen instead of in the Potions classroom than concentrating on the Hair Raising potion they were supposed to be brewing.' He added, 'Not that we need any more hairs to be raised.'

'And that's not the first time something has happened. I've had more calculations gone awry than usual and not just in any particular year. Not to mention the odd ways in which the castle keeps changing. I mean, we're all used to the moving staircases, but now we have rooms and corridors moving around as well,' Septima said.

Again, there was general nodding around the table.

'I fear it's only a matter of time before something more serious happens,' Horace announced in a gloomy voice.

'Possibly,' Minerva concurred. 'Which is why I want to find out what exactly is going on, and how to stop it. We've already run several magical sweeps of the castle, all of which have come up with nothing out of the ordinary. So, Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm open to suggestions.'

Hermione said, 'I've done some research into the history of Hogwarts and other magical schools, but there is no record of similar incidents anywhere. Not even in the old handwritten records, which Irma kindly made available to me.' She nodded to the librarian. 'So whatever this is, it's either new or so obscure that we don't have any records of it.'

'The portraits in my office weren't able to offer any suggestions beyond what we've already tried, either,' Minerva added.

As usual, the ghosts looked to the Bloody Baron to be their spokesperson, but for once he chose to remain quiet.

Instead, Nearly Headless Nick said, 'We have noticed that something is going on as well. It almost seems as if the castle is playing pranks. We too have conferred about the occurrences...' He looked at the Bloody Baron for a moment before he continued, '... but none of us can remember anything similar happening.'

'So essentially, we're back to square one,' Angelina pointed out.

Minerva sighed. 'It looks like it. Bill should be back in a week; I'll ask him to look into it again. After all, he is our resident Dark Arts expert, no offence, Michael. I'm reluctant to request an official Auror enquiry at this point, but if things continue, we may have no other option.'

'I could ask Harry to investigate discreetly,' Hermione suggested. 'The MLE might have access to sources we don't.'

'Yes, do that. Any other suggestions?' Minerva cast a look around the table. 'If not, let's continue our daily routines, but let's make sure we stay alert and pay attention even if the incident seems insignificant. Meeting adjourned. Thank you, everyone.'

Rooms kept vanishing and reappearing over the next week, spells sometimes had unpredicted yet harmless results and the menu at meals wasn't always what it was supposed to be. Though nobody minded the steamed cod with spinach turning into fish and chips, the whole school seemed to be tense, waiting for something to happen.

The raven kept sticking close to Hermione. Wherever she went, so did he. The house-elves continued to make sure that he was well fed. Hermione was pretty sure that this wasn't a typical raven's diet, but whenever she tried to raise the topic with the elf on duty, they turned out to be very hard of hearing.

Everybody had soon become used to Hermione's new and very faithful familiar as the raven simply kept turning up whenever Hermione was around. The only exception was Wilhelmina, who kept throwing him suspicious looks. The distrust seemed to be mutual as the raven tended to mysteriously disappear whenever Wilhelmina was close.

On Saturday, the raven hovered near Hermione as she was getting ready to meet Ginny for lunch in Hogsmeade. She wasn't really all that surprised when he settled on her shoulder as she walked down to the gates.

Five

Chapter 5 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

The frozen ground was crunching under her feet, and there was a hint of snow in the air. Hermione, bundled up in a warm cloak, scarf, bobble hat and mittens, could feel the frost nipping at her nose. The raven didn't seem to mind the cold at all; he was happily swaying on her shoulder as she strolled down to the gates.

'Snow would be lovely, don't you think?'

The raven cawed.

'Though it might make it difficult to hunt, I suppose,' Hermione continued. 'But then, it's not as if you do much hunting anyway, do you? What with Blinky and the other elves spoiling you rotten.'

'Cr-r-ruck.'

'She really seems to like you. I wonder what it was that made her take to you instantly?'

 Hermione carefully sidestepped a patch of ice.

She suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, causing the raven to tighten his claws on her shoulder for an instant. 'The house-elves. Of course. Why didn't I think of that earlier? They might know something we don't.'

Continuing her way down to the gates, Hermione made a mental note to talk to Blinky later.

As soon as they left the school grounds, the raven took off, sweeping overhead in large circles. Hermione gazed after him. He looked gorgeous and very elegant in flight.

Just as she reached the *Three Broomsticks*, Hermione felt the raven settle back on her shoulder.

Nobody blinked an eye at the raven. Whilst the pub's reputation wasn't as shady as *The Hog's Head's*, there still tended to be all kinds of patrons, many of whom brought assorted animals with them some as companions, some for sale and quite a few of them were the sort one didn't want to argue with. Rosalyn, Rosmerta's daughter and current landlady, continued her mother's policy of pretending that the familiars and other creatures weren't really there as long as they behaved.

Hermione spotted Ginny at a table in the back corner, her seven-month-old daughter peacefully snoring in a carrycot next to her. Hermione looked at Rosalyn who shrugged. As far as she was concerned, the Muggle world and its laws were a very long way from Hogsmeade, so Rosalyn treated babies the same way as familiars: as long as they didn't make a fuss, she simply overlooked them. That Ginny Potter used to be a famous chaser for the Holyhead Harpies helped, too.

After a detour to the bar, Hermione made her way over to the table, a glass of orange juice in hand. Ginny had got up when she saw Hermione and was about to hug her when she noticed the raven on Hermione's shoulder. She hastily took a step back. 'Oh, hello, Hermione.'

Hermione set her glass down. 'Hi, Ginny. Don't worry; he won't hurt you.'

'Yeah, but I doubt he'd appreciate a hug,' said Ginny.

Hermione grinned. 'Probably not; he's not exactly the touchy-feely sort.'

The two women settled on the bench while the raven fluttered off to sit on the backrest next to Hermione. 'So how's my goddaughter?' she asked.

'Fine, and a right little terror,' Ginny answered, her fond expression belying her harsh words. 'She's going to give the boys a run for their money when she's older.'

'Good for her,' said Hermione smiling at Lily Luna before she squinted at the chalkboard that listed the day's lunch offerings.

'Oh, and Harry says "hi",' Ginny added.

'Tell him, I said "hi" back.'

'Will do.'

Hermione was contemplating the merits of a jacket potato with tuna and sweetcorn versus a chicken salad sandwich when Ginny asked, 'So, what's with the raven?'

'I think he's adopted me.'

'Adopted you?'

'Yes. It was a dark and stormy night...'

Ginny started giggling.

'It was,' Hermione said.

'Yeah, right. Go on, then.'

Hermione proceeded to tell Ginny how the raven had first turned up at her house, then at Hogwarts, and the way he had seemed to stick to her since then. When she had finished, Ginny looked at the raven. Then she said, 'It's a bit odd, but he seems to like you, and he's... sort of handsome, isn't he?'

'I think he's very handsome,' Hermione said.

Ginny grinned. 'If you say so. '

'I've more to tell you, but let me go and order first.'

'I'll have the chicken curry,' said Ginny.

At the bar, Hermione decided on the spur of the moment to have chicken and chips rather than a sandwich. When she returned to the table, she told Ginny about the recent events at the school.

'It sounds almost like something Fred and George would have come up with, but the scale is too large. And you really have no idea what's caused all this?' Ginny asked when Hermione had ended her tale.

Hermione shook her head. 'None whatsoever. I think between us, Angelina, Michael and I have scoured every single book in the library for clues. Minerva hasn't found anything, and neither the ghosts nor the portraits have any idea what's going on. On the way here, I realised that nobody had bothered to talk to the house-elves; if they don't know anything either, we're out of options.'

Rosalyn signalled that their food was ready, and Ginny went to get their plates. When she returned to the table, she looked thoughtful. 'Do you want to talk to Harry about this?'

'Yes. I was wondering if he could do a bit of digging in the MLE's records for us. Minerva doesn't want to launch an official enquiry with the Ministry yet, so he'd have to be discreet.'

Ginny nodded. 'I'll tell Harry to owl you.'

The raven had hopped onto the table and was eyeing their food speculatively. To Ginny's credit, she didn't bat an eye when Hermione offered him a piece of chicken and continued to feed him the occasional chip whilst they were eating.

'You know of course who'd be able to sort this out in a jiffy, don't you?' Ginny asked after a while, her voice carefully neutral.

'Maybe,' Hermione answered non-committally. 'But for that, he'd have to turn up first.'

'I still don't know why you didn't try harder to find him back then,' said Ginny.

'Because he didn't want to be found. And if someone like Snape wants to vanish, he does.' She sighed. 'Really, Ginny, we've been over this a hundred times.'

'I know. It's just...' Ginny hesitated. 'I was so sure there was something going on between you. I mean, you spent so much time together after the war, and you used to talk practically about nothing else.'

Hermione fed her last chip to the raven before she answered, 'I think he saw me as a friend at best. Sometimes there seemed to be more, but maybe I just imagined it. I mean, it was right after the war; I was only nineteen, and we were all pretty shaken.'

'Hm,' said Ginny.

'But you know what's really strange? I mean, I haven't been mooning over him for the last ten years, or anything. You know I haven't. I mean, I've been going out with other blokes, and everything, but for some reason, I keep comparing everyone I meet to Snape. It's really silly.' Hermione was drawing patterns in the leftover blob of gravy with her fork.

'A bit,' Ginny conceded. 'But some day, you'll find someone who lives up to your standards.'

'It's not about standards. I just want someone who's interesting, who occasionally reads a book, who doesn't bore me to tears within half an hour.'

'He'd have to read a bit more than the occasional book in order not to bore you,' Ginny said with a smile.

'Yes, well.' Hermione decided it was time to change the topic. 'We've been babbling about me all the time; enough of that. Tell me, what's going on with you? Is it true that the *Prophet* has asked you to cover the League next year?'

Ginny beamed. 'Yes, I'm going to be their special correspondent.'

Hermione didn't waste time and called for Blinky right after she returned to Hogwarts that afternoon.

The elf appeared almost immediately as was her habit. 'How can Blinky help?'

'Blinky, surely you and the other house-elves have noticed that there have been some strange events lately?'

Blinky nodded.

Hermione phrased her next question carefully. Despite the fact that elves were treated differently than during her schooldays there had been considerable discussion and subsequent changes in the rights of magical creatures after the war they still tended to punish themselves for all sorts of often imagined mistakes. 'I know what's going on is not your fault, but do you or any of the other elves know what could be happening? Have you ever seen anything like this before?'

Blinky was silent for a moment, then she shook her head. 'No, miss. We elves is wondering, too. We know nothing about this.' She looked at Hermione with big, round eyes.

Hermione said quickly, 'Thank you for telling me. That will be all.'

Blinky bowed and disappeared even more quickly than usual and with an audible "pop".

Hermione frowned. 'Is it me, or was she in rather a hurry to get away from our little chat?' she remarked to the raven, who had observed the conversation from his spot on Hermione's living-room bookcase. 'I do hope Harry finds something in the MLE's records.'

She walked over to the window that was facing the grounds and the lake. She looked at nothing in particular as she thought about what she wanted to do with the rest of her Saturday afternoon. She could have another go at finding something pertaining to the recent events in the library. Or she could catch up on what was going on in Charms research. It seemed like an age since she'd had time to focus on the more interesting and challenging side of her subject. Indulging in research seemed almost frivolous, though, whilst Hogwarts was facing a crisis. Crisis. Hermione weighed the expression in her mind, considered it, but yes, this was a crisis. So far, it had just been pure luck that nobody had been hurt, and the general atmosphere of worry that had taken over the school wasn't exactly conducive to learning.

As she looked out over the grounds, she saw that quite a few students were outside despite the frosty weather. For some reason, the sight of a couple of people milling about by the lake, one of them a skinny, slouching, dark-haired boy, made her thoughts return to the lunch conversation with Ginny. 'I bet Severus could sort this out,' she said.

She felt the familiar clenching around her heart as she thought of Severus. 'Wherever you are, I hope you're doing well,' she whispered.

There was a soft "whoosh", and a familiar weight settled on her shoulder. As woman and raven looked out at the wintry sky, Hermione felt a bit less alone.

Six

Chapter 6 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance...

After her little bit of introspection had passed, Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon curled up with the latest edition of *Charms Quarterly*. She took notes for a possible response to one of the articles and toyed around with the idea of finally writing that essay about communication spells she'd planned for years. The raven had settled again on his favourite spot on her bookcase. Every now and then, he fluttered down onto her coffee table. It almost felt like he was checking on her. Or so Hermione thought until he picked up one of her quills and dropped it on the floor. When she glared at him before she Accio'd her quill, he swept back up to his place on the bookcase.

She was so comfortable on her sofa that she contemplated skipping dinner. After the sumptuous lunch she'd had at the *Three Broomsticks*, she didn't feel particularly hungry, anyway. But then, in the present situation, it would probably be a good idea if as many teachers as possible were present at meals.

With a groan, Hermione rose and went to her bedroom to change into a robe suitable for the Charms mistress. When she returned, the raven was sitting on the sideboard next to the door, looking like he was waiting for her.

He tilted his head when he saw her, and Hermione couldn't help the feeling that he was giving her a once-over.

'Like what you see?' she teased.

The raven's caw sounded almost approving.

'Well, come along then.'

After dinner, some students left the Great Hall, but quite a few lingered. As it was Saturday, curfew was an hour later than on weekdays, and the Great Hall was a popular meeting place for students from different houses to play Gobstones, Exploding Snap, wizard chess, or other board games, or simply to chat.

Horace leant over to Neville. 'How are those Moonflower blossoms you promised me coming along?'

'They should be nearly ready to bloom,' Neville answered. 'I'll check on them and bring you some later.'

'That would be greatly appreciated, Neville m'boy,' Slughorn said.

Neville left for the greenhouses soon after.

'We're off to the *Three Broomsticks*.' Michael gestured at himself and Angelina. 'Anyone else fancy a pint?'

'No, thanks.' Hermione wasn't keen on another trip to Hogsmeade today.

The older teachers declined as well, though Hermione suspected that they had their own Saturday evening entertainments. At least if the hung-over looks of Horace and Aurora on many a Sunday morning were anything to go by.

She was just getting up to go back to her quarters when Angelina, Michael and Neville returned.

'Back so soon?' Hermione quipped; then she noticed that the three looked rather annoyed.

'Minerva, did you order a lockdown of the castle?' Angelina asked and instantly had the attention of the complete High Table.

Minerva paled. 'I certainly did no such thing. Did you try to leave by the main doors?'

'Yes,' said Michael.

'I tried to use the door to the courtyard; it's locked as well,' Neville added.

Horace asked, 'And now?'

Minerva appeared to be thinking very quickly whilst the other teachers waited.

Hermione noticed that Angelina, Michael, Neville and Aurora had their wands out.

All the other teachers had their hands near the places where they usually kept their wands. When she looked down, her own wand was in her hand as well, though she wasn't aware that she had taken it out.

Finally, Minerva said, 'Please check all entrances to the castle as well as the windows on the ground floor. Those of you who know about the hidden passages, please check those, too.' Her eyes rested briefly on Hermione and Neville.

'Please be discreet. I don't want the students to panic.' The apparent "yet" remained unspoken.

'Aurora, if you would keep an eye on things in the Great Hall?'

'Of course.'

'We'll reconvene here as soon as we're done.' Minerva briefly nodded at the rest of the staff and then led the way, wand in hand. The other teachers lingered for a bit before they left the Great Hall in pairs or on their own. As Neville and Hermione walked down the aisle between the house tables, the raven flew down from his look-out. For some reason, Hermione felt a bit less anxious when the familiar weight settled on her shoulder.

'Classrooms first?' Hermione suggested.

Neville nodded. 'Good idea. I think all the exits are covered.'

They walked in silence to the row of classrooms on the ground floor. None of the windows opened. The handles couldn't be moved, and *Alohomora* didn't have any effect at all.

In the last classroom, Hermione pointed her wand at the glass panes. *Confringo*.'

Nothing.

She looked around her. 'Neville, do you see anything heavy? Like a brick or something?'

Neville stared at her for a moment with round eyes before he caught on. 'That's brilliant, Hermione.'

'Only if it works.'

There wasn't a brick, but there were plenty of chairs.

'*Accio* chair leg.'

With a satisfying crunch, the leg disengaged from the wooden chair and flew into Hermione's hand. The raven quickly soared to safety on the top rim of the blackboard as Hermione swung her arm and smashed the chair leg into the glass.

Nothing. Not even a crack.

'Fuck! Do you want to have a go?' She passed the chair leg-come-club to Neville.

Neville's attempt had exactly the same result as Hermione's: none at all. 'Merlin's buggery bollocks,' he swore.

To which Hermione added another "Fuck."

'And now?'

'Now we check the secret passages.' Hermione refused to give in to the feeling of desperation that threatened to engulf her.

They went to check the two remaining passages, the only ones left after the war, but neither the one behind the one-eyed witch nor the one behind Gregory the Smarmy would open.

Neville leant against the wall, frustration evident in his eyes. 'It's a shame the room of requirement is gone,' he said quietly.

'Yes. It's too bad that it's the one thing that couldn't be repaired,' answered Hermione. 'Let's go back to the Great Hall. Perhaps the others have found something.'

'Maybe,' said Neville, but he didn't sound very hopeful.

They were among the last to arrive back in the Great Hall. One glance at the others' faces told Hermione all she needed to know.

Minerva looked at her with a hopeful expression; it crumbled when Hermione shook her head.

'I want everyone in the staff room. Now. We have to discuss our options, and I want to do it in private,' Minerva announced.

'Er, I think I can offer a quicker solution,' Hermione said. 'And this way, we don't risk anyone getting lost.' She cast *Muffliato*.

'Nifty spell,' Aurora commented.

'Thank you.'

'I knew there was a reason why they appointed you as Charms teacher,' Michael whispered into her ear.

'Not exactly a standard spell, is it?' Minerva said. 'But useful.' She looked haggard. 'Suggestions?'

'Have we checked the Floo?' Septima asked.

Minerva nodded. 'I did. It doesn't work. Floo powder doesn't have any effect whatsoever.'

'Windows and doors on the upper floors are locked as well. Wouldn't budge,' Wilhelmina added.

'It seems we're effectively trapped,' Minerva said.

There was silence around the table until Hermione said, 'We may be trapped...' She snapped her fingers. 'Blinky.'

As usual, the house-elf appeared almost instantly. 'How can Blinky help?' When she saw all the teachers, she looked worried, and her ears began to droop.

Hermione said quickly, 'Blinky, sorry to bother you so late, but Professor Slughorn has been telling us wonderful things about Rosalyn's oak-matured mead, and I wondered if you could quickly pop over to the *Three Broomsticks* and get us some?'

Blinky beamed. 'Yes, miss. Right away, miss.' She disappeared.

Whilst they waited for Blinky to return, nobody said a word. Even the raven on Hermione's shoulder seemed to hold his breath. Hermione was memorising every detail of

the table, the walls, the sconces on the walls, the floor tiles. She had counted about half of the candles floating beneath the enchanted ceiling when Blinky reappeared, a bottle of mead in her hand. A wave of relief went around the High Table.

'Thank you, Blinky. That will be all,' Hermione said.

'Very good, miss.'

When Blinky had disappeared, Minerva said, 'Good thinking, Hermione. At least we can get messages out.'

'Here is what needs to be done. Heads of houses, I want you to address your houses in the common rooms tonight. The official message we'll give is that we're having a small magical difficulty. It will be dealt with soon. And there is no need to worry. For security reasons, everyone is being kept inside the castle, and no student is to go anywhere on their own. Apart from that, things will go on as usual.

'I'll send a message to Mr Potter tonight. As our current head of the board of governors, he'll be able to reassure any concerned parents. I want to avoid a panic, but I think we can all agree that the situation is serious.'

There was general nodding around the table.

'I also want patrols of the castle 'round the clock. Aurora and I will draw up a roster and put it up in the staff room. There'll be two people on each watch, including the ghosts. As we can't communicate by Floo, we'll have to resort to using our Patroni. Whilst they can't leave the castle, as Aurora found out earlier, they can move within the school. I trust you can all cast a Patronus?' Minerva looked at everyone. 'Good.

'As I said before, for the sake of the students, we need to keep running things as smoothly and normally as possible. Anyone who is not teaching or on patrol, please keep looking into possible causes. Whatever this is, we have to get to the bottom of it.'

'Hear, hear,' said Horace, sounding suitably impressed by Minerva's crisis management.

She gave him a brief, tense smile. 'Any further questions or comments?'

Hermione said, 'I'd like everyone to write down what they can remember from all the incidents; also, if you could keep notes if anything else happens that would be good. Maybe there is a pattern.'

'Yes, that is a good idea. Now, if there isn't anything else, I need volunteers for tonight's patrols.'

Angelina and Michael raised their hands, Michael muttering, 'Nearly as much fun as the pub, this.'

'Thank you.' Minerva nodded at them.

'Actually, there *is* something,' Wilhelmina said. 'Need to talk to Hermione. And you too, Minerva.'

Wilhelmina had avoided her eyes all evening. Hermione tried to quell the queasy feeling in her stomach.

Hermione cancelled the Muffliato spell, so that Minerva could announce to the students still in the Great Hall that they had to return to their common rooms early tonight. There was a lot of murmuring and whispering as the student shuffled out.

Finally, everyone except Minerva, Wilhelmina and Hermione had left the Great Hall.

Now Hermione's stomach was definitely unhappy. It didn't help that the raven had disappeared to his preferred alcove.

Wilhelmina looked after him before she said, 'Something's not right with that raven. Bird turned up around the same time this mess began.'

'Hm,' Minerva said.

Hermione wanted to take the raven and run with him to safety. Instead, she said, 'There's nothing wrong with him. Besides, I don't want you poking and prodding him.'

'Don't be daft, girl,' Wilhelmina snapped. 'Could be an Animagus. Or worse.'

Hermione had drawn breath to inform Wilhelmina what exactly she thought of that ludicrous suggestion when the raven solved the problem by sweeping down from his look-out and landing on the table right in front of Wilhelmina. His caw sounded distinctly annoyed.

Hermione looked at him, a tiny pang in her heart. He was her friend. She didn't want him to be hurt.

Wilhelmina had been observing the raven closely. Now, she slowly took out her wand. 'Just going to check you over,' she said soothingly.

The raven sat quite still in front of her.

'I've already done that,' Hermione said. 'There are traces of magic, but very faint. I couldn't even tell if he's a magical bird or not.'

Wilhelmina was obviously concentrating on her diagnostic spell because she didn't answer. The queasy feeling in Hermione's stomach was now trying to creep up her throat.

'That one's magical, all right,' Wilhelmina said, peering at the bird, then she frowned.

'Hm,' she said, then pointed her wand at the raven, which became engulfed in a flash of blue-white light as Hermione shouted, 'No.'

When the spell had finished, there was still a raven sitting on the table, but his plumage was ruffled, and he was trembling.

'Was that really necessary?' Hermione glared at Wilhelmina. 'I hope there is a good explanation for what you just did.'

The raven beat his wings and hopped a few inches, then he stopped, looking miserable.

'Definitely a wizard in there,' Wilhelmina announced.

Hermione had the feeling that the ground was shifting beneath her feet. 'You mean, *he's* an Animagus?' she asked.

'fraid so,' said Wilhelmina. 'But he can't transform back. Cursed, I suspect.'

'Just what we need: another mystery,' Minerva muttered staring at the raven. 'There is something familiar about him. Odd that I've never noticed it before.'

'Cursed?' Hermione asked. Her mind felt completely blank.

Wilhelmina answered, 'Yup.'

Hermione looked at the raven, then at Wilhelmina, then at the raven again. 'What do we do now?'

Wilhelmina stared at her as if she'd grown another head. 'You're the Charms mistress. Should be something in those books of yours.'

'Oh, yes. Books. Right.' She looked at the raven again, feeling the prick of tears behind her eyelids.

He was still sitting on the table, looking back at her. He looked so familiar. And yet he wasn't. Hermione felt like she'd just lost a friend.

'Hermione...' Minerva began.

'No.' Hermione shook her head. She sniffled a little. Straightening her shoulders and drawing a deep breath, she said, 'Well, I better sort this out, then.'

She got up and marched off. The raven didn't follow her. At the door she turned around. 'Well, are you coming? Unless you prefer to stay here, of course.'

The raven beat his wings a few more times before he took off and flew to the house table nearest to her. As Hermione left the Great Hall, she heard Minerva calling after her, 'Be careful.'

The raven continued to follow her as she walked to her office. He didn't land on her shoulder as he usually did. To Hermione, it felt like part of her was missing.

Get a grip. For all you know, he could be a former Death Eater or something similar But somehow, she didn't believe that. Yes, Scabbers had been a faithful familiar to Ron for years before he showed his true colours. But her raven she couldn't yet stop thinking of him as *her* raven wasn't Scabbers.

Whilst Hermione was arguing with herself, they had reached her office. She barely took the time to close the door behind her before she hurried over to her bookshelves. They covered three of her office walls, and she walked along them, selecting every book that might hold a possible clue to the counter curse she needed. By the time she was done, her desk was covered in stacks of books.

Hermione dismissed the more standard books on curses and counter curses quickly and concentrated on the more obscure volumes. The raven had taken up his usual spot on one of her bookshelves. Hermione occasionally glanced at him; he was sitting very still, appearing to be in deep thought. Which didn't sound as ridiculous as it would have a few hours ago.

It was four o'clock in the morning by the time she picked up a slim, battered-looking volume she had found in a second-hand bookshop when she had been on holiday in Brittany a couple of years ago. She scanned the table of contents. There it was: a whole section on animal Transfiguration and ways in which it could be used. She thumbed through the chapter and started when the raven landed on her desk.

'Do you think we're on to something here?' she asked.

The raven hopped closer to the book. 'Cr-r-ruck.'

And then she found it, at the very end of the last page of the chapter: a counter-curse for those trapped in their animal form through "intent moste evile".

Hermione read the spell three times and then a fourth to be sure. 'I think this is it,' she said to the raven.

He tilted his head.

Then she said something, which she had been on her mind earlier. 'You know, I can either try to lift the curse or, if you prefer, I'll find a place to hide you until we can get out of the castle, and you can leave then and go wherever you want. It's your choice.'

The raven remained sitting where he was; he looked almost like he was weighing his options. After a while, he hopped forward another few inches and tapped the page that contained the counter curse once with his beak.

'All right, then,' Hermione said.

She glanced around her office before she pointed to the rug in front of the fireplace. 'I think this is really the only place to do it.'

The raven took off and landed in the middle of the rug. Hermione took out her wand and set protective wards around the area on the floor.

'Sorry about this,' she told the raven. 'But I'd rather be on the safe side.'

She took the book, reminded herself that she really, really wanted the raven to be able to change back, pointed her wand and started reciting the lengthy incantation. Waves of light emanated from her wand: first light blue, then dark blue, then green, red and finally pink until the raven was completely engulfed in a swirl of multi-coloured light.

When the magic cleared Hermione gasped.

Severus Snape was lying naked on her office floor.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance

'Shouldn't you be wearing clothes or something?' Hermione blurted out.

Severus hastily wrapped himself in the rug. 'Side-effect of the curse.'

Hermione continued to stare at him, for the first time in her life at a loss for words, her heart still racing.

'If you've finished gaping, would you mind lifting the wards?'

Hermione snapped out of it. 'Yes, of course.'

With a flick of her wand, the wards lifted. Severus got shakily to his feet and stood motionless for a moment, obviously steadying himself, before he padded across the room. 'There's still a loo across the hall, I take it?'

'Yes. Hang on.' With another flick of her wand, the rug transformed into a black robe.

Severus nodded once in acknowledgement of her gesture and stalked off.

Hermione looked after him, trying to come to terms with what had just happened.

Despite her shock, she hadn't failed to notice that she'd rather liked what she'd glimpsed earlier... Right, but that was hardly the issue here. The raven was Severus. Had been all along. Which posed more questions than it answered. Where had he been for the last ten years? Why had he come to her? Why now? Who had cursed him? Her train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door.

'Come in,' she said, only then noticing that she was still standing in the same spot, her wand in hand.

Severus appeared in the doorway.

Hermione looked at him, trying to reconcile the tall wizard with the raven who had been her constant companion for the past weeks. She'd come to view him as a friend. Someone she could rely on, who greeted her in the morning, who listened to her talking about her day, who kept her company in the evening. All gone. Before her stood a man who was an unknown.

Once, she'd thought him her friend, too, and maybe more. Until one day, when he was gone, not even bothering to say goodbye.

Best not to go there. Not now. She directed her mind to more practical matters. 'I suppose you need a place to sleep.'

'That would be nice, yes.' Severus took a few tentative steps into the room.

Hermione wasn't sure what to do next. The Severus she'd known had been perfectly capable of wandless magic. But this one had just regained his human form. How long had he been stuck in the bird's shape? Had it affected his magic? He looked shaken enough, and his walk still seemed to be a little unsteady. In the end, she pointed her wand at one of the chairs and transfigured it into a bed, complete with pillows and a comfy duvet.

It took her two attempts to complete the spell, and her wand arm was shaking by the time she'd finished. Fatigue crept through her like lead.

'I... ' Severus began.

Hermione shook her head. 'Not now. It's been a long day. Good night.'

When she'd nearly reached the door, she heard Severus' voice speak so quietly she was barely able to make out his words.

'Thank you,' he said.

Her quarters seemed strangely bare. She tried not to notice the empty perch, but it seemed to stare at her. Through her bedroom window, a hint of dawn was already visible on the horizon.

Hermione quickly slipped on her pyjamas and crawled into bed, snuggling under the duvet. As soon as she closed her eyes, the evening's events began to replay in her mind. Wilhelmina's revelation, the raven-who-wasn't-a-raven, the waves of coloured light and Severus turning up seemingly out of nowhere. She tossed and turned, but the loop in her head wouldn't stop. By the time she finally fell asleep, the sun was already high in the sky.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. She was late again! She sat up quickly and swung her legs out of bed.

As her feet met the cold stone floor, she realised that it was Sunday. No lessons. She lay back again, pulled the duvet up to her chin and waited for the warmth to return to her feet.

She was dozing off again when she remembered. Hermione sat bolt upright. Last night. The raven. No, not the raven. Severus. And she had no idea whether she was happy about seeing him again. What if he just turned and disappeared again? Oh, right. He couldn't as they were all trapped inside the castle. Somehow, that didn't make her feel any better.

'I may not know how I feel about you at the moment, but I do know that I want some answers,' Hermione muttered as she finally climbed out of her nest of duvet and pillows.

Showered, groomed and dressed which had nothing to do with the man in her office, she just liked to look neat, thank you very much. Hermione set off to see how Severus was this morning...morning being a rather loose description as the Muggle clock in her living room had shown that it was well past lunchtime.

She found Severus sitting at her desk, drinking tea. Next to the teapot was a plate that, very obviously, had contained some sort of breakfast. Hermione had stopped just inside the room and suddenly didn't know what to do with her hands or feet.

'Morning,' she said tentatively.

'Afternoon, rather,' Severus replied.

Hermione eyed his empty plate. 'How come you get breakfast, and I don't?'

'No idea. Blinky turned up with it right after I'd woken up. Would you like some tea?'

'No, I need coffee. And something to eat.'

As if on cue, a pot of coffee, a cup, milk, sugar and a plate filled with eggs, bacon, beans, tomatoes and toast materialised on the other side of her desk.

Hermione looked at the plate, 'I haven't had a full English in ages.'

She walked around the desk, sat down across from Severus and poured herself a cup of coffee. Adding milk and sugar, she observed, 'One would almost think someone's feeling guilty.'

Glancing at Severus, she said, 'The house-elves knew all along, didn't they?'

He nodded.

'Blinky could have told me.' Hermione speared a bit of egg and bacon.

'No, she couldn't have.'

Hermione's fork paused in mid-air. 'Oh?'

Oh.

'Does that mean...' she said.

'Yes. The Hogwarts house-elves are bound to the Headmaster. Since I didn't die, they're still bound to keep my secrets.'

'So they couldn't have revealed your presence to Minerva, either.'

Severus shook his head. 'No.'

'Well, that answers that. But there are still a couple of things I'd like to know.'

'Why am I not surprised?'

'Hmph.'

'I know I owe you an explanation...'

'Yes, you bloody well do.'

'...about the raven and the curse, but first, I wouldn't mind a shower and something else to wear,' Severus said.

Hermione sighed, but called for Blinky.

Almost immediately, the house-elf popped into view. She didn't quite look at Hermione. 'Blinky is sorry, miss.'

'It's OK, Blinky. I know you couldn't tell me.'

The elf's ears perked up a bit, but before she could say anything, Severus said, 'Blinky can you find me some clothes? And is there a shower somewhere I could use?'

Blinky beamed. 'Elves have kept Headmaster's things for him. Blinky will bring them to miss' quarters.'

She vanished.

Hermione stared at the spot where the elf had been. 'Did she just tell you to use my bathroom?'

'I think so.' Severus didn't look particularly comfortable with the idea, either.

Hermione sighed again. 'Come along, then. Would you like me to Disillusion you?'

'Yes, I don't think the school is quite ready to see my bare feet.'

She performed the spell and was about to pick up her coffee cup. But both cup and plate had disappeared. 'Great. So much for breakfast,' she muttered.

Blinky was already waiting for them in Hermione's quarters by the time they got there. She was carrying a pile of clothes on top of which lay a wand.

Hermione looked at Severus. 'You left your wand?'

'One of my wands. I departed in rather a hurry.'

After she'd handed him some clean towels, Hermione left Severus to his shower only to discover that her breakfast had found its way to her living room, conveniently placed under a warming charm.

Two cups of coffee later and pleasantly full, she was almost glad to see Severus, showered, shaved and in black robes, walk into her living room. This time, he remained standing, looking around. Neither of them said anything. Hermione used the occasion to look him over. He was still tall, lean and pale, but had lost the gaunt look from ten years ago. His hair fell to just beneath his shoulders; it was black and shiny with a few silver threads. All in all, peace-time and wherever he'd been seemed to suit him very well.

Silence stretched between them until Hermione said, 'Won't you sit down? It's not like you haven't been here before, is it?'

Severus stalked over to the armchair and lowered himself into it. 'Why don't we get the questions over with?'

He sounded tetchy. Hermione watched him thoughtfully and tried to make up her mind where to start.

Having come to a decision, she asked, 'Who cursed you?'

He looked a bit surprised as if he hadn't expected that particular question first. 'I don't know.'

Hermione stared at him. 'How can you not know? You were the best spy the wizarding world has ever seen.'

Severus sighed. 'My spying days are long over. But yes, it's very rare for anybody to catch me unawares.' He looked thoughtful. 'I had checked my surroundings and thought I was alone at the time. Apparently, I wasn't.'

'Where were you?'

He suddenly looked shift. 'I was taking a walk.'

'How nice,' she said and decided to change the subject. "Talking a walk" sounded suspiciously unsuspicious. She knew Severus had been up to something, and she was determined to find out what, but that would require a different strategy.

'Have you always been an Animagus?' she asked.

Severus frowned.

Was he surprised that she wasn't going to pursue his "walk"? Well, she had learnt a few things over the past ten years.

'No,' he said. 'I taught myself. After the war. It's something I'd always wanted to learn; I found myself with a bit of time on my hands, and I had the sources available.'

The pink elephant in the room was growing by the minute.

'Those *sources*, they wouldn't have happened to be anywhere near here, would they?' asked Hermione as if she was making conversation about the weather.

'No. They would have happened to be in France. At Château Malfoi.' Severus answered in the same tone.

Hermione's coffee cup hit the saucer with a clatter. 'I still find it hard to believe that you're friends with that... *thatman*.'

'I know. And so does Lucius.' A corner of Severus' mouth was curling upward.

'How was I to know that he hadn't come to finish you off?' Hermione hoped she wasn't blushing. When Lucius Malfoy had come to visit Severus at St Mungo's during his recovery, she had greeted him with a rather impressive hex. She'd only meant to use a *Petrificus Totalus* on him, but her magical equilibrium had been slightly unbalanced only due to the events of the war and nothing to do with Severus, of course so her silent spell had immobilised him, bound him with ropes and for some reason turned his hair a lurid green. To his credit, Mr Malfoy had not only accepted her half-hearted apology when it turned out that he'd had no intention of harming Severus and only wanted to check on his old friend, but he had also apologised to her in turn for the way she had been treated at his house.

Hermione remembered Lucius Malfoy's face when he had come to and realised that he was bound and that his hair had become a vivid shade of green and was rather frizzy on top of it. She started grinning, too. It had been rather memorable indeed.

She looked at Severus. And just like that, the ice in the room started to thaw.

She still had questions. Loads of them. And she still missed her raven friend. And she still wanted to know why Severus had left without so much as a good-bye. But somehow, it was good to have him back. Ten years was a long time, but it was nice to see him sitting there in her armchair and have a conversation with him as she had wanted to do so often after he had left.

Severus, too, looked slightly more at ease and less wary. His mouth was definitely twitching now. 'Ever since, Lucius has considered you one of the most extraordinary witches he knows.'

'He'd better.'

Both fell silent, but it wasn't uncomfortable. At least not much.

Hermione considered carefully what to say next. She liked the more relaxed Severus, yet there were things she needed to know. It was obvious he didn't want to share any more information about what he'd been up to when he had been cursed, and so far he hadn't volunteered any information on how he had ended up unconscious in her garden, either.

'I suppose I'll have to talk to Minerva at some point,' said Severus.

'Seeing that you're trapped here with us, that might be a good idea,' Hermione agreed. 'Would you like me to send a Patronus? It might be a bit of a shock otherwise.'

'Please do.'

Hermione concentrated, and soon her otter Patronus erupted from her wand. She relayed her message, and it gambolled around them a few times before it vanished through the crack under her door.

They were silent whilst they waited for Minerva's reply. Just as before, it was an almost companionable silence.

Minerva's silver tabby Patronus appeared almost instantly. 'Severus, please come to my office immediately,' it said in the Headmistress' stern voice.

'It seems I'm being summoned,' said Severus as he rose.

'Do you want me to come with you?'

Severus looked at her for a brief moment. 'I think I can manage,' he answered before he stalked off.

Hermione glanced at the clock for the fifth time in as many minutes. Surely, it couldn't take that long to have a little chat with the Headmistress? What would happen now? Obviously, Severus would have to stay at the castle, but that didn't mean that he couldn't avoid her. Would he want to? Hermione shook her head. 'That's just silly,' she said. *And I really need to stop talking to myself.*

Another look at the clock, and then her thoughts returned to Severus. There was a giddy little caterpillar in her stomach every time she reminded herself that he was really back. It was quickly followed by the memory of the way he had left ten years ago. At least, until the happy wriggling took over again and told the ghost of the past where to stuff it. Hermione had just decided to take a little stroll through the castle past the gargoyles that guarded the Headmistress' office when there was a knock at her door.

'Enter,' she said to find Severus standing in her doorway, a carefully guarded expression on his face.

'The Headmistress has expressed a wish that you and I do some further enquiries into the recent events at the castle,' he said by way of greeting.

Hermione looked at him incredulously for a moment before she remembered who she was dealing with. Right, why waste time on telling her whether Minerva had been happy to see him. Or vice versa. 'That's good. Do you want to take a look at my notes?'

'Yes, please. Especially those I haven't seen before.'

'You have seen my notes?' Hermione asked.

'I was a raven. Not blind.'

Hermione realised what else he might have seen and turned pink. Apparently, Severus had just realised it, too, because two pink spots had appeared on his cheeks as well.

'Er, yes, right. They're in my office. Why don't we look through them?' She turned to leave, Severus in her wake.

They met Blinky in the corridor. She beamed at Severus, a look of adoration on her face. 'Elves have taken good care of Headmaster's possessions,' she said. 'Blinky has brought them to your room.'

Hermione threw Severus a quizzical look over her shoulder.

'Minerva has assigned me quarters, so I don't need to trespass on your hospitality any longer,' he explained to her back.

'You weren't trespassing,' answered Hermione.

They continued in silence until they reached her office.

Once settled at her desk, they spent the next hour poring over her notes. It was dark outside, and dinner was well over by the time Severus put the last piece of parchment down.

'Hm,' he said. 'I think further research is in order.'

Hermione put down the stack of notes she'd just read for what felt like the thousandth time. 'Between us, Angelina, Michael and I must have been through every book in the library that might hold a possible clue. Nothing.'

'I'll draw my own conclusions. Besides, I have a private collection of books that may hold information that isn't in the library.' Severus threw her a calculating look. 'You're welcome to join me. Unless you've something better to do, of course.'

'I don't have any classes on Monday, so I can spare the time,' answered Hermione. Despite everything, the words "private collection" and "join me" had just sent a delicious little thrill through her.

'I'll see you tomorrow, then. Good night... Hermione.'

Eight

Chapter 8 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance

By the time Hermione arrived at the library the next morning, Severus was already there. She found him in a cubicle separated from the main reading room; magic was vibrating around it. A diagnostic spell showed it to be heavily warded, but allowing her entrance.

'Morning,' she greeted the top of the head, barely visible behind several stacks of books.

There was a mumbled answer.

'Sorry?'

'I brought a couple of my own volumes with me. If you like, you can start with those over there.' A finger pointed vaguely in the direction of another pile of books. 'I'll go through these from the Restricted section.'

'Fine,' said Hermione, sitting down and pulling the topmost book towards her.

They worked mostly in silence for the rest of the morning, occasionally sharing an idea or showing the other a passage in a book that might be relevant to the school's predicament.

Blinky showed up around lunchtime with a tray full of sandwiches. 'Headmistress says not to bother with coming down to the Great Hall. You is to continue working,' she explained.

One of Severus' eyebrows wandered upward. 'It seems we've been given special privileges.'

'Or special obligations,' said Hermione.

'That too.' Severus selected a ham sandwich. 'Been a teacher long?'

'Three years now,' Hermione answered, choosing an egg and cress sandwich. 'It's been a nice change from working for the Ministry.'

'Whatever made you go and work for that bunch of incompetent nincompoops in the first place?'

'Not all of them are,' Hermione said.

'Hmph.'

'They offered me a job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I thought it was a good opportunity to change things.' Hermione didn't quite look at him, hoping he wouldn't make her defend an institution in which she no longer believed.

Severus' expression remained carefully neutral. 'And? Was it?'

'For a bit, yes. But the more time passed after the war, the less likely people became to listen to my suggestions. Then came the offers of promotion. All good positions in departments that had no influence at all.'

'Basically, promote you to shut you up,' Severus said.

'Exactly. So I left, took out my savings and went travelling for a bit. I had always wanted to see more of the world, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity. Sort of a late gap year. When I came back, Professor Flitwick had just retired, and Minerva offered me the position.'

'Do you enjoy teaching?' Severus asked.

'Yes. Very much.' Hermione selected another sandwich. 'What about you? Did you hate it very much?'

Severus looked surprised. 'I never hated teaching. I just have very little patience with ignorance.'

Hermione threw him a sceptical glance; she remembered Severus' teaching style all too well.

'Besides, in Potions, a harmless little prank can become very dangerous very quickly. I never fancied the idea of scraping the remains of my students from the ceiling,' he explained.

'Not to mention that the paperwork would have been a nightmare,' Hermione added.

'That too.'

There it was again: the little, barely visible smile she remembered so well.

She finished her sandwich and picked up another before she asked, 'Have you been in France all this time?'

Severus shook his head. 'No, when I was completely recovered, I went travelling as well. I had sources that informed me it would be better to stay away from the UK for while.'

'But you're a hero!' Hermione exclaimed.

'Maybe,' Severus answered. 'But unfortunately a living one. It would have been so much more convenient if I had died.'

Hermione wanted to contradict him, but she knew that what he said was true. Despite Harry's efforts, there had been a lot of talk about the more sinister side of Severus Snape after the war, and he'd probably done the right thing in vanishing for a while. 'I'm very glad you didn't die,' she said softly.

Severus looked at her, an unreadable expression in his dark eyes. They stared at each other for a bit, neither saying a word.

Finally, Severus looked away and started fiddling with the crumbs on his plate.

'Where did you go?' Hermione asked.

'Sorry?'

'When you went travelling. Where did you go?' she clarified.

'Couple of places. Italy, Spain, Croatia, Greece, most of the Mediterranean, really. And Egypt, India and China.'

'I love the Mediterranean. That's where I went, too. And to India. Isn't it fascinating?'

Severus nodded. 'Yes. I mostly followed the traces of Potioneers that I had heard about.'

Hermione smiled. 'I sought out various Charms masters and mistresses. It was brilliant.'

They continued to compare notes on their travels and spent a very pleasant hour before they returned to their research.

After Severus had agreed with Hermione's findings that there wasn't anything that held any clue to the school's current mystery, they moved to his rooms to take a look at some of his books.

Minerva had assigned Severus quarters in the teachers' wing rather than a guest room. Hermione was expecting one of Hogwarts' standard suite of rooms that contained all the necessities, but mostly left their occupants to alter them magically to their liking. She couldn't have been more wrong. Severus' sitting room contained a cosy dark blue sofa, two squashy armchairs in the same colour, a coffee table made of a reddish wood and books. Lots of books. They filled all the bookcases that covered every wall and even framed the window. There were stacks of books on the coffee table and on the floor, too. Hermione stopped in the middle of the room, looking around her with big eyes and feeling like a child that had been dropped in the toy shop of their dreams.

'The house-elves brought up all my things,' Severus said, sounding almost apologetic.

'It's brilliant,' Hermione said, beaming at him, barely able to tear her eyes away from all the books.

'Those that might be of use to us are over there.' Severus pointed to two stacks on the coffee table.

Unceremoniously, Hermione plonked herself down on the sofa and started to leaf through the topmost book. She didn't notice the time passing and was surprised that it was dark outside when she looked up. She sighed. 'Nothing. Have you found anything?'

'No.' Severus shook his head before he picked up the next book.

He started reading, then put it down. 'I need to talk to the Bloody Baron,' he said, already getting to his feet.

Hermione closed her own book. 'We've already spoken to the ghosts. They don't know what's going on, either. '

'Which ghosts?'

'All of them. Minerva asked them to join us at a staff meeting, and Nearly Headless Nick said...' She suddenly remembered the Bloody Baron sitting through the meeting and being unusual quiet.

'Yes?'

'...they didn't know anything. Actually, I thought at the time it was odd because usually the Baron speaks for the ghosts. But if he knows something, why didn't he tell us?'

'He's a Slytherin. He wouldn't talk to just anyone. But he'll talk to me.'

'Why do you need to talk to the Bloody Baron? What's in that book? Do you know what's going on?'

'I'll pop by your rooms later.' Severus was practically shoving her out of the door.

And then, Hermione found herself standing in the corridor, staring at a closed door. She resisted the urge to either stamp her foot or to demand an instant explanation from Severus. Barely.

'Insufferable man,' she mumbled as she set off for her own rooms, curiosity and annoyance warring for dominance in her feelings.

For the second time in two days, Hermione kept glancing at the clock about every five minutes. She had cleared her coffee table, arranged some of the books on her shelves and then rearranged them. She had tried to read, but nothing held any interest so she'd dusted off some of the shelves. Another glance at the clock.

By now, she was pacing the length of her living room. Why wasn't Severus back by now? Surely, it couldn't take that long to find the Bloody Baron and talk to him? Annoyance had ceded the field to worry with curiosity still hovering in the background.

Blinky kept turning up every quarter of an hour or so, finding something to dust or offering Hermione a refill of her teacup. Finally, Hermione said, 'Blinky, have a seat. You're welcome to wait here with me.'

'Thank you, miss.' The elf found herself a place on a footstool near the fireplace.

'You really care about Severus, don't you?'

'Elves is loyal to the Headmaster.' Again, Blinky's eyes didn't quite meet Hermione's.

Hermione frowned. 'But there's more to it, isn't there?' she enquired.

'Headmaster saved elflings from Carrow professors when they is wanting them for experiments. He sent elflings into forest to stay with Professor Hagrid and tells Carrow professors that there is no elflings at the castle and that grown-up elves can't be spared for experiments,' Blinky explained softly.

Bile rose in Hermione's throat at the thought of what the Carrows might have done to the house-elf children. 'I'm glad he did,' she said.

More pacing and another glance at the clock. It was well past midnight. Again.

At last, there was a knock at the door. Hermione opened it and found a pale and dishevelled Severus in front of her.

'I'm so glad to see you,' she exclaimed and hugged him.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta Melusin and my equally wonderful alpha readers Chivalric, Gingertart and Karelia.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance

Severus stiffened for a moment before his arms closed around her. Despite his dishevelled appearance, he smelled of something fresh and lemony and something that was genuinely *him*. Hermione breathed in deeply and snuggled a bit closer into his woollen robes. They stood like that for a while before Severus let go and took a step back. Once again, there were two pink spots on his cheeks.

'Er,' said Hermione.

Recovering quickly, she added, 'What did the Bloody Baron say? And why did you need to talk to him?'

'I haven't found him.' Severus sounded tired. 'I didn't even make it to the dungeons. The sodding castle kept leading me elsewhere.'

'You've been wandering around the school all this time?'

Severus nodded. 'Yes. I know a couple of passages through it that very few people do. Or thought I did.'

Meanwhile, Blinky had vanished. Hermione realised where she had gone when two steaming mugs of hot chocolate materialised on her coffee table. Drawn by the enticing scent, she sat down on the sofa, Severus next to her.

'I thought something had happened or..., ' she said, looking at her mug rather than at Severus.

'Or that I had gone?'

'Yes. No. I mean... I know that you couldn't because we're all trapped here, but... At least leave a bloody note next time!'

'I briefly considered Obliviating you back then...'

Hermione huffed.

'...and no, I couldn't have left a note.'

'Why not?'

Severus took a sip of chocolate and seemed to consider his answer. 'If I had, you would have left no stone unturned to find me, and knowing you and how resourceful you are, you would have managed. I couldn't risk that.'

She almost smiled at the compliment. 'Why? Why did you have to leave? I thought...' She checked herself in time before she said something foolish.

'Exactly. You were nineteen; you'd barely stopped being my student, and you'd just been through a war. And I had some things to sort out, too. It would have never worked.'

'It wasn't your decision to make,' Hermione said. 'Not for the both of us.'

Severus looked thoughtful. 'Maybe not. But at the time, I did what I thought best.'

'Best for you, perhaps. Do you have any idea what it's like when someone simply vanishes one day, and you don't even know if they're dead or alive?' Hermione had got up and started pacing again. 'Hell, I even sent an owl to Lucius Malfoy to find out what happened.'

'I know. He told me.'

'How nice of him. All he told *me* was not to worry. Only that it took him a few more sentences.'

More pacing.

'Hermione.'

'What?'

'I am sorry.'

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to look at him. He did look genuinely apologetic, and there was a hint of something else in his expression. Something that looked almost like fear.

Hermione sighed.

'It was a long time ago,' she said and sat down next to him again. There was a palpable look of relief on his face.

Had she let him off too easily? She glanced at him again, took in the lines around his mouth, his prominent nose which rather suited him, the lines around his eyes and finally his eyes. He looked equal parts tired and worried. Plus, the look of relief was still lingering. Perhaps, "sorry" was enough at least for now.

'Why did you come to me in your raven form? Was that merely a coincidence?' she asked.

Severus shook his head. 'No. I'd been back for a while and had meant to call on you anyway, but I wasn't sure whether I'd be welcome.'

'What changed your mind?'

'One of Lucius' books. I'd been staying at the manor and came across a volume of, not quite prophecies, more prognostications, auguries, if you will, and gathered that something might be afoot at Hogwarts. I had planned on alerting you to a possible danger, but wanted to confirm that what I'd read indeed concerned the school.

'I went to Hogwarts to investigate; as a raven so as to remain undetected. However, I'd barely entered the school grounds when I realised that I was trapped in my Animagus form and that my magical powers were waning. I decided to find shelter somewhere and remembered that I'd looked up your address. You know the rest.'

It took Hermione a moment to digest that information. 'And then you turned up at Hogwarts.'

'Yes, I had hoped to find a way to regain my human form by that time, but didn't. So I assumed Hogwarts was my best option; at least, I'd be able to watch what was happening.' Severus seemed to find the remnants of the chocolate in his mug very interesting.

'Thank you for keeping an eye on me.' Hermione sidled a bit closer to him on the sofa and took his hand.

Severus didn't move away.

They sat in companionable silence, their hands linked until something Severus had said registered. 'Malfoy's book?' Hermione asked.

'Sorry?'

'Lucius Malfoy's book. Maybe we should look at it again, and I still want to know why you need to talk to the Bloody Baron.' She snapped her fingers, and Blinky appeared instantly.

Severus explained to the elf that they needed a book from the library at Malfoy Manor and hastily scribbled a note to Lucius. Blinky beamed at him and vanished only to reappear again almost immediately. She disappeared again and reappeared. And again.

Hermione watched the house-elf blinking in and out of vision with a sinking feeling in her stomach. Finally, Blinky gave up. She stood in the middle of the room, her ears drooping, looking utterly dejected. 'Elves can't leave the castle anymore,' she informed them.

'Fuck,' said Hermione.

'Bloody hell,' Severus added before he said, 'It's all right. Thank you, Blinky.'

After Blinky had left, Hermione remarked. 'It's getting worse. Now would be a really good time to tell me why you think we should talk to the Bloody Baron.'

Severus fished a thin and battered looking notebook out of his robes. He opened it and showed Hermione his notes.

'This is a paraphrase from Lucius' book, but since we don't have the original it will have to do.' A long finger pointed at the passage in question.

'Hm,' she said. 'What makes you think the Bloody Baron would be the knowledgeable and cunning spectral entity this is talking about? The Grey Lady is rather wise, too.'

'True,' Severus conceded, 'but I'd hardly call her cunning.'

'Because only Slytherins can be cunning?' Hermione quipped.

'Not necessarily, but in this case, the Baron is definitely the most crafty of the ghosts, and he knows more about Hogwarts than any other living or undead being around. Plus, you noticed that he seemed to be acting oddly.'

'Good point. Let's find him tomorrow after lunch, then. Can't do it earlier because I've got to teach in the morning.' Hermione yawned.

'There's no need for you to come along,' Severus pointed out.

Hermione threw him a stern glare that was worthy of Minerva. 'Oh yes, there is. Together, our chances are much better should the castle decide to play labyrinth again.'

Severus looked mutinous, but seemed to know when it was pointless to argue with Hermione. He excused himself soon after, wishing her a good night.

Hermione had half-expected Severus to attempt to find the Slytherin ghost on his own in the morning, but when she met him at lunch, it turned out that he had indeed waited for her. She ate her jacket potato with a smile on her face. After the meal, she briefly informed Minerva of their plans before she and Severus set off for the dungeons.

They made it to the lowest level without detour, much to their surprise. Both the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady crossed their path, but denied having any information about the Baron's whereabouts. Hermione had never been this far below the castle since the war. The sconces on the walls cast enough light so that they could see where they were going, and the air was surprisingly fresh, yet it felt eerie.

'What's down here?' she asked.

'Mostly storage rooms for food and those potions ingredients that need to be kept cool. And the old torture chambers, of course,' answered Severus, his face inscrutable.

'Of course.' Hermione wasn't entirely certain whether he was having her on.

They walked through what felt like endless corridors, past more storage rooms and then climbed upwards again into the Potions corridor...and then down once more to another series of rooms where they found the Bloody Baron lounging in front of a heavy wooden door. He threw a suspicious glance at Hermione, but bowed to Severus.

'I require your assistance.'

The ghost bowed again. 'At your service, Headmaster.'

Severus seemed to consider his question carefully. Hermione was watching him; despite the fact that he was wearing robes that were ten years old, despite the fact that he still looked tired, he appeared every bit as a Headmaster should: tall, authoritative and powerful.

'Can you throw any light on the school's current predicament?' Severus asked.

'Conflict, discord and imbalance create a disturbance. Harmony must be restored. The answer which you seek lies at the Heart of the Castle.' The Baron bowed once more before he disappeared through the dungeon's ceiling.

Hermione stared after him. 'The Heart of the Castle? What does that mean? Well, I suppose it's back to the library.'

'No.' Without further explanation, Severus started to march off.

'Wait.'

'What?'

'What was he on about?' Hermione had her feet firmly planted on the ground, and her glare would have intimidated the bravest of Gryffindors.

Severus, however, wasn't a Gryffindor; he merely raised an eyebrow. 'We won't find anything in the library in this case. The Heart of the Castle is one of the best kept secrets in Hogwarts' history. I do remember reading something along those lines in the Head's scrolls.'

'The Head's scrolls?' Hermione asked. 'Are those...?'

'Yes, a series of papers exclusive to the Headmaster or 'mistress of the school,' Severus confirmed.

They had begun walking again and made it to the ground floor without incident. Two detours later, they stood in front of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmistress' office. Or was it the Headmaster's office, Hermione wondered when the gargoyle leapt aside at Severus' approach without requiring a password. They hurried up the revolving stairs to the doors that were already open.

Minerva sat behind her desk, seemingly unperturbed by their entrance, but Hermione noticed that her fingers were curled around her wand.

'Aha,' she said. 'I thought so.'

'Yes,' answered Severus before he continued, 'I need access to the scrolls.'

Minerva pointed to an inconspicuous brick in the wall above her desk. 'I had almost convinced myself that they were merely a legend since it won't open for me.'

'They're not a legend.' Severus performed a series of movement with his wand.

Nothing happened.

He frowned and tried again.

Nothing.

'Weird,' he muttered.

Hermione looked at him and at Minerva and then at Severus again, and she remembered something Blinky had said. 'The scrolls are only accessible to the current Head of Hogwarts, right?' she asked.

Both Minerva and Severus nodded.

'What if the castle considers you both Heads? Have you tried it together?'

There was a slight pause before Severus said, 'Minerva?'

Minerva came to stand at Severus' side. 'Ready when you are.'

They raised their wands and started to perform the spell, mirroring each other's moves. After what felt like hours, a small niche appeared. Severus retrieved a miniature chest from it. He put it on Minerva's desk. A tap from both wands, and Hermione, Minerva and Severus watched as the chest grew to almost thrice its size before the lid sprang open. Three scrolls of what looked like very ancient parchment nestled inside it. Minerva lifted them carefully out of the chest. At the bottom of it lay a big, and by the looks of it, very old, book. She took that out, too, before she and Severus started to unfold the scrolls. They bent over them whilst Hermione tried to see what was on them from the other side of the desk. They all came to the same conclusion at about the same time.

'Nothing. Just plans of the castle.' The deception was clearly audible in Minerva's voice.

Meanwhile, Severus had picked up the ancient volume and started to leaf through it. Hermione and Minerva waited whilst he went through the tome, a look of utmost concentration on his face. After what seemed like a small eternity, he finally appeared to find what he had been looking for. He turned the book so that Hermione and Minerva could see the passage at which he was pointing. 'This is what I remembered seeing.'

The passage described similar events to the incidents that they'd been witnessing over the last weeks, including the castle trapping everyone inside. 'Does it say what the reason could be?' Hermione asked.

'Yes, it seems there could be several.' Severus showed them the relevant chapters in the table of contents.

'Severus, we need to duplicate these so that we can all read them. Help me to disable the protective wards on the book,' Minerva said.

A few spells later, everyone had copies of the pertinent chapters in front of them, and they had just started reading when a horse Patronus clip-clopped into the room. It informed them in Michael's voice that there had been an incident in the fourth years' Defence lesson, that Poppy was on her way, but could the Headmistress please come down, too?

Minerva sighed. 'I'd better go and sort this out. Why don't you two continue here? The sooner we find a reason, and possibly a solution, for this the better.' She hurried out of the office.

'I hope no one is seriously injured,' said Hermione.

Severus looked up briefly from the page he was reading. 'Yes. Well, we'd better get on with it.'

They continued for some time before they compared notes. Every now and then, Hermione glanced at Severus. He was bent over the parchment, a look of utter concentration on his face. Despite the gravity of the situation, Hermione felt a warmth spread through her. Sitting here with him, doing research, felt perfect. In fact, she didn't think she'd ever been more comfortable with a reading partner.

'Well? What have you found?'

Hermione realised she'd been gazing at Severus and quickly turned her attention back to her notes. 'This chapter says there could be several reasons for the castle acting the way it does, like magical wars or a continued grave injustice; what it comes down to in all these cases is that the magical balance is off.'

Severus nodded. 'Apparently, there were similar incidents after Salazar Slytherin left the school, and then again shortly before the Statute of Secrecy was passed, as well as couple of minor incidents on various occasions. It says here that these things hurt the castle's very heart and may well break it.'

'It's odd that these events were never mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*,' said Hermione.

'Not that odd. I suspect they've been kept out of historical records to hide the fact that the castle is vulnerable. Hogwarts is supposed to be an almost invincible place of security. It wouldn't do for possible enemies to find out about the castle's potential weaknesses, would it?' Severus started flicking through the book again. 'But why now? Ten years after the war?'

'I suppose it's an accumulation of magical imbalance that wasn't mended and the persistence of grave injustice,' came Minerva's voice from the doorway.

Both Severus and Hermione turned to look at her as she continued, 'There are the consequences of the war, and even though the castle was rebuilt, it wasn't healed entirely. As you both know, the Room of Requirement never turned up again. We're still not treating all the houses in entirely the same way, even though we try, and then there's the matter of the Headship.'

'Yes, Severus. I know. As far as the castle is concerned, you're still the Headmaster of this school. And the accusations we all levelled against you have never been formally withdrawn.'

Severus nodded once in acknowledgment of Minerva's admission before he said, 'I don't want to be Headmaster; you're more than welcome to the job.'

'Nevertheless, you'd have to formally hand the duties over to me since you're alive and present at the castle.'

'So basically, transfer Headship to Minerva, finally begin to treat all the houses equally, restore magical balance so that the castle can heal. Piece of cake,' Hermione said.

'Yes, that about sums it up,' agreed Severus.

'How do we do it, and where do we start?'

'With the easiest thing: the Headship,' suggested Minerva. 'Hermione, would you mind being our witness?'

'I'd be honoured.'

Severus took Minerva's right hand. He said, 'You'll need your wand, Hermione.'

He showed her where to place the tip on their linked fingers, then he said, 'Formally and of my own free will, I pass on the duties as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and all the rights and privileges that come with it to you.'

A thin, golden light erupted from his fingertips and hovered over their hands. Minerva answered, 'Formally and of my own free will, I accept the duties as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and all the rights and privileges that come with it.'

The golden light vanished into her fingertips.

Severus was about to let go of Minerva's hand, but she kept their fingers firmly linked and continued, 'Furthermore, I declare that Severus Snape has been a lawful and honourable Headmaster of Hogwarts. He has served the school in an exemplary manner and will one day take his rightful place among the portraits of his predecessors.'

It felt like the castle was breathing a sigh of relief, and somewhere in a hidden corner, preparations for a new portrait were begun. Hermione had watched Severus during the brief ceremony and seen the expression of happiness that flitted across his face at Minerva's declaration.

'That's that,' Minerva said. 'Knowing this castle, I suspect that restoring the magical balance will be a bit more complicated.'

'You'd be right about that.' Severus pushed the open book towards her.

Hermione craned her neck so that she could read the paragraph as well. "More complicated" summed it up nicely. There were a series of spells that needed to be performed by a balanced mixture of Hogwarts' staff. Once now, then again in three months' time and then once more exactly a year after the first set of spells had been cast. There were also requirements in terms of justice and balance between the houses so that eventually the castle's equilibrium could be restored.

'I suggest we take a few hours to prepare and then perform the spells. Eight people should do it and give us the required balance,' Minerva said.

'Severus, would you represent Slytherin? I think as a former headmaster you'd definitely qualify as a staff member. Not to mention that we will need your magical power for this.'

'It would be an honour,' he replied.

'Hermione, you and I can represent Gryffindor, Aurora as second Slytherin, Michael and Septima for Ravenclaw, and Wilhelmina and Rolanda for Hufflepuff. Yes, I think they would be the best choices. I'll inform them, and we'll meet in the Great Hall at dawn.' Minerva had duplicated the sheet with the list of spells as she was speaking and handed each of them a page.

Severus and Hermione were silent as they climbed down the stairs to the teachers' quarters. When he turned to leave in the direction of his own rooms, she took his hand. 'Stay with me, please? I don't fancy being alone right now.'

'Some company might indeed be agreeable whilst we prepare,' he replied and walked back to her rooms with her.

They installed themselves on her sofa and started memorising the spell. 'It's a bit disappointing,' Hermione said.

'What is?'

'The Heart of Hogwarts. I had hoped for some secret hidden chamber where all its secrets are kept, not just a metaphor.'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'There may not be a hidden chamber where you'll learn all about the castle's secrets, but I think it's more than a metaphor. I think the Heart of

Hogwarts literally means its life force. That which makes this school what it is and what keeps us all safe.'

'That makes sense. And we're all part of it.' Hermione sidled a bit closer to Severus. 'Has anyone ever told you that you're amazing?'

He started fiddling with the parchment in front of him and mumbled something unintelligible. Hermione used the occasion to curl up next to him. Severus didn't say anything, but she felt his arm settling around her shoulders.

After a while, she asked, 'Do you think that's why you couldn't transform back? The magical imbalance rather than a curse?'

'Yes. The Headmaster's magic becomes connected to the castle, and since the castle's magic is out of balance it affected me too as soon as I came near it,' said Severus.

'So you should be all right with the spell? Now that your magic is no longer tied to the castle?'

Severus just nodded and pulled her a bit closer. They spent the hours until dawn cuddled up on the sofa, comfortable in each other's company.

Shortly before dawn, Hermione and Severus made their way down to the Great Hall. Hermione thought there was an icy draught in the corridors, even colder than usual at this time of year, and the way seemed very long. She was glad when they reached their destination. Minerva, Wilhelmina and Michael were already waiting; everyone else arrived soon after.

They took their positions so that each witch or wizard stood at the corner of an octagon. They all raised their wands at the same time, and Minerva began the first incantation. A ray of golden light erupted from her wand, and Hermione could feel the tingling of magic as it passed round the circle. Severus followed with the second incantation, producing a strand of silvery white light from his wand, looking almost like the beginning of Patronus, but much more intense. Then one after another, the other six followed. Each spell released a strand of magic visible as a ray of coloured light, and each one sent a wave of magic around the circle.

The nine following spells were performed by everyone together. Again, Minerva began the incantation; everyone joined in, their wands raised and pointed towards the middle of the octagon. Hermione felt a thrill run down her spine as she heard the different voices chanting the same words together. Different coloured lights emerged from the wands in rapid succession: red, green, purple, blue. At some point Hermione lost count as she felt more and more waves of powerful magic swirling around them. The air seemed to vibrate, and she felt it passing through her body in waves of sensation: hot, cold, accelerating her heartbeat until it completely engulfed them and reached a crescendo with the last spell. Everybody remained standing still as the magic receded in slow waves.

Finally, the air in the Great Hall was quiet again. Minerva lowered her wand, and everyone followed suit. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, brilliant sunshine filled the enchanted ceiling, and one by one, the candles beneath it lit up. Outside, a creaking could be heard as the big oak doors of the castle opened.

'Think we did it.' Wilhelmina said.

'Yes. This is only the beginning, but we did it,' Minerva confirmed.

And then they were all hugging each other, laughing with relief.

Was it just her impression or did Severus' embrace last a bit longer than strictly necessary? Just for good measure, Hermione hugged him once again.

'I really need some fresh air after being cooped up inside for so long,' he said. 'Fancy a walk?'

Even though it was February, they didn't bother with cloaks and just cast a quick warming charm. The brilliant sunshine and fresh winter air was too tempting. They walked silently at a brisk pace down to the lake and followed the path that led around it. When they were halfway round it, they both stopped and looked back at the castle and then at each other.

Hermione felt her heart racing when she saw the expression in Severus' dark eyes.

They remained locked in each other's gaze until he pushed a strand of her hair back behind her ear and then trailed his finger down over her cheek and her lips before he lowered his head and placed a kiss on her mouth. His lips were cool and smooth. Hermione ran her tongue over his bottom lip in response. Severus gave a small sigh as he opened his mouth to her. His hand found its way to the nape of her neck, drawing her closer to him. Her own arms came up around his back, pulling him closer to her, while their mouths became very well acquainted with each other.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta Melusin and my equally wonderful alpha readers Chivalric, Gingertart and Karelia.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 10

A raven, a riddle and a romance

Seventeen Months Later

Hermione opened a sleepy eye and watched as a ray of sunshine sneaked through the curtains. The summer sun looked tempting, but it felt much too early to get up, so she snuggled up to the man next to her and fell asleep again.

The next time she woke up, the delicious smell of freshly brewed coffee was wafting through her cottage. After a detour to the bathroom, she followed her nose into the kitchen to find Severus, dressed in nothing but black briefs, making toast. She looked at his back and his arse. It was a very nice back. And a very nice arse.

He seemed to have noticed her ogling him as he turned around and smiled. Hermione padded over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

'Morning, sleepyhead,' he said, passing her a steaming mug of coffee.

'Thank you.' She took her mug over to the table, on which butter, jam, cheese and some fruit were already waiting, whilst Severus brought over the toast. Neither of them was much of a morning person, which meant blissful silence at breakfast.

'I had almost forgotten how lovely the first week of the school holidays is,' Severus remarked.

So much for blissful silence. 'Do you regret taking up Minerva's offer?'

'No. I like teaching Potions, and Horace is much happier now that he's retired. And—' he hesitated, '—I have nice colleagues. One in particular.'

Hermione beamed at him. 'So do I.'

'Ready for the big day?' Severus asked.

Hermione nearly dropped the cherry she was nibbling. 'Hm,' she replied.

'We don't have to do this. I don't mind waiting a bit longer.'

'No. We've waited long enough. It's time.'

'If you're sure.'

Was there a tad of anxiety in his voice? Hermione snaffled the last cherry before she said, 'Yes.'

It wasn't too warm outside; a lazy wind was chasing bits of blue and grey across the sky, occasionally interrupted by a few rays of sunshine or a few drops of rain. In short, it was a typical Scottish summer day, and the garden seemed like the perfect spot for their plans.

Hermione made sure she had enough space on all sides. One last look at Severus, who nodded reassuringly, and then she cast the spell.

She closed her eyes as an odd sensation swept through her body. When she opened them again, she found herself much closer to the ground. She'd never seen as clearly before. Every single blade of grass was in sharp focus as it was stirred by the wind.

Hermione checked, legs: two. They felt a bit shortish, and her centre of gravity seemed to have shifted somewhat. Neck: short, and as it turned out, extremely nimble. Definitely not an otter, then. Arms: there. Also two; she moved them experimentally and was propelled a few feet into the air before she landed harshly on her feet again, which proved to be quite useful as she could dig her toes, no claws, into the ground to prevent from keeling over.

Her heart had started to race. It couldn't be. She hated flying.

Carefully, she moved her arms – wings? – again. The result was the same; only this time, she managed to land a bit more softly.

Her heart still racing, Hermione sat quite still in the middle of the lawn, trying to come to terms with the fact that she had turned into a bloody bird. She swivelled her head around – really useful that neck – and looked at Severus. She could see every detail of his face: his dark eyes, his aquiline nose, the strand of black hair that the wind had blown across his face, even the tiny lines around his eyes. He held out an arm.

Hermione considered her options. She could transform back. No need to leave the safe ground beneath her feet.

Or she could learn to use her wings and find out whether flying as a bird was more fun than on a broomstick. She flapped her wings once, twice and then took off – no clinging to a piece of wood, desperately trying to keep her balance. Instead, the air was carrying her; the wind was her friend propelling her forward. She soared once around the garden before she landed on Severus' outstretched arm.

He smiled. 'Hello, there. You're a beautiful owl.'

'Hoot!'

Severus laughed. 'Yes, dear.'

Hermione nibbled his ear affectionately and then took off again for one more round through the garden. This time, she landed smoothly on the garden wall. She hopped down to the ground and transformed back.

Severus came over. 'Congratulations on your first successful Animagus transformation,' he said, hugging her.

'Thank you.' Hermione leant into his embrace. 'The form is a bit of a surprise. I was so sure I'd be an otter.'

'Yes, most Animagi turn into the form their Patronus takes, but some don't. Usually, those who learn to master the spell a bit later in life.'

A mischievous glint appeared in Severus' eyes. 'You do realise that the possibilities are endless, don't you? Next year, we'll be able to sneak out behind Minerva's back any time we like.'

'Now, there's something to look forward to,' Hermione replied with a laugh. 'But first, we've got a couple more weeks of summer holidays left – all ours. I don't know about you, but magic can be so exhausting. I think I need a nap.' She winked at Severus as she took his hand, leading him back to the cottage.

'I can think of a few very relaxing activities,' he purred into her ear as he followed her.

Fin

Author's Notes

This was originally written as a gift for Sempraseverus during the sshg exchange 2012 on livejournal.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta Melusin and my equally wonderful alpha readers Chivalric, Gingertart and Karelia.

A few additional notes:

1. This story was also inspired by Sempraseverus' gorgeous artwork [Transfiguration Blues](#).
2. I found the information on how to treat an injured wild bird here:
http://britishwildlifehelpline.com/first_aid_for_birds.html
3. There is an Inuit legend that is called [The Owl and the Raven](#); it has nothing to do with my tale, but it is a lovely story.
4. And finally, (and because I love trivia) the South Devon Railway used to have types of locomotives that were called Owl and Raven respectively.