

Exotic Matter

by Squibstress

When Hermione is asked to update the National Dictionary of Wizarding Biography, she discovers some surprising things about her favourite professor. An angsty, nerdy time-travel romance. (MM/SS, HG/RW)

Warning for brief violent scene, mention of character death, mention of suicide.

Winner of 2 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards.

Part I

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Notes: Written for the 2013 Minerva Fest on LiveJournal. Suffice it to say that this story was not what I set out to write. For one thing, it's as much about Hermione as Minerva. But one sentence led to another, and before I could mutter *Peskipiksi Pesternomi*, the plot pixies got totally out of hand. It will be clear to anyone with a passing familiarity with physics, medicine, or library science that I'm largely making this up as I go along. My sincerest apologies for the amount of disbelief I'm asking you to suspend.

Thanks to the mod and the Headmistress for their patience, and to Kelly Chambliss for the fun prompt: *Adult Hermione is asked to write the biographical entry on Minerva McGonagall for The Dictionary of Wizarding Biography. Her research takes her in some interesting, and maybe even surprising, directions.*

Thanks to MMADfan for the beta. Need I say that any errors...grammatical, philosophical, or scientific...are completely mine? I am also indebted to the authors of *String Theory for Dummies*.

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□

Here we are, trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why

~ Kurt Vonnegut

Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?

~ Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

I.

The smell of old parchment and ink sends a thrill of nostalgia through Hermione. It's been a long time since she's sat in an office like this one, with its antique mahogany desk and shelves of leather-bound books.

"You were the first person we considered for the job," Mr Babcock says when they exchange the necessary pleasantries and get down to discussing the matter at hand.

Hermione can't quite believe that, but she lets him go on.

"Your edition of *Hogwarts: A History* was masterful."

"That was twenty years ago, Mr Babcock. I've retired from editing."

"Yes, but we thought we could tempt you out of retirement for this project. We're prepared to offer you a substantial advance."

Hermione has little interest in the advance, although a bit of extra money wouldn't hurt now that Ron has taken his retirement from the Aurors. What stayed Hermione's initial impulse to decline the meeting with Diagon Alley's oldest publisher was the project Mr Babcock dangled in front of her: a complete revision of his company's flagship property, the *National Dictionary of Wizarding Biography*.

"No one is as qualified as you for the modernisation of important reference works, Madam Granger-Weasley," Babcock says.

What he means is that no one is as likely to quell complaints that the book leans heavily towards pure-bloods and wizards. He wants her for her name, not her editorial skills. Nevertheless, she knew before she even met Mauritius Babcock that she'd take the job.

"I have a few conditions," she says.

"Name them."

"One, I get approval on all writers for the project. Two, I control the editorial budget. Three, I write the entries of my choosing."

Babcock adjusts his collar and says, "Done."

~oOo~

Childress's office is a welcome oasis in an edifice that is, given its purpose, peculiarly modern. Or "modern", Hermione thinks, adding the editorial quotation marks in her head.

The National Museum of Wizarding History has that sleek, airy look, at the same time brightly optimistic and grimly industrial, that was so popular in the first decades of the twenty-first century. It's meant to evoke the clean, uncluttered future everyone hoped would be forthcoming after the upheavals of the previous century, but it just depresses Hermione.

Like everything else, this shiny new building will eventually become a relic, a fixed point in a transient story, representing nothing more than the particular anxieties of its era.

The curator of the museum's rare manuscripts division has attempted to mitigate the unrelenting glare of the glass, cement, and metal of his surroundings with reassuring materials from a bygone era, and Hermione's shoulders relax as she sits in a chair upholstered in cracked cognac-coloured leather.

"You have your work cut out for you, Madam Granger-Weasley," Childress is saying. "There's an enormous amount there. We accessioned all the books and papers after the Ministry finally released McGonagall's estate from probate last year, but we simply haven't had time to go through it all, what with the modernisation project.

"Modernisation?"

"We're Transfiguring all the Museum's books and papers from parchment to digital format."

The shadow that passes across his face is gone as quickly as it has come, and Hermione feels a glimmer of sympathy. She sometimes imagines that she is suspended in the æther, watching helplessly as time strips away the familiar and the dear.

"I quite understand," she says.

What she does not voice aloud is her suspicion that the proper archiving of Minerva McGonagall's papers will never be a priority. Minerva, to Hermione's everlasting annoyance, is generally treated as a footnote in the Dumbledore hagiography.

She suppresses an urge to sigh when Childress smiles across the desk at her and asks the only question anyone ever seems to have about Minerva.

"So, are you going to solve the mystery about where she went after the war?"

Twenty minutes later, she's seated at one of the pristine cement-slab desks in a chilly reading room and tries not to think about how much she'd rather be in a dusty carrel in the bowels of the Bodleian.

As Childress implied, Minerva's papers are a disorganised mess. At least they're well cared-for: the protective spells are all in place, a Bubble Charm around the boxes to keep moisture out and oxidation to a minimum. And Childress's young assistant goes through proper handling procedure with her. She doesn't have the heart to tell him that she was doing this decades before he was born, so she lets him show her the variation of the Impervious for her fingers and the correct way to turn pages with her wand so as to flex the leaves as little as possible.

She takes an hour or so to organise everything into vaguely chronological order, then begins looking at letters, surprisingly affectionate, from Lachlan McGonagall to his daughter, apparently the only personal things from her Hogwarts years that she kept. They shed little light on Minerva's life at the time, although Hermione gathers that young Minerva had trouble making friends.

A crinkled Muggle photo is enclosed with one of the letters. On the back is written in faded script *Moorehead, 1934*.

Scanning the faces of pinafored little girls, she homes in on one in the second row from the top. The girl has long plaits and wears a serious expression that Hermione thinks she recognises. Of course, all the girls in the picture look sombre, and she supposes that life in the upper reaches of Caithness circa 1934 gave them little to smile about.

Making a note of the school's name and the date, she replaces the photo with the letter and puts them back into the envelope.

II.

Minerva put her hands over her ears, but it was no use. They could probably hear her father as far away as Wick.

"I'll not have it, Aurelia! The child needs an education."

Minerva couldn't make out her mother's murmured reply, but her father's booming voice continued to carry as he said, "What, from that lackwit who gave you your letters and numbers? No, thank you."

She gave up covering her ears and sat on her bed, opening her clandestine copy of *The Time Machine* to where she'd left off. Squinting hard, she stared at the page, hoping that the extra effort would somehow transform the lines and arcs into something she could decipher.

Defeated, she took the hated specs from her pocket and put them on. Someday she was going to invent a spell that would cure astigmatism.

She couldn't hear her mother's soft voice, but she could guess what she was saying well enough. It was always the same argument. Mother didn't think Minerva should be at a Muggle school, and Father thought a tutor a waste of money.

While Minerva privately agreed with her father's opinion of her mother's education, she couldn't help hoping her mother would prevail so she could leave Moorehead. The other girls were stupid and coarse, and Mary Gordon had been merciless ever since Minerva had got her spectacles.

Mary had got what she deserved, though.

Minerva smiled a little when she remembered the stupid, shocked look on Mary's face when the skipping rope she'd been holding turned into a hissing snake. The other girls had scattered, screaming, while Mary had seemed unable to move. Minerva had had to knock the snake out of Mary's hands before it bit the girl.

Still, a pang of guilt shot through her. The incident had caused trouble for her parents, even though she'd overheard the Obliviator the Ministry sent tell her mother that it had been an impressive bit of Transfiguration, especially for unintentional magic.

The row downstairs was apparently not over. "If Muggles are such a terrible influence, you shouldn't have married one!" her father shouted.

Minerva looked back at her book, the pleasure of Wells's words filling her and gradually crowding out everything else.

Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future.

III.

"Madam Granger-Weasley?"

Hermione looks up to see the freckled face of the assistant, Tristan Rowle, looking down at her.

"Sorry to interrupt you, but I got you a coffee."

"Thank you, Mr Rowle."

"Call me Tristan."

"Thank you, Tristan. You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble."

His face reddens. "It was no trouble. I was going to get one during my break, and I thought you could use something hot. It's pretty chilly in here, and with the regulations against spellcasting, I was worried you might be cold. It's against the rules to drink it in here, but I thought we could . . . um . . . go to my office. If you want."

"A break would do me good," she says, standing, flexing and rotating her stiff shoulders and rolling her neck. She follows him to a closet-sized room that houses a metal desk, a holoscreen, and not much else.

"I didn't know how you take it, so I brought some of that powdered cream and some sugar," Tristan pulls a hand out of his pocket and proffers the items, looking at her from under his thick lashes. His face is now blotched all over with pink evidence of his nervousness. Ron has the same pale, freckled skin, and every emotion maps itself out on it, which has proven useful over the thirty-seven years of their marriage.

"That was very kind of you," she says.

She puts a little creamer and one packet of sugar into her cup and stirs with a finger. When she pulls it out and sticks it in her mouth to clean it, she keeps her gaze steady on Tristan, who blinks rapidly.

A guilty little thrill runs through her. It took her years to grow into the idea of her own attractiveness, and after spending some time castigating herself for being so shallow, she also came to accept that she enjoyed that kind of masculine attention. She isn't insecure about Ron's continued attraction to her, but it's been at least a couple of years since she's been aware of another man of any age looking at her *that way*. She'd thought that, at sixty-two, her time turning heads was finally over, and it has surprised her to mourn that loss. But this young man, who can't be more than twenty or twenty-one, blushes and stammers in her presence, and it makes her want to be just a little bit naughty.

"You've been really helpful, Tristan," she says. "I wouldn't be making nearly so much progress without you."

He grins shyly at her. "My pleasure, Madam Granger-Weasley."

There's a smudge of what's probably ink on his chin.

That was me, forty years ago, Hermione thinks. *Or might have been.* But her status as a war hero had catapulted her over other young people, and no one had believed she'd want to slog along as a lowly intern in a library or museum. After a few years of trying to learn her trade, making her mistakes in the unforgiving light of childhood notoriety, she fled to the Muggle world for respite. Ron waited for her, a thing that surprised everyone but Hermione and Harry.

Tristan lapses into shy silence, and Hermione lets it hang. The idea of flirting with the young man has lost its appeal suddenly, and she's eager to get back to her work.

~oOo~

While she prefers traditional, which is not to say retro, décor in libraries and museums, and paper and ink for reading, Hermione isn't among the wizards and witches who bemoan the incursion of technology...*Muggle technology* being the unspoken objection...into the wizarding world, and it pleases her to know she had a small hand in making it happen.

The holoscreen flickers in front of her, and she thinks at it: *Daily Prophet. 1943. Whole year.*

"*Quaérite.*"

Within seconds of her verbal command, a list of files appears.

Minerva McGonagall. M-I-N-E-R-V-A-space-M-C-G-O-N-A-G-A-L-L.

She's so used to spelling out the name in her head, she could probably do it in her sleep. Hell, she probably does.

"*Quaérite.*"

Only one file comes up this time, and she says, "*Acquirite.*"

It turns out to be an old scan, from the days when they were still using pure Muggle technology rather than the new Transfiguration techniques, to digitise documents.

Teen Witch Becomes Animagus

LONDON. Minerva McGonagall, aged 17 years, became the youngest documented Animagus in British history when she registered her form Felis catus, or common house cat, with the Ministry of Magic yesterday. According to registrar Leslie Milford, only ten other individuals have registered since the Ministry de-criminalised and regulated Animagi in 1803.

It is unusual, Milford said, for anyone to undertake the hazardous training outside of official Ministry channels, as texts related to human-to-animal Transfiguration have long been suppressed as containing Dark magic. "It's a grey area," he replied when asked about the legality of McGonagall's unapproved training.

McGonagall declined to be interviewed for this article, but her registration form was signed by Hogwarts professor Albus Dumbledore, who says she first achieved the transformation last month, after a year of private study.

"Miss McGonagall is an inquisitive young woman and an extraordinarily talented witch. She did not expect to achieve transformation so soon. Had she realised how rapidly she was progressing, she would certainly have alerted the Ministry earlier," Dumbledore said.

McGonagall will return to Hogwarts in September to complete her N.E.W.T. studies in Transfiguration, Charms, Magical Defense, and Arithmancy. "We are very proud of Miss McGonagall's achievement," said Hogwarts Headmaster Armando Dippet.

IV.

"Hullo, Puss," Professor Dumbledore said, reaching down to scratch her between the ears.

Minerva arched into his caress and allowed the sheer physical pleasure of it to wash over her. She rolled over and exposed her white belly, which would make her blush remembering it even hours later. He rubbed obligingly, and when he stopped, she flipped back over and butted her head against his leg.

"You look as if you could do with a saucer of cream," he said, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her into his office.

She'd been anxious to surprise him with what she could do, but now she was torn between popping back into her human form and staying as she was to see if he would pet her some more.

"I could do with some tea myself," he said and put her down on the desk.

He summoned a house-elf, who brought the tea and some cream for Minerva. She lapped it up, enjoying the sweet, grassy aroma and the way the fat-heavy droplets pulled on her whiskers.

She settled herself carefully next to his papers and sat purring on his desk as he marked essays. When he put down his quill, yawning, he said, "I think I'd best leave the rest of these till morning."

He took her to the door and set her down just outside it, dashing her half-formed hope that he might take her to his quarters, or even let her sleep at the foot of his bed.

"Off you go, Puss," he said. "Back to your rightful place."

The exercise was repeated on two more occasions, Minerva promising herself that she'd reveal her secret each time, each time failing to do so. There was something so *intoxicating* about being an animal, with no expectations of propriety, free to enjoy her physical being and the touch of a man who would never lay a finger on her in her human form. She couldn't bring herself to give it up just yet.

It would be a game, she told herself. See how long it would take him to figure out that his nocturnal visitor was not a cat, but the young woman he'd known for almost seven years. The markings around her eyes would give it away eventually.

It was after the third time that disaster struck. She was padding round the corner from his office when sharp-nailed fingers closed around her neck and she was lifted by the scruff.

She yowled, hoping Dumbledore would hear her, but no such luck. The swipe of a clawed paw at the pale, handsome face of Tom Riddle missed, leaving her twisting helplessly, four legs paddling in empty air.

He shook her until she thought her bones would rip from their sockets. She tried to concentrate on re-transforming, and it was only the thought that if he killed her, she might remain in cat form and no one would know what had become of her that sobered her enough to achieve it.

She fell to the floor, pain shooting through the wrist she'd managed to put down to break her fall. Riddle was standing over her, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Well, well, well," he said as she got carefully to her feet. "And just what have you been up to, McGonagall? Catting around Dumbledore's office?"

"It isn't any of your concern," she said, straightening her skirt with her good hand.

"Maybe not," he said. "But unregistered Animagi are the Ministry's concern. I hear you can get five years in Azkaban for it. And Dippet might be interested to know that you've been having night-time rendezvous with Dumbledore. Did he teach you just so you could meet him in secret?"

"He didn't. I..."

"I'll bet he just loves to pet his pussy."

She felt her cheeks grow warm.

"You're disgusting," she said.

"I'm not the one who's messing about with my Transfiguration professor. Anyway, I might be persuaded to forget what I know. For a price."

Her belly turned over, but what he said next wasn't what she expected.

"If you tell me how you did it, I won't say a word to anyone about you and Dumbledore."

"There's nothing like that between us," she said. "He doesn't even know I'm an Animagus."

"Who's going to believe that, Minerva?"

"It's the truth."

"The truth is what's written in the history books. And if I tell, he'll be put down as a lecher and you a whore."

The unfairness of it made her want to scream. It had started out as a harmless experiment, a way to impress her professor, and now it threatened her reputation and his livelihood unless she agreed to help Riddle, a boy she loathed and who, truth be told, frightened her.

"So what's it to be, Minerva? Do you help me, or do I go to Dippet?" The way his eyes shone and the sly curl of his lip almost made her tell him to go jump in the Black Lake. But it wasn't only her reputation at stake.

"I found the instructions in a book."

"Which book?"

She hesitated.

"All right, then," he said, and turned to go.

"*Secrets of the Darkest Art*," she said to his back.

He turned back to her.

"Get it for me."

"I don't have it. It's in the library. The Restricted Section. You'll need a pass."

"That won't be a problem," Riddle said. The cold, calculating look he had worn suddenly broke, and he smiled, a dazzling, genuine-seeming grin, and the rapid change scared her more than anything he'd done that evening.

"Thanks, Minerva. You're a peach," he said, turning to head down the stairs to the dungeon.

The retreating sound of his jolly whistling broke her paralysis.

Ignoring the pain in her wrist, Minerva turned and raced in the opposite direction, up four flights of stairs, and pounded with her good hand on the door to Dumbledore's quarters.

He appeared a moment later, his robes unbuttoned to mid-chest, a frown creasing his brows.

"Professor, I have to tell you something."

"It's after midnight, Miss McGonagall, can't it wait until morning?"

"I'm afraid it can't, sir. I've done something terribly foolish."

V.

Hermione looks around the table and wonders when she became the Weasley matriarch. She would have thought it would be Angelina, since she and George moved into the Burrow with Arthur after Molly's death, or Ginny, as the only Weasley daughter, but it didn't work out that way.

Everyone seems to gather at Hermione and Ron's in St Albans for family occasions.

Earlier this afternoon, as he did the spellwork to temporarily enlarge the dining room, Ron said, "The house won't weather too many more Expansion Charms. We might have to think about buying something bigger."

She threw her washrag at him and he grinned at her.

They've been talking about trading down into a flat ever since Hugo moved out fifteen years ago, but somehow, it has never happened.

"How are things at the W4C, Hugo?" Harry asks as they eat Ron's special "Blood-Traitor Chicken," so named because of the red wine sauce it swims in, and served because Arthur has requested it for his birthday dinner.

"Good, Uncle Harry. Keeping me busy."

"What I want to know is, when is Wamazon going to let us get one-minute delivery from America?" says James. "I had to wait a week for my new Harley."

Hugo shrugs. "Ask the guys in the Unspeakables when Telefiguration will work over really long distances."

James turns to his brother, who is, in fact, an Unspeakable. "It can't be that big a deal."

"It is if you want your fancy new American broom to arrive in one piece," says Albus. "It's a hugely complicated Transfiguration problem, getting all those particles to reconfigure themselves the right way. The longer the distance, the greater the acceleration problems. See, the tachyons..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Professor. I don't need a lecture on Transfiguration. I just asked a simple question."

"Speaking of Transfiguration and Unspeakables," Ginny says over her elder son's words, "how's the McGonagall bio going, Hermione? Figured out where she disappeared to?"

"Not yet." She doesn't tell them she hasn't even got into Minerva's thirties yet. They already think she's a bit barmy, working so hard on a single biographical entry in a book only old codgers buy.

She says, "As a matter of fact, Al, I was going to ask for your help."

"Sure, Aunt Hermione. What can I do for you?"

"I wondered if you could see if there's anything about Minerva in the Department of Mysteries files."

"Which files are we talking about? I don't have access to everything."

"I wouldn't ask you to look for anything classified, but maybe just do a search for her name. See what comes up."

"I can do that. What years was she with the DOM?"

"Nineteen fifty-two to nineteen fifty-six."

"I'll look."

"Wow, you're really dedicated to getting the full story, aren't you, Aunt Hermione?" Lily says.

Hugo coughs loudly, saying under it, "Obsessive. Obsessive."

Hermione feels the heat rise to her cheeks.

"Tenacious. Curious," says Ron, looking at her with a gentle smile. "Thank Merlin, or we wouldn't have got out of half the trouble we got into at school, right Harry?"

"Too right, mate."

VI.

The contents of Minerva's stomach hit the floor with a wet, smacking sound. When she straightened up, Scrimgeour handed her a handkerchief.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he Vanished the mess at her feet.

She nodded, still dabbing at the corners of her mouth with the handkerchief. At least she'd decided on bland oatmeal for breakfast this morning, in the hope that she'd get to do another trial. The last few had been short jumps, just a day or two, but the longer the interval, the worse the nausea. She'd been gobsmacked when the head of the Time and Space Division, George Muldur, had given her leave to go back an entire month.

"You got the time recorded?" she asked.

"Right here," Rufus said, tapping his notebook with his wand.

He performed the spell to unseal the door to the jump lab, and Minerva followed him into the Time Room.

"Are you sick?" he asked as she sat down at her desk.

She quirked her mouth up at him. "No, I'm fine. It's just a little nausea. I expected it," she said as she took her lab notebook and a quill from a drawer to make her notes. She thought for a moment, then wrote herself a reminder:

Talk w/? at St M re: anti-emetic potion. Direct effect on dig. tract or systemic? If direct, won't work?

She looked up when she felt him staring at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You're not . . . you don't think you're . . ."

"What?"

"You know. In trouble."

It took her a few moments to twig to what he meant.

She laughed. "Of course not! What in the world gave you that idea?"

He looked at her for another moment, then crossed the room to fetch the tea kettle.

She turned back to her notes and murmured a thanks without looking up when he set a cup down beside her. His hands on her shoulders made her jump.

Throwing her quill down on her desk, she asked, "Rufus, what are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've asked you before not to do that."

"What?"

"Touch me like that."

He laughed, and she swivelled around in her chair to look up at him, annoyed. He wore the knowing smile that alternately infuriated and enchanted her.

The smile slipped from his face.

"You're serious?"

"Of course. Your pawing at me isn't helping us get our work done."

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then snapped it shut, his oddly yellow eyes seeming to cloud over.

"Yes. Right. Sorry, Minerva."

He took his teacup and went to his desk. Instead of drinking it or pulling out his notebook, though, he just sat, gazing across the room to the Bell Jar, where the hummingbird was making its way to the top. Minerva followed his gaze, and when the bird fell and became a chick, once again locked into its egg, a wave of melancholy passed over her.

She looked back at her notes, focussing her mind on the work at hand.

"Rufus, can you read back to me what you got from Feynman on time-reversal symmetry?"

"Come again?"

"When you saw him last week. There was something he said about the self-energy problem, but I can't remember what you told me."

"I didn't see Feynman last week."

"Of course you did. You went to California."

"Minerva, I never went to California. Remember? I . . . er . . . I forgot to get the authorisation for the Trans-Continental Portkey. I sent the form in yesterday, though. I thought we were going to go together this weekend."

Minerva looked down at her notebook and went back a few pages. An icy feeling swept over her as she looked, turning page after page. There were notes there, but they were scant, and different from what she remembered writing. It was as if they'd done little over the past few weeks. But they'd been working late into the evenings at the lab, Rufus getting more and more familiar, Minerva's resolve to keep their relationship strictly professional becoming harder and harder to maintain.

Oh, Merlin.

She fingered the prototype around her neck, wondering what would happen the next time she tried it.

Her quill raced across the parchment:

Trial #6 02/07/56. Target = 29.75 days (1785h)

Jumper: Minerva McGonagall

Control: Rufus Scrimgeour.

Retrotemporal Jump

Location: Timejump Laboratory, Department of Mysteries, Ministry of Magic, London.

Departed: 02/07/1956; 14:53:42h

Arrived: 03/06/1956; 08:54:26h

Rotations: 36 , anticlockwise

Observations: Nausea +4, disorientation +2. No other biological sequelae noted.

R-control (Rufus Scrimgeour) confirmed arrival date & time. R-control exhibited surprise, but no other observable reaction.

Established time-jump protocol followed, with one deviation: R-control provided a cup of water for jumper, but no other contamination of the timeline was observed.

Protemporal Jump:

Departed: 03/06/1956, 09:02:13h.

Arrived: 02/07/1956: 14:53:51

Rotations: 36, clockwise.

Observations: Nausea +6, disorientation +1. No other biological sequelae noted.

Conversation between jumper and control suggestive of significant timeline contamination.

She hesitated for a moment, then added:

Prev. notes on trials hv disappeared. GRANDFATHER PARADOX?????

"I remember now. The jump must have disoriented me more than I thought," she said.

Reading from his notebook, Rufus said, "So that was a three-second interval for a two-hour jump. That gives us a 0.025 lapse coefficient. Not bad, but it's bigger than for the one-hour jump."

As he read, Minerva carefully tore the page she'd just written out of her notebook and slipped it into her pocket.

He was frowning down at his notes. "If we don't work it out, we'll never be able to go more than a couple of hours without risking serious temporal anomalies. And if your nausea is any indication, it could do serious harm to the jumper."

She was about to tell him that she still wasn't feeling well and needed to go home, when the door opened and Muldur strode in, obviously furious about something. His heavy brows were knit together until they almost touched, and Minerva noticed with a start that his wand was in his hands, almost as if he were going to hex someone.

"Scrimgeour. My office. Now."

As Rufus crossed the room, flushed and stoop-shouldered, he shot a baleful glance at Minerva, and she got the impression that he knew what Muldur was so angry about. It couldn't be about the latest problem, could it? Muldur couldn't know about it, and besides, he would have called them on the carpet together.

Merlin's bloody balls.

She got up and crossed the empty room to table that held the Bell Jar, leaning on her elbows to watch the bird in its Sisyphean flight

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

Her nausea was gone, replaced by cold panic.

VII.

A rush of complicated emotions fills Hermione when she steps through the great oak doors of Hogwarts for the first time since leaving it forty-four years ago. Examining her

reaction, she realises that it's nostalgia for the time before the war changed her...changed them all...mixed with a physical memory of the anxiety that pricked at her almost constantly in those days. And other things too, for which she cannot find a name.

The gargoyle is the same surly thing he was during Hermione's school days, but the spiral staircase no longer rotates upward. When she remarks on it, Neville pats his abdomen, saying, "Hannah's after me to do something about this middle-aged paunch. I don't get out in the garden as much as I'd like these days."

The Headmaster's office has changed dramatically since she was last in it. Gone are the oddments that festooned the place when Dumbledore occupied it. Plants of various colours and sizes...and odours, she notices as she passes through the room...sit on tables and cling to walls.

As she and Neville exchange the obligatory tidings of family and friends, Hermione wonders what this office would have looked like had Minerva ever occupied it. During her brief tenure as Headmistress, the Head's tower was still being repaired and cleared of the Dark magic that had infected much of Hogwarts during the final battle, and when Hermione asked to see her, Minerva suggested they meet away from Hogwarts.

Things are still in disarray, and you'd choke on the dust, the Headmistress said, but Hermione suspected that Minerva understood that she was not yet ready to face her ghosts, actual or metaphorical.

"It was a shock when Headmistress McGonagall showed up in her portrait last year," Neville says with a low chuckle. His smile fades, and he glances up at the painting that sits on the wall behind his desk, sandwiched in between Professors Snape and Vector. "I guess that means that she's really dead," he whispers.

"Yes."

"Are you ready to speak to her? Shall I wake her?"

"Please."

The visit is disappointing. Neville has told her to take as much time as she needs to talk to the portraits, but in the event, it takes only ten minutes.

Minerva's portrait gives Hermione information she already knows; picture-Minerva claims only to know about her life after coming to Hogwarts to teach, and Dumbledore defers to Minerva when Hermione questions his portrait.

She's anxious to leave. Magical portraits have always discomfited Hermione, and speaking to Minerva's feels wrong somehow, as if she were speaking with an imposter behind the back of a friend. She's been more than fifty years in the wizarding world, and some things still make her feel alien. Ron shrugged it off years ago when she confessed her discomfort; semi-sentient beings have always been part of his world, much as television and automobiles were once part of hers.

When she looks at the non-magical portrait of Snape, Neville says, "I know it's a shame he never had the charmed one done, but to tell you the truth, it's kind of a relief."

Hermione laughs in understanding. She too has mixed feelings about Severus Snape. Hero or not, it's hard for her to forget what an utter bastard he was. Harry won't hear a word against him, of course, but Ron agrees with Hermione, privately.

"He was so horrible to you, and to Harry," he said when they discussed Snape after the long-delayed ceremony at which an emotional Harry had awarded Snape the posthumous Order of Merlin. She found it dear of Ron to be so outraged on her behalf, and she later thought that it was the reason they'd finally consummated their relationship that evening, quietly, in her childhood room in her parents' house.

She and Neville have tea and promise, as usual, to see one another more often, but each knows it won't happen. She rarely sees anyone from her Hogwarts years anymore, except Harry and Ginny, and that's only because she's married to Ron.

At home, she finds Ron ensconced on the sofa with Lizzie, their seven-year-old granddaughter, looking at a photo album. Alexander, Lizzie's four-year-old brother, is asleep on the carpet in front of the hearth, surrounded by a small armada of toy ships in bottles.

"Where did those come from?" Hermione asks after kissing her husband and granddaughter.

"Dad's shed. I went over to help George and Angelina clear it out this morning, and Dad suggested I take them for the kids."

"Looks like they were a hit."

"Yeah," Ron says, chuckling. "He wore himself out playing pirates."

"And you, miss . . ." Hermione turns to Lizzie, giving her a tickle that makes her squeal with delight "What are you doing?"

"Granddad said I could look at pictures."

"Oh?" Hermione says as though this were a big surprise. Lizzie is obsessed with photos and can spend hours poring over old pictures of people she's never met. It gives Hermione pleasure to know that Lizzie prefers the old leather albums to the e-screen photo displays.

"You were pretty," Lizzie says to Hermione.

"She's still pretty," Ron says.

Lizzie looks up at her grandmother as if considering. "Yah," she says finally and turns the page of the album.

There's a loud *crack* in front of the house.

"That'll be Hugo. Come on, sweetie," Ron says to Lizzie, "Time to get your shoes and socks on. Daddy's here."

Alexander starts to cry. "Easy there, mate," Ron says, "you can take those home with you. Your granny doesn't want them cluttering up our house."

Their visitor isn't Hugo, after all, it's Albus, and he has surprising news.

When he relates it, Hermione feels as if she's been hit by a Bludger.

She asks, "How did you find this out?"

Al smiles sheepishly. "Turns out personnel files from before the turn of the century aren't digitised. I just went down to the storage area...creepy place...and *Accioed*. Here."

He holds out a roll of yellowing parchment. It's been decades since she's seen rolled parchment, and as she takes it, a frisson of pleasant memory washes over her. After years of writing on cheap school notebook paper, the purchase of her first ten feet of creamy parchment was a sensual experience to match her first kiss.

Al leaves, apologising for the short stay, but he has a date. Hermione and Ron know better than to ask who it is; the subject of Scorpius Malfoy is a sore one in their house and in the Potters'.

When he's gone, Hermione says nothing, and Ron follows her into the kitchen. They move in harmony, Ron getting out the teapot and filling it with water, charming it hot as Hermione takes out the tea tin, cups, and spoons.

Hermione sips her tea quietly, the gears in her mind turning, trying to find purchase in the information she's just been given.

Ron grins over his teacup. "Old McGonagall. Who would have thought it, huh?"

His glee irritates Hermione, and for a moment, she visualises herself dumping her tea over his head, but she's long since learned to control her temper. Fighting with Ron stopped being fun thirty years ago.

"Why not?" she says.

"Well, she was so buttoned-up. It's hard to think of her doing it."

"So you thought she was a virgin all her life?" Hermione suspects that his assumption should irritate her further, but somehow it does not. She can only muster a vague amusement.

He says, "No . . . well . . . I guess I never thought about it."

Hermione has. There was a time, during her fourth year, when the petting she and Viktor did in a disused classroom was growing more and more intense and she had no idea how to stop it without alienating him, or if she even wanted to stop it, that she thought quite a bit about Professor McGonagall and sex, and about the two together.

Her feelings for her professor were a complicated mixture. Her admiration for a smart, powerful witch was tempered with both envy and fear. The cloistered kind of life Minerva McGonagall led fascinated teenaged Hermione even as it repelled her. At eleven, twelve, even thirteen, a life devoted entirely to the mind had seemed enticing to her. Then, as her body began to change and exert new and strange imperatives, it occurred to Hermione that her teacher probably experienced...or had done...similar longings, and she began to wonder how Professor McGonagall managed them. Because there were times when Hermione thought she might go mad with wanting something she shouldn't have. Then, when she discovered how to touch herself, she wondered if Professor McGonagall did the same. It became a sort of loop, the thoughts of her professor touching herself filling Hermione's mind as her hand moved under her knickers. *Professor McGonagall does this*, she sometimes thought while she masturbated. In her daytime self, she rejected the notion entirely, but at night, as her fingers stroked and probed, it seemed an arousing certainty.

Hermione supposes now that she's never quite got over her crush on Minerva McGonagall. The entry in the *National Dictionary of Wizarding Biography* took up residence in the forefront of her brain almost at the moment Babcock proposed the project to her. Ron actually suggested she consider writing a biography, but she dismissed the idea while wondering how much Ron suspected of her feelings. A biography felt too personal, or at least, too soon. But she found herself brooding over the short paragraph in *Hogwarts: A History*. She didn't write it herself, and the terseness of it still bothers her.

The clink of teaspoon against teacup pulls her out of her thoughts, and she says to Ron, "I would imagine Minerva lived as full a life as anyone."

"Yeah, but Rufus Scrimgeour? Her boss's son-in-law? That doesn't sound anything like the Minerva we knew."

"We didn't know her, Ronald."

His mouth quirks downward for a moment at hearing his full name. She only uses it when she's trying to wrong-foot him, make him feel like the awkward, always-one-step-behind boy he was. There was a time during their marriage when she used it often, but it's been years since it's passed her lips.

"I'm going up," she says.

She puts the parchment Al has left in her briefcase and climbs the stairs to bed.

Ron follows a minute later, and when he gets into bed, she presses herself against him in silent apology.

They make love, quietly and with little urgency. As Ron moves within her, she tries to picture what Rufus Scrimgeour must have looked like as a young man, how he would have been with Minerva.

When it is over, Ron asks, "You all right?"

"Fine. Why?"

"You didn't come."

"Too tired tonight, I guess."

"Do you want me to finish you off?"

"No, it's okay."

He holds her, though, and it's nice. As she drifts towards sleep, she thinks *This is my life. And it is good.*

~oOo~

The next morning, Hermione looks through the parchment Al has given her. There, at the top, in faded black ink is the reason for Ministry employee number 1003's dismissal.

"Improper relations" is the term used, and Hermione wonders how the powers that were at the Ministry found out about the affair. Scrimgeour obviously didn't get the sack, or at least, wasn't forced out of the Ministry, and for a few moments, Hermione lets anger stop her from reading further.

She scans the rest of the parchment. There's the predictable information about wages, a notation that the Non-Disclosure Charm had been renewed on 5 April 1956, and several entries describing in frustratingly vague terms the projects Minerva was involved in. Then, about midway down the document, Hermione stops.

Minerva and Scrimgeour are listed as the patent-holders, along with the DOM, on the first prototype of a Time-Turner.

Hermione's thoughts are propelled back to her third year at Hogwarts and Professor McGonagall's office.

"Tell no one you have it. The Ministry was very clear on this. And you must never use it for any purpose other than the one we have discussed. It isn't that I don't trust you, Miss Granger, but the temptation to change the past has proven too great for older and more experienced mages than you, so I must impress upon you the dangers of trying to do so. More than one person experimenting with time travel has thought to make a small change and inadvertently killed him- or herself, wiping out entire families with one stroke."

"I understand, Professor. But please, if I may ask . . . if someone went back to the past and was killed, wouldn't they no longer exist in our present? So how do we know about it?"

Professor McGonagall took off her glasses, and for a moment, Hermione thought she saw a smile curve her lips. But it was quickly replaced...if it was ever even there...with the thin mauve line that was part and parcel of the professor's normal expression.

"There have been those who have used it . . . in times of extremis. To save a life. There was a witch who travelled back to save her husband. The witch was killed, and the husband survived only to find that their children had never been born."

"Wow," Hermione said, "I can't imagine how awful that was for the wizard."

When she went to the Hogwarts library to look for books on time travel, she found very little, and nothing about the incident that Professor McGonagall had described. She had meant to ask the professor about it, but by the time the events of that year had played out, it had slipped Hermione's mind. When she went to turn in the Time-Turner, though, she felt a pang of regret: here was a fascinating branch of magic that she would have liked to study further. She asked Professor McGonagall to recommend a course of study.

"You would have to join the Unspeakables if you wanted to study time travel in a wizarding context, Miss Granger. But I would recommend studying Muggle physics. The work of Frank Tipler, Igor Novikov, Hugh Everett, and Joseph Polchinski in particular."

Later, when Hermione went up to Oxford to read history and linguistics, she sat in on some Physics Department lectures on special relativity and stochastic processes, but found them largely impenetrable and bewildering.

In the increasingly rare instances when she's thought back to the surreal events of her Hogwarts years, she's occasionally wondered if Minerva was telling the whole truth about the Time-Turner's provenance. Why, she has asked herself, would the Ministry have granted permission to a schoolgirl to use such a potentially dangerous magical object? She has never quite come to a satisfactory conclusion, and she thinks now that perhaps Minerva lied about having Ministry permission. There was no paperwork for Hermione to sign, no Ministry-approved training to attend, only Minerva's stern warnings.

Part II

Chapter 2 of 2

When Hermione is asked to update the National Dictionary of Wizarding Biography, she discovers some surprising things about her favourite professor. An angsty, nerdy time-travel romance. (MM/SS, HG/RW)

Warning for brief violent scene, mention of character death, mention of suicide.

VIII.

A black, aching despair that had nothing to do with the Dementors' recent presence enveloped Minerva.

Failed.

She'd failed to protect Harry Potter.

Dumbledore finally took Harry's limp hand from hers and folded it neatly onto the boy's chest, pulling her up and away from the bed where he lay next to Sirius. Sirius's eyes were closed, but his breath still rasped, his chest moving up and down. Harry's breathing was quieter, but his eyes were open, deep green pits of nothingness.

She pulled away from Albus and went to Hermione, who sat on her bed, staring as Poppy tested her pupils.

"How is she?"

"Nox," Poppy said, putting out the light from her wand, and turned to Minerva. She shook her head.

"But she's sitting up on her own. Surely that means something."

Poppy put her wand back in her pocket and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands before answering.

"Physically, women tend to recover faster from trauma than men. But I'm afraid my preliminary tests suggest that there's little brain activity beyond what's necessary to sustain life."

"But..."

"Minerva, come. Let Poppy work," Albus said, drawing her away.

Of course, there was nothing Poppy could do, and Minerva knew that sometime in the next few days, Hermione, Harry, and Sirius would be transferred to the Janus Thickey ward at St Mungo's. It would have happened today, but they'd never had a patient who'd been Kissed before, and Poppy said the Healers were arguing amongst themselves about protocols for treating their incoming celebrity patients.

Minerva followed Albus, not to his office, but to his private quarters. He poured them each a dram of Firewhisky.

"This is my fault."

The words jolted Minerva because they were exactly the ones she'd been about to utter.

"I should never have permitted the Dementors here," he said.

"Fudge gave you no choice."

"There is always a choice!"

An electric crackle tickled her skin and made the hairs at the back of her neck stand up. Albus's magic, like water from an overfull cup, was escaping in his distress, and she was afraid despite herself. Her own magic was orders of magnitude less powerful than his, and yet she'd done some significant damage on those few occasions when she'd lost control of it. This man could bring the castle down around them all in the blink of an eye.

She put a hand on his arm, half expecting to be thrown across the room by the excess power emanating from him, but he seemed to relax slightly, and he put his hand over hers.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he said.

"Don't be. We're all wretched at the moment."

He looked down into his drink for answers. Finding none, he threw it back in one swallow, something she'd never seen him do before. It took her three, and he poured them each another without asking if she wanted it.

She'd never seen him so badly shaken, even during the worst days of the last war.

The liquor seemed to bring him back to himself, and his tone turned businesslike.

"We'll need to inform Miss Granger's parents," he said, and by "we" she knew he meant "you."

"Yes. I'll go in the morning. I don't think I can manage tonight."

He nodded.

She returned to her quarters and wept her way through four handkerchiefs.

It was going on three o'clock when she rose from her bed and removed the wards from the box that was Concealed at the top of her wardrobe. Gazing into it, she made a decision. Or rather, she acknowledged the decision she'd made the moment she looked into Harry's blank eyes.

Three hours later, she used the privilege of her position to Floo directly to Albus's quarters, surprising him before he'd risen from bed.

"There may be a way to save them."

"Tell me," he said, pulling on his dressing gown and gesturing for her to sit

He listened to her without interruption, seemingly without reaction, but she'd known him long enough to understand that the slight twitch of lips meant she'd surprised him.

When she finished her tale and showed him the item in question, he said, "Are you certain it will work properly?"

"It did forty years ago."

He looked into her eyes, and she waited to feel the press of his Legilimency against her mind, but it didn't come.

"You haven't used it since?" he asked.

"Never."

He was silent, looking at her appraisingly, and she understood that he was recalibrating her in his mind, reconciling the Minerva McGonagall he'd thought he knew with one who could make the only functioning prototype of a dangerous magical instrument and keep it a secret for decades.

"Why did you take it?"

His question surprised her. They almost never spoke of personal matters, of their whys and wherefores. That path would be too fraught with hazards neither wanted to engage.

Because I was angry, she wanted to say. Because they didn't deal fairly with me. Because Rufus kept his bloody job, while I was tossed out without a reference But he knew all that. He wanted to know the excuse she gave to herself, wanted to judge whether her private lie should affect his actions. He was not a scholar of time travel, but he was a man who understood that a lie could affect the fabric of reality just as surely as the tiny instrument that hung from a chain around Minerva's neck.

She said, "Because it's dangerous. I didn't trust the Ministry with it. I made a mistake in helping develop it, and I didn't intend to compound that by leaving it in their hands."

"It is dangerous. Very. And yet, I think, in the right hands, it could be used for great good."

She caught herself before she could roll her eyes. They both knew perfectly well that he would use it...his hands were the right ones, were they not?...to alter the unbearable events of the past twenty-four hours.

He sent a house-elf around to the rest of the staff to postpone the emergency meeting he'd scheduled, and he and Minerva sat together for the next three hours, thinking, talking, arguing, and came up with a plan. Mad, it was, and dangerous, but these qualities were not strangers to either of them, although they sat more comfortably with Albus than with Minerva.

She'd assumed that she would be the one to change Potter's bleak destiny, but no.

Albus said, "We must change only what is absolutely necessary," and ultimately, she had to agree. She understood better than anyone the dangers of interfering with time.

It needed to be someone close to Harry, who was already with him throughout that terrible day. To insert someone new into the events that led to what had happened would be too great a gamble.

And it needed to be someone who could be trusted to keep the Time-Turner absolutely secret...or frightened into it. Someone who would use it only as a last resort, to save a life or a soul.

"It will need to be calibrated to Hermione's magic," Minerva said. "And that will take at least a few weeks, as it has to be done gradually."

"She must not know about the plan, though," Albus said. "Everything must be allowed to unfold as closely as possible to the way it did that day. There are too many potentially dangerous variables."

Ordinarily, his penchant for using people without their knowledge would have angered her...for all the good her anger would have done...but in this case, she found she agreed. To tell Hermione of the plan would put enormous pressure on the girl. She wasn't as impulsive as Harry or Ronald, but the temptation to change more than what was absolutely required might very well sway even the most level-headed fourteen-year-old.

"You will need to prompt her, Minerva," Albus said. "Plant the seed. Otherwise, she might not act as we wish."

~oOo~

The Albus Dumbledore of September 1993 was less surprised than she'd thought he would be when she appeared in his office explaining that she was from the future. He read the letter from future-Albus, his eyes darting across the lines once, then over again, but he did not question her veracity.

"It's risky. But I imagine you and I debated the risks rather thoroughly," he said, smiling at her in the way that still made her flush.

"We did."

"May I see the Time-Turner?"

~oOo~

She didn't see September-Minerva, of course, but once quarantined in her Islay cottage, she received a series of terse notes in her own hand reassuring her that Miss Granger was suffering no deleterious effects from the Time-Turner.

Sometimes it still astounded her that the Unspeakables had never been able to create one that was reliable over more than a few hours. Rufus had had a remarkably quick mind, but he lacked whatever neurological anomaly that allowed Minerva to make creative connections between concepts which seemed to elude everyone else. Without her notes and the spells she'd developed, Rufus and his subsequent colleagues had been unable to make the final leap. The tests conducted in the years since she'd left had ranged from disappointing to disastrous, and eventually, the programme had been shelved, or so Amelia had said. Yet the other, failed, prototypes were preserved in what she had once thought of as her lab in the Department of Mysteries, so perhaps one day someone else would succeed. Minerva hoped she'd be long dead before it happened.

~oOo~

The appearance of Severus Snape at her door on Christmas Eve shocked her so badly that she popped into her Animagus form without quite meaning to. Her first thought was that something had gone wrong, but as it turned out, it was only Albus's unfathomable need to keep his fingers in every last bit of pie asserting itself once again.

"Albus thought you might be lonely," Severus said with a snicker after she'd turned back into her human self and invited him in.

"So he sent you?"

"Your powers of deduction have evidently been unaffected by your little trip."

She closed the door behind him and said, "Albus's definition of absolute secrecy differs somewhat from mine."

"Do you plan to take my cloak, or shall I just stand here dripping on your floor?"

"Also his idea of pleasant company," she said, taking the cloak and hanging it by the door.

"If you'd like me to go, say so. I do have other things to do with my time than babysit a Gryffindor from another dimension." His lip twitched and he adjusted his left cuff with a fussy tug.

She gestured for him to go into the sitting room, and as she knelt to stoke the fire, she said, "So you've been sent to spy on me, have you? To make sure I'm not sneaking out, endangering everyone with a feminine weakness for human society?"

"Congratulations, Minerva. You've got it in one."

He stood in the middle of the room, watching with his hands clasped behind him as she struggled to her feet, and she was angry with herself for being glad to see him.

"Well, you can spy just as well from a seated position, can't you?" she said. "Or would that be too much like a friendly gesture?"

He removed something from his robe pocket and used his wand to enlarge it. It was a stack of books, which he dropped on the table.

"I thought you might want something new to read. Or rather, Dumbledore did."

"Thank you. And thank Albus for me."

He looked around, as if searching for the most advantageous seat, and selected a high-backed chair facing the door.

"I'm not sure what Albus expects us to talk about," he said. "I am apparently not allowed to know why you are here, and we cannot discuss Quidditch. You already know who's going to win."

Nevertheless, she made tea, and they fell into conversation. He complained, with his customary acid wit, about Longbottom's various academic shortcomings, and she listened with a jaundiced ear, reminding him that a third of his students had failed to achieve an O.W.L. in his subject last year, so perhaps his teaching methods were less effective than one might hope.

He railed, while Minerva smirked, about Remus and his little Boggart lesson, and she goaded him about his refusal to attend Filius's annual Christmas Eve drinks party.

"But I am going this year."

She almost spilled her tea.

"Oh?"

"Your doppelganger won a wager and insists on it as payment."

Minerva tried to think of something to say, but Severus changed the subject abruptly to the recent art thefts in Sweden, opining that some of the paintings would soon turn up at the Malfoys' estate. They moved on to a discussion of the Downing Street Declaration, and debated what effect it might have on the Scottish home-rule movement, Severus taking the position that the Muggle Scots had demonstrated over the centuries that they were incapable of managing "this damp little clot of dirt" without help from their southern neighbours.

When he left, the cottage seemed emptier than it had been before. Brooding didn't suit her, so Minerva took her animal form and went for a prowl in the light snow around the cairns, glad for her feline vision as afternoon darkness overtook the island. That night, she slept soundly, and Harry's empty eyes did not, for once, haunt her dreams.

~oOo~

Severus visited more and more often over the ensuing months, always appearing unexpectedly, and they talked, played chess, and argued.

She suspected Albus had warned him against discussing time travel with her, perhaps concerned that the temptation to plumb her mind for the secrets only she possessed would prove too great a temptation for him. Albus had done so, of course, after she'd told him about the Time-Turner, but he was of the opinion that such information was best left between the two of them.

She would have liked to talk about it with Severus; new theories and ideas about space and time had cropped up over the decades since she'd sparred with Rufus over causality loops and infinite-length cylinders, and the itch to debate them with another sharp mind was almost overwhelming.

Yet whenever she brought it up, even obliquely, he none-too-deftly steered the conversation in another direction.

But one day in March, just as he was leaving, he said, "It can't work."

"What?"

"Never mind," he said, and Apparated away before she could question him further.

Later, among the back issues of *Transfiguration Today* he'd left, she found a 1990 copy of a Muggle journal, *Physical Review*. It contained a paper describing a principle of self-consistency and asserting the impossibility of changing the past.

Events on a closed timelike curve are already guaranteed to be self-consistent, Novikov argued; they influence each other around a closed curve in a self-adjusted, cyclical, self-consistent way.

Leave it to Severus to find a way to comment on the plan without saying a single word.

Eventually, and in spite of Novikov's principle, they tumbled into her bed. Or, to be perfectly accurate, her settee, that first time, when their argument had spent itself and their passion for contending had not. He was surprisingly adept with a woman's body; she had always imagined him as a sort of monk, but perhaps it was only his relentlessly black clothing that suggested it.

But a monk he was not. They argued as often as ever, but they also fucked...occasionally both at once...and she noticed that he never closed his eyes but looked at her as if afraid she might disappear if he blinked.

He didn't ask her about her past, and she returned the courtesy. The tiny island cottage was like a reverse Neverland, where neither of them had ever been young or foolish or unlucky in love; they simply existed as they were, suspended in time.

She had no idea what he wanted from her. Sex, obviously, but he could get better elsewhere. A man was always in demand at a school filled with young teachers who did not yet understand that they were spinsters, and a dark past only added to the allure for some of them. Although Remus's arrival this year had doubtless created some competition. Severus enjoyed Minerva's company, inasmuch as he enjoyed anyone's company, she knew that, but being the least objectionable among his co-workers hardly formed the basis for sexual attraction. But there was no denying that he was attracted to her.

It was a gift, she told herself, this intense young man and his ardour, an unlooked-for bonus in this strange, disconnected point in her existence. She'd always been disconnected, she supposed. Neither Muggle, like her father, nor pure-blood, like her mother, she'd been a child half in, half out of each world. Then at school, drawn more to the teachers than to her fellow students, she fit in precisely nowhere. And Rufus, of course. He had memories of the love affair she'd longed for but never had.

There had been men since, but the life of an aging schoolteacher in a boarding school in the Scottish Highlands afforded little opportunity for sex, and even less for romance. Her lovers had been, in the main, summer flings, and the two who had been interested in more had come to resent her devotion to her work, mistaking it for a devotion to Albus Dumbledore.

Well, what did she expect? She was a time-traveller. The moment she'd made the first turn on her invention, she'd untethered herself from time and space, from all others, but she longed for those bonds.

~oOo~

The closest she and Severus came to discussing their unusual situation was when she asked, just after he'd slid inside her, "Have you ever done this with the other Minerva?"

He stilled.

"If I had, wouldn't you know?"

She suppressed a laugh.

"You've been reading Novikov. No. I am not aware of all the things that happened to the Minerva from this timeline, because I exist in another timeline...another reality."

"So she is not real?"

"Of course she is real. To herself. As I am to myself."

"But you are not real to one another?"

"Yes, in theory, but we exist in separate...well, dimensions isn't really the right concept, but it is close."

"But you are in this dimension...her dimension."

"This dimension is not hers, it is mine."

His cock flagged, and she pulled her legs around his hips to keep him from slipping out.

He said, "But if you Apparated to Hogwarts right now, you could see her, touch her, just as you can touch me."

"Yes. In my dimension. My only reality is the time and space I occupy at any given moment, regardless of who or what else appears to be in it. When I do something, it is always in my dimension, in my time and my space. Never anywhere else."

"So the future Minerva, the one who will come back here, she does not exist? You do not exist?"

"She exists in her dimension as I do in mine."

He withdrew and pushed himself off of her.

"And me? Do I exist in your dimension?"

His breath hitched just before each exhalation, like a tiny question mark.

She debated expounding on multiverse theory and Hilbert spaces, then decided on a little kindness instead.

"Yes, Severus. You exist."

"Well, thank Merlin for that."

He didn't move, and she crawled down the bed to take him in her mouth. He put a hand on her head, but didn't stop her, and after a minute, he pulled her up so she could straddle him. His hands clutched her upper arms so tightly that she'd later find bruises there, and when he came, she leant down and put her palms on either side of his face and whispered against his lips, "We exist."

~oOo~

As June drew closer, Minerva grew more and more anxious, and when Dumbledore Floo-ed through to her sitting room, she nearly collapsed with relief when he told her that they had succeeded.

"Thank Merlin. So she did it?"

"No. I was certain she would use the Time-Turner to prevent the Kiss. But that is not what happened."

"Oh, Albus, who did we lose?"

"No one. They are all fine."

He paused, a small smile playing over his lips. "Severus saved them."

"But he was Stunned."

"In your original timeline. But something in this one changed enough to allow him to cast a Patronus. It was quite interesting. His form has changed."

Minerva tried to recall what Severus's Patronus had been.

Dumbledore answered the question before she asked. "It was a crow. Now, it is a doe."

Whatever she had expected, it wasn't this. She'd taken to teasing Severus when they'd finished and he got up and dressed immediately, telling him he was like a doe, afraid the wolf was on its way. It had been a way of diffusing the hurt she'd felt at his eagerness to leave her bed.

Albus said, "No one else must know it was Severus. I altered Harry's memory. He believes it was his own Patronus he saw. A stag."

He fixed his eyes on her, and she wondered at how quickly they could turn cold and piercing.

"Minerva, you didn't say anything to Severus? About what was to happen?"

She felt guilty under his gaze, and told herself she had no reason to.

"No. Although I'm sure he guessed that my appearance in this timeline was something to do with Potter."

Albus's fingers went reflexively to his beard, as they often did when he was turning something over in his mind.

"Perhaps it was enough," he said, more to himself than to her.

Then, too brightly, as if telling her of a meeting he'd forgotten or a parent who needed soothing, he said, "I had to send them back anyway."

Minerva, who had been en route to the small drinks trolley to pour them some Ogden's, stopped and turned back to him.

"Why?"

"Black was captured. Fudge would have had him Kissed. I sent them back to prevent it."

This seemed like folly in the extreme, and far too sentimental for the Albus Dumbledore she knew. But, she told herself, he prided himself on his unpredictability.

She said, "Not that I wanted Black Kissed...Merlin forbid...but I thought the main purpose was to save Harry? If we achieved that, why risk any more alterations to the timeline to save Sirius?"

"My other plans were predicated on his intact survival. Harry will leave his aunt's home on his seventeenth birthday, and he must go into hiding until he is ready to face Tom. I intend for him to live with Sirius at the Black ancestral home."

At her look, he continued, "The Black house is among the best protected I have ever encountered. Bellatrix tried for years to get access to it, but she failed. I have tried and failed. The magic protecting it is very old and incredibly strong."

"Then how will Sirius and Harry get in?"

"According to Walburga Black's will, the enchantments only permit the legitimate heir, and those he or she designates, to find and enter the home. When she died, she named Sirius's brother as her sole heir. What she presumably did not know is that Regulus also made a will shortly before his disappearance, naming Sirius his heir. If, as I believe, Regulus is dead, Sirius will be able to occupy the house."

"So you see, Minerva, that I had to send them back to save him. Otherwise, the home would likely have been lost forever."

He sounded like a first-year, trying to convince her that it wasn't his fault the matchstick had become a nettle rather than a needle. She decided to simply be glad that all three of them had escaped the Kiss.

"But will he agree to live there? He loathed the place," she said.

"He will have nowhere else to go. When Pettigrew escaped, Sirius's last chance at exoneration, at least for the moment, went with him."

Later, as she went over the day's events in her mind, her thoughts kept returning to Severus. Her strange appearance in this timeline had apparently changed things enough to alter what had happened to Severus that night. She was tempted to ask him about it when he next came to her, but then she recalled that he had no knowledge of the events of the original timeline.

She tried not to wonder whether the Severus from the original timeline had been, as he had said, still Stunned when the Dementors attacked Harry, Hermione, and Sirius, or if he had seen the Dementors but opted not to intervene.

She reminded herself that such a Severus no longer existed. Not in her reality. The Severus in her world had a new Patronus.

~oOo~

As the future became the past and Minerva waited for the Time-Turner to be returned to her other self at the end of term, she wondered what might happen if she simply didn't go back. If she stayed here, in this timeline, and let the future unfold as it would with two Minerva McGonagalls in intersecting superpositions. What would it change?

She could flee, choose another future for herself, yet another reality. And perhaps . . .

Thinking of it later, after she'd re-calibrated the Time-Turner and given it 338.25 clockwise turns, and her future self had shot off into whatever reality belonged to her, it would all seem utterly ridiculous. Existence couldn't consist simply in the arrangement of particles, could it? If so, why bother about souls? About love?

IX.

Hermione has come to the end of her work. She's spent far too much time on the McGonagall entry, and she'll have to rush to finish editing the forty-three new entries that have come in from the other writers by the deadline. She also has to review the older entries and decide which need updating.

Her entry on Minerva is written, but it feels unfinished. She cannot help being disappointed at not having found out what became of Minerva, although she's insisted rather adamantly to all who would listen that it wasn't important, that the life Minerva McGonagall lived up through February 1999 was quite interesting enough to merit careful examination.

She lies to Neville, telling him she needs to confirm some minor genealogical facts, and asks him to ask Hannah if she would arrange a meeting between Hermione and Perdita Abbott, Hannah's cousin's widow and Minerva's great-niece.

Several days later, Hermione receives an owl inviting her for tea at Madam Abbott's in Godric's Hollow. It is the first time Hermione has been there since the fateful trip with Harry at the end of what the wizarding history books call the Great War, which has always irked her.

The town has changed since then. Where once there were well-kept half-timbered houses and small lanes, there is now a run-down high street with shops and restaurants that are mostly shuttered.

The Abbot cottage is also run-down. The paint is peeling, and the garden is overgrown with weeds. The Perdita who greets her at the door is more than a decade younger than Hermione, but her hair is shot-through with grey, and when Hermione remarks on the changes in Godric's Hollow, she says, "Oh, yes. After the war...not the last one, of course, but the Great War...it got to be quite the tourist destination, back after that book came out and they did that film. Everyone wanted to see where that snake... Oh, I'm sorry. I'm afraid I forgot that it really happened to you."

Hermione is quite used to her life story being treated like a page from a historical novel.

"It's all right," she says.

"Anyway, the property values went way up, and more wizards moved in. Then, when the economy went tits up, they moved out again, mostly, and they haven't come back."

Despite the evidence of the Abbott family's falling fortunes, their tea is served by a house-elf, the first Hermione's seen in years. When the elf has deposited the tea things and disappeared, Perdita says, almost apologetically, "She wanted to stay. The rest of her family was killed in the reprisals just before Emancipation. I tried to get her to go to Hogwarts with the others, but she wouldn't. I pay her now, of course."

Hermione gives what she hopes is a genuine-looking smile, and says, "Thank you for inviting me."

"It's my pleasure. Though I'm not sure I can tell you any more than what's in the genealogy my father did, and it's all online."

"Yes, I saw it, he was very thorough. Actually, I was wondering if you know anything about Minerva's house? Some of her papers refer to a place in Islay."

"It came to me after she was declared dead." Perdita fusses nervously with the tea cosy. "I sold it three months ago."

"Were there any papers, any diaries?"

"There were some papers, but I'm afraid I disposed of them."

At Hermione's look, she adds, "I'm sorry, but they didn't look like anything...mostly receipts, some old tax forms. She was rarely there in the last years, so I thought everything important would be at Hogwarts."

"I see."

Hermione tries to hide her frustration, but it is apparently written across her face.

"I've done something terrible, haven't I?" Perdita asks.

"No, not at all. You did what anyone would do."

"We did keep some of the furniture. The kids took most of it, but there's a writing desk in my office, if you'd like to see it."

The desk is one of those with a hundred tiny cubbies for the obsessive organiser to fill. There's a holoscreen and a hard copy of *E-Auctions for Imbeciles* sitting on it. For a moment, Hermione holds out a hope that she'll find some note, some crucial clue, hidden in the desk, but when she performs several Revealing spells...with Perdita's permission...nothing happens.

"There were quite a lot of books," Perdita says from behind her. "I got rid of most of them, but I kept the ones that looked like they might be valuable. They're on that shelf there."

She points to a bookcase behind the desk, and Hermione steps around to have a look. There's a leather-bound *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, several of Dickens's more famous works, and, she smiles to see, a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* that looks like the edition Hermione first read when she got her Hogwarts letter.

Hermione says, "May I?"

"Be my guest."

She takes the book out and opens it to a random page, which details settling of the first Mer-colony in the Black Lake. There is no marginalia, no underlined passages, as she flips through. Not that she expected there to be. Hermione would never mark a book, and she suspects that she and Minerva are...were...alike in that.

When she puts it back on the shelf, she notices *The Time Machine* next to it. It is very old, this copy, and the faded red cloth of the spine is cracked with wear. Something compels her to pull it out, and when she opens it, her heart begins to thud insistently in her chest. There is a piece of parchment folded between the pages. It almost slides out, but Hermione anchors it with a quick finger.

Closing the book, she says without thinking, "Can I buy these from you?"

Perdita is not expecting the question, and she hesitates before answering.

"I guess so. I don't have any emotional attachment to them, but why would you want them?"

"I collect old books, and it would mean a lot to me to have Minerva's."

The first part of the statement is a lie, but the second is not.

"I should have them appraised, I suppose," said Perdita.

"I'll give you two thousand Galleons."

Perdita bites her lip, and Hermione realises that she's come on too strong, so she softens her tone.

"I'm not trying to cheat you, honestly. I just really want the books. Tell you what: if you'll sell them to me tonight, I'll have an appraiser come look at them as soon as possible. You can choose the appraiser, and I'll pay for it. If he or she thinks I've underpaid, I'll give you the difference. If I've paid too much, you can keep it. I'll take a Wand Oath."

When Hermione gets home with her Shrunken treasure, Ron is, thankfully, out. She doesn't know how she's going to explain the sudden depletion of their Gringotts account. They can afford it, but it will mean cutting back elsewhere. Probably they'll have to skip their planned holiday in Spain.

She opens the book with trembling hands and takes out the parchment hidden in its pages. It is a letter, unsigned and undated.

If you are reading this, I am dead.

I can only hope that, when the charm on this parchment activates, the Dark Lord is dead and Potter victorious, but I must allow for the possibility that the Dark Lord has prevailed, in which case I do not wish to contemplate the circumstances under which you might be reading this.

As I write, however, I am, regrettably, still living, here, in this dimension, and I find it strangely intolerable to think that you should take a single thing I have said or done to you in the past year forward to your new life, or your death.

You suspected my true allegiance; I could see it in your face. I had to crush that hope...and this was no sudden pang of concern for your safety; it was mine with which I was concerned. I have an assignment, and I mean to complete it. Your meddling was a hindrance and a danger, and I have nipped it in the bud, have I not? Am I not Dumbledore's cleverest pupil?

And yet, that night in your quarters was the worst thing I have ever done. Or perhaps it was the best; I do not know anymore, and the terms best and worst seem to have ceased to mean anything.

What I do know is that you are the only good I have known of the world for some time, and I've never told you. Unhappy as I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth, as that hack you are so fond of once wrote, but in this case he is apt. In any event, I am not entirely sure I have a heart. If I do, I am certain it is black as night and you are better off for being rid of me.

Forgive me.

Her eyes are wet as she reaches the end, and she reads it again, and then again.

She has occasionally thought about what those left at Hogwarts that final year of the war had to face, and she realises that, despite Ginny's descriptions, despite all the histories she's read, she has no bloody idea. She suspects that her own hardships paled in comparison. She does not want to think about what Minerva's life was like then.

She wipes her running nose on her sleeve.

Foolish girl.

It's his voice she hears in her head, and it makes her laugh aloud.

Her eagerness to look through the other books has faded, and she decides to leave them for tomorrow. She has to reconfigure yet another Minerva in her mind. She has to conceive a new Snape, one who would care about forgiveness, who would write such a note. One who might have loved Minerva.

Was it Minerva's image he carried to his grave, even as he gave Harry memories of Lily Potter?

Did Minerva know? Or was this note his declaration?

She betrayed nothing when Harry brought Snape's body back to the makeshift morgue that the Great Hall had become. And at the hurried funeral, one of too many in the weeks that followed the end of the war, her words had been professional, the expression of sorrow for a colleague, not a lover. Then again, this was Minerva. Tears and the rending of garments would not have been her way.

There are too many unanswered questions, and Hermione feels too many things.

She folds the parchment and puts it back in the book.

When Ron gets home, she's curled up on the sofa, seventy-three pages into *The Time Machine*.

He kisses her quickly and goes to put his broom in the shed. After he's showered and changed, he comes back downstairs and makes tea. Handing her a cup, he sits down next to her and asks, nodding at the old book, "What's this?"

She closes the book and says, "I'm afraid I've done something stupid."

~oOo~

"What the hell?" Ron asks, dropping his fork to his plate with a clatter.

The noise that has interrupted their dinner turns out to be an owl at the window. It's a large one and makes a great deal of noise. Hermione takes the parcel and looks at Ron helplessly. Owl post is so unusual these days that they don't even keep any owl treats handy. Ron cuts a bit off his lamb chop and gives it to the bird, who hoots its thanks and flutters off, leaving a mess of feathers on the windowsill.

The parcel is the size of a deck of cards, and it bears a stamp saying: Shrunken by #212. Hermione Enlarges the parcel and opens it.

Inside is a folder with a note from Perdita attached:

Dear Hermione,

My daughter found some more of Minerva's papers in a bedside cabinet. They look like old Muggle forms, but I thought I'd send them on in case you want them. If not, feel free to bin them.

Best,

Perdita

She reads it to Ron, who says, "Least she could do."

They've been tiptoeing around the subject of Hermione's recent purchase. Ron didn't say much when she told him about it...he's made a few impulse purchases over the years of their marriage, but none so large as this. But he balked when they discovered that the books were only worth about six hundred Galleons. He isn't parsimonious, but he doesn't like to feel cheated, and Hermione knows he thinks her upper-middle-class upbringing made her too cavalier about money. It was a source of minor friction early in their marriage. They'd worked it out, mostly, but it's still like a tiny stone in his shoe, waiting to cause new irritation.

She takes the folder to her office and opens it.

The first paper is thin and light-pink, and Hermione immediately recognises it as a printout from an old-fashioned computer. It's been decades since she's seen one, and it makes her think of her parents. The study in their last home in England was full of these kinds of forms; her mother was an indifferent file-keeper, and her father left the business end of their dental practice largely to his wife and partner.

Royal London Hospital

Whitechapel Road

London

E1 1BB

20 3428 9650

PATIENT NAME: Smith, Stuart Thomas

NHS No.: 943-476-5919

DATE: 10/10/98

DISCHARGE INSTRUCTIONS

1. Keep wound clean and dry. Patient may bathe. A plastic bag may be placed over the dressing to prevent accidental saturation.

2. Change the dressing daily, using sterile supplies.

3. A district nurse will visit every other day to change drains as necessary. The first visit is scheduled for:

12 October .

The second sheet notes that Smith, Stuart Thomas has been prescribed Tramacet and Cefixime, which Hermione recognises as a pain-killer and an antibiotic, and instructs the patient to return to the Harrow Road clinic in ten days.

There are several other papers...notes in what looks like Minerva's hand...about medications, food intake, urine output . . . the kind of things with which Hermione is all too familiar.

She activates the holoscreen and runs the name "Stuart Thomas Smith" through it. Google Magic returns no entries, even when she expands the search parameters beyond 19902020, so she boots out of Sphinx and into Linux to access the Muggle Internet. Regular Google comes back with a list that that at first seems daunting, until Hermione realises that there are only three entries for his full name.

The first two are genealogy sites that list two Stuart Thomas Smiths who lived in England, deceased in 1904 and 1889, respectively. The third leads to the personal site of an actor who invites visitors to use his avatar in films, webvision shows, interactive comics, and other projects ("No pornography!") for the bargain price of 25 Gooros per content exabyte and a two percent royalty for every Gooro of net profit. But the actor is too young to be the Stuart Smith she's looking for.

Next, she tries "Stuart T. Smith," and gets thirty-three hits. She scans the list quickly, using her wand to save each promising entry to her iSieve for later examination, when one catches her attention.

It's a scientific paper, "Safety and immunogenicity of a Menispermum-adjuvanted monovalent influenza vaccine in adults".

Menispermum is a term Hermione will never forget, as it was the subject of the most vicious of Snape's responses to one of her Potions essays. Although she'd received an "Acceptable" mark on the assignment, Snape's acid commentary in the margins said that, although she had clearly digested every bit of text on the subject of Moonseed in the Hogwarts library, she had no true understanding of its immunogenic properties. At the bottom of the paper, he had slashed, *Cleverness is the refuge of an intellect terrified by its own mediocrity*, reducing her to tears.

"Purchase," she says, and the holoscreen immediately spits back a request for her universal banking code. She gives it, and lets the retinal scanner confirm her identity. The Muggle account she keeps for books and other minor purchases is depleted by 200 Gooros.

A second later, the paper appears on the holoscreen.

She isn't accustomed to reading hard science, but as she looks at this paper, it dawns on her that it is about the vaccine that halted the so-called "Mystery Flu" pandemic after it had killed 35 million people, mostly Muggles and wizards with near-Muggle ancestry. It was a mystery because the H12N6 influenza virus had come from none of the usual avian or porcine reservoirs. Ron told her that the Aurors suspected an act of magical biological terrorism against Muggles and Muggle-borns, but they never traced the source. The Muggle authorities somehow managed to contain it a year after it had burned its way across the globe.

Hermione tries not to remember, but the past pushes in like an inexorable tide and fills her until there is no room for anything else.

She is back in that fucking house where she and the children had spent six weeks in quarantine. Hugo is pressed hard to her chest; she doesn't want him to see, but she forces herself to watch Rose take her last breaths. Hermione's witness and her hand the only things she can offer her sweet daughter as she slips away, out of their shared existence. Hermione's magic had been impotent as the anti-virals the Muggle doctors had pumped into her father's collapsed veins.

It is a few minutes before the past relents and she wrests herself back into the present. It is another hour before she can bring herself to look at the paper again.

X.

She'd thought her preparations had been so careful, but when she arrived in the tunnel, there was a Death Eater lying there. He was bloody, and his robes were torn, and she thought he must have managed to crawl into the tunnel in the minute after the trio emerged and before she jumped. Hermione had not told her of meeting anyone in their retreat from the Shack, and she'd thought she'd be alone.

When a piece of the tunnel wall exploded behind her, she realised he was firing at her. His aim was off, but the space was so small that she couldn't get into a good duelling position, so she dropped the tiny satchel from between her teeth, popped into her Animagus form, and backed out of the hole, nearly getting beheaded by the Whomping Willow.

Just out of the Willow's reach, Remus was battling a pair of Death Eaters, and when she popped back into her human form, he looked over at her for an instant, his wand still dancing, deflecting spells

"Minerva?" he asked.

It happened fast, but it would later haunt her with its slow-motion horror during her dreams. A red slash of light from Dolohov's wand opened Remus's chest, and he stood there in a moment of disbelief as the dark stain spread across his shirt before he crumpled to the ground.

The other Death Eater had apparently done a bunk when Minerva appeared, and Dolohov turned his wand on her. The duel took only a few minutes, but Minerva was acutely aware of every one, aware of each second ticking past. When she landed a weak Stunner, she didn't stop to secure Dolohov, nor check for signs of life in Remus.

She crawled back down into the tunnel and saw the wounded Death Eater. He was moaning and crying, and for a second, her anger and her fear made her want to use the Killing Curse for the first time in her life. She mastered the impulse and Stunned him instead. Although he would probably die if he wasn't found soon, she hadn't killed him. Taking her feline form and retrieving the satchel, she climbed over him and made her way down the tunnel.

Time seemed to suspend itself when she saw him lying on the dirty floor like a discarded doll. So much blood! It formed a black pool in the dim light, and she was alarmed to see that the wounds only pumped thin rivulets of it from his neck. His heart had slowed dangerously.

Enlarging the satchel, she pulled out the things she'd brought with her from the future: an experimental antivenin she'd got from Augustus Pye, three phials of intravenous Blood-Replenishing Potion, several large wound kits, and Dai Derwent's *Trauma Management: Spells for Field Use, Vol 3*.

She worked quickly, sealing the wound with her wand and setting up the IV, which was nearly impossible, despite the hours she'd practised on herself, leaving purple welts up and down each arm. She searched for a usable vein, even while ignoring the terrible, high-pitched whine of his breath as what was left of his blood-clogged trachea closed in reaction to the poison. Finally, there was a spark of red in the tubing, and she was in. She checked his heartbeat and for an agonising moment heard nothing, going over in her mind the complicated spell to restart it. But when she listened again, holding her own breath, there it was, little more than an irregular whisper inside his chest.

Time was her inexhaustible enemy. Sweat coated her face and made damp, itchy patches on her back and between her breasts as she waited for the potion to give him enough blood volume to allow the antivenin to circulate. Two minutes and fifty-one seconds after injecting Pye's elixir, Severus's breathing became more audible, a rasp rather than a whine, and she knew that the antivenin was doing its job.

She was no fool. Even if she got Severus there alive, the doctors at the hospital her research had told her was the best for his type of injury might not be able to keep him that way. Then there would be months of convalescence and rehabilitation before she could return to her future, and no guarantee that, when she walked in the door to the cottage in that altered future, he wouldn't curse her for saving his life.

She checked his vitals one more time. They were stable. It was time to go.

As she set the Shack to burn, Minerva knew that, even if she returned to a future in which Severus Snape never became Stuart Smith, she had changed things...changed herself...irrevocably.

Remus was dead.

So he wouldn't be there to deflect Bellatrix's curse, and Tonks would die too, unless some other change to the timeline prevented it. If not, it had already happened, while Minerva had been working to save her lover's life.

Two lives, in exchange for his.

She knew what he would make of the bargain and hoped he would forgive her.

The heat pressed in on her as she prepared to Apparate them away from this place where her future had died and from which it would begin, and she thought of the orphan whose future she'd stolen as surely as if she'd cast the Killing Curse herself.

XI.

Ironic, Hermione thinks. All those times she visited her parents in Sydney, she was less than twenty kilometres from here.

"Here" is not the place she'd expected.

The private pharmaceutical consulting firm that ST Smith supposedly owned and that was listed in the vaccine paper's disclosures is a small bungalow on a quiet street in Parramatta.

She can't picture them here, in this suburban neighbourhood, surrounded by families and sunlight, and the shouts Hermione can hear coming from the skate park down the block.

"May I see the inside?" she asks the agent.

"Of course," he says, and punches a number into the keypad by the door. It beeps, and he puts his thumb to the scanner. There is an encouraging tone, and the door clicks open.

The house is nothing remarkable. To her disappointment, there are no echoes of Minerva or Snape in the furnishings or the decor. Perhaps it's been cleaned up, made neutral, for sale.

"The furniture is included in the asking price," the agent says. "The previous owners left it. If you don't want it, I can probably get the administrator to pay for hauling it away."

"Why didn't they take their furniture?"

"They died. And since they left no will, the house is being sold as is. We're representing the state's administrator."

"Do you know how they died?"

The agent scratches his nose, and she can tell that he's been hoping she wouldn't ask.

"It happened here. I'm required to disclose that to you. The woman was old, died of natural causes. The man...her son, I guess...killed himself shortly after."

She needs to sit down.

It isn't that she expected to find him. Not here. The house has been on the market for almost two years, after all. But to have it end so abruptly makes her dizzy and nauseated, as if she were stepping too quickly off a funfair ride.

"Do you want to see the rest?"

The agent is bored now, anxious to get on with it. He knows, or thinks he knows, from her reaction that she will never make an offer now. She's squicked by the presence of death. He's seen her type before.

"Yes, please," she says, and he leads her up the stairs.

There are two bedrooms. The smaller was clearly used as an office; there is no bed, only a small desk and swivel chair. There are high bookshelves against each wall, and in the closet, but the books have been taken away.

The other bedroom contains a double bed with a brass frame. The bedclothes look new. They are a cheery yellow, and there are large, overstuffed pillows at the head. The throw at the foot is a green tartan pattern.

This is the room in which they slept, made love. Or so she hopes. She thinks of the bed she shares with Ron, in which their children were made. There were no children for Minerva and Snape. Their legacy is not flesh and blood, but history. Lives saved, Muggle and magical. No one will ever know how many. Hermione will not include the story of Minerva and Snape in any book. It belongs to them, and the fact that they are both dead does not change that.

She wants to ask if this is the room in which they died, but she thinks the agent will tell her he doesn't know.

After a perfunctory peek into the bathroom, they go back downstairs to see the kitchen. It's larger than she expected, with an island and racks for pots above it. She imagines them sitting at the table, having tea, reading the newspaper, talking . . . the things that she and Ron do every day that seem so ordinary and yet make up the fabric of a shared life.

"The basement's finished, if you want to see it," the agent says.

It was his lab, of course. The agent has tried to make it look like a typical basement rumpus room...put down area rugs, added some chairs and an old billiards table, but the shelves that line the brick walls contain lots of tiny drawers, and the floor is cement, with stains that the rugs can't quite hide. There are no windows, of course, which would have suited him, and she can picture him here, pale and intense, just as in the dungeons at Hogwarts, perched over a cauldron, slashing notes every so often in a black leather-bound notebook.

The potions would have been kept there, in the small separate room the agent calls a wine cellar, and the climate would have been as carefully controlled as if he were keeping several magnums of Salon '05 there.

They climb back up the stairs, and she knows the agent is itching to be rid of her.

She disappoints him.

"Is there a garden?"

There is, of course. A small one, with high fences on all sides to keep out busybodies and the balls of neighbour children. The remaining plants have been pruned back, and there are several holes where she suspects he removed the more dangerous items before ending his life. An Acacia blooms bright yellow in the corner, and Hermione is thankful for her allergy potion.

She can feel the agent watching her as she slowly walks the length and breadth of the garden, imagining what might have been planted in each area.

"So, that's it," the agent says. "You've seen it all."

"Would you mind getting me a glass of water?" she says, purposely stumbling a little. "I'm afraid I've rather overdone it with all those stairs."

"Sure. Come on inside and sit down."

"No, I think the fresh air is good. I'll just sit over here for a minute," she says, plopping down on a teak bench near the tree.

He eyes her, no doubt wondering if this well-kept but middle-aged lady is going to have an inconvenient and possibly fatal coronary in the middle of the property he's been trying to sell, giving him one more disclosure to make to the next prospective buyer.

"Okay," he says. "I think there are some glasses in the kitchen. I'll be right back."

She hears the screen door slide open and glances back to make sure he's not watching.

Drawing her wand from the hidden pocket in her long jacket, she takes a deep breath and says, *Accio Time-Turner*."

She is both surprised and not when the hand she's outstretched is hit by something, hard enough to sting. The Time-Turner is smaller than she remembers, or perhaps it's just that she's bigger. It's smeared with damp earth, and the chain, which is broken, slides out of the loop and disappears in the crabgrass that tufts the foot of the tree.

The door opens again, and she slips the Time-Turner into her pocket. She meets the agent halfway across the garden.

"I'm feeling much better, Mr . . . ?"

"Nguyen. So, do you have any more questions about the property?"

"No, thank you. But I'll be in touch," she lies.

"Right. Thanks," Nguyen says.

Later, in the hotel in Sydney's chaotic wizarding district, she can't stop looking at it. She's cleaned it off and put it on the chain she bought at the overpriced jeweller's in the QVB.

The safest place for it is around her neck, and she puts it there before slipping between the cold sheets. It is heavy between her breasts, the answer to a question she never knew to ask.

She is uneasy in her skin, and she doesn't know why, unless it's resonance from the emotional day she's had.

Her hand moves compulsively to her chest. The cool metal is reassuring in her fingers. She knows she will never use it. She is happy with her present, with her life. There are no regrets.

Nevertheless, she'll begin the calibration process in the morning. It will be an intellectual exercise, a walk down memory lane. There's no harm in that, after all.

~FIN~