

Burn Down The Mission

by *TeddyRadiator*

Seven years into Hermione Granger's tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts, the castle will reveal a secret that changes everything she ever knew about it, the role of Head of Hogwarts, and herself. Written for LiveJournal's Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest.

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One

Chapter 1 of 6

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I would like to thank my amazing beta stgulik for brainstorming, editing, and encouraging me through those dark and lonely nights when I had to roam through this castle alone, with not even a ghost for company. Any mistakes you see here are mine, because I couldn't help but go back and hide some Easter eggs for her to find. This was originally posted in answer to Tophoenix's prompt in the 2014 SSHG_Promptfest on LiveJournal, but I have made some small changes and corrections here. The characters in this story do not belong to me, and I make no money from this fic.

"Only the profoundly vain, my friends, understand: no two mirrors are alike. And only we, the truly unapologetic, can name our especial favorites from over the years. I remember one.... A genius of a glass when it came to showing me the me I intend. You know I've rejected several. I will not be distorted by something I myself purchased. I just won't, I tell you...fair warning."

Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All by *Allen Gurganus*

Hermione Granger had assumed her life would never be ordinary from the moment her Hogwarts letter had arrived, and because she had never known anything different, she thought the life of all Wizarding folk was fundamentally the same. True, she had grown into her magic during a particularly intense time in Wizarding history, but she had always counted on two things: her ability to reason and use her intellect, and the fact that most of what she needed to know could be found in books. If she was confident of anything, it was with the right amount of time and resources, she could find the answer to every question.

This must be understood, or nothing wonderful will come of the story I am about to relate.

~o0o~

Standing in the Ministry of Magic, Hermione raised her wand to her throat and quietly murmured, *Sonorus*." She looked around at the assembled group of illustrious witches and wizards, raised her wand and in a clear voice, announced:

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, do upon this day, accept the position as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I do solemnly swear to fulfill this honour to the best of my ability; to uphold the standards established by its Founders, its educational charter as set up by Chadwaller and Finch in the Wizengamot Congress of 1542; to oversee the welfare of those in my charge: student, staff and all other magical beings; to promote goodwill to all witches and wizards both foreign and domestic; to oversee and encourage the youth who attend; to enable them to learn and grow using the finest, most innovative educational methods; to protect and defend the castle and its environs; to mold those under my tutelage with a firm hand and a compassionate heart..."

She rattled on for fifteen minutes, amid the noise of shuffling, restless feet and impatiently clearing throats. *Well, you can bloody well shut up and sit through it* she thought as she droned on. It had taken her two weeks to memorise the damn oath, and by the gods, they were going to listen to every idiotic word of it.

~o0o~

The ceremony was purely for show; she had donned the mantle of leadership four months before, at the end of the Spring Term, when Minerva McGonagall announced she was retiring. Hermione, who had been her deputy for the past four years, had seen it coming long before then. "I have given the best of myself to this school," Minerva had told her emphatically. "I have no desire to one day fall asleep at my desk and wake up six months later as a ruddy portrait. I staunchly refuse to die in harness."

Almost from the moment she had joined the Hogwarts staff, Hermione knew she was being groomed for eventual leadership. Nothing about the passing of the torch had surprised her. During Minerva's final year as Headmistress, Hermione spent every possible moment shadowing the older witch, learning exactly what it meant to serve as Hogwarts' youngest Headmistress. She was told often that only Severus Snape had been younger than her when he took up the post in that last, ill-fated year before the end of the war. Hermione felt she was more than ready...more, she hoped, than poor Professor Snape had been.

On Minerva's final day as Headmistress, she solemnly prepared to perform her last official duty: to drop the massive wards that protected the school and establish the Head's authority and ownership of the castle to the incumbent. "Once they transfer to you, it's your baby, Hermione," the older witch said, a smile crinkling at the corners of her eyes. "I cannot say I'll be sorry to let go." She looked around the room winsomely. "It's been quite a ride, but I'm ready to get off."

For the first time since Hermione had met her, Minerva seemed old, not just *older*. It reminded Hermione of a long-ago conversation with her father about Tony Blair, and how the burden of leadership had aged him. As Minerva raised her wand to cast the spell, Hermione caught her wrist. "Minerva, does Hogwarts have any secrets? Things only the Head knows about? Things the castle only shares with you?"

Her former Head of House and mentor threw back her head and laughed so hard she choked, and Hermione had to pound her on the back. As if things could not any get more surreal, every portrait in the study started laughing. "Och, Hermione!" Minerva exclaimed, wiping her eyes. "You are a treasure. I almost wish I could be a fly on the wall these next few weeks."

"Don't worry, Min," Dilys Derwent crowed, her heavy jowls shaking with laughter. "We'll keep you posted."

"As I recall, Headmistress Granger, you weren't above keeping a secret or two yourself," drawled an elegantly waspish voice two portraits away. An aquiline nose appeared at the edge of the painting, followed by the rest of Phineas Nigellus Black's aristocratic profile. "Hogwarts should be a picnic after—"

"Pay them no mind, my dear Hermione." She would have recognised Albus Dumbledore's voice in a snowstorm in the middle of a Weird Sisters' concert. "I'm sure you'll take all your discoveries in stride."

Minerva regarded her fondly. "In answer to your question, dear, yes. Hogwarts has many secrets. And discovering them can be delightful, as well as occasionally alarming. But you will do well. Of that, I am completely sure."

With that, she whispered the spell, and the wards of the school dispersed around them like a puff of smoke, leaving them feeling strangely vulnerable and exposed. Minerva then took Hermione's hand in hers. She touched the tip of her wand to Hermione's open palm, and withdrew that most sacred and powerful of all magical ingredients. While it was more symbolic than essential, the ancient magic still demanded a tiny drop of blood to bind Hermione to the school. As it fell onto the stone floor, her ears popped, and the wards closed around them. Something shifted within her, like her entire being had transfigured into something else, while remaining the same. The process had taken less than thirty seconds. Both she and Minerva sighed in relief: Minerva, for finally letting go of her duties; and Hermione, for the castle's acceptance of her as its headmistress.

And that, Hermione thought, was that. Except it was not. Minerva had not merely released the wards for Hermione to assume. Hogwarts was a massive, willful Saint Bernard, and Minerva had just handed her the end of its lead.

~o0o~

In the years that followed, Hermione settled into the routine of Headmistress. She had always felt at home within the old walls, but now there was a difference. The spirit of the castle *spoke* to her now, infused her with its pride and protectiveness. She befriended everyone and everything, alive or dead, that resided in the castle. She took copious notes, finding all those secrets Minerva had only hinted at. Some of the things Hermione would discover were more perks than secrets. Any Head, for example, could Apparate anywhere within the walls or grounds of Hogwarts, which accounted for their uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. She also had final say on all menus for the students, and gleefully struck haggis and aubergines from the menu in perpetuity.

An instrument that stood in the middle of her study, which she had always assumed to be a huge Sneak-o-scope, was actually a magical camera that allowed her to look into any classroom she chose. She felt a little guilty, like she was snooping around, but it did save a lot of time and trouble, being able to check corridors and grounds without getting her feet wet.

Her chambers were sumptuous, her bed huge and so comfortable she hardly slept the first few nights because she did not want to miss a moment's pleasure from it. The Prefects bath was a public loo compared to hers, with its gorgeous mosaic tiles and bathing pool-sized tub. The house-elves, with whom Hermione had long since made her peace, could not do enough to make her comfortable and happy.

But by far, her greatest treasure was a lovely, eccentric private library, which had revealed itself to her shortly after her induction. Every wall groaned under the weight of fat, weighty tomes and slim volumes with questionable covers. Hermione had danced from one shelf to the next, practically squealing in anticipation. If she lived to be one hundred and fifty, she doubted she would ever be able to read them all, but by the gods, she would give it a damn good go.

Even now, seven years into her Headship, she had hardly made a dent.

In the cramped, pinched-in corner at the top of the tear-drop shaped room, two books were set apart from the rest on ornate brass stands. They looked both impressive and innocent. The information between their pages was revealed without judgment or question, and they expected neither in return. Like any book, they could only divulge what they knew.

The first was the Book of Students, the famous register that listed every magical person in Great Britain qualified to attend the school. It was roughly the size of a large suitcase. Moving her wand over the cover, she whispered, "Who's the latest—" and it flew open with a blurring flutter of pages. It was a little tradition she had begun her first year as Headmistress—a ritual she had performed every spring since, if only to reassure herself that the future was guaranteed through the newest crop of Wizarding babies.

As the flying pages slowed, Hermione smiled at the latest entry. Apparently *Susan Pettit Shoat* was Hogwarts' newest student-to-be, having been born, according to the date and time, approximately fifteen minutes before Hermione opened the book.

She turned her attention to the second book, one she had opened only once or twice since discovering it. It was much smaller, bound in crumbling black leather and sealed with tarnished silver clasps. Although it was roughly the size of her latest edition of *Hogwarts: A History*, it was, if anything, heavier than the Book of Students. She levitated it to a nearby reading table, and gently blew the heavy dust from the cover.

Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. 949 A.D. to. There was no end date.

The first time Hermione had pried the clasps open, grunting with effort, she had randomly turned to a page somewhere near the middle. She looked at the portrait of an old woman with a kindly smile and merry eyes. In an elegant and formal handwriting, the caption read *Heliotrope Wilkins ~1610-1672~*. This was followed by a hand-written, detailed account of Headmistress Wilkins' life. "Nice to know I'm not the only Head with a strange name," Hermione muttered to herself.

"Well, it was a relatively new one when I came along. Me father said he named me that because of me sunny nature. But I like yours! Hermione's a lovely name," Headmistress Wilkins answered with a little wave. "I've always thought so."

"Thank you," Hermione answered, feeling somewhat at loss. "So, is this a biography of all the previous Heads?"

"Well, it is that, of course," Heliotrope answered, her Welsh accent heavy and florid. "But it includes all the Heads of Hogwarts. The Founders created it at the same time as they did the Book of Students." She smiled encouragingly. "It's a great time-saver, you'll find."

"A time-saver for what?"

"When you're ready to hand over the reins to your successor, of course."

In those early years, Hermione had refused to let herself peek at the entry after hers. She had only just got the hang of the job; she hadn't been in any hurry to find out who would be kicking her out of that lovely, massive bed. Besides, it had too much of that 'someone walking over your grave' feeling that struck her as faintly morbid.

Now, seven years on, she felt more secure. She had established herself as a well-respected, well-liked Head, and the future seemed more solid, less precarious. Minerva had started preparing Hermione for the job almost the moment her name appeared in the book; perhaps this was a way she could repay the castle for its generosity.

The leaves slowly fell open to her name, and she turned to the page that followed.

She jumped backward so quickly she bumped into her desk, overturning a stack of books and breaking her favourite magnifying glass.

Moments later, she stormed into her study. "When did Severus Snape's name appear *after* mine in the Book of Heads?"

~o0o~

"You must understand that the Book of Heads is only as precise as destiny allows," Phineas Nigellus Black explained.

Hermione looked from Black to Dumbledore. "Severus Snape is dead. Unless his ghost is coming back to haunt Hogwarts as its first and only Apparitious Headmaster, then the book is wrong."

While there was no portrait or monument or plaque within the castle to mark his passing, Hermione nevertheless felt the acknowledgement of Severus Snape as keenly as any past Head. When that pink nightmare Dolores Umbridge had Dumbledore sacked and herself declared Headmistress, the castle had famously refused her entrance to the Head's chambers. This had not happened while Snape was Headmaster. The castle had known his true heart...did it not then follow that part of his spirit fortified the ramparts, like the souls of all those who had gone before him?

He seemed to be there and not there all at once, as if he himself was one of the castle's secrets. By the time the Aurors went to the Shrieking Shack to recover his body, it had been reduced to ashes and bone and a few scorched bits of wool. Death Eaters had claimed responsibility for *Incendio-ing* the Headmaster's body for his treachery to their cause. Only the blood and venom-streaked floor and some broken pieces of his wand were left to mark his passing.

Harry Potter had insisted Snape's remains be interred at Hogwarts. A simple, black marble headstone was erected in Snape's honour, with no markings regarding House or affiliation. It merely read *Severus T. Snape, 1960-1998. Do not pity the dead. Pity the living, and, above all, those who live without love.*

Professor Dumbledore chimed in. "As past Heads, we are privy to certain facts regarding the school. One of these facts is the succession of the Headmasters of Hogwarts." He cocked a keen blue eye at her. "I suppose you also noted that Severus' name was not listed as *my* successor."

"And this means ..." Hermione huffed in frustration. "Are you saying that the castle ultimately rejected him?"

"Absolutely not, my dear," Albus countered, with a shake of his head. "The castle's magic is something I doubt any of us will ever fully understand. And time itself, as you well know, is always in flux. Sometimes the book will change its mind, and the name will disappear. Sometimes fate has a different future in store and a person is no longer suited for the position. A potential Head will suffer an untimely death, or their health will decline unexpectedly, and again, the name will change."

"According to Harry, *you* were the one who schemed to make Professor Snape Headmaster *after you* forced him to kill you."

Dumbledore shrugged unapologetically. "He was the right choice. He had a role to play in the demise of Tom Riddle, and that role was as Headmaster."

"So, you screwed with the castle's plans. And Snape died because of it."

"Severus died because of a snake bite."

A wave of loathing washed over Hermione, and she looked up into the face of the man she had once idolised and mourned. "He died because you planned it that way, you manipulative old spider."

"The point is," Black said through gritted teeth, "Albus changed history as thoroughly as if he'd used a Time-Turner."

Hermione glanced back to Albus, narrow-eyed. "Snape's body was never found. Everyone assumed those ashes were his! Are you telling me that he is alive somewhere and you knew all along?"

For the first time, Dumbledore looked uncertain. "I've had my suspicions. Nothing more. Until now."

Black's smile reminded Hermione of a shark. "I'm betting if anyone can find him, it's you, Headmistress Granger. You're just the sort of tenacious little Niffler who can sniff these things out."

"And how in Merlin's name do you propose that I do that?"

"How does anyone find anything, Headmistress?" Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You dig."

Hermione glared up at him. "The only thing that needs shoveling around here is your mooncalf dung, Albus Dumbledore."

"Mooncalf dung is highly sought after as magical fertilizer, Headmistress," one of the less talkative portraits offered helpfully. Before she could work herself into proper wobbly, Hermione turned on her heel and left the study. Phineas' ratcheting laughter followed her out the door.

Once she left, however, the laughter ceased.

"I hope for your sake she can find him, Albus," muttered Black.

"She will," Dumbledore replied, but his voice carried an uncertain note. "The name is there. Perhaps amends can be made, after all."

"The boy deserved that and more," Dilys Derwent countered testily.

"Please," Dumbledore closed his eyes. Sadness and remorse etched the features of the portrait. "I don't have to be reminded what happened."

Black shot him a dark look. "What you *caused*, you mean. If she fails, Albus, you'll pardon me for reminding you. Over and over, for all eternity."

Two

Chapter 2 of 6

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Again, thanks and a big bowl of Magic Cookie Bar Ice Cream to Stgulik, who is the best beta/editor there is. I own none of these characters; Harry Potter characters are the property of J.K. Rowling and Bloomsbury/Scholastic. No profit is being made, and no copyright infringement is intended.

"Hermione, my dear! What a nice surprise!"

"Nice my apple," Hermione said, with a laugh. "I can see the wheels turning, Minerva. You're all smiles and 'what a nice surprise!' but you're really trying to figure a way to rig your Floo network so it will always be engaged when I try to contact you."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll find a way eventually." Professor McGonagall's ember-wreathed face smiled. "To be honest, I'm surprised I don't hear from you more often. Knowing how much Albus and Phineas love to meddle, I felt sure you'd be calling on me every other day to find out how to shut them up."

"Well, I ... now that you mentioned it, *howdo* you shut them up?"

Minerva laughed. "You know very well you can't. You'll eventually learn to tune them out. Now," she continued, making herself comfortable. "What brings you to my hearth this fine day?"

Moments later, she was no longer laughing. As Hermione told her about the Book of Heads and her conversations with the two portraits, Minerva grew pensive. "Hermione, are you sure about Severus' name?"

"Absolutely," Hermione said emphatically. "Didn't you notice..."

"It's just that, while I was there, Severus' name wasn't. In the book, I mean." Minerva's voice was hushed, but excited. "Don't you see, Hermione? I think this means that Severus is alive after all!"

Hermione rocked back. "How is it that he was nowhere to be seen until yesterday?"

"When was the last time you checked the Book?"

"Well, I ..." Hermione frowned. She felt rather foolish admitting she'd never had the courage to look.

"It doesn't really matter, you know. The real rub is that it's there now." Minerva looked contemplative. "Wherever he is, perhaps he's lost. And you're going to find him."

~oOo~

When Hermione had first come to Hogwarts as a child, it had all seemed so simple: incantations, spells, wand-waving, potions making. Hogwarts had been mother and father; it had given her everything she needed, and now she felt this deeply intense obligation to the castle. It needed Snape, and it was her duty to find him. She owed the castle that much.

Perhaps this was why so few Heads married; Hogwarts gave them everything they needed to feel loved and cherished. Had her poor, doomed Professor felt any of that support and love while he made his lonely way through the last year of his life? She truly hoped so, for his sake.

She spent the next several days looking into every possible lead on Severus Snape she could find. Together and separately, they didn't add up to much. It was one thing to suspect he was alive, but no magic spell or charm or incantation could find a trace of him, living or otherwise. Even more frustrating was trying to speak to someone about him. The subject of Professor Snape was still very touchy. Many, like the Bloody Baron, would not answer any question that carried the merest hint of Snape.

Making her way down the stairs, Hermione stopped at the gargoyle standing guard at the entrance to her study. When Hermione had first become head, she had watched in bemusement as Minerva's gargoyle Bertram stepped down from his perch, and her new guard stiffly saluted the old sentry before ceremoniously taking his place. His name, he had announced with a dignified bow, was Dave. Over the years, Hermione had grown to like him very much.

"Dave," she announced, "I'm going for a little walk around the castle. If anyone needs me, send word with Toidle."

The stone monster nodded with a scrape of granite. "Yes, Headmistress," he rumbled, his voice as deep and heavy as the rock that had once encased him, before some long-ago magical sculptor chiseled him out of it.

Hermione took several steps, then turned back. "Dave, does each Head have their own unique guard?"

"I have stood here before."

Surprised, Hermione pressed, "For whom?"

The stone warrior raised his lichen-stubbed chin. "For the one who was and was not. The dark and the vanquished one. The one who came before his time, and was taken before his hour. The forsaken one, the shamed one. I could not protect him from himself." He bowed his head low. "They say he disgraced his post, that he deserted the castle in its hour of need. I do not believe that."

Hermione's heart clipped along a little faster. "You were Professor Snape's guard?"

"I was, Headmistress, aye. He was a wizard of honour," the gargoyle added. "And I was proud to have been chosen by my brothers to serve him."

"How many gargoyles—I mean, how many of your brothers guard the castle?"

His hard face creased into a frown of concentration. "My brothers numbered six hundred and seventy-one before the Great Battle. We number four hundred and eighty-three today."

For a moment, they stood together, in silent tribute for his slain brothers. It had appalled Hermione to know that Hogwarts lost more magical creatures in that final battle than actual Wizarding folk.

"I'm sorry so many of your brothers perished."

Dave regarded her with his stony stare. "We are the still warriors. We serve the castle. We defend it." There was pride and sadness in his tone. "How much more glorious it is to die in battle as hard, broken rubble, than to grow smooth and feature-less, worn away by time and the elements?"

Hermione stopped herself from reaching up and stroking his rough cheek. Impulsively, she asked, "If Headmaster Snape was still alive, Dave, would you be happy?"

Impassively, the gargoyle looked straight ahead. "If he lives, should I rejoice or mourn? I should do both, for he was neither alive nor dead when he was my master here."

Shaken, Hermione managed a nod and left Dave at his post.

Dig, Dumbledore had said. Dig where? There was only one place in Hogwarts Hermione knew of where questions had been asked, and answered, but sadly, it no longer had the capability to help anyone.

~o0o~

As she stood before the wall that had once opened on to the Room of Requirement, Hermione cursed under her breath. For years, the best Wizarding consultants throughout the world had tried to reset the room, but the Fiendfyre that had engulfed it on that final night of the battle still raged within, over twenty years on. How many times had she herself stood here while great wizards and witches had depleted their magic, holding the conflagration at bay while others threw spell after spell, trying to staunch the unquenchable flames? The Room was strong enough and sentient enough to contain the magic within, but sadly it was unable to halt its own destruction.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione pressed her forehead against the wall. Even though it was agreed that the Room's magic held it in a separate dimension, she could feel the heat emanating from the other side of the wall. "I need you to heal," she said quietly. "I bet you could find Severus Snape for me."

From the other side, there was a soft, purring hum. Almost immediately the heat dispersed, and the ponderous magic that formed the massive door groaned as the Room of Requirement opened of its own accord for the first time in twenty-eight years.

~o0o~

Hardly daring to breathe, Hermione stepped into the vast room. Mountains of discarded furniture, dressers, bureaus, old books, brooms, robes...everything any student in Hogwarts' thousand-year history needed to hide, stash for later and forget; anything no longer in use or necessary for the running of the school but too serviceable to throw away; outdated and unwanted school books and robes and desks and equipment of every shape, size and function...it was all there. Amassed in great piles, stacked so high they disappeared into the dark ceiling, or haphazardly tossed into teetering mounds of mundane flotsam. The Room, it seemed, catered to all tastes and disciplines.

She walked down one of the narrow clearances, which branched out in a myriad of different directions, like tributaries of a river. Even as she walked, she couldn't stop testing the air for the tell-tale stink of smoke, but all she could smell were dust motes, the sickly-sweet smell of old parchment, the must of fabric and upholstery, stale chemical smells and dander. It was supernaturally quiet, like being in a graveyard.

Winding her way deeper into the endless room, she stopped, and tears came to her eyes. There, in a little clearing, were hammocks, and lanterns and the detritus that all students leave behind. Here and there she thought she recognised a discarded jumper or pair of trainers.

Dumbledore's Army. The last defense of Hogwarts, the scourge of the Carrows. They had made their stand here, aided by house-elves and the rest of the faculty. "And by Professor Snape," she said aloud, her voice whispering through the empty space like a lonely ghost. Snape had surely known about this little band of vigilantes, relentlessly eroding the undercarriage of his authority. "And they still hated you. Were you a brilliant actor, or did you become the monster they needed to hate?"

A sudden creaking noise made Hermione jump, and she put a shaking hand to her galloping heart so it wouldn't leap out of her chest and run screaming from the room. "Who's there?" she demanded, wand at the ready. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and glanced up toward the tall portrait that hung on a nearby wall. A solemn young woman waved at her from the canvas, her eyes intelligent and sad. "I know you!" cried Hermione. "You're Albus Dumbledore's sister ... A-Ariana?"

Ariana nodded and beckoned to Hermione. As she approached, the portrait swung open, and she peered into a long, very dark corridor.

Her *Lumos* flared in the enclosed space, revealing old tree roots poking from the ceiling, and cobwebs whose owners she had rather not meet. The dirt floor beneath her feet was soft; here and there the heels of her shoes sank into it and she had to carefully un mire herself. It was damp and chilly in the passage, and try as she could, Hermione could not see to the end. For all she knew, it had caved in years ago.

A gruff, dry voice made her jump. "Well, what are you waiting for? You might as well come on up." It sounded peevish, grudging, as if she had interrupted its owner in the middle of something important. "I figured you'd eventually show up, but I wasn't counting on it being so soon. You Gryffindors don't waste any time, do ya?"

Hermione peered upward into the stern, unsmiling face. "Mister Dumbledore!"

Aberforth Dumbledore held out his hand, as meaty and raw as a Sunday roast, and after a second's hesitation, she took it. "Aye, and who else would it be? The Queen of Sheba?"

He gracelessly hauled her down a set of rickety stairs, into a dingy little sitting room. Almost thirty years on, Aberforth's quarters looked every bit as drab and lonely as they had the night she and Harry and Ron stumbled in, on the run from the world.

A wooden table sat against the wall, and beyond it, a narrow bed with a faded, matted quilt. Three or four chairs of no particular style encircled the room. Off to one side, facing the bed, was a full length, rectangular mirror on a stand, its back to her. Across from it, a battered sink surrounded by grey, uneven cabinets. It was the living quarters of a man who had long since ceased caring what anyone thought about him.

"Take a seat," Aberforth commanded, pointing to a chair that might have once been maroon. It was sepia-toned now, sagging in the middle and slick with goat hair. As Hermione carefully perched as little of herself on the chair as she could without falling off, Aberforth grabbed three grease-smearing glasses, poured some unidentifiable reddish-amber liquid into them, then passed one to her. "Yer health, Headmistress," he barked, and saluted her with his glass.

"And yours," she replied, and raised the glass to her lips. The fumes alone made her eyes water, but she gamely took a sip. Instantly she regretted it. It was gutrot whisky, newly distilled, and so harsh it peeled the skin from her throat and made her nostrils feel as if they were melting.

Aberforth laughed as she struggled to keep from gagging. "It needs a few years maturin', but when you get my age you don't count your chickens," he said, and took another deep drink. "Think of this as what you might call the 'angel's share'."

For a moment they regarded one another. Aberforth seemed better at it than she was. The first time she had met him, Hermione thought he looked just like his brother, Albus. Now, with the benefit of twenty more candles on her own birthday cake, she realised nothing was further from the truth. Albus had always been slender, capricious and sly; Aberforth was stocky and tough as old boot leather. He looked like a Hagrid in training, but with none of Hagrid's sweet, innocent nature.

"You look well," she finally said. He laughed, a bitter, rattling sound that said everything about the man.

"Compared to what? I'm an old wizard, girl. Just marking time before I pop m'clogs. Seems you've grown up a bit since the last time you darkened my doors, though."

"Oh, you remember me? You see, I'm..."

"I remember you. I said I was old, not senile."

Another silence stretched on. Hermione had questions, but Aberforth Dumbledore had never been one to invite inquiry.

He took another drink. "How'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

He gave her a side-long, gimlet stare. "You know exactly what I mean. How did you heal the room?"

Taken aback, Hermione answered, "I didn't. It must have healed itself."

His look told her plainly that he did not believe her. "When Ariana found the room was alive again, I knew you'd done it. Only the Head has that kind of power over Hogwarts."

"So why didn't Minerva do it?" she challenged.

He snorted. "Maybe she didn't have any reason to."

"You sound about as cryptic as your brother."

"No need to insult me, girl."

Hermione took another tortuous sip of whisky, and sat back a little more. Aberforth's silences were starting to grow on her. She glanced up to see him watching her so intently she had to stop herself from flinching. "Well, go ahead," he rasped. "Say what you have to say. I'm no idle school mistress who can while away her days sitting around. I've a business to run. Out with it."

Startled by his sudden vehemence, Hermione shot back, "Why do you think I have anything to say?"

"You came here, didn't you? Don't tell me you didn't know where the tunnel led."

"Of course I knew, but I..."

"How did you find out?" He stood up and towered over her, swaying slightly. "Who sent you? That shitsack brother of mine?"

Hermione rose to her feet. While she wasn't exactly afraid of him, she wasn't prepared to take any more nonsense from him than his brother. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Dumbledore. No one sent me. I was looking for..."

"I know what you were looking for, and you can tell Albus that he won't find it here!" His wand was in his hand. "Tell him the damage is done, and nothing can fix it."

"Fix what?" Her heart pounding, Hermione faced the older man, her own wand out. "Mr. Dumbledore, I don't know why you think I'm here, but it has nothing to do with Albus."

"Everything has to do with him!" he shouted. "Meddling old fool, getting everyone to do his dirty work! Hasn't he done enough? Get out, Headmistress, and don't come back. There's nothing for you here."

He looked so wild-eyed and angry Hermione was almost afraid of him. Pleadingly, she explained, "I haven't come on Albus' behalf, Mr. Dumbledore. I was looking for some information on Severus Snape."

If she thought she had upset him before, it was nothing to the rage that overcame him at the mention of Snape's name. He grabbed her arm and pushed her toward the portrait. "Right. I've had enough of you, missy!" he roared and the portrait door swung open so quickly it banged against the adjacent wall. "Get out of my pub, Headmistress, and if I ever see you here again..."

"Aberforth! Stop. I've heard enough. She doesn't know."

Hermione gasped so loudly it came out as a sob. "What's going on?" She met Aberforth's defiant glare, but there was uncertainty in his eyes as well. "Who said that? Who's here?"

"I should think that would be obvious, Headmistress. I am here." The voice rang out with the power and authority that had captivated her from the first day she had ever heard it.

Frantically looking around the room, Hermione cried, "Where are you?"

The voice, which she still heard in her dreams, seemed to curl around her. "Aberforth, please. As I am unable to do the honours myself, I still require your assistance."

Even though she had never heard him speak with such gentleness or pleading, there was no further doubt in Hermione's mind. No one on this earth with the exception of one wizard had a voice like that: dark like treacle, silky as sable. It could make the most mundane subject sound alluring, it could crackle like thunder when raised in anger. It was magical and harmonic as the deepest, darkest ocean, and as intimate as a caress. Hermione's own voice shook as she insisted, "I know that's the ghost of Severus

Snape, Mr. Dumbledore. Please let me see him."

To her surprise, the disembodied voice replied rather sourly, "I assure you, Headmistress, were I truly a ghost, I would need no assistance in making myself visible. However, in the circumstances ..."

He trailed off, and with a soft growl of frustration, Aberforth walked over to the mirror standing in the corner. He turned it slowly, as if it were very fragile, until it was facing Hermione. She gaped in shock.

Standing in the mirror, where her reflection should be, was Severus Snape.

Three

Chapter 3 of 6

Seven years into Hermione Granger's tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts, the castle will reveal a secret that changes everything she ever knew about it, the role of Head of Hogwarts, and herself. Written for LiveJournal's Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest.

Warning - this is not a story for snowflakes. Proceed at your own risk. You have been warned.

Still in shock she might be, but Hermione was not sufficiently addled that she did not know Dark Magic when she saw it. She cast spell after spell over the mirror, but it revealed nothing more than the wizard reflected in it. He suffered her diagnostics with only a hint of impatience. "Who created you?" she demanded, casting the *Veritas* spell commonly used on inanimate objects.

He seemed pleased and confused at once. "Well, well. Hermione Granger...that little Muggleborn girl with her hand in the air, *Syou're* Headmistress now. What happened, did Minerva die in the battle as well? Candidates a bit thin on the ground?"

Her desire to understand what she was seeing fought a brief skirmish with the temptation to tell him to stuff it. "Minerva retired seven years ago and is in excellent health, thank you very much. But you...you died! I was there." She cursed herself silently. Even now, this wizard could reduce her to a babbling fourth-year. "Two different Death Eaters testified they'd burned your body."

Snape imperiously crossed his arms over his chest. "And you took the word of Death Eaters? How trusting you are." He snorted. "Did anyone bother to check if the ashes were actually mine?"

That derailed her. She had been *told* the ashes were Snape's remains, but ...

Snape gave her the I-thought-so sneer she had grown to hate in her six years under his tutelage. "And you were supposed to be the bright one."

"Oh, yeah?" she challenged, feeling at once irritated and excited. "I'm not the one trapped in a mirror, wonder boy." She paused, a thrill racing through her. "Although it has done wonders for your looks. You haven't aged a day."

"What do you mean?" He walked closer, as if the mirror were a window he could look through. He peered at her carefully, as if truly seeing her for the first time. "How old are you?" he demanded.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to ask a witch her age?" she shot back, but her heart was clipping along in a most un-aggravated way. Bickering with Snape was probably the most exhilarating thing she had done in twenty years. "If you must know, I'm forty-five this coming September."

Snape stared at her, his dark eyes huge with shock. He looked poleaxed. "Forty-five?" he whispered, his eyes drinking in the sight of her. "Aberforth, why didn't you tell me?"

Hermione turned to the older man. "Tell him what?"

"That so much time had passed," Snape answered, his face twisted with confusion and something much harder to define. The excitement died in her breast. His eyes met hers, stripped of his usual brittle coldness. They were large and dark and achingly vulnerable. They made him look even younger. In a low, small voice, he whispered, "Has it really been so long?"

They both turned to Aberforth, who sighed heavily. He grabbed the third whisky-filled glass and placed it on the table, where it reflected in the mirror. "Sit down, both of you. This will take a while."

Hermione sent her Patronus to inform Dave and her house-elf Toidle she would be gone from the castle for the rest of the evening, and made herself as comfortable as possible on the ratty old chair. In spite of his obvious discomfort at her scrutiny, she could not take her eyes off the man in the mirror. She was still not one hundred-percent convinced this was the *actual* Severus Snape (*Never trust anything if you can't see where it keeps its brain*) but her gut told her she was in the presence of her former professor.

It disturbed her that, while time had stood still for him, he bore so little resemblance to the man she held in her memory. His teeth were just as crooked, his hair just as unkempt, his complexion just as sallow as she remembered. His clothing was of the finest quality, a deep black wool robe with his trademark buttons marching in an orderly line from throat to hem. The style had been quite fashionable in the years following the war but it now looked dated, like an old photograph. It was rather rumpled, and looked damp in places, especially around his neck. There was a bandage around his throat that looked freshly applied.

He was slim and wiry, and still carried himself very stiffly, as if he distained being touched by the world. With the twenty-twenty vision of maturity, Hermione realised it was all a trick. These weren't merely physical ticks and idiosyncrasies wrapped up in a never-changing costume. They were props to hide behind.

Where she had only seen and remembered defiance and anger, she now saw fear and a sorrow that went deep, down to the bone. It had always been there; she just had not known what she was looking at. He was still severe-looking, even ugly, but knowing him as she now did, she could not help but combine the individual, unattractive ingredients and find the completed product altogether ... fascinating. He looked like a creature out of time, a statue in a show window, or a very old Muggle photograph...both untouchable and heartbreakingly real.

She stared at him so hard he grew skittish, so she looked away to give them both some breathing room. That seemed to relax him a little, and he took a sip from the glass

of whisky reflected in the mirror, grimacing at its appalling taste. Hermione quickly looked back to the one on the table; it had not moved.

"Yeah, he can use the objects reflected in the mirror," Aberforth said, as if she had voiced some challenge about it. "If I place books there, he can read 'em. If I place food or drink, he can consume 'em."

"How did you come to be in ... possession of this mirror, Mr. Dumbledore?" Hermione asked.

Aberforth filled his own glass, and sat down heavily on an old ladderback chair. "Ariana found him. It was during the battle, and I just happened to come up here and saw her. She was frightened and obviously upset. Somethin' going on in that Room at Hogwarts."

He nodded toward the portrait's door. "I went in, and the Fiendfyre had just about gutted it. You could barely see for the smoke. I heard... somethin'. That's when I found him."

Hermione shook her head in amazement. "We were there as well. Vince Crabbe started the fire. It eventually killed him. We barely made it out in time ourselves." She turned to Severus, who was obviously not enjoying being spoken about as if he were not in the room. As he listened to the conversation with wary, hooded eyes, she asked, "Who did this to you, Professor?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I don't know. I remember being attacked by the snake. I remember you and Potter, and giving him some memories. Then I must have lost consciousness, because the next thing I knew I was in here, and the mirror was surrounded by fire."

"Do you remember everything else? Your life before that night?"

It seemed to be on the tip of his tongue to reply with a remark that would leave the air sizzling with emotion, but he stopped himself. "I remember everything, Headmistress," he answered, using his honeyed voice to convey all that his words could not.

Hermione regarded him thoughtfully. Just as time had given her better insight into her former professor's personality, it had also eroded his ability to obfuscate undetected. He was telling a version of the truth, but not all of it.

She turned back to Aberforth. "So you saved him from being destroyed. What I don't understand is why you didn't let anyone know?"

"Wasn't my secret to tell."

"But—"

"Why should I? So the Ministry, in their wisdom, could vilify the boy in a trial that would have put a three-ring circus to shame?" The look he gave her would have made milk curdle. "Do you think they would have passed up an opportunity to make a spectacle of him? There's many a wizard would have paid to see them destroy this mirror with him in it. They would have sold tickets and claimed it was for war reparation."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. In the days that followed the final battle, passions were running high and wild. It wasn't outside the realm of reason that the Ministry would have found Severus Snape a particularly useful scapegoat on which to hang their grief and thirst for vengeance against Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

"You...you could have brought him to Hogwarts," she replied lamely.

Aberforth snorted in derision. "Oh, yes. That's the perfect place for him! And let my brother start influencin' you all on how to take care of him? Severus would've ended up like some sort of exhibit, paraded out every year like a freak at a fun-fair! How long would he have lasted? There's a lot of rocks at Hogwarts and a lot of orphans looking to blame someone."

Snape scoffed, "Don't be so sodding melodramatic, Aberforth. You know that doesn't work."

Hermione looked at Snape. "What doesn't work?"

For the first time, he did not bother to hide his discomfort. "When I first realised my ... situation, I agreed with Aberforth. While my life has never been very pleasant, I had some small degree of autonomy. I was mobile, at least." He looked around at his environment. "I am trapped in a mirror, Headmistress Granger. I cannot live and I cannot die, and most of all, I cannot escape. I surmised that death was preferable to this half-life."

The words were spoken dispassionately, but Hermione's heart ached for him. "You thought by breaking the mirror, you could free yourself. One way or another."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "Since I had no idea what would happen, I decided to take back whatever control I could. Anything was preferable to this...even death. So, at my insistence, Aberforth tried to break the mirror."

"What happened?"

"Nothin'," Aberforth answered morosely. "I tried every spell I knew. I hit it with everything I could get my hands on. They all just deflected off the damn thing. I even tossed it down the stairs. It just bounced."

"And I'm afraid all I got was a bloody nose and a bruised arse for his troubles," Snape interjected ruefully. "Aberforth brought me every book he could find that might shed some light on how to break the spell, but I found nothing. This is where I am, and apparently, this is where I will remain."

Something did not add up. Oh, a lot of things did not add up, but the most telling was Snape himself. When he spoke those words, there was no bitterness, no sadness, no defiance, no resignation, either. If anything, he seemed accepting of his fate...almost serene. The prospect of eternity locked in a mirror held no more pain for him. Hermione did not know whether to admire or pity him.

In any case, Hogwarts wouldn't be headed by a mirror. "You may well accept your situation, Professor, but I don't." Hermione stood. "I have the wealth of Hogwarts' extensive library behind me, and now that I'm Head, I have even more resources. We'll find a way."

Aberforth looked sad but resigned. "I knew the moment you found out, you'd start bossin' him around." He looked at Snape beseechingly. "It's your life, Severus. Say the word, and you'll not move from this room, no matter what Miss High and Mighty says."

"Mr. Dumbledore, I don't think..."

"You're safe here. Don't you know what will happen when the Wizarding world finds out about you? You can't believe she can protect you."

"Now you listen to me, Aberforth Dumbledore," Hermione said, her temper boiling into anger. "The last person who underestimated my ability to protect a secret found the word 'SNEAK' written across her face in purple zits, and twenty-eight years later she's still trying to get rid of them. I don't need you, nor anyone else, to tell me how sensitive this is."

Snape was watching her carefully. His neutral expression revealed very little, but Hermione wanted to believe she saw hope in his dark eyes. When Aberforth tried to respond, she held up her hand.

"I have reasons of my own for wanting to free Professor Snape, and I'm not going to let anyone harm or harass him in the process. Your help in the matter is preferable than going forward without it."

For a moment, the room was silent. Then Snape said, "Aberforth, would you please give me a moment alone with Headmistress Granger?"

The old man shot Hermione a warning look, but finally turned and left the room. The door shut softly behind him, and they both waited until they heard Aberforth's heavy tread lumbering down the stairs.

Alone, Hermione turned back to her former Professor, who was studying her intently.

"I have only one thing to ask you, Professor," she began, and was a little surprised when he chuckled. His features did not soften with mirth like most; if anything he seemed harder, more inflexible. He appraised her coolly.

"Just the one? You *have* grown up, Miss Granger," he replied.

"Don't be an arse," she shot back. "I need to know: do you want to be free? Is that why Mr. Dumbledore is so reluctant? Have you expressed the desire to remain where you are?"

He rolled his eyes impatiently. "What a ridiculous question! Of course I want to be free!" he growled, with a tint of resentment in his voice. "Aberforth is a good enough host. He saved my life. He made me welcome here, and I've been as content as a wizard trapped in a mirror can be.

"Had fate been different, perhaps I would be an exhibition piece in Hogwarts. Perhaps I would have gone mad from the isolation and loneliness. He saved me from that as well."

Hermione felt her face flush. This time Snape's features *did* soften. "He's also a very solitary man with no one but goats for company. I've been a captive audience for twenty years. Not that I have any right to complain," he added. "All things considered, it could have been worse."

He met her eyes with his. "Even trapped here, I am aware of my environs. As Aberforth hinted, I can eat and drink, and interact with the reflections behind me. I also feel the changes in temperature." He looked away pointedly. "I'm the one Aberforth heard in the Room of Requirement. I was screaming for help... the reflection of the flames, you see ..."

Hermione's hands flew to her face in surprise. "Oh, dear gods, it must have been awful."

He regarded her with a singular quirk of his brow. "You have a most un-Gryffindorish gift for understatement."

She found herself smiling at him, and wonder of wonders, he smirked back. "So, Headmistress Granger, where do we go from here? Admittedly there is little I can do to stop you, but I think I at least deserve to know your intentions for the outcome."

"I am going to make sure you are the next Headmaster of Hogwarts."

Four

Chapter 4 of 6

Seven years into Hermione Granger's tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts, the castle will reveal a secret that changes everything she ever knew about it, the role of Head of Hogwarts, and herself. Written for LiveJournal's Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest.

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It took a matter of moments to explain the revelation in the Book of Heads. Snape looked both pleased and gobsmacked in turn. "Well, I must say, this has been a day for surprises all round," he finally pronounced. "I know of the books, of course. I spent most of my time as Headmaster hiding them. Dolores Umbridge was especially interested in the Book of Students."

He looked at Hermione keenly. "But my name was never in the Book of Heads. At least, not while I was there."

"No. Apparently it only appeared after I became Headmistress."

"So," he replied, pacing in front of her, "Hogwarts wants me back legitimately this time. How flattering." He shot her a defiant look. "Presuming a miracle occurs and you are successful in somehow freeing me, Headmistress, why on earth would I want the job again? If memory serves, the first time was no picnic. I've enjoyed rounds of *Crucio* more."

"No doubt," she replied, "but Hogwarts wants you to be Head after me, and I feel honour-bound to comply with its wishes." She gestured at the mirror. "Besides which, you don't deserve this! If it's in my power to free you, I have to try!"

Slyly, he looked at her through long black lashes. "And what if you do succeed, Headmistress, and the freedom goes to my head so completely I give two fingers to Hogwarts and fuck off to the Fiji Islands?"

She gaped in amazement, then laughed. He sounded filthy when he swore. That tingle of pleasure returned. "Then I'll just have to come find you when I retire and drag you back."

The look he gave her was two parts pity, one part admiring. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she smiled. "But I promise I'd make it worth your while. I would ply you with all the tropical drinks, sand and witty repartee you could stand until you gave in and came back with me." Gods, was she flirting with him? She thought she might be.

"Indeed?" Something in his rakish look told her he thought so, too. He sobered, and looked around the room that had been his home for twenty years. "Very well, Headmistress. I can't fight both you *and* Hogwarts. I place my fate in your hands. In any case, I fear I've outstayed Aberforth's famous hospitality long enough. We were starting to bicker like old marrieds anyway."

Hermione smiled at him, willing him to have faith in her. "Well, you know what they say: a change is as good as a rest."

An hour later, she and Aberforth were returning Snape to Hogwarts. They decided he might be comfortable in her private library, away from prying eyes and nosy portraits. Hermione settled the mirror in among some tempting books and a bottle of thirty-year-old elf-made wine. She transfigured an old journal into the first comfortable bed he had had in the past twenty-odd years.

"You're welcome to return to Hogwarts and visit him anytime you like, Mr. Dumbledore," Hermione said, as Aberforth turned to leave. "Just because he's here doesn't mean you can't keep him company."

Aberforth turned back. "And just because he's here doesn't mean he belongs to you now, Headmistress." He turned to Severus, and there was genuine sadness in his voice. "I'll be by and check on you. If you're not happy ..."

"You'll be the first to know, Aberforth." Snape placed one hand against the mirror; long, slender fingers, graceful wrist. "Thank you for everything, old friend. I owe you more than a life debt."

Aberforth nodded stoically. "The only debt you owe me is to have a life, Severus. You deserve that, at least." He gave Hermione a curt bow, then left.

~o0o~

While Hermione had no desire to risk the discovery of Snape in the Wizarding world, she also knew she needed help. What better place to find said help than at Hogwarts itself? She summoned Toidle, whom she trusted with her life and the castle's secrets, and explained the situation. He was transported with joy to discover Headmaster Snape was alive, but could offer no help in releasing him.

"Elves is having powerful magic, but we is not using our magic for bad things," he explained, with a mournful shake of his head. "We is not learning how to make wizards unhappy."

"I understand, Toidle. But I want you to see to Headmaster Snape's every need, and bring him anything he wants."

"Oh yes! Toidle can do that, no worries, Headmistress Gee!" he said, his good humour restored. He rewarded her with a smile of pure bliss. "Toidle is honoured to make Headmaster Snape happy!"

The portraits took it in turn to be skeptical, jealous and generally unhelpful. Dilys thought perhaps it was another type of portraiture like themselves, until Hermione reminded her about the Book of Heads. At Phineas' urging, she brought the mirror and its very reluctant captive to her study. The move was two-fold; she wanted to see Dumbledore's reaction as well as listen to the gallery's collective suggestions.

It came as a bit of surprise when she turned the mirror toward the portraits, and Albus burst into tears. "My dear, dear boy. This wasn't supposed to happen," he wept, pressing his thready hands against his canvas. "Severus, forgive me. Forgive me!"

Uneasily, Hermione glanced at the mirror. Snape was sitting in her reflected chair, looking like he would rather be anywhere else. "Albus, please. Enough. You cannot change who you are any more than I."

"Indeed, Albus, cease!" Phineas commanded imperiously. "Save your tears. He deserves your wits, not your guilt, man."

Each day, Hermione spent her spare time scouring every resource available to her, returning in the afternoon with dozens of documents, books, scrolls and parchments. Together she and Professor Snape began the painstaking research to find the spell that had placed him in his silver prison.

Mirror magic was a somewhat fickle art, they discovered. The Mirror of Erised, for example, was essentially an experiment gone wrong. The wizard who had invented it had intended for it to reflect the future, but when facing the mirror to pronounce the final enchantment, he was concentrating so hard on the *success* of the spell, the mirror absorbed his desire as well as the intention. The moment he looked into the mirror, he saw his reflection receiving an Order of Merlin for his brilliant innovation in mirror magic. Since he assumed the spell worked, he never stopped to think he might only be seeing the deepest, most desperate desire of his heart, instead of the actual future. Only later did he add the famous writing across the bridge of the mirror, as a warning to others. He died a broken man.

Mirrors were commonly spelled to talk to the person reflected in them, but this was a simple charm, and usually had a finite life. Charmed mirrors were rarely reliable, and few Wizarding folk (with the possible exception of Gilderoy Lockhart) trusted them to actually tell the truth. Since they could only reflect what they saw, most were spelled to tell the person what they wanted to hear.

Night after night, once all her Hogwarts business was attended, Hermione and her former professor poured through old documents, archives and journals. Usually they would eat together, or share a bottle of wine. He ate sparingly, and a little self-consciously, as if others were watching. A lifetime of hypersensitivity about his looks, his blood status and his past had left him repressed and dour, and twenty years of time alone with only an older wizard for company had made him a little nervous, almost shy around Hermione. It was the most ironic of ironies that the one wizard she had turned herself inside out to impress now felt insecure in her presence.

It was almost endearing, in a completely mad way.

As it turned out, Snape was good company in a way that surprised Hermione, but should not have. His fierce intellect, his wry, dry-as-a-bone humour and his powers of rapier-sharp observation appealed to her. She could talk to him without that ingrained expectation of having to dumb down, or mentally deducting IQ points. He knew so much, and Hermione loved matching wits with him. He certainly gave her a good run for her money. Many was the night that Toidle intruded with a gentle admonishment that "Headmistress Gee needs her sleep!" only to discover they had merrily argued some salient point until four in the morning.

Gradually he opened up about himself and the amazing events of his life. His history with Harry's mum was legend now, but he spoke of Lily Potter with a gentle affection that made Hermione feel jealous and wistful in turns. When he talked of his allegiances, first with Tom Riddle, then with Dumbledore, there was little animosity, only the quiet acceptance of the choices he had made, and the fate they had set in motion.

It was obvious that, no matter what he said about the passage of time, he had spent a lot of it thinking about the past. As they spent more time together, Hermione understood that he regarded his life in the mirror as a means of atonement. It had been every bit as instrumental in keeping him sane as Aberforth and his rough-hewn, salt-grass company.

Unfortunately, he had grown too comfortable with it. Hermione was sure that Snape's resignation and acceptance kept him in the mirror almost as much as the spell that had put him there in the first place. It was her job to convince him that his term had been served.

She supposed it was why their conversations often turned to other subjects besides his situation. If she could convince him to envision a life outside the mirror, perhaps he would be less afraid to leave it. They talked about Hogwarts life, and the staff which was both family and bane of existence at times. Snape provided amusing, sometimes wicked commentary that often left her in stitches.

Several of his contemporaries had moved on; Horace Slughorn had retired (*"Thank Merlin. The man was a complete pain in the arse and brewed like a moro!"*). Filius Flitwick had taken a five-year sabbatical to Japan. He sent Hermione and the rest of the staff magical postcards and charming, useful little gifts (*"Good man. Good wizard. Demon duelist. We used to practice together and I have the scars to prove it"*). Sybil Trelawney had experienced a 'bit of a turn,' and was currently spending some time 'recuperating' in Cardiff (*"Poor cow"*).

"That's it? That's all you have to say about Sybil? 'Poor cow'?"

Snape sniffed and smoothed the front of his robes. "I don't think I have to tell you why my feelings for Sybil are decidedly mixed."

Hermione swallowed. "I suppose not."

To change the subject, she hastily launched into a discussion about her current Potions professor, who was a pleasant-enough witch, but not a certified Master. Her N.E.W.T. students' scores had been a bit lackluster for the previous two years. When Hermione asked Snape if he had any advice she might pass on, he snorted.

"I think you may recall I wasn't the best of professors myself, Headmistress. When I..."

"Hermione. Please call me Hermione."

He shot her a wary look. "Hermione. As I was saying, when I..."

"And may I call you Severus?"

"May I finish giving the advice for which you asked?" he replied, eyebrow raised haughtily.

"Of course. Do proceed, Severus." He looked at her askance and she shrugged. "Well, you didn't say no."

Gradually, as they grew more comfortable with one another, they shared stories of that last, awful year, when Hermione was on the run with the boys, and he was Hogwarts' unasked for, most hated Headmaster. "Dumbledore's sodding Army! Merlin's beard. They kept the Carrows so wound up I had to fight both sides, usually at once."

Severus sat back, and took a sip of wine. "And that bloody Sword of Gryffindor! I nearly froze to death, traipsing around the Forest of Dean, trying to find a place to plant the damn thing where Boy Potter could 'take it under conditions of need and valor.' When it turned up with you three at Malfoy Manor, the Carrows went spare. They had been told it was locked away at Gringotts, you see."

"Bloody Sword, indeed," Hermione commiserated. "It almost got me killed at Malfoy Manor." She pulled up her sleeve to reveal the faded scar on her arm that still clearly read "*MUDBLOOD*".

Severus' eyes widened in shock. With a mixture of anger and sadness, he asked, "Gods, Hermione. Who did this?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Hermione replied breezily, almost proudly. "She was convinced we'd raided her vault and stolen it. We actually did raid Gringott's to steal Helga Hufflepuff's cup, but that wasn't until later." She indicated the scar. "This is how I got one of her hairs to Polyjuice myself into her. So I guess you could say this helped us to kill one of the Horcruxes. Well, that and all the *Crucios* she performed on me."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "I'm sorry. She was completely mad, you understand. Even before Azkaban scrambled her brains, she was nobody's idea of sane." His eyes met hers, and Hermione was struck by their depth, their softness. Without guile or mistrust or agenda to shutter them to the world, they were expressive and hypnotic, framed with ludicrously long lashes. Next to his voice, they were easily the most beautiful thing about him. *A witch could get lost in those eyes* she thought.

Suddenly he pulled back his own sleeve, and revealed a puckered, crescent-shaped scar on his right forearm. "Bellatrix gave this one to me as well, when I was about that same age, as I recall."

She leaned forward and afforded him a look of respect. "Why? I thought you were, you know, allies at the time?"

"Who knows why Bella did anything? She never needed an excuse to inflict bodily harm. It was almost a gesture of affection for her." He shrugged, neatly side-stepping her remark about allies. "But I remember it was something fairly innocuous. We were probably dueling, or practicing hexes."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I can do you one better on that account." She pulled up the hem of her robe to reveal a long scar on her left calf. "Ginny Weasley zapped me during a dueling bout the summer before Fifth year. Friendly fire."

"Pah, child's play. Look at this." To her surprise he raised his own robe and Hermione flinched at the ugly scar that zig-zagged down his long, muscular leg, from mid-thigh to ankle. "Hagrid's piggin' three-headed dog gave me this one."

"Fluffy?"

"Fluffy my arse. Gods damned menace is what he was. Albus let it just pounce around the school like it was a Chihuahua."

Laughing, Hermione answered, "Ha! I can beat that!" Without a second thought, she opened the front of her robe, revealing part of the gruesome scar that bisected her abdomen from her solar plexus almost down to her pubic bone. "Department of Mysteries, Fifth year. Dolohov."

Severus looked at the scar on her chest, and the smirk faded from his lips. He grew pale, and all the playful scar-upmanship fizzled and blew away like a Pygmy Puff on the wind. Softly, like a balm, he said, "I remember that. I was there when they brought you into the Infirmary." He shook his head. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone as afraid as Poppy Pomfrey was that night."

Hermione cursed herself silently for spoiling the mood. She tried to claw back some levity by replying, "You must not have seen me, then."

"I *did* see you." He raised soulful, haunted eyes to hers. "I remember thinking that for such a little thing, you had so much blood coming out of you. I was furious with Potter for placing you in such peril over that mutt, Black. One part of me wanted to expel you, and the other part wanted to bargain to the gods on my knees to let you live."

He tilted his head, and the bitterness left his tone. "And right at the most critical moment, when it was literally touch and go, you opened your eyes and you looked straight up at me." He laughed silently. "You said, 'I'm not going to die, Professor. I simply can't. I have to find out if I passed my O.W.L.s.'"

She gaped at him in shock. "I never did!" His thin lips quirked into a smile, and she felt like swatting him. "I knew you're were telling porkies!"

He shook his head, smiling. "I'm not, I assure you. Everyone just stared at you, in the middle of this carnage of blood and destruction, and laughed." He glanced at her almost shyly. "I remember thinking, 'If this is the kind of friend Potter has on his side, we might just stand a chance of winning, if we can keep her alive. I'm literally holding this girl's body together while Poppy sews her up like a garment, and all she can think about is exams.'"

A dark, sudden thrill ran over Hermione. "You...you held me that night?"

He nodded. "I was covered in so much of your blood, Albus thought I had been the one attacked." He looked into his wine glass. "Tough, brave, clever, mad little Gyffindor witch."

Hermione stared at her former professor. It was as if thousands of butterflies in her stomach suddenly took off, and it was her turn to duck her head. "You know, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

He placed his palm against the mirror, and on impulse, Hermione placed hers against it. She could *feel* the warmth of his hand through the mirror, as if all that separated them was that tiny expanse of melted sand. "It's been too long," he said, his voice husky. He cleared his throat. "Time ... doesn't have the same meaning here. It seemed like only a handful of days from the time Aberforth rescued me from the fire, until the moment you showed up in his pub." His eyes dropped, and took in her entire body in one sweeping glance. "I confess ... it's rather overwhelming to realise the witch standing before me is that same little girl I held in the Infirmary."

Hermione swallowed. "And I'm finding it difficult to compare the professor I knew with the man in the mirror." She readied herself, and spoke the truth. "Before you 'fuck off

to the Fijis,' maybe we can get to know one another better. I'd like to, anyway."

His eyes shot up to meet hers, and he pulled his hand away, as if the glass had burned him. Hermione felt a chill where his warm palm had been. He would not meet her eyes, but his voice was as expressive as ever. "So would I, Hermione. But I'm not the kind of man who ever profited from getting his hopes up." Severus sat down with a sigh. "For the first time since I woke up and found myself trapped here, I'm conflicted about what will happen if we find a way to end the enchantment." He finally turned the full battery of those liquid expressive eyes on her. "I don't want to die, Hermione."

Something deep within her soul broke, like a glass ball crushed in a strong fist. A tiny, hidden chink she did not even realise existed cracked open, and Severus Snape strode in as if he owned it. At that moment, Hermione understood with sudden, terrible, wonderful clarity that she was in love with him.

She placed both hands on the mirror, and promised the gods everything she had if they would free him. "I won't let you die, Severus. I promise you that."

Five

Chapter 5 of 6

Seven years into Hermione Granger's tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts, the castle will reveal a secret that changes everything she ever knew about it, the role of Hogwarts, and herself. Written for LiveJournal's Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest.

Warning - this is not a story for snowflakes. Proceed at your own risk. You have been warned.

I want to thank you all for the amazing and supportive comments you've given to this fic. Again, special thanks to stgulik, the world's best editor/beta. I do not own these characters, and I make no money from this or any other work of fanfiction.

Shortly after lunch, an approaching summer storm began bruising the sky with dense purple clouds. By tea time, they were layered over the castle like blankets, heavy and stifling. The air turned stultifying and still; the metallic taste of it lay heavy on the tongue. It was so eerily quiet, not even the Whomping Willow moved. The world held its breath, waiting.

By eventide, the first skirmishes of hot and cold air rumbled like approaching cannon from the west. The wind picked up, swirling into dust devils as tall as the Astronomy Tower. Hermione and the ghosts quickly roamed up and down the corridors, battening down hatches and seeing that everyone in the castle was accounted for and safe. The temperature dropped twenty degrees, and there was nothing to do but let it happen. Hermione hated it.

Thunderstorms reminded her too much of the sounds of the final battle.

The first huge drops of rain caught her as she started across the main courtyard toward her study. With a heart-stopping crash of thunder, the skies opened, and even at a dead run Hermione was soon soaked to the skin before she even had the chance to cast a water-repelling charm.

Severus actually laughed at her bedraggled state as she squelched into the library, while Hermione applied a drying charm and tried not to flinch with each boom of thunder. Catching her expression, Severus sobered, and called for Toidle, who appeared with an accompanying bolt of lightning.

"Headmaster is wanting something?"

"Yes, Toidle. Take the Headmistress to her chambers and build a warm fire in the parlour. She'll be more comfortable there."

"But Severus..."

"The noise doesn't carry so much in there, and I will still be here in the morning when the storm is over," he said firmly. "It will be pointless to try and carry on with you jumping out of your skin at every thunderclap."

Hermione looked from the elf to the mirror. "Fair enough, but I see no reason it should interrupt our research. Toidle, I'll take myself to my chambers. Take Professor Snape to my parlour. And please be careful."

Toidle gave her a look that could almost be taken as loving. "Yes, Headmistress Gee." With a *POP!* he and the mirror were gone.

Severus was correct; it was quieter in her chambers. As she bustled about, changing into warm, dry clothes and wringing the last droplets from her hair, Hermione thought of the wizard in her parlour, sitting in the reflected chair by the fireplace. A pleasant fantasy spun in her head: she would walk into the room, and he would rise from the chair and offer her a glass of brandy. Perhaps he would join her on the sofa, and they could talk about the storm, and what they would do tomorrow once the harsh weather had passed. They could walk the grounds together, surveying any damage the storm might have caused. As the thunder rolled overhead, perhaps his large hand would cover hers reassuringly ...

Hermione shook her head to clear it. For some strange reason, she suddenly felt ashamed. She quickly joined Severus in the parlour. "How about...oh, I see Toidle has already beat me to it!" she said, indicating the brandy glass in his hand.

Severus rose to his feet as she crossed to the sofa. "Indeed. Toidle was always one to show concern over my creature comforts back in the day."

"You were well liked by many here. Even when they weren't supposed to."

He made a strange dismissive gesture as he resumed his seat. "Part of me hated it. It made my job harder. How can you be the enemy when the gargoyles and the house-elves are hanging on to your every word and stroking you like you're their favourite pet?"

Hermione smiled. "Still, it must have given you some comfort knowing the castle was on your side."

He regarded her solemnly. "I didn't want to look at it that way, Hermione. It was too hard, trying to hold everything together. I was so afraid all of the time. I had to keep everyone at a safe enough distance so the cracks wouldn't show." He looked away. "That way, I didn't have to take responsibility for the hideous things I had to do in order to keep my cover." He stared into the fire. "It was surprisingly easy to become the most hated wizard in Britain."

When he did not continue, Hermione put her glass down, and moved closer. "You aren't hated anymore by anyone, Severus. Let it go. Be the wizard you want to be. Good

or bad, nice or not, you can do it on your own terms now, without any fear of anything."

He shot her a nervous look. "I don't know how to do that."

"You will," she said firmly, believing it. "You will when you are free. And if you truly don't wish to be the next Head of Hogwarts, so be it. The book can't trap you here like this damn mirror. You can do whatever you want."

The crackling fire was the only sound in the room for perhaps the space of ten heartbeats. Severus put down his glass. "And what if all I want is you?"

~o0o~

Hermione's hands were shaking as she positioned the mirror to face her bed. She lay down and pulled it close, until it was as if she and Severus were lying together, facing one another on the bed. He closed his eyes and a sigh slipped from his lips. "I'd forgotten just how comfortable this bed was." He opened his eyes, and his hand pressed against the mirror. "You look like an angel lying in it."

She placed her hand against his, matching fingertip to fingertip. An ache bloomed in her chest, as heavy and dark as the storm. "I wish I could touch you right now," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I'd give anything to make love to you."

His eyes were so close. They blocked out everything in her vision. "Close your eyes, Hermione." His voice was so sweet. It was as if she could feel the rush of it as he spoke.

"I don't want to stop looking at you."

"Do this for me, Hermione," he insisted, his voice low and throbbing with desire. "Close your eyes ... close your eyes, and dream ..."

Obediently, her eyes fluttered closed, and there was a soft, gentle whisper of air against her face. "Hermione," he purred, and she could feel his voice, the soft tap of consonants, the puff of vowels, the caress of his fingers against her skin ...

Hermione opened her eyes, and he was there, his hand amazingly warm on her cheek. "Is this a dream?"

"If it's a dream, it's my dream too," he replied, his voice so entrancing she moaned with desire. "I want you, Hermione Granger. I have since the moment I recognised you, all grown up and so beautiful. I am aching to touch you."

She was drowning in his eyes, his voice, the heat of him. "Severus, I want this more than anything..."

"Shhh," he soothed, and moved close, until their bodies were touching. "Then let's not waste a moment of it. Kiss me."

His lips were soft, and Hermione stopped trying to think, stopped trying to understand, and gave into the sweet suffocation of his kisses. He moaned into her mouth, and she pulled him closer, to drink from him, her hands sliding into his silky hair. In the way of dreams, they were suddenly naked, and he was sparsely beautiful, like an icon. Pale, smooth skin, black hair, caramel nipples, long wiry limbs. She stroked his chest, down, down, carding her fingers through the line of black hair pointing to his hard cock. He moaned rapturously, and pulled her to him, their bodies twining, their mouths fused hungrily.

He pressed her into the bed, pinning her under his weight, and she mewled helplessly. It had been so long since she had been with a man, and she drank in the sight of him, breathed in his scent, willed him to melt into her, to feel his heat and hard planes and soft skin. His hands stroked her skin with greedy urgency, and as his mouth closed around one tight and aching nipple, his dexterous fingers plied the other until she was writhing against him, needy and desperate for his touch.

Even as what was left of her rational mind tried to reason with her that this was *not* real, her body hummed, riding this sensual, languid tide of desire, floating with him like leaves in a summer stream. He stilled, and looked down into her face with such wonder and longing her vision swam with tears. She tried to turn in his arms, to give him back some tiny piece of the pleasure he was giving her so selflessly, but he was too strong, and his intentions too focused.

He parted her thighs, and eased down between them, gifting her with the tenderest of kisses. "Please, more," she whispered helplessly, impatient and terrified this incredible dream would end before he did.

"My love," he whispered hoarsely, and opened her with his lips, his tongue. His moan of hunger parted her, swelling her core with desire, teasing her until she was helpless, his for the taking. She came immediately, her entire body pulsing in time with her pounding heart.

He lifted his head to watch her climax, his face flushed, his lips glossy and red, and Hermione rose from the bed to capture his mouth with hers. He kissed her without finesse or tricks, only hungry, intoxicating desire, as if he could find every release within her body. His arms snapped around her, until she could barely breathe. "Please, now, Severus," she gasped between his drugging, overwhelming kisses. She reached between them, and when her fingers closed around what she sought, he trembled like a boy. He was impossibly hot, and so hard it did not seem possible that he was made of only flesh and blood.

"Oh, gods," he moaned. "Touch me. Please, touch me." Hermione stroked the hard, desperate length of him, and he shivered with pleasure at each caress. As her hand slid between his legs, caressing his sac, his perineum, he closed his eyes, a look of agonised pleasure on his face. "I want you now, Hermione. Please let me take you now."

"Yes," she moaned, opening her thighs, guiding him to where she needed him most. He loomed over her, allowing his cock to tease her primed and drenched core. His face was the very picture of ecstasy. Eyes closed, mouth parted, his silky brows turned inward. Without warning or indication, he sank into her, and they cried out at the sweet pain of her body stretching and encasing him. Hermione's legs slid around his waist, pulling him deeper, and he ground out her name as he took his first slow, generous plunge into her.

Even as his body shuddered at the effort to be gentle, it was still almost too much. He crooned sweetly in her ear as his hips slid against hers in that timeless erotic dance. She could tell he wanted to give into his passion and take her, and that was all that mattered. He wanted her, here, now. "Do whatever you want with me," she gasped, kissing the slender column of scarred flesh at his throat. "I'm yours now. Do whatever you want with me, Severus. Tell me, show me ..."

Even as she spoke, his body shifted, and the control that had allowed him to ease his cock in and out of her with such slow, deliberate skill eroded and crumbled away. He rose onto his forearms, pumping into her faster and faster, until his thrusts were wild and unleashed. Soon he was fucking her, hard and fast, his voice a low growl of dizzily intense, masculine lust. It hurt and it was beautiful, and even as his hips crashed against hers, she felt her body tightening, preparing for flight, ready to burst apart with his.

Suddenly a deep growl rose from his chest, and he cried out her name, as his body froze in extremis. His cry of release was a wild, sweet animal sound. It sang in her bloodstream along with her own joyfully pounding heart, and she let go. Her orgasm was swift and overwhelming. It went on and on as he rode her, his thrusts spear-like and relentless. All she could do was hold on, pinned to him by his hard, male body, the curses uttered harshly in her ear, the crushing arms that both hurt and cradled her. Gradually, his grip softened by inches, to a caress that made her want to weep. As their breathing gradually slowed, Hermione opened her eyes and looked up at him.

He was still panting, his face glistening with sweat, his lovely eyes unfocused and glassy. "Hermione," he breathed, covering her face with frantic, desperate kisses. "Hermione."

She tried to answer him, but sleep was overtaking her consciousness like a drug. She was fading, her eyes too heavy, her body too spent. "No," he moaned, pulling her closer, as if his embrace could keep them together. "Not yet, please ... Hermione, hold me, stay with me, *touch me* ..."

Her eyes flew open, and she looked into the mirror. Severus was there, still asleep. Tears slid from his closed eyes. "Touch me," he whispered.

The yearning in those two words crushed her, and her own tears began to fall.

~oOo~

"Albus is driving me mad," Hermione announced as she entered the room. Her arms were laden with parchments that had arrived earlier from the Wizarding Library in Alexandria. "Gods, I hate it when he tries to be coy. You were right, Severus. Gryffindors are pants at being cryptic. Ambiguity is the true reserve of Slytherin."

He smirked. "It's practically *ourraison d'etre*," he said. He looked at the tower of documents with something like bewilderment. "What is our illustrious predecessor on about now?"

"He keeps saying that I need to dig. If he'd tell me *where* to dig and what I was digging *for*, I might be a little more inclined to listen. I swear he grows more barmy by the year." She gave him her patented Reproachful Head Tilt. It worked wonderfully on younger students. "He keeps telling me I already know the answer."

"I think he says that sort of rubbish when he wants everyone to think he knows more than he does," Severus grumbled, picking up a scroll and untying the ribbon that secured it.

"I agree. And I don't have time to chase his riddles. I'm not eleven," she replied, grabbing another scroll. She tugged at the bow impatiently, knotting it in the process. "I got everything they had on mirror magic, but we can only keep these parchments for three days before they have to go back to Alexandria."

"I must confess, I do like the sound of that."

Hermione looked up, and to her surprise Severus was smiling at her. "Like the sound of what?"

He ducked his head, and his cheeks coloured. "We. I like being part of this." His eyes met hers. "I've never really been part of a couple before, but I confess it pleases me. To be part of you."

Hermione blushed. They had been sleeping together since the night of the storm, and even though they did not actually touch, it was lovely to feel his presence in the room, to wake up and see him lying beside her, his severe face gentled in sleep. Hermione did not question what power it took to bring them together in her dreams; she merely took it for the gift it was.

Fueled by passion and tenderness, they sometimes made love until oblivion overtook them with the rising sun. It did not happen every night; sometimes they were only able to connect for a few fleeting moments. Sometimes they could not come together at all, no matter how they tried. But on those occasions when the magic happened, Severus could not get enough of her touch, and they held onto one another in wordless, desperate bliss. Every moment they could touch, every second they were apart from one another; they all increased Hermione's resolve to find a way to end their separation once and for all.

Hermione paused over the scroll. "We do make a good team, don't we?" His level nod served to answer. Smiling to herself, Hermione shifted her attentions back to the satin ribbon, and the knot running laps around the scroll. "I think once we get started we can make a good dent in all this reading if ... oh, for Merlin's sake!"

With a huff of frustration, she picked up a letter opener and jabbed at the pernicious knot. As she struggled to cut through the ribbon, the knife slipped and gouged into her hand. "Damn!" she cried, quickly moving away from the delicate scrolls. She caught her foot on a chair, and stumbled backward, banging her hand against the mirror with another juicy curse.

"Bloody hell, what a mess!" she hissed, looking down at her bleeding hand. It was shallow cut, but long. After grabbing her wand and quickly healing the wound with a hastily-muttered spell, she grumbled, "You'd think after all these years I would remember I'm a witch! Why I didn't just untie the knot with my wand I'll never know! I didn't get any blood on the scroll did I? The Librarian at Alexandria will go mad if I do. She makes Madam Pince look like a pussycat..."

She turned, but Severus wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the small smear of blood left behind where she had struck the mirror, his eyes huge with shock. "Gods," he whispered hoarsely.

Tentatively, he took a swipe at the stain, and the breath left Hermione's body as Severus held up his trembling hand, dappled with her blood.

Six

Chapter 6 of 6

Seven years into Hermione Granger's tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts, the castle will reveal a secret that changes everything she ever knew about it, the role of Head of Hogwarts, and herself. Written for LiveJournal's Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest.

Warning - this is not a story for snowflakes. Proceed at your own risk. You have been warned.

Author's Note: This is the epilogue of this story. Like Stephen King at the end of his Dark Tower Series, I am advising you to think of what you have read up to this point as the finale. If you read any further, upon your head be it.

Thank you for all the lovely comments you have given this story. Proceed at your own risk.

*Looking is benign. Seeing has teeth and comes with consequences. You see it, you own it. Sometimes it owns you*Wane Dorn

Severus stared down at his bloodstained hand, then, to Hermione's consternation, began licking the blood from his fingers.

"That's disgusting!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

He looked up at her with wild-eyed, painful joy. "Don't you see? This is the first human contact I've had in almost thirty years. I realise it's a bit strange, but ..." He shrugged, a look of pleading on his face. "It's you, Hermione. I've had this small bit of you, and," he shook his head and laughed shakily. "Well, let's just say I have a greater

appreciation for our vampire brethren now."

Hermione stared at him in shock. "I suppose we should both be glad I didn't wee on it," she muttered.

It was his turn to look surprised. They began to laugh. Their laughter was a mile long and a fathom deep, and they both held their sides until tears spurted from their eyes. It was the laughter of relief, and to Hermione it felt like they were making love again.

Gradually, their burst of elation faded, and he sobered. "It's an amazing breakthrough, but I don't fully trust the implications of it. As you may recall from your DADA classes, blood magic is very dark magic, Hermione. Or at least it can be. What happened may not even be relevant to the spell that imprisoned me."

Hermione had a sudden, silly desire to put her fingers in her ears and sing at the top of her lungs to drown out his pessimism. "Of course it's relevant! My blood went through the mirror from this plane to yours!"

"I'm just saying it could be some sort of honey trap."

Hermione stilled. "How so?"

"Aberforth tried blood magic too, Hermione. It didn't work." He looked down at the last smears of blood on his fingers. "Whoever did this to me wanted to make sure I'd never escape. I'd say the odds were very good it was a vengeful Death Eater, in which case my window of opportunity closed when the last of them died a few years ago. It might have even been the Dark Lord himself."

"But you see, I don't think it was. The timing doesn't work. After Voldemort left you to Nagini, his movements are well documented." She frowned, trying to piece together something that was dancing just out reach in the back of her mind. "Alright, let's go with the assumption you were placed in the mirror by blood magic. It's all about intent, as you say. After all, Minerva and I used blood magic to bind me to the castle. That was little more than magical calibration."

She paused. "You know, this isn't too dissimilar to a piece of a soul being placed into a Horcrux. Different, of course, but there are parallels."

Severus looked cautious, but intrigued. "Go on."

"What if we approach releasing you using this same theory? We used magical objects to kill the Horcruxes. Deeply powerful magical objects. A basilisk's tooth to kill the diary and the cup, the Sword of Gryffindor to destroy the locket, Fiendfyre killed Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem." She chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully. "Dumbledore essentially used himself to destroy the ring."

"And destroyed himself with it." Severus frowned. "I don't like where this is going."

"But think, Severus! How is a Horcrux created? With murder. With cold-blooded, remorseless murder. How was this mirror made? With hatred! You said yourself that whoever did this to you must have hated you more than anything on earth! Who would have possibly filled those shoes that had the ability and the timing to do it?"

For a moment, the room was quiet except for the sound of their breathing. "I know of only one person," Severus said quietly. He looked up at Hermione, his eyes bleak. "Bellatrix Lestrange."

Hermione's heart jolted in her chest. "The timing could be right. If she returned to the Shrieking Shack, looking for Voldemort, then found you, she could possibly have taken you to the Room of Requirement at some point. She was in the castle when Molly defeated her. But why would she do something like this? I mean, why not just kill you and be done with it?"

He shrugged. "You know from your own experience that Bella didn't need an excuse to torture someone. I can tell you she never trusted me after the Dark Lord returned. She did everything in her power to erode his faith in me as his spy. She could never understand why he found me remotely interesting or worthy in any way. Perhaps she thought I would make a trophy for him. Beyond that, if she had other reasons, I don't want to know them."

Hermione winced. "Yes, I can see where she might do something like this. I just can't believe a person can be so cruel. What a vile woman!"

"If was her, she had the final laugh, didn't she?" he quipped, his voice brittle. "Mirror magic is one of the few forms of magic that survives the castor. Erised proves that. Bella knew if something happened to her, the mirror would still hold me. She hated me enough to make sure I'd never escape either way. Godsdamn her!" He struck the mirror, hard, and it shook violently, but held.

"We don't know that," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice calm and measured. Her mind was whirling. "We can't dispute the fact that my blood was able to breach the mirror. Severus, what if Bellatrix was counting on hatred to be your shield?"

He looked at her with an expression of pure bafflement. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You said yourself that you were the 'most hated wizard in Britain.' What if Bellatrix used that hatred to imprison you? She expected nothing less than victory; it was beyond her ability to envision a world where you would *not* be a figure of hatred! No matter which side won, you would still be villified!"

"Hermione are you saying..."

"I'm saying that as far as she was concerned, this mirror was an eternal sentence. She didn't know the truth, Severus! She didn't know you were Dumbledore's man. She didn't know about Lily. She didn't know Hogwarts had plans for you." Some of the wild excitement quelled, and Hermione met the eyes of the man she had come to care about more than any other. "As far as she was concerned, you would always be trapped, because no one would ever want you. Even when she died, you would remain a prisoner forever, because you weren't worthy of love."

The emotion on his face was beyond anything she had ever seen. So much hope, so much longing. "Hermione/ never believed I was worthy of love. Certainly not a love as righteous and fierce as this. I'm still struggling to believe it."

She drew closer. "Believe it. You held me while I was bleeding to death, and kept me from dying. My blood was on your hands then, too, Severus, and you helped save me. "

"Blood magic doesn't work that way."

"Aberforth cared for you, but he didn't love you. And love is the only thing that will free you. It's the only thing Bellatrix and her Dark Lord didn't understand."

He was shaking his head slowly. "I...I didn't love you that night," he whispered, his expression streaked with shame. "The night you almost died in my arms. I didn't even like you all that much. It was just ... duty."

"What you gave Harry was given out of duty, but it helped him win the war. That's another kind of love."

"It's another kind of slavery!"

"Do you love me now, Severus?"

He stopped pacing, and his eyes grew large and full of fear. "I do love you, Hermione. I love you more than anything, but..."

"Then love is on both sides of the mirror. And true love isn't about enslavement. It's about freedom. "

As they stood silently, gazing across the chasm of magic that separated them, the solution came to Hermione as if someone had injected it into her brain. Relief and joy flooded her chest. Why hadn't she done it before? How could she have been so blind? "Severus, I know what to do! I know how to free you now! Wait here!"

He laughed, a short, sharp bark. "And where else, pray tell, would I go, witch?"

"Sorry! Wasn't thinking! I'll be right back!" she called, racing toward the study. As she traveled, she ran a long Arithmancy equation in her head. She ran it again on paper. As her portrait audience looked on, too alarmed at her frenzy to ask any questions, she cross-referenced it twice, and checked her figures four times against every known table, until she was convinced of their accuracy. As she went to tell Severus, she paused by the large glass case, and emptied it of its contents. She could hear the peanut gallery shouting at her even as she headed back to the library.

~o0o~

Severus looked at her in undiluted terror as she came into his line of sight, brandishing the Sword of Gryffindor. His face drained of what little colour he possessed. "Hermione, please. We need to be sure." His eyes pleaded with her. "I don't want to die. I'd rather stay here, like this, with you."

"You *will* be with me, Severus," Hermione insisted, trying to transfer her conviction to her lover. "I would never endanger your life. And I've got proof."

She explained her Arithmancy numbers, even going so far as to draw the equation in the air, using her wand to set the glowing figures in motion. He followed the sequence, but still looked unconvinced. His reticence puzzled her. "You have to admit, you can't get much more accurate than Arithmancy, Severus. It makes sense, doesn't it? It feels right."

Severus would not meet her eyes. "Bellatrix Lestrange was mad. Reason and sense had little in common with the workings of her mind."

"That doesn't matter, Severus! Every spell must follow universal magical parameters no matter how simple or complex. Mad or not, Bellatrix had to follow the rules of magical theory. Balance. Intent. Physical Law. Probability. Capability."

He pressed against the mirror, and Hermione was puzzled by the panic simmering in his eyes. His voice shook with it. "Let's wait. Please. We haven't even properly looked at these documents from Alexandria yet. We should talk to Albus. Better still, talk to Lucius Malfoy. He might be able to shed some light. The library at Malfoy Manor is second to none..."

"The Malfoys haven't lived in England for over ten years. No one even knows where they are. And Malfoy Manor was destroyed almost five years ago, Severus. We don't need them!" she explained, willing him to understand. "Don't you *want* to be free?"

He suddenly looked pained, as if her words hurt him. "Of course, but..."

Hermione lifted the sword. "Then I'm going to free you now, Severus. Trust me."

He was breathing hard, and looked ready to bolt, but something of her confidence finally caught, and burrowed past his doubt. In its place a dead, resigned calm took hold. "Alright. I trust you. You'll do it no matter what I say."

He stepped back and met her eyes. "Whatever happens, I want to thank you, Hermione. Thank you for trying."

She felt a silly, foolish grin playing over her lips. "Don't be afraid, love. When it's all done, I want you to thank me properly."

He gave her a small, sad smile. "All the tropical drinks, sand, and witty repartee you can stand. I promise, love." Tears spilled from his eyes. "I love you," he whispered. He closed his eyes and placed his beautiful hands flat against the mirror. Hermione looked at those large, capable hands, the slender fingers, the pale wrists, and remembered how sweet it felt to be held with those hands. She pressed hers against his and felt the heat of him.

With her heart beating wildly, she stepped back, and Severus did the same. He watched her intently as she grasped the blade of the Sword of Gryffindor, and drew it sharply over her palm. The edge bit into her hand, but she didn't feel any pain. As her blood coated the edge of the blade, she whispered, "I love you."

With a cry of victory, she hefted the heavy sword into its backswing, then slashed it forward with all her might, putting all her weight and faith and belief in herself behind her drive. The sword hit the mirror solidly, slicing cleanly through Severus' reflected figure, and the rest of the mirror shattered with a screech of protest. The room burst with light, and the momentum of the sword's follow through actually spun Hermione around. She felt a rush of flying glass...

"... and to discharge my duties with firmness and fairness, until such time as I am no longer able to do so, either from illness, senility or death. So mote it be."

"So mote it be!"

The crowd cheered wildly, and Severus Snape lowered his wand hand. His voice was raspy from so much continual speaking, but at least he could hold his head up and say he had remembered every poxy word of that damned oath.

Wizards dignitaries, luminaries and hangers-on crowded around him, congratulating and flattering him. Flashbulbs burst as he posed with the Minister and the heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, none of whom he personally knew. He was only marginally aware of saying or doing anything. He shook hands with Harry Potter for the benefit of *The Daily Prophet*, and almost ran from him afterward, unable to face the questions in the younger man's eyes. He stayed for the minimum amount of time he could, then made his excuses, citing Hogwarts business. Over the years it would become a handy scapegoat for his time.

After all the teen angst and crushes and drama and moments of heart-stopping fear and grief, the castle welcomed him home. It had, after all, chosen him as its mate. All those who had walked these halls before him had felt this same intimate bond with Hogwarts. It was part of the mortar that held the castle together; each and every Head left something of their spirits behind to fortify it. Even her.

Especially her.

When Hermione freed him from his purgatory with her blood and love, he had hoped against hope that breaking the mirror would mean his death. No matter the outcome, he knew he was destined to lose. Bella had done her work only too well. "If anyone is ever stupid enough to think they love you, they can release you, Severus, oh yes," she had cooed, her death's head smile lighting her face. "Not that they'll survive it. But don't worry, Sevvy," she cackled. "You'll be alive and well. Alive and well." Her laughter rang in his ears as she walked away.

Even as his heart broke and bled, it was full of stupid, base anger. Freeing him from the mirror was a foregone conclusion. Why hadn't she considered the repercussions of it?

Balance. Intent. Physical Law. Probability. Capability.

Balance.

He told himself that his inability to tell her the truth was part of Bella's spell. He told himself he was only trying to save her, to discourage her, that he lied to her to reassure her that his prison wasn't a hell.

Aberforth had been easy; he had never loved anything beyond those goats of his, so Severus had been safe in the knowledge Aberforth would never, could never take his place. If he had known Hermione would come back into his life, would he have tried harder to make Aberforth love him?

He wept as he dragged himself to his feet, and looked back at the mirror. Hermione had met his eyes with growing terror, and his apology died on his lips. That look of fear was enough to kill a stronger man. Then again, he had always had a bottomless vein of self-preservation where his heart was concerned.

The mirror was such a liar, as all mirrors were. They only showed you what you want to see, what you *expected* to see. How cruel it had been, to watch her look around at the drab and lifeless room that was her new home. He could see the understanding dawn when she took her first sip of wine. Nothing, not even the feel of liquid in her throat. Panting with fear, she picked up an apple from the bowl on the table, and Severus' gut churned, knowing that the tart, fresh taste would never find its way onto her tongue. Hermione would never again feel hot or cold, hungry or full, asleep or awake.

She raced around the room, trying to find something familiar, some small link with the world she had given back to Severus, and he sank to his knees, waiting for the retribution that never came. She picked up book after book reflected from the library, only to discover the print was backward, or the pages blank, or written in a language not of this earth.

She had wept then. She had cried and he had cried and pathetically begged for the forgiveness he no more deserved than his freedom.

He took up the reins of Headmaster that following Autumn, after weeks of discussion with the Minister and the Head of the Unspeakables Department. He told Hermione only that he had been made Headmaster because the Book of Heads declared him as such, and that she would remain with him. Only he, a house-elf and the gargoyle named Dave knew the truth regarding the fine print on his Hogwarts contract. She would *not* be relegated to the Department of Mysteries. She would *not* be an exhibit to be wheeled out on certain holidays, or an object of experimentation to be dissected by Unspeakables.

He would protect her with his life.

~o0o~

On the twentieth anniversary of his tenure, he performs his morning routine and faces her as he dresses. "Stop primping," she teases coquettishly. "You look wonderful, as always. You were made for this." He knows she means it with all her heart. Her sincerity is one of the few truths she has left, and she cherishes it zealously.

"You are so beautiful," he replies, and together they press their hands against the glass. In spite of her barren, bookless and pleasureless life, she looks just as fresh and beautiful as she did the day she freed him. If he looks closely, he can still make out the tiny scar on her hand, the wound that ultimately led to the destruction of their lives. At least, that is what the mirror shows him.

They have spoken of trying again, but they both know it will never happen. "I won't risk your life," he insists. "I could truly lose you this time." He will not acknowledge the real reason, even to himself.

"I love you, Severus." How hollow and toothless those words are now, but they are the only roses that bloom in the desert of her existence. They are the only three words that truly mean anything to her anymore. She caresses the surface of the mirror, as he once did. It is their only contact, her only lover, and he feels an irrational, stinging jealousy.

"I love you too, Hermione." He means it. He really does.

He has been a good Headmaster; many call him a great one. He is as beloved and respected as Dumbledore ever was. He is known above all else for his fairness and openness, his sense of justice and compassion, and his intolerance of cruelty. O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores are higher than they've ever been, and it is a singular point of pride in every Hogwarts students' heart to be able to say they attended school under the greatest Headmaster it has ever known: Severus Tobias Snape.

He owes her that much.

They played their parts, and gave their all to Hogwarts. When they are finally penciled into the history books, this will have to be enough. Their shared burden is great enough already. His remorse and his guilt led to his making, just as her overwhelming pride in her own knowledge was her downfall. Since that first outburst of emotion at that awful moment when they swapped places, she has never once complained, or accused, or cried.

Or laughed.

At the end of each day, when he has given everything Hogwarts requires of him, he returns to her. In those first moments before he faces the mirror, the cowardly heart of him hopes he will look into its silvery depths and find only himself looking back. He atones for his treachery by turning down the bed, and lying side by side with his lover, and he wishes with all his heart that his impatient dreaming will bring her into his arms once more. He watches her, restless in her dusty, hard bed, and he reaches out to her from the soft, lulling confines of his own, and wonders: *Did I do enough? Could I have done more?* He cannot bring himself to answer those questions.

The nights are long, so long. His bones ache, he doesn't sleep well. He spends most of his night watching the rise and fall of his lover's gentle breathing. She is his faithful consort, his constant guilt, his undying love, the anchor of remorse that drags him ever deeper...she is his Erised.

Sometimes they meet in his dreams, and he holds her as close as he can for as long as he can, knowing how starved she is for his touch. But those times are short and less frequent as his body grows older and weaker.

He once prayed for freedom, and Hermione answered his prayers. Now he prays to fall asleep, and to never wake up. One day he *will* die, and perhaps then the mirror will give her back to him. Surely she deserves that much, doesn't she?

Doesn't *he*?

You tell me there's an angel in your tree

Did he say he'd come to call on me

For things are getting desperate in our home

Living in the parish of the restless folks I know

Burn down the mission

If we're gonna stay alive

Watch the black smoke fly to heaven

See the red flame light the sky

Burn down the mission

Burn it down to stay alive

It's our only chance of living

Take all you need to live inside

Burn Down The Mission, Bernie Taupin

"It was all about reaching the Tower, you see...mine as well as Roland's...and that has finally been accomplished. You may not like what Roland found at the top, but that's a different matter entirely. And don't write me any angry letters about it, either, because I won't answer them. There's nothing left to say on the subject. I wasn't exactly crazy about the ending, either, if you want to know the truth, but it's the right ending. The only ending, in fact. You have to remember that I don't make these things up, not exactly; I only write down what I see." End Notes, The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower by Stephen King
