

The Crafty Case of the Corpses That Weren't Corpses

by Ladymage Samiko

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In Which Murder Appears...?

Chapter 1 of 3

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"What would you say, Snape, to a trip to the Tower of London?" Magistra Hermione Granger, draped lazily over a large, comfortably plush armchair, looked innocently over at her companion. "Not today, certainly; it's miserable out. But soon."

"I would say, Granger," he replied, glancing over briefly before returning his eyes to *Alchimie Tō Daeg* he was perusing, "that I have already seen the Crown Jewels, and that ravens are extremely dull conversationalists. If you have a desire to play tourist at home, I suggest you choose a more intriguing setting, such as Heathrow Airport." Magister Severus Snape, late of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was sufficiently experienced to understand that innocent looks nearly always implied the opposite, and was also quite aware that Magistra Granger would reveal her intentions without any interference from him. It was simply a matter of applying his maddening habit of patience and silence. He turned a page.

The two, witch and wizard, were...quite surprisingly, to most observers...amiably ensconced within the walls of the library of Magister Snape's home at Spinner's End. The room itself had developed remarkably since our introduction to the location...as, indeed, had the rest of the house. What was once small, dark, cramped, and uncomfortable for anyone except possibly the owner, had become pleasantly airy and reasonably lit. The books, scrolls, and other paraphernalia that are the life's blood of the bibliophile were tidied away in a truly logical fashion...meaning that one could actually *find* what one wanted, as opposed to trying to deduce the logic one used when one last put the item away...and the chairs had been refurbished to the point of looking presentable while still fitting all of one's kinks. The odour was that most enjoyable combination of slightly musty books, tea, and the ghost of a wood fire. It was still small...there is only so much that can be done without unsettling a certain portion of any magical library or, indeed, the house's owner and occupant...but it was a much more pleasant place to be in than it had been.

The wizard had not even finished the new page when his companion gave a small sigh and folded her copy of *The Daily Prophet*. By this, he knew that she considered the matter serious; in little things, Magistra Granger had the habit of trying to wait him out, all the while brewing her temper to positively shrewish heights, a process which Magister Snape found quite amusing. In this instance, however, he paid heed to the signals and laid his journal down. "What is the problem *this* time?" She might consider the matter serious, but his opinion rarely matched hers...in his observation.

She did not rise to the bait, and Magister Snape made note of this as well. "The Aurors," she replied, looking quite serious and sober, "have arrested Dennis Creevey. For murder."

It was almost certainly the worst possible reaction, but from his point of view, it was the *only* possible reaction. He laughed.

It took some time, and quite a bit of the patience Magister Snape hadn't believe she possessed, for the wizard to calm down enough to be talked at. At the sound of the first hoot of laughter, Umber poked his head in, for which he might be forgiven; his master's hilarity was wholly improbable, if not impossible, and had a tinge of something that might be interpreted as hysteria. The Brownie's orders had been to stay out of the way for the afternoon, but Magistra Granger simply gave a tiny shrug and mimed a cup of tea. Umber nodded...a smooth, deep movement...and vanished again. Magister Snape was himself again by the time the Brownie returned to the library. He quirked an eyebrow at Magistra Granger and accepted the cup Umber proffered. "Thank you, Umber."

Magistra Granger smiled and offered her thanks when he poured her cup. "I think you may as well remain, Umber," she said.

Umber turned briefly to his master, who shrugged minutely. "Very well, Magistra." He retreated slightly, taking up a suitably deferential position. It was an instinct with him, one which his master did not always appreciate and which his master's... colleague had initially condemned...quite loudly and at great length. She had required a very long, detailed recitation upon the nature of Brownies...and of their degenerate, distant cousins, the house-elves...to begin to understand that she could no more ask him to stop being what she considered a 'slave' than she could ask a fish to swim backwards against a strong current. Umber was still not sure that she entirely understood, but she had, at least, ceased to pester him in the kitchen and subject Magister Snape to her well-meaning, but tiresome, lectures. Magistra Granger accepted his presence and, thankfully, his intelligent sentence. Umber was not human...though he possessed that general shape, his form appeared as though he had been stretched beyond human proportions by a mediaeval rack or a modern taffy puller...but his mind was fully formed and informed through several centuries of serving the best men and women the human race could produce, interspersed with decades of serving no one at all. Umber folded his fingers before him and fixed wholly black eyes upon the lady witch.

She recounted the article she had read, though her narrative was often interrupted by Magister Snape's comments and continued sniggers. Dennis Creevey, following the War, had chosen to honour his brother's memory by following the Arts, and lacking any inclination (perhaps even harbouring an aversion) to photography, he had chosen sculpture as a form of expression. He had been granted a fair amount of success; his fruition as an artist came just at the time when the Wizarding world had entered its mania for memorial statues, and he had, as a participant, been called on to produce the majority of them. (Magister Snape, in a rare moment of condescension and magnanimity, commented that he had actually found young Mister Creevey's representation of Magistra Granger relatively tolerable, though her hair, naturally, was all wrong. The magistra replied tartly that he had never yet seen his own statue, for which he should be grateful.) As a result, Dennis Creevey was well-monied and well thought of, and he could afford the following period of experimentation. He had then revealed that he had discovered an entirely new sculptural process, that would allow for the casting of metal statues that would, when complete, move around freely and naturally within the confines of their pedestals. They would not, however, possess the same autonomy and intelligence as their portrait counterparts. The young sculptor received an immediate barrage of requests, for he was decidedly in fashion, and began to produce his masterpieces.

He began, but could not finish. The first three of his clients had all vanished, suddenly and mysteriously, on the eve of their statues' completion. At first, this had gone unremarked upon; magical folk were notoriously vague in the matters of time and appointments, and their families had all believed that the missing people were involved in nothing more sinister than their own projects. A classic case, *The Daily Prophet* pointed out, was the wizard Owain Tardif, who in 1492 had popped over to the Continent to fetch some wine for a potion and only returned fifty years later. When pressed, he replied that he had been trying to help a fellow who had apparently gotten lost and ended up thoroughly turned around himself. Wherever he had been, it had involved a lot of sea water and a very hot sun. Tardif had, however, brought home some very interesting magical plants, which his wife later used to develop magically medicinal chocolate. She had been quoted at the time as saying that such a gift had inclined her to forgive Tardif for his protracted absence. And so, it was only when Dennis called on the families of the missing in a effort to locate them that the connection was remarked upon, and suspicion began to grow. After all, the Muggle-born wizard had come up with a process that no one had ever had an inkling of before. Further, he had not taken it to the Ministry to be properly registered and regulated, nor had he shared it with anyone, even though there were other magical artists clamouring for the secret. What else could be assumed but that there was some Dark secret to his new technique, one that kept him from sharing it and must somehow cause these disappearances?

Snape rolled his eyes. "Dennis. Creevey," he said meaningfully.

"I agree with you," Granger replied. "People change, certainly, and the War certainly changed all of us, but Dennis really only sobered a bit. Somehow, he's still the same irrepressible little boy he was at Hogwarts. I don't see how anyone could take him seriously as a murderer, or even a kidnapper. It's possible, I know, but pretty bloody far-fetched, if you ask me."

"Assumptions, Magistra Granger."

She sighed. "I know. Assumptions will get you killed."

"If I may, Magistra," Umber interjected quietly, "who are the missing wizards, and what other connection might they have?"

"That's the troubling bit," the witch admitted. "Whatever other connection they might have is... improbable, at best. I've been cudgelling my brain and so far come up empty. The first was Cornelius Fudge."

"I imagine a majority of the Wizarding world would be queuing up to perform *that* service to humanity," Snape quipped *sotto voce*.

"The second," she continued, giving Magister Snape a hard look, "was Apolline delaCour."

That brought the wizard upright. "Who the devil would want to kill *her*? At least, here in England. Being half-Veela, I should imagine there are quite a few women in *France* who might want her out of the way, but she doesn't spend enough time here for that."

"If I thought for one minute," Hermione remarked sweetly, "that you were... looking in that direction, my first target would be *you*, not her." Snape bowed his head in mocking acquiescence. "Her only connection here that I know of would be her daughters and their families. I've never heard of any *liaisons*, or even of any real flirtations, from Ginny, and she would know. Between Molly and the Harpies' locker room, she hears every shred of gossip worth knowing...and a lot that isn't. I think she knew of your refusal two milliseconds after I had popped the question...the first time, I mean."

"It was very nicely done, Magistra," Umber inserted politely, "if I may say so." The Brownie had an appreciation for events that were well-planned and -executed, the more so if the effort was put forth in his master's favour.

"Thank you, Umber," she replied. She added, favouring her companion with a mock glare, "He still said no."

"A regrettable and hopefully impermanent lapse of judgment on his part, Magistra."

"Are you quite certain you still work for me, Umber?" Snape interjected smoothly.

The Brownie, undeterred, continued. "I shall endeavour to anticipate your next appeal, Magistra. As, if I may be so forward, will Mrs. Potter. I am afraid she is *not* what I would call a lady. I have several times been forced into less than aboveboard methods in order to prevent her entry or her introduction of surveillance devices into this house. I suspect her, Magistra, of gathering information for the benefit of the *papers*." The last was expressed with the fastidious disgust of a Kneazle finding a Mißchen in his path, and Hermione nearly laughed before his words made their true impression upon her understanding.

Both witch and wizard bolted upright in their chairs at the admission, and Magister Snape roared his fury, both at the effrontery of Mrs. Potter and the duplicitous silence of his butler. Nothing would please him short of a full accounting of the facts of the attempts, and this derailed the conversation from its initial intent for some time. In fact, the sun had long since set, and it was far too late to even contemplate a trip to London town, had they been inclined to. Magistra Granger did manage to bring matters back to the third and final disappearance: Lavender Brown. Like the other two, she had vanished around the time of her final sitting with young Creevey. Unlike the others, she had been missed almost immediately, having had, the previous evening, a magnificent row with her current beau, Ronald Weasley, which *The Daily Prophet* had taken great

glee in reporting. They had parted ways at the restaurant...with young Auror Weasley footing the bill...but he had called round to her flat early the next day, hoping, as he said, to patch things up before her witch-friends got hold of her. He had let himself in, being possessed of a key, and found that she had never even been home. Being an Auror...and famous and a friend of the even more famous Boy-Who-Lived...he was able to call in the department immediately. "Further investigation," Hermione quoted from *The Prophet*, "introduced the gravest concern for Miss Brown's whereabouts," and later uncovered Mme. de la Cour's apparent vanishing into thin air. (A self-inflicted condition that was considered and disproved, though both Snape and Hermione refused to take *The Prophet's* word for it. Or, indeed, for anything.) Mr. Fudge had been missed some time before, but had been rather neglected through the placement of his case in the hands of two neophyte Aurors with their safe-training spells barely removed. This situation was rectified immediately upon the discovery of The Creevey Connection, and the young man was brought in immediately upon no stronger evidence than that each missing person had noted an appointment with him in their diaries, though he did admit that he had sculpted all three...sculptures left unfinished in their final, animative spell casting. *The Prophet* asserted confidently that a search warrant would be forthcoming, adding with equal certainty that the dastardly criminal would undoubtedly be unmasked in the process and brought to swift, unerring justice...trademark rhetoric of the magical tabloid.

"What they don't seem to have thought through," Hermione added upon finishing, "is that if Dennis *did* have some *nefarious* necessity to finish the animation spells, the figures would be completed by now...Fudge and Apolline, anyway; he might not have had time for Lavender."

"Logic," Magister Snape said dryly, "is not their long suit. In fact, it is a trait that very few wizards...or witches...possess." The implied compliment was clear to one who had spent as much time in Snape's company as she had, and Hermione, to her embarrassment, blushed.

"You still won't marry me, will you?" she asked, busying her hands and eyes with her evening coffee.

"Certainly not," Snape answered equably, stirring his own.

"But you will come with me tomorrow?"

"Of course."

For most wizards, a trip to London was a simple apparition from anywhere in Britain, but it particularly suited Magister Snape to approach the Establishment in such a way that no one was aware of his arrival until he was standing before them...and sometimes not even then. And so the two wizards popped into a generally disused corner of the venerable Victoria and Albert Museum, took a few moments to appreciate the tapestries, and proceeded in a deliberate fashion down to the Underground station below. They both found the trains an amusing means of transportation that had the added benefit of being completely free of people whom they did not wish to see.

A short time later, they were walking onto the grounds of the Tower of London. In the heart of the ancient City, the Tower was its war crown, giving the impression of both delicacy and endurance, as well as a certain aloofness; it did not mingle with more common structures. In seeing it, Hermione imagined that if the worst ever came, the Tower (like Hogwarts, in its way) would be the site of Britain's last stand, its defenders waving the two-fingered salute in defiance of whatever barbarians the universe had thrown at them. She dismissed the image as pure whimsy, and continued on across the yard. She should very much have liked to take Severus's arm, but did not like the thought...and knew he would feel the same...of impeding one or the other's wand hand.

A small door set into the outer wall was rather ignored by everyone who came to see the Tower, and was even fairly neglected by the men whose business it was to secure the ancient fortress. The two passed through...Severus at the lead as it improved his humour...and nodded to the wizard who lounged just inside, feet propped atop a heavy desk. He was an odd chap...not always there, though his job seemed to be to look after the door...and none of the regular Aurors ever seemed to have a fair idea of who he might be, though they never worried over him much, either. He often liked to talk nonsense, and today, he flashed a broad grin and confided to Hermione, "I hate pears."

"Bananas." She liked him and took his nonsense in stride. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Shame," the chap fit in before they passed and wagged a trainer-clad foot.

The Aurory-Under-Tower was a labyrinthine sort of place, and Snape sent out a magicked ball of twine in search of their quarry. Narrow halls were peppered with narrow doors, which gave way to narrow rooms. The room meant to hold not-yet-criminal wizards was no better, and the addition of even a single witch to its standard population of one not-yet-criminal and a half-dozen Aurors made it resemble the final stages of a parlour game of Sardines. Dennis Creevey sat uncomfortably sandwiched between two brawny Aurors with sufficient muscles to fill the cell all by themselves. His brown hair hung limp and his eyes drooped: a cheerful beagle transformed into a mournful basset hound. Snape waited for him to howl, but was disappointed. "Out," he ordered peremptorily. A slim girl who had been leaning against the wall shrugged and slipped through the door. Three more, arranged deliberately around and on a desk equipped with any number of arcane law-enforcement potions and apparati, levered themselves up and fingered their wands, all the while glaring suspiciously at the magister. He glared back with far better success; they, too, evacuated the tiny room in favour of the hall. The muscles remained. Hermione took a seat at the desk; Snape leaned against it.

In all his time as her schoolmate, Dennis had always struck Hermione as extraordinarily *young*, a gambolling puppy even amongst the half-grown ones that surrounded her. And now that he was grown, that didn't seem to have changed. He wore large glasses that magnified earnest eyes, and while he might be a bit low, his essential honesty and eagerness stood out all over him in knobs. She exchanged a glance with Magister Snape and knew they concurred in their opinion of the boy.

"You," Magister Snape intoned, "are a positive nuisance to the community."

A grapevine, magical or mundane, is the swiftest form of communication known to the universe, so it was hardly a surprise to the current head of the Aurory, Kingsley Shacklebolt, when two old comrades came to visit him from further down the hall. Nor did it surprise either Hermione or Snape that Kingsley was expecting them. They accepted his hospitality gracefully, feeling much better now that they could move their elbows more than half an inch away from their torsos, and endured his smugly knowing expression.

"I find it hard to swallow myself," Shacklebolt admitted when all were seated and had their cup of tea. "That kid, of all people. But we had to secure the studio, if for no other reason than to keep the rest of the populace from bugging up our investigation. Most wizards still don't understand the problems presented by manufacturing evidence; they see it as 'helping us out.' Merlin forbid that any witch or wizard pronounced guilty by *The Prophet* have the effrontery to be innocent." He paused to accommodate Snape's roll of the eyes and Hermione's spluttered expostulations. "They also have trouble with the concept that lynch mobs are immoral...and might also be wrong. I feel better with Dennis in here, where I can keep an eye on him and where his worst injuries will be a pair of bruised elbows."

"Has he explained his 'process' to you?" he asked suddenly.

Hermione acquired her own, suitably muted, smug expression. "He trusts *us*," she said primly. "And as far as we can determine without testing it ourselves, it is a perfectly legitimate system of dependent spells and charms based on the Kalibos animative limning codification with suitable adjustments made for the differences introduced by the use of different materials and three-dimensional media. It does *not* involve necromancy or animancy in any of the forms delineated by *Price's Compendium of the Morbid and Moribund*."

"I'm sorry, Hermione; did you just imply that you've *read* the *Compendium*?"

"Certainly I have. Severus gave it to me for my last birthday but one."

Kingsley caught a terribly unsubtle smirk upon the magister's face and decided he had better move on. "Well, then. That's good to know. Creevey wouldn't share it with *us*, naturally, but the pair of you have better credentials than we do."

"Now, to be blunt, we can't find any evidence to implicate Creevey in these disappearances. We've searched his studio, his flat, even his parents' house and found

precisely nothing. We *have* impounded the statues as they are and I'm having them brought here. You two can take a look when they come in; I'm sure Severus's expertise in Dark magic will be quite valuable in their evaluation...not to mention more trustworthy when it's written up in the papers. Otherwise, his movements are generally accounted for, his actions consistent. There's no creditable motive that we can discover, unless he's simply a psychopath...which isn't impossible. We may have to resort to Veritaserum, but that's very unsatisfactory."

"And unreliable in the mentally unstable," Magister Snape pointed out. "If Creevey is a psychopath, the results would be buggered from here to Cathay and back."

"There *must* be some other connection," Hermione interjected. She frowned in a way that reminded Snape uncomfortably of the classroom. "Fudge. Mme. delaCour. Lavender. Is there some cause that they're all a part of? Did they meet with any common person *besides* Dennis? Why did they all decide to have their statues made?"

Kingsley leaned back in his chair to an alarming degree. "Brown and Fudge were on a few post-war committees; Fudge's absence from grandstanding *had* been noticed, but with relief more than anything else. The French witch's only interests here were her two daughters and their families; according to Fleur and Gabrielle, she had little opinion of anything else in Britain...and that's saying it nicely. She met with Auror Weasley briefly in the course of visiting, but only ever in company, and he goes to great pains to avoid Fudge; he has since the end of the war."

"I *do* think he loves her," Hermione added softly. "Ron and Lavender, I mean. He told me a little while back that he was planning to propose."

Snape snorted. "I hope he was planning to do a better job of it than *last* time." Weasley had made an announcement in front of the gathered Weasley clan...without bothering to ask Magistra Granger beforehand. Her reply had made the headlines back then...and had been quoted verbatim without any improvement by a Quick-Quotes Quill.

The lady smiled. "He asked for advice this time. I'm female enough to have valuable information on the mysteries of witches."

"They *did* have a fight," Kingsley reminded them.

"They always fight," Hermione countered. "I've known them to have one every day for two weeks straight. I think they enjoy it. Ron's impressed that she'll stand up to him, and Lavender likes the abject apologies afterwards. And you haven't answered my third question."

"Why..." Kingsley tilted his head back to look at the dingy ceiling. High above, it had been carved with fantastical monsters and painted with a variety of celestial themes; the resulting confusion was so crowded that he might very well be able to pick out the answers to universal mysteries in its expanse. "There I have to take Creevey's interpretation. He didn't ask, but I asked him and their relatives what they knew on that score."

"Cornelius Fudge is an egotistical old sod who should have been confined to his house for the safety of the community," Magister Snape put in, with a drawling sneer.

"He was thinking of re-entering the Ministry," Kingsley added, to the outrage of witch and wizard, both of whom began spluttering violently. He continued, "Mrs. Fudge was quite certain on that point, including his dreams of becoming Minister of Magic again. The statue was to be part of his public campaign."

"The man was self-centred and egotistical to the point of insanity!" expostulated Hermione.

"It is more surprising that some charitable soul hasn't done away with him long since," Snape agreed.

"I rather think Creevey agrees with you...and with myself." The large Auror smiled. "I saw the statues in studio; the thing is supposed to show Fudge reaching for the future, and all I saw was a small, selfish, little man clutching at whatever he could get." Kingsley sobered. "It wouldn't be surprising if there had been an altercation between Fudge and Creevey when the man got a look at his likeness. Self-absorption coming up slap-bang against artistic temperament. Might even have been an accident."

"That still doesn't explain the others," Hermione said. "They can't *all* have objected to their portrayal."

"You wouldn't think so. And I'd doubt it. Mme. delaCour's is lovely, naturally, though it doesn't have the magnetism of the original."

Magister Snape smiled thinly. "A Veela's power is rooted in her being, which is just as well, or we'd have piles of wizards in front of a portrait, dying from dehydration as they drooled."

Hermione's eyebrows lifted. "Are you immune, then?" she asked.

Magister Snape looked smugly back. "My attention has always been... elsewhere." Magistra Granger turned away, and it was Kingsley's observation that she was biting her lip rather severely. He wisely said nothing, but turned the conversation back.

"Mme. delaCour would realise that," he said. "She would not fault the sculptor for not capturing the impossible. And Miss Brown's is a fair likeness, insofar as I know her. Creevey said that his impression was that she was planning it as a gift rather than a possession."

"She's vain, but not that vain, I don't think. A few magical scars do that to a person," Magistra Granger said evenly. "I'd guess it was a present for her parents... or for Ron."

"Still," Snape meditated, "we have three people with sufficient egotism to have statues made of themselves. I imagine it's something we should remember."

Kingsley took them down to the White Room, where possibly criminal objects were stored. It was, as the name suggested, a massive room painted a stark, unrelenting white that made Magistra Granger wish for sunglasses or protective goggles.

"Just movin' 'em in now, sir," rumbled a heavy-shouldered, plain-robed wizard. He looked as though he had been carved of the grey stones that constructed the Tower. "They's in the Grey Room. That's th' room they's apparated into," he added, for the benefit of the green-as-grass companions of the Chief. "Ah, 'ere they come." The three silvery statues bobbed along between the wands of two lanky apprentices. One statue wobbled. "Careful, y' flobber-brains!" he called and dashed over to help. "Them's evvy-dense!" But he was too late, and Magisters Snape and Granger watched as the figure of Lavender Brown, still stationary on her pedestal, swayed alarming to and fro before toppling with a sense of inevitability. The elbow smacked down on the stone floor with a nasty combination of clanging and snapping, then skidded away.

Hermione, for all her modern sensibilities and professional detachment, couldn't help it; she screamed, a single, loud, piercing shriek that echoed through the mostly empty room, and her hands flew to her mouth in a futile attempt to stifle further sounds. Snape laid heavy hands along her shoulders and pulled her back against him, though he did not try to block her vision of the grisly relic that lay but a few feet away.

From inside the hollow metal of the statue's arm protruded a browning, yellow-white bone: a human arm-bone, complete with the joint and entirely devoid of flesh.

Lavender Brown's arm bone.

It was a long, horrid, grotesque process that followed. While the Aurors and medi-wizard were the ones who did the actual work and were both careful and skilled, the extraction of the desiccated skeletons from their silver skin was uncomfortably akin to an autopsy. Magistra Granger was quite green by the time they finished their task and laid the bones out along tables. Magister Snape characteristically silent and uncharacteristically thoughtful, conjured a bottomless basin for her to use and made no objection when she gripped his hand or leaned heavily against him. They watched the Aurors conduct a battery of tests, and when they were over, it was quite certain that the bodies of Cornelius Fudge, Apolline delaCour, and Lavender Brown lay on the tables before them.

After the awful business was completed, Head Auror Shacklebolt showed Magisters Snape and Granger into a room that appeared to belong to someone's very ancient

great-aunt. Cabbage roses were ubiquitous in the textile patterns, and the scent of lavender hung heavily in the air. It was a room that seemed to Hermione to be wildly incongruous with the rest of the Under-Tower facilities, until she noticed a distinct absence of the more intrusive forms of wizardry...things along the lines of magic mirrors and talking portraits...and remembered the soothing properties of the all-too-appropriate herbal scent. She listened for a moment and realised that the room was not deafeningly silent, either, though she could not precisely place the nature of the ambient noise. It, too, was calming, 'home-like', a balm to senses that had just been violently assaulted.

Kingsley gestured for them to have a seat. Tea appeared on a table, three lightly steaming cups in pleasantly worn china. The Auror took a swig and gazed at it in surprise. "Huh. Better than the usual dishwater." (Even house-elves cannot surpass such set traditions as the quality of institutional tea.) Snape and Granger tried their own; he detected mint, ginger, lavender, and lemon...amongst other things...and exchanged a glance with Magistra Granger. Both detected the fine hand of Umber behind this little luxury; he was no doubt behind the scenes somewhere, bullying his way into the Aurory elves' domain. Hermione allowed herself a moment to settle back into the settee and let the tea do its work on her still-rolling stomach and raw-edged nerves.

"The families will arrive shortly," Kingsley said finally. "They'll have to be told and allowed to make arrangement for the bodies. I can't... Under the circumstances, it *must* be Dennis, but I can't quite make myself believe it. But he's said himself that there is no one else who could have tampered with the... the statues."

"It's horrible. It's sick!" Hermione set her cup down in its saucer with a heavy clink. "I knew Lavender; she would've been so *pleased* with her statue, so excited to think of giving it to... to Ron, probably, and making up with him and having him admire it and then gushing about it and their make-up sex all the day after. She... she could be such a *child* sometimes, and somewhere in all that... that giddy joy, she had *this* done to her. It's *obscene*! And a waste. Such an awful, awful waste!" Long fingers delicately removed her cup from white-knuckled fingers. Half-ashamed of her outburst, Hermione leapt from the couch and began pacing the room.

"You did not say, 'He killed her,'" Snape put in, eyes following her back-and-forth, something that was not overlooked by the Auror. "You don't believe it was Creevey, either, do you?"

"I don't *want* to!" she exclaimed. "But it's all there; all the evidence is there! And silver-plated, to boot!" she added with a slightly hysterical laugh. "Oh, hell!" Her fist pounded the wall, and she hunched against it. "I should be used to this," her muffled voice emerged. "Violent death. Murder. Betrayal. I've seen it before. Why the hell should I care? Why can't I just skip blithely away and leave it where it belongs, in Kingsley's lap?"

"Because you're Hermione bloody Granger. And you will sit down and drink your tea, Granger. It's gone cold." Snape's sharp tones cut with precision. Hermione did not sit down, but she snatched up her cup and bolted it down.

A knock, meant to be discreet but delivered by a fist that believed a right hook to be subtle, rattled the door. Kingsley shouted his permission to enter.

"Scuse me, Chief," the beefy sergeant poked his head in, after the manner of a wizard expecting to need a shield from a deliberate and malicious hex. "But Auror Mageworthy's informed the families, Chief, and that Mrs. Fudge's gone in to see her husband, Chief, 'cept she says it ain't her husband, Chief, and never was her husband, Chief, and we'd better have a 'damned, bloody good excuse,' beggin' yer pardon, Chief, or she's gonna 'have all yer arses on toast,' beggin' yer pardon again, Chief."

"What in the name of Mordred is *that* supposed to mean?" Shacklebolt surged up from his chair.

The sergeant ducked back behind the open door. "Dunno, Chief. Not my department, Chief. But the *corpus* folk says he is, Chief, and she says he ain't, Chief. Sommat 'bout his teeth, Chief, near as I can make out, Chief."

Shacklebolt said something very brief and extremely pungent, and the sergeant took that as his cue to vanish. Snape and Hermione exchanged glances and followed the Head Auror as he strode out of the room.

A/Ns: This was written for the 2014 SSHG Promptfest, the first exchange I've ever written for, and was a response to hopelessliehermn's prompt for a Dorothy Sayers (Peter Wimsey/Harriet Vane) inspired fic. The Aurory-Under-Tower was inspired by Doctor Who, because if UNIT can appropriate it, then so can I. (For that matter, kudos if you noticed the cameo there.) More complete A/Ns & disclaimers due at the end of the fic, lest I inadvertently give something away.

In Which Murder is Disproven... and Re-proven

Chapter 2 of 3

Several people have disappeared from the wizarding community, and a wholly unlikely suspect is being accused. Who else but Hermione Granger would take up this impossible case—and who else would she drag along with her but Severus Snape? A classically styled murder mystery.

Mrs. Eulalia Fudge was of the breed of witch known as Formidable, a Force to Be Reckoned With, complete with capital letters...even in all capitals, if the wind was in the east. Today, the wind appeared to be an east wind of gael force. Snape, in full possession of all the insight and prudence twenty years of spying and over forty years of Slytherinning had instilled in him, discreetly kept out of her direct line of sight and ensured that his wand was loose in its holster. Hermione, in full possession of her common sense and respect for his instincts, followed his example. Kingsley, being the Wizard in Authority, could only wistfully consider bolting out of the room, but was condemned to the full Force of the witch's Stare.

"You," she said, the syllable infused with glacial fridity, "have made the most incompetent of mistakes. I do not know who *that* is, but I can assure you with complete confidence that *that* is *not* my husband. I *suggest*, Auror Shacklebolt, that you rid yourself of whatever incompetent told you that it was."

Head Auror Shacklebolt bristled. "I assure you, madam, that our forensic witches and wizards are both highly talented and trained. Several of them have conducted a battery of tests and examinations. Every test has positively concluded that this is, indeed, your husband. I can understand that you may be *unwilling* to accept..."

"Unwilling, my eye!" Mrs. Fudge snapped. "I believe I may be expected to know my husband, Auror Shacklebolt. I have laid my eyes on him nearly every day for the last forty years. I have supervised every detail of his activities and habits. I am quite aware that in spite of my direct order, the house-elves have smuggled to him nearly a pound of Turkish Delight every day. I am *also* aware that in consequence, the majority of his teeth have rotted into nothing. I am aware that I made him an appointment several years ago to see a competent dental wizard in London, whom he avoided as potential hazard to his *public image*, choosing instead to visit a shoddy little quack in *Lichtenberg*, of all places! Instead of regrowing his teeth, as any proper *British* dental wizard would do, the... the *man* pulled them and sent him home with little more than an anchored Glamour. My husband has possessed no more than a handful of teeth for years, whatever he might have wanted *British Wizards* to think!"

Everyone's eyes shifted to the corpse upon the table and its perfect set of pearly slightly-yellows. They were the teeth of an English wizard who has been drinking tea for several decades. They were not the teeth of an English wizard who had been guzzling cloyingly sweet candies for as long. Nor were they the appallingly artificial perfection that would have been the result of American-influenced denti-wizardry. Shacklebolt was forced to admit...to himself, if no one else...that something was very wrong.

Very few Aurory wizards would sleep that night.

"Duplicates," Head Auror Shacklebolt confirmed to Magisters Snape and Granger the next morning when he called at Hermione's flat. "Magically produced duplicates, created from some fragment of the original. All of them."

"That's old magic, isn't it?" Hermione queried rhetorically. "Intensive, though not particularly complicated to perform. I remember discussing it with Molly Weasley once, when I asked her how she managed to feed that horde of Weasleys on Arthur's salary. That was when I was struggling on Ministry pay," she added hastily. "I needed the advice. She used it to duplicate joints of meat." She went a bit green as she applied that statement to the current situation, as did Magister Snape. Shacklebolt looked none too happy with the idea himself.

"Er, household uses aside," he said, "it does tend to be a witch's magic; I don't know why. It's not taught in Hogwarts, as you remember, and it's one of the spells that mothers pass on to their daughters. Sons, not so much; we have other ways of accomplishing the same end."

"But none so effective for this... particular purpose," Magister Snape mused. "The methods I am familiar with are more easily detected, particularly by the Aurory's forensic spells. You would not have identified the bodies so conclusively if those methods had been used. Granger, what do *you* know of the duplication spell? I can't imagine you simply learning the method at Molly Weasley's feet and then leaving it alone."

"This duplication spell is known to modern scholarship from Rowena Ravenclaw's grammaries," she answered readily, ignoring the unspoken 'Know-It-All' her comrade had appended to his statement. "She mentioned that it was said to derive from Greek scrolls attributed to the sorceress Medea and passed down through her progeny. She is supposed to have used it to recreate the bodies of her children, after which she used animancy to return their souls to the copies and erased the memories of their deaths. Those scrolls, however, have been lost, as well as any of the development process Medea might have recorded and her method of reanimation. In a rare appendix to the *Compendium*, Price admits that while he was able to successfully cast Ravenclaw's duplication spell using bits from a cadaver, he was unable to in any way ensoul or animate the resulting body; he could only create a corpse, not a fully endowed human or animal."

"So it *is* possible for a man to cast the spell," Shacklebolt interjected. Magister Snape merely looked annoyed that she had unearthed an appendix of which he had not even been aware.

"Certainly," Magistra Granger agreed. "Price recounts that, knowing this to be a witch's spell, he conducted his research trials both by his own hand and by his wife, Mary's. The result was in both cases the same, leading him to believe that it was a witch's spell merely by tradition rather than by any inherent mechanism triggered by the caster's sex. Neither were able to produce more than an inanimate corpse, though identical to the original in every respect. Even a Frankenstein-like application of lightning merely caused involuntary movement for the duration of the strike.

"I myself delved further back when I spent my year abroad, in all the libraries I could find. While I found the spell mentioned and detailed several times, there wasn't any further information to be had, nor were there any compatible animation spells...at least, none that were conclusively proven to be effective, or that I was willing to try myself."

"And the method?"

Magistra Granger looked thoughtful for a moment, then stood up. "I'll show you once," she declared. "If you wish to try yourselves, you're welcome to after that."

After a skilled demonstration that had Auror Shacklebolt questioning...only half-jokingly...if *she* was in fact the perpetrator, Hermione sank down into her chair, grateful for the extra cushions that discreetly placed themselves behind her. The all-seeing Umber again; he had more than half-adopted her as well, though he was disinclined to show himself before guests. He preferred that other humans believe that Magister Snape merely possessed an extraordinarily gifted house-elf. She felt a cool touch upon her forehead and wrist and pushed the inquisitive hands away. "I'm fine," she murmured irritably. "It didn't use to take quite so much out of me."

"You didn't use to get back-ache, either, after sleeping on the ground," he sniped back, "and you're out of practice. I am well aware that you can afford to *buy* your chicken breasts nowadays." Magister Snape settled back comfortably into his own set perfectly plumped cushions. "And I do, in fact, agree with you; you're quite well, but the spell is almost absurdly draining. To the point of virtual impracticability. The question becomes: why use it at all?"

"The obvious answer is to implicate Creevey," Kingsley remarked. "Unless he did it himself to make the statues...?"

Hermione shook her head, then grimaced at the resulting needle of pain that lanced through her spine. "Mrs. Fudge made it quite clear that she saw the statue nearing the last stages of completion, and in the company of Mr. Fudge. Dennis wouldn't have needed a body to cast the statue...all he needs is a mold, and that's easy enough, probably far easier, with a wax form...and the duplication spell..." Her authoritative tone died, and Magistra Granger's voice became quite small. "I guess I was hoping; I didn't want to admit... The spell only works on *dead* tissue."

It was a rare gesture, and one he would never admit to, even if taxed by Auror Shacklebolt; Magister Snape pulled her against him and laid a kiss atop her head, which in turn...as he expected, for she hated feeling as though he were treating her like a child...caused her to pull away and kiss him thoroughly, something she knew he disliked doing in front of any sort of audience. It was possible they became somewhat carried away, for the next sound to register was that of Auror Shacklebolt mucking about in the kitchen. Hermione sat up and frowned at Snape. "I know what you were doing."

"I should hope so," he replied, and his lips curled into a fox-in-the-henhouse grin. Hermione merely raised her eyebrows, and her erstwhile professor shrugged. "You knew Apolline delaCour and Lavender Brown; I've taken great pains to avoid them as far as is wizardly possible. I cannot blame you for being affected by their deaths...or, god forbid, what must be a prolonged and ghastly torture."

"I guess I do hope they're dead at this point," she admitted, sitting back onto the couch Indian-style. "Any alternative is unthinkable. And we still haven't figured out what or why."

A vehement curse flung itself through the kitchen door and assaulted their ears, at which Magister Snape smirked and Magistra Granger sighed. Crookshanks sauntered out with far more deliberation and dignity, carrying a scrap of robe in his teeth. He had long since laid claim to a certain cabinet over the sink, and only just tolerated his lady-servant opening the doors to put in fresh food; Kingsley had disturbed His Majesty and paid the penalty, which...as the Kneazle knew the wizard to be a friend...was fairly mild. Kingsley, for his part, chose the better part of valour and retreated from the field, muttering further deprecations as he returned to his feline-free desk at the Aurory.

I don't feel like we're getting anywhere." Spinner's End, whatever its sins, was still larger than Magistra Granger's flat, and she now lay along the rug, staring at the ceiling. It was an unprepossessing ceiling, decorated only with a number of cracks that Umber had not been allowed to fix. The Brownie considered her current posture...not to mention the prohibition against plastering the ceiling...highly undignified, particularly when he was standing over her, but tolerated it as the Magistra claimed it helped her think. He also knew it was not his place to criticise liberties Master Snape allowed. The master himself was properly ensconced in his customary chair like the gentleman he was.

"If I may inquire as to our current status, Magistra?" Umber asked.

She laid out the facts before him, the master elucidating on several points, and what they had discovered in the few days that had passed since the discovery of the duplicates. The Aurory had begun again with the natural suspects: the family and friends of the missing, in the hopes of discovering a common thread. The majority had alibis for the times of the disappearances. Mrs. Fudge, for example, had been hosting a session of Crevasse for several other 'Quidditch Widows' of a certain age (about whom Severus made a number of quite rude remarks). Most of Madame delaCour's associates were, naturally, in France. Fleur, when asked, said (interspersing her comments between a host of childish crises) that her mother had intended to visit Gabrielle, who was settled near Dublin with an eye to Seamus Finnegan. Gabrielle claimed she had never arrived, nor had she informed her of any such intention. ("And Veelas are normally very courteous in that regard," Umber interjected. "They do not wish to... intrude on certain activities. They are very territorial creatures.") And of Lavender, only Ron was unaccounted for, and *that*, Hermione stated bluntly, she absolutely refused to believe. Of the two, Dennis was far easier to believe than Ron. He *could* have hexed or pummelled someone if his hair had got the better of him...and it would have been painfully easy in the case of Cornelius Fudge...but following such an act, he would have gone to some sort of authority (even if it was only Harry in his Auror persona), smote himself upon the breast, and claimed his culpability in loud, ringing tones best suited to Quidditch referee or a mad, old missionary upon a street corner. Privately, Magister Snape agreed with her, but he did not care to commit himself verbally. Beyond that, there were very few leads. The bodies that weren't *real* bodies had been carefully planted in the statues' cavities by magic that itself had no residue, nor did they possess any other magical signature but the barest traces that registered the duplication spell, traces which matched those the Aurory found on Hermione's demonstration chicken. Dennis remained in custody on the off chance he was somehow involved and the more likely chance that someone would murder him believing he was.

Umber considered the information for a moment, then spoke. "If I may, Magister, Magistra, it seems to me that the crux of the matter at hand is the framing of Wizard Creevey."

Magister Snape regarded him thoughtfully. Umber rarely meddled in affairs that were beyond his inbred purview, which was one of the reasons he didn't refuse the Brownie's service. What a nuisance it would be to have the taller creature leaning over his shoulder during a brewing and offering suggestions? "Explain, Brownie."

"It is my observation, Magister," Umber stated, "that with magic, it is a very simple matter to rid one's self of inconvenient evidence, such as a body. If one has house-elves, one merely gives the order, and the corpse disappears. If one does not, it is a matter of Vanishing it, or transporting it to some distant sea or volcano, or even turning it into safely anonymous Potions ingredients." At this, Hermione was fascinated to notice that Magister Snape had the grace to blush, and she wondered just whom he himself had 'reduced' in the past in such a fashion. Certainly it must have been during the Dark years, since she'd kept a close eye on him since, and the sneaky bastard wasn't *that* sneaky, surely. At the least, she knew of no other mysteriously missing people. Umber continued, "*A Priori Incantatem* is virtually useless after a certain amount of time, particularly if one is intelligent enough to avoid using obviously deadly or harmful spells. Thus, if one is determined, it is no difficult thing for one wizard...if he has the skill to kidnap or murder another...to simply make that one vanish. And if this can be done, then what is the purpose of making a body reappear, particularly if it isn't the original body?"

"And so we should focus on discovering who bears a grudge against Creevey," Magister Snape mused. He stood and paced a single line between chair and fireplace. "That narrows the field of investigation, certainly, but it leaves a great deal of dark, murky territory to cover. Creevey is, by nature, a disgustingly cheerful, sociable wizard; he may not please everyone...indeed, he probably irritates a great many who must deal with him...but I would daresay he rarely makes a true enemy, particularly one of the sort who would go so far as to attempt to frame him for murder. And it introduces another question: are the murders the primary motive, or are they incidental to the purpose of framing Creevey?"

"Who is the 'principal murderee?'" Granger murmured from the floor. "Damn. I hate it when people try to be devious. I hate it even more when they succeed."

"You're the one who got us into this mess," Snape reminded her. "I myself would be thoroughly content to be tending my deadly nightshade or raising red-venom wasps in glorious solitude."

"Hardly solitude, with Umber about." She smiled graciously at the Brownie. "Which is all for the better. And you are perfectly welcome to tell me to take myself and my detective instincts elsewhere for the duration."

There was an alarm that sounded somewhere deep in his brain when Magistra Granger said things like that, and Magister Snape was aware enough to pay it heed. "Don't be daft, Granger," he replied comfortably. This proved to be somewhat inadequate for its purpose.

She eyed him, as one does a magical beastie of whose temper one is uncertain, and picked herself up off the floor. Magister Snape watched her; she had dressed rather beautifully this morning, in black robes with a garnet and black brocade under vaguely mediaeval lacing and her hair half-tamed down her back. It was fascinating how women always seemed to find time for personal primping, come hell, high water, or Dark Lord. Magistra Granger retrieved her witch's hat...one of wide brim that framed her face and hair...from Umber and vanished out the door with a few meaningless courtesies.

"Dinner for one this evening, Magister," Umber commented. Though the phrasing was bland enough for the most phlegmatic of butlers, the implicit disapproval was as blatant as if the Brownie had cast a Sonorous spell to cover a twenty mile radius. Somewhat baffled and thoroughly annoyed, Magister Snape retreated in high dudgeon to his laboratory basement, wherein he proceeded to blow up several dozen glass phials and deride the entire female species for their incomprehensibility.

In Which Murder Will Out

Chapter 3 of 3

Several people have disappeared from the wizarding community, and a wholly unlikely suspect is being accused. Who else but Hermione Granger would take up this impossible case—and who else would she drag along with her but Severus Snape? A classically styled murder mystery.

Magistra Granger spent much of the following day in conversation with her fellow witches. Some time away from Magister Snape was warranted, she decided, and there were things she wanted to find out that could not be had for the asking if said wizard was looming behind her and glowering at everything that offended him, including grown witches, small children, and invisible dust motes. Her first port of call was at Harry's house in Shropshire. He had...wisely in her opinion, and, in fact, in her advice at the time...sold both Godric's Hollow and Grimmauld Place in order to purchase houses that did not possess recent memories of violent deaths or long-standing memories of insane fanaticism. He had not actually been required to sell, given the state of his finances, but, as he confessed to Hermione, doing so had liberated him from much of the weight of the war. Hermione thought privately that his razing Grimmauld Place to the ground had done rather more for his psyche than the sale of the land, but she saw no reason to express this to him, particularly as she agreed with the act. The house at Sheep's Fall, on the other hand, was large enough to house Harry and Ginny's growing family as well as any number of relatives and friends...even some acquaintances, if people were willing to budge up a bit. Tucked up against a hill and constructed before modern enthusiasms for such things as concrete and drywall, it reminded Hermione just a little bit of a Hobbit hole. It was something of a disappointment every time the head in the garden turned out to be Harry rather than Samwise Gamgee, but she told herself philosophically that the existence of magic was quite extraordinary enough without asking for things like Hobbits and Tolkien-esque Elves to be real.

Harry did pop up out of the garden, which was one of his particular hobbies, despite being half-rubbish at the art, and upon inquiry revealed that Ginny was actually in the kitchen this morning, being plagued by young Jims, Albie, and Lily. "She's been on the broom so much lately," he said, rubbing dirt from his hands into his trousers, "with the Harpies, that I can't feel guilty for handing all three of them over at once. Even with the London matches, she's been staying overnight. Barely see her sometimes, though Molly's offered to take the kids tonight, so we can work on producing her namesake."

Aware of the likelihood of an eavesdropping wife, Hermione edged closer to her old friend. "Everything all right, Harry? With you two?" After all those years of near-certain death looming over him, he deserved to be happy, and if he wasn't, she was prepared to do something about it.

He shrugged, dislodging some sort of creeping greenery from his shoulder. "She's been a bit moody, is all. Might be Molly, Jr. is already on the way." He grinned, and Hermione grinned back, though she forbore from congratulating him. There would be time enough for that if it was true.

"I'll go through, then, and send the kids out to make your life miserable for a bit," she said, and suited actions to words.

Ginny was very much as she had always been: slim, athletic, and intense, all of which made her an excellent Quidditch player. The tea she gave Hermione was reheated rather than freshly brewed, but with three children, Hermione refrained from being verbally critical. The younger woman cast a quick cleaning spell over her robes...green linen over cream, pretty and practical...and joined Hermione at the table.

They exchanged the customary pleasantries concerning work and family and children, though neither mentioned Snape; the Potters had not yet determined if they approved. Hermione expressed a reasonable amount of enthusiasm about the children...she was, after all, one of their godparents, and expected to do a certain amount of feminine gushing...and listened patiently to Ginny's recounting of the Quidditch season to date. "There's been some talk of expanding the league to include the old Empire teams," she told Hermione, "but I'm not sure. If we extend the season and the travel, I may have to quit altogether. Harry's marvellous, of course, as is Mum, but children and away matches aren't particularly compatible."

"You might take them all with you," Hermione suggested. "I think the kids would love Australia, at least, and you know the Aurory wouldn't mind anything Harry suggested. He could be an Auror ambassador, or a liaison officer, or something like that. It would be a shame for you to quit when you enjoy it so much and you're so good at it."

Ginny's expression became vaguely disapproving. "One makes sacrifices for family," she said, and Hermione felt the criticism. While little had ever been said, Ginny had never been accepting of the split between her brother and Hermione, blaming the other witch for not, as she saw it, accommodating Ron's wishes and tastes. It didn't seem to help that, of all the witches of their generation, Hermione was the only one left unspoken for; Ginny seemed to resent it, for some reason. "I'll consider it," she added grudgingly, "if it happens."

There were a few more exchanges, bland and feather-smoothing, before Hermione felt able to broach the subject she had come about. "I'm looking into Dennis Creevey's case, and I was hoping you could help."

Ginny went lemon-sour in an instant. "What do you expect *me* to know, Hermione?" she asked. "I have nothing to do with Dennis anymore."

Magistra Granger blinked, startled into brief silence. She hadn't expected Ginny to still... "I was hoping," she said carefully, "that you might have some insight about Dennis himself. He still hasn't been cleared, you know. And maybe something about Mme. de la Cour, or Lavender. You knew them better than I did."

"Apolline was a cow," Ginny said rudely, "no better than Phlegm. And I haven't dated Dennis for nearly a decade, now. What do you expect me to know about him *now*?" She stood abruptly and dumped her tea into the sink. "As for Lavender? My brother was planning to marry her."

"*Another* romance of his gone."

Hermione was silent. Eventually, Ginny sighed. "Fine. I'll tell you what I know."

Magister Snape glared at two phials. Slightly different processes, same results. Two crabbed, antique sources...one Italian, one Welsh...for the same potion. So far, no discernable differences. The magister began to clean up his equipment, mentally cataloguing all the tests he would be required to do to determine precisely what difference had resulted from the different instructions. *Bloody foreign potioners*, he thought, fully aware of the irrationality of it, but requiring some vent to his feelings *always thinking of something to bollix up a perfectly straightforward process*. He paused and looked at two identical, carmine red potions.

"Umber!" he roared. The Brownie appeared, as usual, with nary a sound and a respectful bow. "Notify Minerva." Magister Snape rushed through the clean-up, ignoring Umber's nod. "Tell her I'm coming over to bloody Hogwarts and that she'd better have tea ready. And that bloody Scotch of hers. I've got questions, and I'm not leaving until I damn well have the answers."

"Yes, Magister."

Why, Hermione asked herself whimsically, *do Weasleys all feel this urge to populate the world in their own image?* She had been glad to escape the Potters, for Ginny's ill grace had been followed by the children's demands to be thrown about like small trolls and allowed to climb upon their 'Auntie Mione' in the guise of miniature knights vanquishing a bushy-haired dragon. It wouldn't have been so difficult to refuse the children, except that Harry had looked at her with the expression that many parents possess, one that expresses not a shred of doubt at another adult's indulgence of childish whims because, naturally, their children are adorable, and *all* people are simply *yearning* for the opportunity to play with said moppets. Bloody Harry. But three small Potters were succeeded by five...six?...small Weasleys of Bill-and-Fleur extraction. They rampaged, expressing themselves in an obscure pidgin of French and English and Romanian and Merlin-knew-what-else. Fleur, still enviably beautiful, entirely Gallic in her serenity punctuated with outbursts of shouting and admonishing, and quite obviously pregnant again, was settled upon a chaise longue. A negligent French command produced a house-elf with coffee, tea, and juice, and Hermione found herself installed along a similar chaise.

The accent that had been so pronounced back in their school days had eroded into a slight foreign lilt to her words. "You are here because of my mother," she stated.

"Yes." It was not difficult to determine, and of no purpose to deny; Hermione had little in common with Bill or Fleur and normally only met them at Weasley family functions, as she was still considered an honorary member. "There's too much we don't know. I hoped that you might have something to tell me."

"The Aurors, they have already spoken to me." For the first time, Hermione could see the grief behind the woman's eyes and felt sympathy. "I do not know what I can tell you that I have not told to them."

"I don't know," she said frankly. "Perhaps there isn't anything. But there isn't much to go on, magically speaking. I'm hoping that somebody can tell me *something* that would help."

The blonde sighed. "I will say everything again." A smile blazed across her face and vanished. "I have great faith in your abilities, me." Fleur recounted slowly the last afternoon; it had been a happy one. Her mother had been thrilled at her pregnancy; Veelas were not normally very fertile, and Apolline had teased her about her husband's dominant genes. The French witch had only come for a short visit, which was her custom, as she had little use for Britain on the whole, except as the country that had produced her daughter's husband. She disdained London's 'provincial,' little shops, and any sights, Muggle or Magical, held no interest for her. Apolline would not even visit an English beauty-witch. "She kissed my cheeks," Fleur told Hermione, "as we do, and said to me that she was going to visit my pretty little sister. She was unquiet about something. She wished to discuss it with Gabrielle herself. The children, they made their farewells. There was much confusion. The twins, they were falling ill and made a great deal of noise."

Hermione frowned; something in that niggled at her. "And Gabrielle never met her? Never expected to see her that day?"

Fleur shook her head. "She said to me that she had no idea what *Maman* wished to say."

"What *exactly* did your mother say?" Hermione asked. She could see that Fleur was startled by her sudden intensity. "Was it in French or English?"

"In English," Fleur answered slowly, considering her memory. "She often...*would* often...speak to me in English when she visited. She said that it helped her to practice. The English, they do not learn French, so she must speak English here. To switch back and forth, French to English to French, it made her English worse and she became self-conscious. That day, she said to me, 'Now, I will visit your pretty little sister. There is something wrong there. But *Maman* will sort it all out, eh, *ma belle*? Then I go to little Dennis, who makes me the most beautiful in silver.' She laughed."

Hermione mulled over the words, turning them over and around in her mind, seeking the ground that her mental signal flag was planted in. When she found it, she blanched. Was it possible? Logically, she knew it was; everything made sense...horrible, horrible sense. Distracted, she brushed off Fleur's inquiries and excused herself. She had to think this through, had to be absolutely certain before she took her findings to Kingsley. As much as she admired him, he might take the opportunity to have the case closed before the Aurors ended up with more egg on its face and accept her conclusions without properly investigating them. It wasn't as though the Ministry hadn't done so before.

She needed to think. Magistra Hermione apparated to the one place where she could do so clearly.

The day had been a productive one. Magister Snape had discovered a theory, shared it, and proceeded to test it with the one person who was decidedly above suspicion in this affair. Minerva, initially a touch crotchety upon having her clockwork day interrupted, was nevertheless intrigued by the idea and, by virtue of her character, determined to prove whether or not the theory was a valid one. She called in Professor Flitwick, cavalierly handing over supervision of his classes to one of the assistants she had hired over the past several years, and the three settled in for a morning and afternoon of experimentation. They had called in students, cast spells and run tests, and Magister Snape had been decidedly cheered by the results. His theory was correct, and the field of suspects substantially narrowed.

So cheered was he that he actually took pains to thank Minerva and Flitwick for their help and promised them bottles of the next liqueur he planned to concoct. (Magical gin made of various intoxicants was in great demand these days and provided Magister Snape with quite a tidy income.) Flummoxed, they could do no more than stammer their gratitude before he descended to the kitchens to collect Umber. The Brownie was found perched upon a stool, surrounded by a horde of elves who were eying him in the nervous manner of peasants suddenly finding a king among them...one who may or may not choose to have their heads for simply breathing in the wrong fashion. With that same regal dignity, Umber stood, handed his teacup over to some anonymous elf, and bowed. "Do we take our leave now, Magister?" The formal phrase was uninflected, but Snape fancied he detected a touch of pleased relief.

"We do indeed, Umber." The thinnest touch of a smile creased his long face. "And further, we shall take ourselves to Magistra Granger, to inform her that we now have only a handful of suspects, rather than several hundred."

"Excellent news, Magister," Umber said. "I imagine Magistra Granger will be exceedingly pleased by the information."

This brought Magister Snape up short, his victory over Granger paling in the face of her likely reaction. She was an intelligent, logical woman, and would eventually accept his findings, but she was highly unlikely to be pleased. Magister Snape scowled, and several phrases more appropriate to the travelling companions of Owain Tardif blistered the air.

He found the younger woman pacing the pavement in front of his house (he had never given her...or anyone...the key) and a quick look at her face told him that she had come to a similar conclusion to his own.

"I know who did it," she whispered.

"And I can prove it," he replied, addressing the air above her head.

It was a sombre collection of witches and wizards who assembled in the morning room of the Aurors-Under-Tower and drank the individual cups of tea surreptitiously supplied by the excellent, unseen Umber. Harry Potter sat with his head in his hands, and the three children huddled around him, miserable and confused, until a Auror house-elf escorted them to another room; no one would want them to hear the ensuing discussion. Molly Weasley and Arthur were pale and silent, their hands gripping each other's tightly. Their sons scattered themselves about the room. Auror Shackbolt occupied the large chair Magisters Snape and Granger had seen him in previously. Hermione herself sat nervously fingering a lace dangling from her sleeve. Snape very carefully approached the Weasley matriarch.

"I'm sorry, Molly," he said gravely. "I'm sorry, Arthur." He retreated, backing up with the silent footsteps of a cat, until he rejoined Hermione and allowed her to still her fingers by interlacing them with his.

"This was," she began, "an attempt to help Dennis Creevey. I felt certain that he could not have been behind the disappearances of three people, in spite of the evidence." The magistra spoke deliberately, each word standing alone with the sharp clarity of a recently cut epitaph.

"Hermione the Crusader," Harry murmured, a wan smile ghosting over his face.

"I think we all felt that way, Hermione," Kingsley rumbled. "You're not to blame for her actions."

"No, I'm not," she agreed. "But that doesn't mean I can't be sorry for the effects of her being found out."

"There was an astonishing display of misdirection." Magister Snape picked up the thread of the narrative and ploughed forward. "Misdirection that Um... that someone indicated to us was entirely unnecessary. Wizards do not *need* to leave forensic evidence lying about like toys children have forgotten to pick up; a flick of the wand or a dash of a potion, and the problem is solved. There *are* always annoying little questions of where this person or that has gone, but if you can distance yourself from the actual disappearance, there is no reason why the Aurors should look at you any more closely than anyone else."

"Before the, um, the 'bodies' were found," Hermione continued, "there was that doubt as to Dennis's involvement. New magical processes are always suspect of Dark Magic and it would not have been unthinkable. But there the bodies *were*, and they were not the real bodies. It was almost absurd to think of Dennis not just *leaving* evidence for the Aurors to find but *manufacturing* it as well."

Kingsley lifted a hand to interrupt. "I asked her what had happened to the original bodies; she said that they had all been Banished to the depths of Mount Etna." Ron Weasley, leaning against the fireplace, flung himself away from the flames in disgust.

"We discovered that the bodies had been reproduced using a certain spell." Snape glanced over at Molly. "One that has traditionally been passed down from mother to daughter. This indicated a female perpetrator, but did not exclude the male...at least, not until I had a chance to talk to Headmistress McGonagall and conduct some inquiries into the subtle differences of the duplicating spell. It happens that this spell...the so-called Medea Spell...has slight idiosyncrasies that have developed over the millennia and are unique to the teacher and her pupils. When Magistra Granger demonstrated the spell to Kingsley and myself, the results the magical signatures...were identical to the ones found on the false corpses. We assumed this to merely be the spell's own signatures. As it turns out, these signatures were the same because the casters had learned the spell from the same witch...from Molly Weasley. Further, Minerva, Professor Flitwick, and I discovered that while men can cast the spell quite successfully, *their* signatures will differ in one or two places from those of his fellow*female* students.

"And our list of suspects thereby dropped to a handful: Molly Weasley, Hermione Granger... and Ginny Weasley."

"While Magister Snape was following this line of enquiry, I went to talk to Ginny first, then Fleur. I had *no* inkling of Ginny's involvement, Molly, Harry. I went to take advantage of her extensive network of gossip; she might have heard *something* over the years that could indicate who might want to frame Dennis or kill the others." There was a plea in her voice that a mostly-deaf wizard of one hundred and twenty could have heard.

"Of course not, dear." Molly managed a tiny smile. Harry echoed the statement a little more forcefully, and startled little Lily Luna.

Braced, Hermione pushed on. "Ginny's vitriol against Dennis startled me a bit, but I didn't think much more of it, any more than I really took her dislike of Mme. de la Cour or Lavender seriously. After all, we all have people we don't like. It was only after I talked to Fleur that I began to piece it together. Mme. de la Cour had told her that she was going to see her 'pretty sister,' but Gabrielle had seen nothing of her, knew nothing of an intended visit. But Mme. de la Cour was not a comfortable English speaker, and it is not uncommon for non-native speakers to translate words and phrases literally, thinking they mean the same thing, particularly if they're not paying as much attention as they usually do."

"*Belle-sur*." Comprehension dawned on Bill's face. "*Belle-sur*, 'sister-in-law.' It would mean 'pretty sister' if reversed."

"Just so," Hermione agreed. "And I took another look at the statements in the Auror files. Mr. Fudge was at a Quidditch game on the day he disappeared...a Holyhead Harpies game. She was at home on the day Mme. de la Cour vanished, and unusually alone."

"I took the kids into town for some new robes," Harry said. "She was baking something, but she never mentioned any visitors."

"And on the night Lavender vanished, she was away with the Harpies. It wouldn't have been difficult to slip out and not be missed from a group of women celebrating their latest victory."

Ron Weasley's fist banged against the wall, making the room jump. "But *why*?" he demanded. "Why would Ginny, of all people, do this?"

"Hatred, Mr. Weasley," Magister Snape replied. His eyes were steady in meeting the younger man's own. "Long-standing, festering hatred."

"She has admitted, under Veritaserum," Auror Shacklebolt confirmed, "that it was pure anger when she killed Fudge. Anger that a man who'd bollixed up so badly while in office would have the audacity to attempt to be put in power again...she saw him canvassing the crowd after her game. It was later, when she'd cooled down, that she considered using the duplication spell."

"You remember she'd dated Dennis years ago, though it was very brief," Hermione said gently. "I never got the details from her, but she seemed to think that he had treated her very badly. Naturally, she knew from the papers what he was up to, and it seemed like a Founders-blessed endeavour to use her crime to frame Dennis and destroy his life."

"I don't understand any of this," Harry cried. His glasses were pushed askew, and he stared unseeingly at the carpet. "I married Ginny Weasley; I don't even recognise this woman you're describing to me."

Hermione gently set aside Snape's hand and crossed the room to support her friend. "I don't, either, Harry. This is a side of her she's never let any of us see."

"You've explained Dennis. And I can understand Fudge." Charlie smiled wryly. "But the others? What *possessed* her to keep killing?"

"Opportunity was a primary factor..." Kingsley began.

"She's yelled at me before, 'bout Lavender." Ron took a swig of his tea in the same manner that Hermione had seen him take a swig of Bogsfoot ale, and she winced in sympathy with Umber to see his talents treated so cavalierly. "Gin always said she was making a fool of me, what with our fights and back-and-forth and what-not. She didn't understand that we liked it that way, that we were always having fun, no matter what we were fighting about. She was always on about me dumping her before Lav had a chance to, before she made a 'real' fool of me by finding someone else. I thought she'd dropped it when I told her I was going to propose. Never said another word to me."

"...and she's never liked Fleur, I'm afraid, Bill." Harry had calmed, and Magistra Granger took advantage of the lull to return to the side of Magister Snape, who made no demur about taking her hand again in full view of the company. "I think she considered this one of the best ways of hurting her without depriving *your* children of a mother, and in an odd way, I think she blamed Apolline for... well, for producing Fleur in the first place."

Arthur sighed. "So many grudges and we never knew. We always knew she had a temper. She was so fierce, so determined to prove herself. But we always believed she let fly and then let go. How could all of us miss such a thing?"

"She learned to keep such things to herself, Arthur." Magister Snape was calm yet, though no one could miss the infusion of sympathy in his words. "But, like all of us, she despised feeling helpless in the face of them. What is more destructive than the need...however misguided...to set things right and be rendered powerless to do so, particularly by the seeming obstinacy of those one loves?"

"Kingsley," Molly wavered, "what will happen to her?"

Auror Shacklebolt breathed a heavy sigh. "She's killed three people, Molly, and deliberately used their deaths to indirectly kill or imprison another. There's little chance of this turning out well for her, I'm afraid. At best, it's the secure ward of St. Mungo's, and it may simply be kinder to..." He trailed off uncomfortably, leaving the obvious unspoken. "We've tried to keep it as discreet as possible," he said, the words booming in his haste, "but it will get out in the papers; it has to, once we let Dennis out. You might consider taking the kids on a long vacation, Harry."

The man looked bleakly at his old friend and superior. "I'll think about it. I don't know how we're going to balance what's best for Gin and what's best for them. How do you tell children that their mother's a murderer?"

"There's no easy way to do it, Potter," Snape said. "But when all is said and done, it is better that *you* tell them before the vultures and the hyenas do."

It was a rare occurrence, and Hermione wished she had the emotional reserves to fully appreciate Severus seeing her home. They had apparated to a quiet spot by the river and were walking slowly along to the next bridge. The late hour had sent nearly everyone, resident and tourist, to their beds, and the sounds were the quieter ones of the water flowing within its banks and the variety of small wildlife chirping or rustling as they went about their own business.

"I still feel guilty."

"And you will for a while yet," he said. "Though you should try to remember who actually committed the crime."

"Do you? Feel guilty, I mean?"

"I feel sorry for them, Arthur and Molly, even Potter and Weasley." He paused on the small bridge that crossed a canal spun out softly from the main waterway and looked at the lock gates, painted white against the greenery and earth. "I do not feel guilty. I have many other things that I have felt guilty for in the past, whether or not that guilt was deserved. Here, now, I think of what might have happened if she had not been stopped."

The moonlight did not help in her attempt to decipher the expression hidden behind the hawk's beak of a nose, the thin, tight mouth, and hooded eyes. "What do you think would have happened?"

"Those who kill feel the power of it, the near divine force of being able to cut off someone's destiny in a second. She would have killed again, found new ways, new reasons. She despises people who makes fools of her family." He turned and looked full into Hermione's face. "How long would it have been before she focused on you?"

"Me?" Hermione was startled and tried to digest this leap of logic. Ginny had never been a friend of the heart, but...

"You are the one who turned down Weasley's proposal all those years ago. You left him free to pursue Miss Brown, and, in her eyes, make a fool of himself. I do not claim to share her logic, but she may very well have considered that an inexcusable slight. And that is without mentioning that you turned your attentions to an object far less... worthy."

Magistra Granger looked stricken, then indignant. "You are *not* 'less worthy!'"

"I am well aware of that," he said imperturbably, and watched her side-long, a tiny smirk playing about his lips. She laughed, her rich, honey-bright laugh, and they continued along the path. "And I am... aware that you are very able to take care of yourself, Magistra Hermione Granger, but Mrs. Potter would have surely found some unguarded moment; she had your full trust. I think of that, of what might have been, and I do not feel pity for her, nor guilt at my part in this play. I am merely grateful that we may continue on as we have been."

"Exactly as we have been?" Hermione could not help but ask, though she knew the answer. She knew that he liked his privacy, that he was content to have a companion who dropped by, well announced, and was happy to pass the time in ways he enjoyed himself; that was the man he was, the one who had captured her attention, intrigued her mind, and sent her heart beating fit to break free.

"Perhaps... Perhaps not entirely as we have been." Her breath stopped, choked into place. "I am a solitary man, certainly, but you, Magistra Granger, require someone to look after you, to keep you from being poisoned or bludgeoned or hexed by those whom you choose to pursue in your righteous causes. I... I glimpsed that possible future when I found you on the pavement in front of my house, having come from a murderess's. I found the possibility unbearably bleak.

"Hermione Granger, will you marry me?"

He had left his face open for once, and Hermione gazed at all of the emotions in it and wondered how calculated they were. He was a master of persuasion and manipulation when he desired something.

"On one condition," she said, and watched him shutter away his feelings again.

"And that would be?"

"That *you* say yes the next time I ask you," she replied. "It wouldn't do not to let Umber have his fun as well. I have a feeling we'll have an occasion cooked up by... tomorrow."

"I shall prepare myself," he said, "and have ready an affirmative answer." And he grinned. He only stopped grinning when she kissed him, and even then, once they had finished, both wore the same silly grin.

Umbert, sitting in his kitchen with his ear cocked, began concocting a list of ingredients...beginning with the champagne.

ANs: There is so much to say at the end of this that I ended up saying nothing when I submitted it to the promptfest. (Being very near, if not exactly the 11th hour contributed to that.) I'll try to make up for that here.

To begin, thank you for reading this through to the end! First timers, I hope the ending surprised and satisfied. Re-readers, I'm so glad you've come back to it! As an author, I ask only that you try to add a little token to the box below; we fanfic writers cannot be paid in coin of the realm and such tokens keep us writing and hopefully honing our craft.

And now for The Notes and Acknowledgments.

[hopelesliehermn](#) provided the original prompt in the fest, which was to write a Sayers-style mystery. If you have not come across her work before, Dorothy Sayers wrote the Lord Peter Wimsey series of novels and short stories, which are set in post-WWI England. I enjoy them highly, which was why I took on the personally daunting task of trying to craft a mystery. If you know Sayers, you may recognise several things from her writings. The 'base method' of murder was from *The Abominable History of the Man With Copper Fingers*, one of her Wimsey shorts. Since Severus and Hermione do not have characters that exactly match Wimsey and his counterpart, Harriet Vane, I took the liberty of lifting various traits and dividing them between the two as seemed fit. Wimsey, for instance, is the constant proposer, a characteristic I've given to Hermione. Umber the Brownie is analogous to Bunter, Lord Peter's faithful valet, just as Kingsley stands in for Chief Inspector Parker, Peter's friend and police connection. The use of the titles 'Magister/-ra' also originate from reading Sayers, those these are real academic titles. My writing style was meant to echo Sayers', but probably also includes the influences of Agatha Christie and radio detective noir.

Speaking of radio noir, the title of (and partial inspiration for) this fic is from a line in my favourite episode of *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*: 'The House of Mystery': "Oh, this is it! I'm getting out of this house. Corpses that talk! Corpses that aren't corpses! I've had enough."

The V & A Museum is one of my favourite places in London, and the tapestry room my favourite exhibit.

The 'Kalibos animative limning codification' is a nod to the original *Clash of the Titans*, while the *Compendium* was named in honour of actor Vincent Price.

Thank you again for reading!