

No Loyalty in the Moonlight

by *Ariadne AWS*

Complete Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

Leviathan

Chapter 1 of 41

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A/N: The title of the story is taken from Anastasia's fic, "Animated Night." It goes without saying that everything else you recognize belongs to J.K. Rowling. If I have seen anything at all, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants. My thanks, as always, to Anastasia and Melenka.

Note to readers: This story, like *A Walking Shadow*, is a mystery. It will unfold fully, but not quickly at least not in the beginning...



Chapter 1: Leviathan

The wind was tossing the tops of the firs in the darkest corner of the Forbidden Forest, and for much of the day, she had watched them from the mullioned window in the Library, her eye distracted by the far-off motion that called her thoughts away, away from her research, the essays she was marking, and, finally, from conscious control.

She had had to force herself to concentrate, to focus, to finish her work. As the falling rays of a dying sun tipped up, illuminating from beneath only the very tallest branches, she set down her quill and sighed, blowing a loose strand of hair away from her eyes.

Twenty-two years.

Twenty-two years ago, she had stood with Harry in Godric's Hollow as Voldemort fell. Twenty-two years ago, she had returned to Hogwarts to complete her education, passing her N.E.W.T.s with marks that surprised no one. Twenty-two years ago, she had accepted the headmistress' offer to fill the post left vacant by Professor Vector, who had been unmasked as one of Voldemort's Inner Circle as her body lay, still, beside those of the Malfoys and Lestranges, to be removed and disposed of by Unspeakables, whose job it was to... yes, well. She knew more of that than she wanted to.

They all did, of course; she more than most.

Maybe.

For twenty-two years ago, she had assumed the responsibility of knowledge, of secrecy, and of loyalty.

For twenty-two years, she had kept her secret hidden lest it shake the foundations of the Wizarding world.

For twenty-two years ago, Harry had failed. Hers had been the blow that had felled Voldemort.

In her panic with Ron down, the Order decimated, some Bound, impotent save their frantic, searching eyes, watching Harry struggle as Voldemort wrestled to control his mind, the one remaining separation of his soul embedded, entangled in the scar with which he had made Harry in his own image.

Because Harry had lived too long under his curse the arcane curse of the Darkest magic, the mundane curse of being the Boy Who Lived to be able, to be expected to be able, to throw him off fully.

Because Harry could not, in the end, defeat himself, and as his eyes glazed and his knees buckled, as he started to sway

In her panic, her wand moved on its own, and it was *her* voice silent, unheard the voice in her mind had spoken, and it was she who had killed Voldemort.

She had no idea how she had done it.

The prophecy had been meaningless. The Unspeakables were at a loss.

There was, of course, a cover-up, and she had returned, obedient, to Hogwarts, donning once more her House robes, pinning upon them her Head Girl badge, changing them, literally, the day she graduated, for her teaching robes, the Ministry officials nodding their approval.

For twenty-two years, she had played her part the brains of the Golden Trio, Harry's last standing supporter, the bereft young girlfriend of Ron Weasley so tragic, so young in silence.

Parchment before her forgotten, she gazed at the falling light in the wind-tossed trees until she realized that what she was seeing was her own face, bathed in lamplight, reflected, distorted, in the leaden windows.

The echoes of twenty-two years of silence pressed down on her from the vaulted ceiling, as if the bones of the Castle drew it from the very bedrock below, as if its roots, stretching endlessly through time, drew the deep vastness of eternity upward into the present to weigh on her, heavy, poised to fall

She shook her head. She had felt such weight before, on nights unnumbered spent scratching with scarlet ink her countless neat comments in the margins of private research tomes, on endless student parchments.

And always she had brushed it aside, banishing it with an impatient gesture, her hand completing the motion by tucking the stray wisp of hair behind her ear.

Professor Hermione Granger always had a smudge of scarlet ink next to her ear. Everyone noticed, of course. But no one not even the most incautious first-year ever said a word about it.

For Professor Granger's temper was short, incendiary, and famous.

Professor Hermione Granger was the most feared person at Hogwarts.

And no one knew why.

"Professor?" As Hermione waved the last of her belongings into her bag, the voice of the librarian bitter, polite cut into her silence.

Hermione glanced up sharply. "What is it, Hannah?"

As always, Hannah Abbott flinched from the pause with which the professor always punctuated her lack of formal title. Clasping her hands behind her back as though she were still a student, she took a small step backward and dropped her chin. "I just wanted to... to know if..."

Hermione's eyes glittered dangerously. "If I was leaving?"

Hannah glanced at the ceiling. "Ye ."

Hermione cut her off. "Obviously," she said, standing and lifting her bag to her shoulder. She swept past the other woman as if she warranted less attention than one of Hogwarts' many statues.

Once the library door had closed behind the professor's cloak, Hannah exhaled and thought, "She was always *sonice* at school." Hannah had had the same thought every night since she had replaced Madam Pince fifteen years before.

Had the professor known of Hannah's perennial lament, she would have said nothing.

Not aloud.

But something in her eyes would have confirmed Hannah's semi-conscious suspicion that she didn't measure up.

Hermione's steps echoed with efficient finality in the stone corridors as she made her way to her rooms. The Bloody Baron drifted into her path, but she stepped through him, unseeing, insensible to the chill that always accompanied contact with any of the castle's many ghosts.

There were more of them now.

The last journey of the Hogwarts Express was the stuff of legend the battered, blackened hulk of its former shining crimson engine dragging its broken tail to die half a league from Hogsmeade Station; the stunned, translucent forms of the few students whose parents had allowed them to board emerging hours later from the Highland fog, mindlessly obeying their last living impulse to get to the Castle, the last stronghold of safety.

The attack on the train had been the final catalyst for Harry. The confrontation at Godric's Hollow had occurred less than a fortnight after they'd had word from the headmistress, who had closed the school and dedicated an entire wing of it to the teaching of her former students. "To ease their transition," she had said.

The Fat Friar had nodded his long-faced approval, and taken up residence with them. Some of them had faded, partially dissolving into stationary misty patches that the students instinctively knew to avoid when the school re-opened the following year.

Sweeping through the castle with her formal teaching robes rustling stiff around her swift footsteps, the professor thought nothing of that time, nor of the first seven years after the war, when all classes were smaller than they should have been and some went untaught altogether. But the Castle was long since full, and she never admitted to nostalgia for the time when there had been fewer rules broken and fewer essays to mark. Only alone, very late at night, did her thoughts ever turn to the time before, and, even then, only in the shadowy moments before sleep when she was long past knowing her own name.

It was her favorite time of day.

Tonight her eye and mind were still drawn toward the trees, glimpsed from windows through columned archways, backlit by the rising moon, their tops still swaying, darkly, silent, only the highest branches of the tallest trees, always first to steal the light from the sky, to sense the wind, heralds of night and of storms.

Tonight the wind was rising, and, from the place beyond her name, beneath her dreams, tonight she felt it rise.

Beneath Her Dreams

Chapter 2 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

With special thanks to my partner-in-darkness (and, as of this chapter, my official beta), Anastasia. Thanks also to Melenka and Tobert for helping me articulate (and testing my thinking on) the backstory.



2: Beneath Her Dreams

Tonight the wind was rising, and, from the place beyond her name, beneath her dreams, tonight she felt it rise.

The headmistress looked up from her desk as a soft chime from the spiraling stair signaled the presence of one of the castle's ghosts. She straightened in her chair and eyed the door. "Enter."

At the sight of the Bloody Baron, she rose slightly, but he shook his head, gesturing her to sit. "He's no worse."

Sighing slightly, she eased herself back into her chair. The head of Slytherin House had hidden his condition from everyone, brewing an increasingly complex set of potions whereby he was able to tolerate the worst of the symptoms and continue teaching, but he had finally collapsed just before the end of the previous term.

"Forgive me, Minerva," he had said, as Poppy stepped back from his bed and caught her eye. No words were needed; the two had seen too much together. "I have so enjoyed teaching..." He had leaned back on his pillows, a soft smile relaxing his features as the pain potion took effect.

"The wind is rising, Headmistress."

The Bloody Baron's voice brought her back to the present, and Minerva eyed him skeptically for a moment. "You sound like a centaur."

The Baron snorted, waffing backward slightly. "She senses it." He drifted toward one of the tall, narrow windows. "She senses it, even if she lacks the sense to know it. It won't be long now."

"Are you certain?" The flatness of her tone belied the sudden chill in her stomach.

He nodded.

Minerva leaned heavily on the armrests, her fingers falling automatically to tracing well-worn grooves in the carving. "But when he dies, that should..."

"It will happen before then, as you well know," the Baron continued, quietly, not turning away from the window.

Tracing a curl in the carving, Minerva realized that the ring she wore spun more easily on her fingers this year, its stone falling heavily against her fingers as she thought. The *snick* it made against the wood was soft, but real, and for a time she held her hands deliberately still. "Then I suppose it's time."

The Baron turned to her, floating a few feet sideways as he framed his next sentence with visible care. "The facts are inarguable." He hesitated for a moment, still drifting. When Minerva did not speak, he added, "She walked straight through me."

The headmistress closed her eyes and exhaled. "No sign at all that she felt your presence?"

"No. None."

"Her research is at a critical stage; perhaps "

"No," the Baron countered, floating a few metres closer. "It was not distraction; nay, nor absorption, neither."

Some corner of Minerva's brain frowned at the Baron's characteristically serpentine syntax, and her eyebrows pinched. Just a fraction, but he caught the movement and the judgment it betrayed and swooped over to her chair.

"She did not even see me. She *cannot* see me, Minerva. She can no longer see *any* of us."

Minerva's hands clenched in her lap and grew cold as his words hung leaden in the air, but she pointedly refused to look away.

He hovered at her, leeching the warmth from the air until he was certain she understood him. Then he retreated to a polite distance.

Thermal etiquette was one of the things he had taught the students from the train.

Minerva sighed, remembering, then looked decisively to one of the portraits. "Albus?"

In the shadowy gloom near the vaulted ceiling, Dumbledore's portrait seemed to fade slightly. "I have expressed my doubts regarding this course of action on more than one occasion, Minerva."

"But Albus, surely, you see "

"Rather more than you do, I am afraid," he said; indeed, from his position high on the wall, he could easily make out the entire Quidditch pitch. He had requested that his portrait be moved for that very reason.

The fact that his view now also extended over the Forbidden Forest did not escape Minerva's notice. She pressed him further. "What else can be done?"

"Why, nothing, of course," he said calmly.

"Then "

He dropped his chin to look at her over the top of his spectacles, and her words died unformed. In a deceptively serene tone, he continued, "In any matter, Minerva, one may nearly always act; however, it does not necessarily follow that one should."

She shot him the piercing look with which she had always met such pronouncements. "Then how else are we to determine "

"It may not be for us to know."

She regarded him coolly; he met her gaze evenly, but did not speak further.

After a few minutes, the Bloody Baron coughed politely. "Headmistress, if you require nothing further..." He let the sentence hang, unfinished. At her nod, he wafted through the door. "I shall update you on Slughorn's condition in the morning, then. Goodni" The word was cut off as he disappeared through solid wood.

Wrinkles weren't permitted, and the sheets were soft. And the pillows gentle under her hair... no edges, no stone, no footsteps, no echoes.

And she felt her face soften, and she slipped into the place of shadowed half-thoughts, of dreams half-formed, hushed under the ever rustling of the wind in the moonswept branches. No words, no body...

... no mind.

She was free.

Minerva paced in the lamplight.

Too soon, she slept.

She didn't want to look at Ron, to where he had been thrown, broken. So close. She didn't want to...

Harry his eyes and she felt him starting to fade, to fall.

"Hermione," Ron gasped, struggling to rise on one elbow to look directly at her.

Eyes wide, she stared back at him, and, stepping back, she shook her head, her mouth open in a formless protest.

"Hermione, please." *His eyes were desperate.*

"I can't!" *A whisper, a scream; both, neither; but he knew, he heard her, and his eyes were steel.*

"You have to. You're the only one who " he mouthed a spasm jerked his head, and he fell back. His head lolled on the ground, staring at the sky, his silent mouth forming the words, "You can."

Wrenching her eyes away, back to Harry, she saw what she had hoped never to see deep in his green eyes, a glimmer of red glowing, growing...

An involuntary glance to where Voldemort's body lay, and back to Ron, his eyes to the sky, still mouthing, "You can..."

She closed her eyes in a wild, childish wish, wishing only to be somewhere, anywhere else, someone else, born for something other than this.

And the voice in her mind had whispered...

When she opened her eyes, she was on her knees, gasping for breath, her wand broken, and Ron's eyes were wide open, staring at her, glassy, indifferent.

But Harry's eyes were green, only green, and the Order's bonds were broken, and in the sudden snap of sound returning to her ears in a murderous rush, they had all hurried past her to Harry, and she had watched them.

The lamp had burned low in the headmistress' office, the warmth receding from the walls as, row by row, the portraits of the former heads of Hogwarts slipped upwards into shadow, and still, Minerva paced, slipping one fold of her robes endlessly between her fingers.

Abruptly, she stopped and she flicked her wand.

A bolt of silver shot past his window, and Severus Snape looked up from his parchment. It had been over twenty years since he had last received a Patronus message, but his face betrayed no surprise as he adjusted the wards to admit Minerva's emissary.

All it said before it faded was, "You are needed."

His eyebrow twitched. He rolled the parchment he had been reading into a neat scroll and, placing it into a waiting valise, he Summoned his broom and sent his Patronus ahead of him into the night.

Her head tossed roughly on her pillow. Under her damp hair, a faint pink stain.

In the morning, the watery-eyed house-elf that was assigned to her would change the pillowcase. Ordinary ink stains were routine for the Hogwarts house-elves, but, for reasons none of them questioned too closely, that particular ink set with those particular tears had proven permanent, and the professor's cast-off pillowcases had long since clothed every house-elf in Britain. When asked about the stain by an especially observant master or mistress, the house-elves' eyes would widen, but they would shake their heads and, uncharacteristically, say nothing.

No witch or wizard ever thought to ask twice.

In the morning, the professor's assigned house-elf would shake her head sadly as she changed the pillowcase, just as she had every morning for over twenty years.

The professor, donning her teaching robes, wouldn't notice, just as she hadn't for just as long.

But now it was still night, and a small, wordless whisper was rising from the place beneath her dreams, having no more substance than a wisp of smoke. It arose, hushed, insistent

"No," she mumbled.

Every portrait in the castle flinched, and, on its shelf in the headmistress' office, the Sorting Hat screwed its eyes firmly shut.

And, standing sentinel in Slughorn's chambers nine floors below, the Bloody Baron looked up. He had heard her, as clearly as if she had shouted.

A Pensieve Sky

Chapter 3 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Many thanks, as always, to my beta, Anastasia (TimeTurnerForSale), by whose grace and patience this chapter achieved its tension, word by elusive word. Also, a special thanks to IndigoFeathers.

Note to Readers: The mysterious secret of Hermione's past will unfold, of course, but not quite yet. A certain tall, dark, and leather-clad wizard has some thinking to do. ::flourishes dark!quill:: ~ Ari



3: A Pensieve Sky

And, standing sentinel in Slughorn's chambers nine floors below, the Bloody Baron looked up. He had heard her, as clearly as if she had shouted.

As the dark, rolling landscape of Northern England slipped beneath him, his body responding capably to the slipstreams and currents, Severus relaxed into a low flying stance and allowed his mind to roam freely. Although he had not been expecting Minerva's Patronus summons, he had been expecting... something. For a very long time.

After his release from prison, he had refused the headmistress' offer to resume his teaching post, stating his desire to pass some time in intensive research. Retiring from the public eye, he accepted the bequest of a small property from his mother's family, and the Wizarding world had heard nothing of Dumbledore's notorious murderer since.

His work for the Order had, of course, come out at his trial, but murder was murder, so he had stood, unmoved, amongst the few surviving Death Eaters as, one by one, in alphabetical order, they had been sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss.

As the head of the Wizengamot neared "S," an anticipatory rustling began, but Severus had appeared to be equally unmoved by his own relatively light sentence: five years in Azkaban, for "dishonorable conduct unbecoming a gentlewizard."

He had wondered wryly what back-thinking, dusty tome the Wizengamot had unearthed to come up with a crime ambiguous enough to mollify the bloodthirsty while easing its own ambivalent conscience.

It was an apt enough verdict. Originally intended as a euphemism for sexual deviance, the judgment carried with it a vague but indelible taint, even though contemporary Wizarding culture no longer worried overmuch about honor.

Angling his broom away from the lights of a small Muggle city, he snorted at the memory. No, lacking honor now qualified one, he supposed, for politics.

No hint of amusement had shown on his face during the sentencing, of course, and if his dark eyes had sometimes glittered with sharp, anarchic laughter during his time in Azkaban, there had been no one there to see it.

As he flew in a long, sweeping arc around the city, he reflected that Albus would have seen the humor in it, if he'd known.

The moon before him blurred.

It had been too many years since he had flown in the Highlands. He had forgotten how sharp the chill could be at a Muggle-safe altitude...

He was kidding himself. He loosened his glove with his teeth, baring his hand to wipe his eyes. Running his hand through his hair, shaking it loose, as if the wind could clear that distant night from his mind...

No. The memory he was seeking was later, from a few years after his release. He eased his fingers back into his glove, clasping his hands to tighten its fit, and resumed his original northward course.

On a rare trip to Diagon Alley to meet one of the Head Goblins on a minor legal matter, he had elected to Apparate near Flourish and Blotts to inquire personally about a few rarer titles he wanted for his research.

He had forgotten how crowded the bookstore could be before start-of-term, and wove dispassionately among the crowds of students to whom the sight of him signified nothing more menacing than the presence of an adult any adult.

Working his way to the back of the shop, he found his progress checked on several occasions by the sudden and apparently random changes of direction to which the younger members of the crowd seemed especially prone. Near the Arithmancy section, he found his way confounded altogether by a particularly tangled knot of rambunctious red-heads.

"Da," the smallest, a witch of about seven, had whined. "Why can't I go to Hogwarts? I'm almost as tall as Lily."

At that, Severus' attention had focused more sharply on the young witch.

Green eyes. Of course, they would be.

He had winced slightly, and with fluid ease, he had slipped unnoticed behind a row of bookshelves, where two older Ravenclaws appeared to be debating the merits of an Advanced Arithmancy text. He paid little heed to their conversation until his ears caught one phrase:

"... the *bat*. Flapping around in those robes like some sort of Dementor." The taller girl shuddered, still weighing the book in her hands.

The other nodded. "I'd rather face one of them than take another year with *her*. Mum insisted that I continue the subject, though."

"Well, with an O on your O.W.L., what did you expect?"

"Just because *you* deliberately dropped your score so your father couldn't make you..."

"I did no such thing!"

"Please, Angela. You've been first in the year since we first boarded the train." Both girls made some reflexive gesture with their fingers at its mention before the shorter witch continued, "No one will blame you for doing it, if you just admit it."

The girl named Angela tilted her head for a moment, as if figuring a probability. Finally, her eyes sparkled and her lips twitched. "Oh, fine. Still. An E isn't so bad, I suppose, and it *did* get me out of the N.E.W.T. class." Rather triumphantly, she held the textbook out to her companion.

The other accepted the burden, lamenting, "Frightfully clever of you."

Angela's voice faded into the general buzz as they moved away. "It was, wasn't it? *I hate* the old bat."

After a long moment, Severus had realized that his eyebrow was in grave danger of disappearing into his hairline.

Making a final turn in the night sky, Severus caught a glimpse of the distant lights of Hogsmeade and, beyond it, the deep, rough darkness that was the Forbidden Forest. His riding leathers creaked slightly in the cold as he shifted his seat to ease his lower back. It had been far too long since he had flown such a distance.

Skirting the tops of the trees and beginning his descent toward the castle, he pondered the memory he had been seeking.

Later that day, after concluding his business at Gringotts, he had turned into the side-street where the more specialized Potions ingredients were sold. It was, as he'd expected, nearly deserted, as most sane witches and wizards avoided London the pre-term shopping week if they had any choice.

Nearly deserted.

Yes, that was the memory.

The door to Alvin's Apothecary had no handle, and as he had pulled out his wand to work the passcharm, the door had opened, and he was face to face with Hermione Granger.

"Professor." A tight nod before she had stepped back coldly to allow him entry.

Backwards, had been his thought at the time, but he had since had occasion, and reason, to perceive her odd inversion of gender etiquette altogether differently.

He had nodded a greeting, and stood with his arm out, gesturing for her to move first.

She had held his gaze impassively for a split-second too long before sweeping through the door and proceeding down the street, her cloak waving behind her, its liquid motion lending her otherwise stiff bearing an undertone of... *shame*?

Poetic, he had snorted, and entered the shop, but as he made his transaction he realized he'd been turning something over in his mind since her cloak had disappeared around a corner.

There had been something in her eyes or, rather, something absent from her eyes that should have been there.

He knew that absence. He had awakened to find it waiting for him in his mirror every morning since he could remember.

Fine, then; war changes people. He had paid for his purchases and left.

But... she had looked at him for just a little too long. Almost as though through the darkness of whatever it was she had seen, done, or survived, there was something else, something that remembered what it was she had lost, and it had recognized the same memory within him, and been unable to look away.

Unable to look away, out of...

What was it?

He hadn't known what it was then, but a few years later, when her work began to appear in *Ars Necronomica*, he had remembered that encounter, and he had known.

Envy.

Oh, yes. Something in Hermione Granger remembered what she had lost.

Skimming the treetops of the Forbidden Forest, Severus Snape eased his broom for the descent to the grounds, and moments later he was striding up to the front door, stomping snow off his boots while the plumes of his breath, caught for a second by the moonlight, skirled away behind him.

No, it was best not to remember. Very few managed it and stayed sane.

He, of course, was one of them.

A moment later, warm torchlight spilled through the open door, and Minerva's silhouette appeared before him. "Severus." She nodded, stepping aside so he could enter, burying her hands in her sleeves against the cold. Drawing a careful breath, she began, "I suppose you want to know what this is about."

"Hardly," he replied, removing his gloves, and the headmistress looked up sharply, the words she'd been seeking dying in her throat. He regarded her steadily, a grim smirk playing on his features as the door swung shut. "But I rather suspect that *you* do."

"No," she mumbled.

A few moments later, her eyes flew open, and she sat bolt upright in bed, eyes wide, hair wild, clutching the sheets.

She turned a face naked with horror to the moon, shining implacably down upon her, and saw the trees whipping wildly in the ever-strengthening wind.

"*No!*" she yelled, the word ripping her throat raw. "*I can't!*"

In the silence that followed the echoes, she heard Ron shaping the words, "You can."

Pulling the pillow to her chest, she curled around it.

"I can't," she whimpered.

She started ever so slightly to rock.

Eventually, she rocked herself into a fretful sleep.

She would remember none of it in the morning.

Have This Dance

Chapter 4 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to Ferporcel, Arynwy, Docmara, and Annie Talbot for shining various lights through various darknesses. As always, a low obeisance to my beta, Anastasia (TimeTurnerForSale), with wishes for safe travels.



4: Have This Dance

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The castle was oddly hushed as Severus and Minerva climbed unspeaking up the stairs. The low, flickering torchlight did little to dispel the darkness, seeming rather to deepen the shadows in cornered places where the injured had fallen and the fallen had lain.

A corner, a corridor, another, more stairs. A slanting passage. Midway between two distant torches, a conjunction of corners, and a door.

That door.

Severus stopped walking. *Through the door, up the stairs, to the tower...* He swallowed, hard.

Minerva hesitated mid-step. "You've not been back. I'd forgotten."

His voice impossibly low, his face immobile, unreadable. "I have not."

His words a precise ambiguity of confirmation and censure; between those possibilities, Minerva stood, at a loss. Before she could decide if decision was necessary, Severus was walking again.

At the far end of the passageway, a patch of wavering mist obscured a portrait. Severus paused and cocked an eyebrow at Minerva.

"Longbottom," she replied, her voice a thin whisper of itself.

"... Longbottom?"

She nodded. "We think so. The portrait used to mark the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room."

"Ah."

They continued down the corridor, their steps somewhat slower than before.

Behind them, the mist turned slowly, spiraling inward around itself then roiling outward, motions repeating as though it were endlessly working up the courage to ask the portrait to dance.

The firelight glowing on the walls of the headmistress' office warred with a thin, persistent patch of moonlight on the worn stone floor. Laying his gloves on his valise, Severus accepted a steaming mug from a house-elf and curled his hands around its warmth. Echoes of other nights from other days whispered from the empty arches, a soft hush rushing, cresting in his mind, crashing, and finally slowly receding, until he found himself hearing only the soft, rasping snores of the portraits ranged above.

He looked up, but the topmost rows were lost in shadow.

"Albus?"

At the sound of his voice, Minerva froze.

"Good evening, Severus," came the response. "I trust you had a pleasant journey?"

The corner of Severus' mouth twitched involuntarily. "Tonight's?" he inquired, dryly. "Or were you speaking more figuratively?"

Albus chuckled distantly. "A fine night for flying."

A choked sound from Severus' throat. "It is."

"It always is, in the Highlands, Severus," Albus said, his voice a scratch on faded parchment.

Fairly certain that there was more going on in this conversation than she would ever understand, Minerva sniffed, not knowing what else, if anything, to do.

Severus' eyes searched the high shadows for a moment longer, then he sat by the small fire, turning his attention Minerva. "So tell me," he said, stretching his legs out before the fire, some tightness around his eyes vanishing as the muscles in his back finally realigned, "who it is that's dying."

Minerva blinked and reached for the armrest of her chair. She smoothed her robes and sat weakly. "How did you know?"

A satisfied intelligence flickered in his eyes. "It seemed the likeliest explanation for your summons."

"I did not call you here for your potions brewing expertise, Severus," she said, a touch more sharply than she intended. "We do have a Healer on staff, and a new Potions master."

"Of course. So it's Slughorn who's ill, then."

"Yes."

"And has he been ailing for long?"

"Longer than he admitted, of course."

"Of course," Severus said again.

Her eyes sparked sharply behind her spectacles. "Nor did I ask you here for verbal fencing." She did not add, "young man," but he heard it nonetheless.

Once a teacher... he thought, a strange smile quirking on his face for a moment.

Minerva saw it and softened slightly. She eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, then ventured, "Horace's replacement is capable enough, but he is not half the Potions master you are, Severus. If you would but say the word "

"No. I have no wish to return to teaching," he said flatly.

She nodded. "Very well." Straightening in her chair and adjusting her robes, she stated, "You are aware that Hermione Granger is on staff here?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes flicking to the valise before returning to Minerva.

Minerva followed his glance. "Oh, good. Then you are aware of her research."

Severus raised his eyebrow at her deduction.

"Really, Severus, I have known you for nearly fifty years."

He hesitated. "Indeed."

A moment passed between them a shared, resonant silence. Too many memories, too many of them sharp. Too many to ignore; too strong to voice... and then the vacuum of twenty two years caught them both in its trap, and she looked away.

"I misspoke, Severus. I apologize."

"No need."

A soft voice from above. "I have often marveled at how a single fact may contain within it both the whole truth and its utter absence."

Neither witch nor wizard looked up.

"Why tonight, Minerva?" he asked finally.

Minerva hesitated. "She has changed, Severus. You would not recognize her."

"Perhaps not," he said, too dryly, and Minerva shot a sharp, appraising look at him before asking, "You've heard, then?"

"I encountered her briefly, several years ago, and have since had occasion to reflect."

Minerva's voice dropped to a dry whisper. "She can no longer see ghosts, Severus."

He straightened in his chair. "None?"

Minerva shook her head.

"The misty patches in the corridors?"

Again, she shook her head.

He frowned. "And the poltergeist?"

Minerva's eyebrows raised. "Peeves? She hexed him out of the Great Hall this morning. No, Severus," Minerva sighed, "I had already considered that possibility. Her magic is unimpaired."

He nodded, resuming his inquiry. "And this is a recent development?"

Minerva pursed her lips and said nothing.

His features sharpened. "How long, Minerva?"

"It depends. I don't believe she has ever been able to see the mists; she's always walked through them. The rest have fallen from her sight one by one, and there seems to be no reason or pattern to the order. The Bloody Baron was the last one, but tonight..." Her voice trailed off.

For a moment, the only sound was the gentle snoring of the portraits. Then Severus said again, "I see."

"Do you, Severus? Do you know why she cannot see them?"

"No. I do not know; perhaps the answer cannot be known."

At that, Minerva glanced reflexively at Dumbledore's portrait. The former headmaster was smiling vaguely, gazing out over the windswept grounds.

Severus continued, "But I do know it is crucial that some attempt be made."

Minerva's hands trembled, and she forced them still.

"Tell me," he said, shifting again in his chair, his body accustomed to it as though he had never left. "Are there many Weasleys at the school?"

Minerva shook her head. "Percy's youngest was the last; she left last year."

"Ravenclaw?"

"Slytherin."

"Ah."

"So no, we seem to be between Weasley generations for the time being."

"I trust that William's children inherited his academic talent?"

Minerva looked briefly troubled then shook her head. "He and Fleur have no children. I believe they thought it unwise, after..."

"Yes, of course." He paused for a moment. "And Potter?"

"Three. Girls. All in Gryffindor, of course. His youngest also finished last year."

The small, green-eyed whining one, the distracting thought floated briefly in his mind.

"Why do you ask?"

But he held up a hand. "Minerva, I must ask you. Of the children of her classmates and friends of those who were connected with the Order have any of them undertaken N.E.W.T.-level study in Arithmancy?"

"Potter's eldest did receive an Outstanding O.W.L. in the subject, but elected not to continue," she began, her voice dropping as she ran through her memories.

Severus watched her face carefully, waiting.

Slowly, first the suspicion and then the realization appeared on her face. Then she nodded, eyes piercing, trying to read his face, to guess his line of reasoning.

"Perhaps," he began, "having their godmother as a teacher would have proved too awkward..." He let the sentence hang.

"She is not godmother to any of them. She and Harry do not speak."

Something in his gaze flashed before he dropped it to his hands and examined the edge of his fingernail very intently.

Minerva did not need to see his eyes to know they were moving rapidly as he calculated... "Severus, *will* you tell me what's going on?"

His fingers stopped moving, and he turned his head very slowly to look at her, a fall of hair obscuring half of his face, reflecting the dying flames. "Why?"

"For pity's sake, Severus! You are no less exasperating at sixty than "

"Why do she and Potter not speak?" His voice remained low, but the potent force behind the question took Minerva aback.

Minerva sighed. "You know he married Ginny Weasley?"

Severus nodded.

"Hermione returned the wedding invitation unopened. To the best of my knowledge, she has not spoken to any of the Weasleys for over twenty years."

Severus turned back to the fire and watched the embers gleam as a gust of wind swept overhead. *Deliberate infliction of pain on those close to her, inability to perceive the dead, and now, with Slughorn dying...*

He had the shape of it now, if not its measure.

He'd expected something like this. But it was worse than he'd thought.

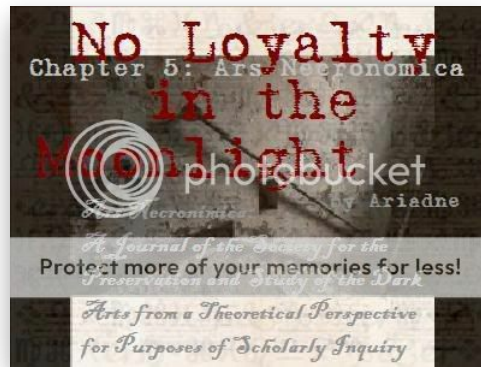
Ars Necronomica

Chapter 5 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried.

Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~
Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: If I have seen at all into the darkness, it is because docmara, my psych!beta, holds her hands around my low, sputtering candle; if the darkness shines in these words, it is because Anastasia, my uber!beta, holds the balance of poetry and precision in her ruthless, compassionate quill. Every writer should be so blessed.



5: *Ars Necronomica*

He'd expected something like this. But it was worse than he'd thought.

As was usual in the morning, Hermione awakened unaware unaware of her dreams, of the house-elf changing the pillowcase; unaware that by noon she would have a fresh smudge of scarlet ink by her ear.

If she was aware that the wind was rushing higher, closer around the castle, stretching to reach for any tiny cracks or crevices in the ancient stone, her face gave no sign of it as her heels marked her regimented progress down the corridor, down the stairs, and into the Great Hall for breakfast.

Mentally assessing the path her research would follow that day, she barely registered that term had ended and the students had left. A possible breakthrough in her research had suggested itself during the night, as sometimes happened whilst she slept, and her eyes were glazed and distant as she consumed her morning meal.

As Severus climbed the stairs toward the Entrance Hall, he found himself idly wondering whether the castle had been instructed to recreate his rooms or whether Minerva had simply allowed them to remain, unused and unchanged, since he had left the school.

His eyes had raked the passage ahead for any signs of the troublesome Professor Granger.

Troubled. Not troublesome, troubled.

Emerging from the dungeon stairs into the Entrance Hall, he was assured by the sound of voices from the Great Hall that the staff was already at breakfast. He paused, leaning briefly on the newel post, sifting once more through his more distant memories of Hermione Granger.

Few specifics suggested themselves. He had taken little notice of her as a student; her work had been acceptable outstanding, according to the few standards he had been permitted to impose but his memories of her from her student days were little more than unconsciously cataloged impressions. Muggle-borns like Granger had received the least of his attention, not out of any real bias, but simply because his shoulder-blades did not itch when he turned his back to them.

Except...

He was fairly sure he had seen her in the dungeon on that final night, in his rush from his office, before speeding down the corridor, up the stairs to the Entrance Hall, on his way to...

He shook his head. Troubling.

But

Envy. That day in Diagon Alley.

Shame. Her cloak, rippling behind her.

And the look in her eyes an echo out of a vacuum, held too long, just long enough for him to perceive something, a sound, a shape, where no sound or shape should be...

Poetry, again. He snorted. *Damn it, Snape.*

The scraping of chair legs against stone echoed outward from the Great Hall, bringing him back to himself, and he turned and took the stairs swiftly and silently, heading for the Library.

The object of his musings settled herself at her usual table and arranged her research materials precisely before her. Glancing once at the ceiling, tucking the wisp of hair behind her ear, she bent to review her notes from the previous evening.

Soon the sound of her quill scratching on the parchment faded in her ears as her inquiry took shape in her mind, emerging to swirl into ever-sharper focus.

Semi-concealed in the library stacks, Severus watched her work, recognizing the outward signs of complete absorption. As the morning progressed, he studied her, although there was little enough to note; she focused ever more intently, and her quill raced to contain her thoughts in language, on parchment. So absorbed was he in observation that he blinked, startled, when the scratching stopped. Her hand hesitated *Almost; not quite* then three more marks, and, leaning back, she set down her quill and exhaled.

Something in the silence that followed sharpened Severus' vigil.

As she re-read her work, he saw her brow grow darker, her eyes unfocused, then *Here it comes...* she tensed and glanced at the ceiling.

His observation had paid off, although he did not fully understand it yet. Something in her look reminded him of... something *Half annoyed, half...*

He was still trying to place it when Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear.

Narcissa, Severus thought, finally identifying the look. The look the professor had shot toward the ceiling was all Narcissa Malfoy, the way she had looked at her husband when she was unsure of her footing in the Inner Circle and feared Lucius' certain reprisals at home. Only in Narcissa's eyes had he ever seen that particular combination of arrogance, resignation, and terror.

Then he saw the scarlet smudge left by her unconscious gesture, and he inhaled sharply, all thoughts of Narcissa banished by his suspicions coming one step closer, growing several shades darker.

His thoughts a rushing vortex of realigning principles and theorems; in his chest an iron certainty.

Granger, he thought, drawing a careful breath, *what did you do?*

He had read every article she had ever published, and he had never known a Weasley whose ears did not flame scarlet when apprehended after hours.

Confession. The word resonated in his mind, unbidden but sure.

Nodding once to himself, and turning decisively on his heels, he retreated through the stacks and circled back, approaching the librarian's counter.

"Professor Snape!" Hannah squeaked, flinching.

"Madam... ah..."

"Abbott, sir. Hannah Abbott," she stammered.

"Indeed." A small smirk that Hannah might have recognized as cordial had she not had her wits scattered by his appearance.

"I... I am Librarian here now, sir," Hannah said, trying to collect herself.

He raised an eyebrow, and she paled. *Hufflepuff*, Snape remembered, mentally sighing. "I've come to inquire after several back issues of *Ars Necronomica*."

Hannah's mouth formed a shocked, silent O. She shook her head. "We don't even keep that in the Restricted Section, sir."

"So I recall," he countered smoothly. "Yet I also recall that Irma would reserve certain resources for faculty use."

Hannah's eyes widened a fraction, and her hands betrayed a very slight trembling. "I'm not sure, sir. We've had little use for such things since you... I mean, since..." She blushed furiously, not knowing where to look.

"Of course," he said softly. Keeping his voice deliberately smooth, he continued, "I believe she would have kept them in the cupboard in her office. Do you know the Charm to open it?"

The librarian nodded. "I've never... yes, sir."

"I'm seeking the volumes from the years I was in Azkaban."

Hannah just stared at him.

"I assume you know which years those were..."

She made a small, high-pitched noise that might have been a "Yes," and retreated to the safety of her office.

Severus turned to lean one elbow on the counter, a low smile darkening his lips. He had found few rewards in teaching, but there had been one or two he had savored.

On the other side of the library, the professor had glanced up at the sound of his voice as it echoed off the slanting stone and through the stacks *Snape?* Listening to his largely one-sided conversation with the librarian, she sat poised, her eyes alert.

His voice seemed to carry with it the rustling whisper of parchment on parchment, promising a judgment of metal on stone.

At the words *Ars Necronomica*, Hermione's eyes sharpened, and she swept her notes into her bag.

Severus heard her footsteps retreating. His smile faded, and his eyes went absolutely still.

A moment later, Hannah returned, levitating several thin volumes before her.

He nodded and took the volumes out of the air. At her shocked expression, he leaned over the counter and spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "They cannot contaminate you through your skin, Madam Abbott."

A faint color rose in her face, and her eyes hardened slightly.

Leaning in closer, he continued, "Only if they touch your mind."

In his chambers near the Slytherin Common Room, Horace Slughorn's face relaxed as Madam Pomfrey administered her most potent sedative.

The Bloody Baron cast dark, hollow eyes at her, and she shook her head.

"I can do nothing more to relieve his actual suffering," she said, "but I can keep him asleep."

"Will it be today, then?"

The Healer tilted her head, considering, then shook her head definitively. "No. Tomorrow, perhaps; more likely the next day."

The Bloody Baron drifted toward the door. "I shall inform Mi-"

Madam Pomfrey sighed as his words left the room before the rest of him. Of all the castle's ghosts, he was without question the most adroit at maintaining a polite distance without seeming to do so, but he had absolutely forgotten that the living cannot hear through walls.

Whistling in the Dark

Chapter 6 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: As always, my devoted thanks to my psych!beta, docmara, and my uber!beta, Anastasia.

Note to Readers: A Hallowe'en gift to you all: Hermione's titles are important and are worth a second glance. We spend part of this chapter in Severus' academic mind, but this should be the last of that for a bit. After all... Minerva has a maneuver or two left in her. And I hope you like the wee ghostie... Hallowe'en is her birthday. ::smiles::



6: Whistling in the Dark

Of all the castle's ghosts, he was without question the most adroit at maintaining a polite distance without seeming to do so, but he had absolutely forgotten that the living cannot hear through walls.

The bastard.

Hermione's steps were rapid, but the pace sounded off to her, and to the several ghosts she passed, unseeing, as she made her swift passage to the safety of her rooms.

The bastard!

It took all the self-control she possessed which was a great deal not to run the last few steps to her door. Quickly dismantling her security Charms, she whipped inside, spun around, and slammed the door shut with her back.

A corner of her robes stuck in the door.

Outside her door, the Grey Lady exchanged a sorrowful look with the ghosts of one of the students from the train a tiny first-year, still in pigtails.

The small ghost pointed wordlessly to the black fabric in the crack of the door.

The Grey Lady looked at it for a long moment, then tilted her head, and wafted upwards through the ceiling, toward the headmistress' office.

"Severus." Minerva's head appeared in his fire, and he looked up from reading. The volumes from the library were stacked, untouched, on a small table by his elbow. "Hannah told me about the materials you requested. And the Grey Lady says Professor Granger arrived at her rooms in quite a state."

He nodded, eyes glittering with a strange satisfaction.

"I thought, Severus, that you were already aware of Professor Granger's research? You certainly led me to believe so." Her face grew even more pinched as she looked pointedly at the stacked journals and back to him.

"I am," he said conversationally, turning a page in the book he was holding.

"Then can you explain why you requested "

"I should have thought that would be obvious, Minerva," he said, not taking his eyes from the page.

"Really, Severus! You've reduced poor Hannah to "

"Which is hardly the point." He snapped the book shut. "Professor Granger was in the library. She heard my request, as I intended her to."

Minerva's eyes narrowed.

"An old Muggle hunting strategy, Minerva, called 'flushing the game.'" He waited a moment for her to process this, then continued, "At this moment, the troublesome professor is doubtless hiding in her rooms, trying to control the first emotion she has felt in several years."

Minerva's eyes went flat, and as she fixed him with her stare, Severus was reminded that she had been a formidable duelist in her prime. "And that emotion would be?"

"Fear."

Minerva sniffed.

"It has its uses, Minerva."

"It certainly worked on Madam Abbott," she said, disapprovingly. "Poppy's had to give her a sedative."

He smirked.

Minerva eyed him appraisingly. "You shall be joining us for dinner, Severus," she announced. "To apologize to Madam Abbott and to the 'troublesome' professor."

Minerva disappeared from the flames without seeing his eyebrow lift.

She didn't need to. She had known him for fifty years.

The little ghost sat down outside Hermione's door. She didn't know why the Arithmancy teacher couldn't see her, but she didn't mind. She liked it here, and she had discovered that when the teacher was away, she could sneak in and read for hours.

It wasn't at all like the library. She didn't like the library, with its tall, arched windows and its bookshelves running in all directions, cutting off her view of everything but the whispering ceiling.

The small ghost gave a blurry shudder. She did *not* like the library. But the professor's rooms, with their neatness, their one armchair, and their book-lined walls... she could see everything in the room from the chair, and she would curl up and read and read...

Once she had learned how to sit in the chair without falling through it, it had become her favorite place in the castle. From it, she could see the small crack in the professor's window growing a little bigger every day.

It had always been there, ever since she'd first floated through the door, practicing for her Transubstance lessons. She'd noticed it that first day, a tiny sparkle of refracted sunlight.

She had had a crack in her own window, once.

She had had her own window once, too.

The small ghost in the corridor sighed herself a few inches into the stone wall before she caught herself and adjusted her material spectrum.

She liked it here. Sometimes when she was in the professor's rooms she pretended that she was at home.

No one had been able to see her there, either.

Hermione's heart sounded loudly in her ears, and the blood rushing in her head pulsed with every beat.

Her hands flat against the wood, pressing into its rough grain, feeling the ridges and dips of its worn, once-living surface, she willed herself to calm.

The wood was cool.

She could breathe again.

It was probably just coincidence that Snape should appear in the castle just as she was finishing the research for her next article.

Just a coincidence.

Deep inside, something small and sharp twisted. Deep inside, something knew she was lying.

But she paid it no heed. Standing straighter, tucking her hair behind her ear, she felt a sharp tug at her robes and turned, frowning. A precise flick of her wand, and she was free.

Outside the door, the little ghost saw the black fabric disappear, and sighed again.

Another flick of her wand, and Hermione's fire rose slightly. Settling into her armchair, she emptied her bag of its hasty contents and set about organizing things properly.

A low whistling came through the widening crack in the window, but, absorbed once more in her work, she didn't hear it.

Seated by the fire in his former rooms, Severus was reviewing the essays she had published in *Ars Necronomica*.

The first had appeared during her third year of teaching. "A Theoretical Investigation into Horcruxes: Their Nature and Known Instances of their Use." *A summary*, he thought, reviewing its conclusion, *of what she must have learned from Potter, which he had from Albus... nothing original. Typical first effort; derivative...*

Summoning a quill and his trademark scarlet ink, he made a brief annotation by the title before setting that volume aside.

Her second and third were almost equally unremarkable, a two-part series appearing in consecutive issues: "On Fundamental Arithmantic Principles of Horcrux Creation: I. Material Conditions" and "II. Metaphysical Conditions." *Must have given the Unspeakables fits, those two*, Severus smirked, re-checking the publication dates.

If Granger's first essay answered the questions of *what* Voldemort had done, her second and third proposed an explanation of *how*, venturing into theory only in the Appendix to Part II, containing her analysis of how, exactly, Potter had survived the Killing Curse.

The five-page Appendix, subtitled "The Formulaic Dispensation of Dumbledore's Theorem in the One Known Antimedean Iteration," was a tour de force of academic analysis, but by that time, Potter's memoirs had appeared, and "because my Mum loved me" was answer enough for most.

Not for Granger.

Some part of his suspicion had grown out of that Appendix, but it was her fourth essay that had piqued his interest when it appeared the first that had appeared after his release from Azkaban. "Theoretical Exploration into Possible Inverse Manifestation in Horcrux Applications" advanced the possibility that...

Here he frowned, deciphering his own faded margin notes...

... that Horcrux creation was not the two-part process even the most advanced witches and wizards in the field had thought it to be. They had assumed that the act of murder split the caster's soul all right-thinking witches and wizards insisted on this but that only through the caster's intention could that soul-fragment be contained in a separate object.

"Otherwise," their best wisdom had insisted, "for every murder, there would be a Horcrux."

Which simply wasn't the case.

Granger's first real advance in the Dark Arts field proposed that Horcrux creation was a three-part process: that the act of murder in and of itself did *not* split the soul, that the split must *also* be intentional.

Murder, soul-splitting, and containment.

Granger's essay had caused a stir amongst the few dozen witches and wizards worldwide who had read it and understood its possible implications: that it was possible for a third party to intervene and reorient part of the spell.

Severus did not doubt that the essay had earned Granger a visit from the Unspeakables; she had not published any more for several years.

He scanned the titles of the last three essays, each title longer than the last.

Severus did not need to review these essays in their entirety. By the time they had appeared, in quick succession, he had been ghost editor of the journal, overseeing submissions under an assumed name.

He had approved their publication personally.

He stretched his legs before the fire and stared into the flames.

It was obvious to him that the body of Granger's work indicated one thing: that she had been the one to defeat Voldemort, and that she had done so by creating a Horcrux.

But all accounts of the final battle, wildly divergent as many of them were, agreed on one detail: Hermione Granger had murdered no one.

Vexing.

That he was the only one to have discerned the personal motives behind her research and the confessional impulse behind its publication no, this did not surprise him. He had survived as a spy, after all.

But even so, as he considered what he called "the Granger Paradox," turning it over in his mind as the flames intertwined and reached higher to fall away and arise again, it did not occur to him to question his own motives.

After several minutes, the whistling grew loud enough to disturb her concentration, and after several minutes more, she could no longer ignore it.

"What?!" she finally demanded, although there was nothing, no one in the room.

She turned her head and instantly located its source.

Frowning, she cast *Reparo*, and the crack in the window seemed to melt back into solid glass. She removed a bottle of ink from her bag and returned to her notes.

The little ghost wafted into the room and looked reflexively for the sparkling crack. At first she couldn't see it, but then it was there, small again, but growing.

She started reading over the teacher's shoulder.

"Concerning the contaminant material interpolation of Horcruxes and its implications for forward subalchemical transmutation," she read, "by Prof. H. Granger, Arithmancy Mistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

The ghost leaned close against the wing of the armchair. She did not understand half of what she read, but the scratching sound the quill made was comforting, and the teacher had pretty handwriting.

After a meditative hour, during which Severus played the possibilities and impossibilities forward and under and around, he found his gaze focused on one glowing ember on the corner of one of the logs.

In an instant, he was on his feet, reaching for the Floo powder.

"Minerva." His voice a command in the flames.

Her face appeared quickly, her spectacles glinting her alarm at his unexpected interruption. "What is it, Severus? Has something happened?"

"Did Ginevra Weasley earn a N.E.W.T. in Arithmancy?"

The Dreams of Dying Men

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: As always, my thanks to docmara, my psych!beta, and Anastasia, for her finely-honed camera work and exacting sense of flow. A special thanks to Indigofeathers, arynwy and annietalbot they know why.



7: The Dreams of Dying Men

"Did Ginevra Weasley take a N.E.W.T. in Arithmancy?"

"Ginny?" Minerva blinked. "Yes yes, she did. I had quite forgotten."

Severus nodded and gestured to close the connection.

William no children. Charles deceased. Percival multiple; youngest, female, same age as Potter's. Fred, George both deceased. Ronald deceased. Ginevra three girls.

More Floo powder.

"Minerva."

"Severus, real"

"Which is the eldest Weasley grandchild the name?"

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Tell me."

She regarded him sternly for a long moment. "Lily. Lily Potter."

A bitter taste in his mouth. "And this Potter took an O.W.L. in Arithmancy?"

"Yes, as I told you."

"The others "

"They did not as much as start in the subject."

"Tell me why."

Minerva hesitated.

"Minerva."

Minerva looked at him, a look he could not read. "Hermione terrorized the poor child, as you did the child's father. The comparison did not go unremarked amongst the staff and older students. She was ever an apt pupil, Severus. "

His eyes narrowed, but Minerva held up her hand. "You had your reasons, Severus, and your burdens."

"She has her burdens, too," he said quietly. "Worse, I think, than mine."

Minerva looked up, startled.

"May I?" He gestured toward the Floo.

She disappeared from the flames to allow him to come through.

A few moments later, he was seated before the headmistress' desk.

"I assume there is some connection between your question about Ginny's N.E.W.T.s and Hermione's..." Minerva searched for the right word.

"The word you're seeking is 'paradox,' Minerva."

"Paradox?" Her eyes widened a fraction, and she felt weakly for the chain at her neck.

He nodded. "I shall explain, of course; the seriousness of the situation requires it, but I have a few questions first, if I may...?"

She pursed her lips she would have preferred that the explanation precede further questions, but, nonetheless, she gestured for him to ask.

"After the final battle, did the Unspeakables test everyone's wands?"

The headmistress nodded. "Of course. It was necessary, for their report to the Minister."

"Everyone's?"

"Except for Hermione's."

He raised an eyebrow.

"It was broken," Minerva supplied.

Another eyebrow that detail had not been in any of the accounts. "Do you have any idea how?"

Minerva gave a small shrug. "She said she fell, right at the end."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "Can you tell me what happened in the final moments, Minerva?"

Minerva paled slightly. In the weeks following the battle, they had all spoken of nothing else, but, one by one, they had found it easier to let the memories lie. "Surely you remember, Severus?"

He returned her gaze calmly. "I was rather occupied at the time," he said dryly, "as you may recall."

He had revealed his allegiance right at the end, turning on Voldemort and killing his mortal body, ensuring that the final confrontation take place within Harry's mind. Lucius and Bellatrix had reacted as he'd expected them to, turning on him with savage fury. The only real surprise was that he had survived.

"I didn't see the duel, Severus. My attention was "

"On Potter."

Minerva found herself braced, but realized there was neither accusation nor bitterness in his tone. Relaxing, she nodded. "After Ron Weasley fell, I am not certain of the details." Glancing down, she said quietly, "Their backs were to me."

"And how did Mr. Weasley die?" he asked quietly.

Minerva looked at her hands, resting on her desk, as though they did not belong to her and she wasn't quite sure what they were. When she spoke, her voice was tight. "Is this necessary, Severus?"

He answered simply, "Yes," but there was something in his tone she had ever heard in it before. It was not compassionate, exactly, but it held a kind of acknowledgment nonetheless they all had their memories, and none of them were easy.

She nodded her own acknowledgment. "It was a Slicing spell."

"*Sectumsempra?*"

She nodded again, still looking at her hands. "Voldemort intended, I think, that Harry's best friend die slowly." She swallowed. "Which he did."

Severus sat back and rested his forehead on his hand. The fact that he had invented that spell could be problematic now. He studied the pattern of the stones on the floor.

Minerva's voice brought him back to the present. "From where I lay, I could see very little. Hermione seemed torn between aiding Ronald and standing with Harry, then Harry seemed to falter..."

Severus nodded. This meshed with the other accounts he'd heard and read during his trial and in the back issues of the *Daily Prophet* he'd collected after his release.

The headmistress was still looking at her hands.

"And?" he asked quietly.

"And Harry did not fall. He straightened, and it was over."

It hadn't been, for him, and might never be, for Granger. "And Miss Granger?"

"I couldn't see her afterward. According to the Ministry, she was found crouched on the ground, unharmed, with her wand broken beside her."

"By the Unspeakables."

Minerva nodded.

"So you did not see her go down?"

"No, Severus. I was watching Harry."

He nodded once and was silent for a long time. "So, after the battle...?"

"You don't remember?"

The look he shot her was pointed.

Her face colored slightly, and her hands raised to hover a few inches above her desk. "Of course, you couldn't... the Aurors... I apologize."

He nodded, whether to accept the apology or for her to continue she wasn't certain.

Drawing a deep breath, she went on. "The Unspeakables arrived, and we were all taken to St. Mungo's."

"Together, or separately?"

"Together, although I believe all of us who... who remained... we were all contacted individually, afterwards."

"Was anyone singled out for particular attention?"

She nodded. "Harry, of course. Myself. Arthur, Mad-Eye, and, I believe, Bill Weasley."

"Granger?"

"Naturally. Other than Harry, she was the last one fighting on our side."

Another pointed look.

Minerva fell silent for a moment. "I don't see the purpose of this, Severus. The Unspeakables must have questioned you as well."

"They did not."

Minerva's eyebrows shot up. "I would have thought..."

"Perhaps I made them uncomfortable," he said easily.

Minerva's eyebrows rose even higher. "I am certain, Severus, that I would not wish to meet any wizard who would discomfit the Unspeakables. More likely it was just a question of jurisdiction."

"Quite," he said blandly.

The fact of his trial and imprisonment weighed in the air between them, standing alone in silent, isolated contrast to the round of celebration and honors the others had well, not enjoyed, certainly, but, facing Severus, Minerva couldn't bring herself even to think the word "endured."

No words could bridge her Order of Merlin and his trial, nor cross a cold northern sea to pierce the walls of Azkaban.

Her reason insisted that this was all in the past, just history, but in her very bones she understood that the present had drawn it forward and it would also always be now. After a time, during which there was no sound save the wind at the windows, she remembered how their conversation had begun, and asked, "What was the reason for your question about Miss Weasley? Why should her N.E.W.T.s matter?"

"Ah." He shifted in his seat. "Granger was Arithmancy professor during her last year, yes?"

Minerva nodded. "She handled the awkwardness of teaching her former schoolmates exceptionally well." The corner of her mouth twitched. The wizard sitting before her had not done half as well.

If he was aware of her comparison, he did not show it. "Do you not find it interesting, Minerva, that Granger's public aversion to the Weasley family seemed to start with the wedding?"

Minerva tried to assess his meaning. "Severus, there was never any indication that Hermione and Harry were in any way "

He cut her off with a look. "I have no interest in adolescent romance, Minerva." One aspect of teaching he decidedly did not miss. "I'm speaking of Horcruxes."

"Professor Granger's research."

He nodded, and she felt suddenly colder.

His next question did nothing to ease the chill. "Did anyone ever question Harry as to how he killed the Dark Lord?"

"Of course. We all did."

"And his answer?"

"He said that Albus had told him something about love, about choices."

He brushed love and choices aside with an impatient gesture. "The explanation he gave in his memoirs is irrelevant, Minerva. I refer to how he explained it to the rest of you."

She sniffed. "That *is* how he explained it to us, Severus. Sitting in that very chair, in fact."

"Love," he said blandly.

She nodded. "He said that's what it felt like, that Albus had been right."

"And so I was." Albus' voice floated down from near the ceiling. "It was love. In the end, the power of love was stronger in Harry than the fragment of Voldemort's soul."

Severus turned slightly in his chair. "And choice factors in how, Albus?"

"Isn't it obvious, Severus? That he chose love?"

"That's not victory, Albus. That's a coin toss."

A hint of Albus' robes rustling as he opened his hands. "Such moments are rare, but such moments can change the course of the world."

"Or prevent change," Severus said dryly.

"A matter of perspective."

Severus eyed the portrait. "So you loaded the dice, that last year with Potter?"

"I did my very best to do so, yes."

Severus frowned and rubbed a finger along his eyebrow. Finally, he spoke quietly. "Albus, magical theory and practical spell-craft both require that the destruction of a Horcrux involve a sacrifice."

"Yes." The voice from the wall was calm.

"A sacrifice?" Minerva asked, startled. Like most of the Order, her awareness of the Dark Arts had been purely for Defense purposes; what you could not counter, you avoided. It was the cornerstone of the Hogwarts Dark Arts curriculum.

Severus frowned, and Albus continued, "The sacrifice was Ronald Weasley, naturally. It was his death that gave Harry the wherewithal to force the last of Voldemort out of his scar."

Severus' frown deepened.

"Whether you believe it or no, Severus, it was love."

"Indeed, Albus; I've no doubt. But did none of you ever think to ask whose?" Again, his voice held no inflection of bitterness, just emptiness.

Albus replied patiently, "The answer is obvious, Severus: Harry's."

Severus' eyes glittered in the lowering sun.

Minerva interjected, "Severus, what are you implying?"

"Not implying, Minerva; stating. Despite appearances, it wasn't Potter. Professor Granger's research reveals that he did not kill Voldemort."

Only the sound of Minerva's ring clanking on her desk as she dropped her hands broke the shocked silence.

"What?" Dumbledore's quiet whisper carried within it some tangible memory of his former power.

It was not a threat Dumbledore had used often, but it lingered in Severus' memory, and something within him snapped.

He rose and strode to the window, something of the old, cutting bite seeping into his tone. "Potter was not the one. Granger's identification of the Horcrux spell as a three-part process proves it."

"Severus," Minerva protested weakly, "I fail to see what her research has to do with what happened so long ago. Ronald Weasley's sacrifice gave Harry the power to choose love, thus destroying the Horcrux in his scar. Harry has said so; Albus has confirmed it."

He snorted, turning back to face them. "Potter confirmed Albus' theory, you mean, using the very words Albus had given him to 'explain' something that he doesn't remember himself, and would not have the words to explain if he did." His cloak rippled to stillness around him, obscuring the dying light. "Albus was wrong."

A small *clink* as Albus removed his spectacles and placed them on the small table in his portrait. "And in which aspect of Professor Granger's theory do you find proof of my alleged errancy, Severus?"

Severus smiled thinly. "In the fact that she has one."

In his windowless chambers far below the headmistress' tower, the dying Horace Slughorn chuckled in his sleep.

Sitting vigil by his bedside, Poppy glanced over and smiled sadly. *What do dying men dream?* she wondered, reaching over to smooth his blanket. This was not the easiest part of her profession, but it could be a peaceful one. Far better dreams dreamed in stillness and peace than amidst the confusion and battle of twenty-two years ago.

She glanced up as the Bloody Baron drifted through the wall, halfway through a sentence. "I love you for dinner, Madam Pomfrey."

She nodded and stood, smoothing her robes.

Hermione clamped her quill sideways in her teeth and reached up to twist her hair viciously into the knot it kept escaping. She was half-way through her introduction, and the words on the page would not behave properly.

The little ghost regarded her seriously. When the teacher got mad at her hair, it was time to leave for a while.

She lowered herself carefully through many floors of deserted classrooms and corridors, coming to rest in a set of rooms that had always been empty to float in front of a mantel that held a small black dragon statue.

She liked to visit the dragon. She extended a careful fingertip and ran it down its back.

It unfurled its wings and blinked at her.

It was almost as though it could see her.

Her Own Making

Chapter 8 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to docmara and Anastasia.



Chapter 8: Her Own Making

It was almost as though it could see her.

When Severus Snape entered the Great Hall for dinner, all conversation at the High Table ceased.

Only Hermione Granger kept eating.

His hair slightly damp from a shower, he made his way slowly between the house tables, which were standing empty. As he neared the raised platform where the staff dined, the staring stopped, and the conversation returned.

"Severus, thank you for joining us," Minerva said formally.

He inclined his head, but said nothing.

He didn't quite trust his voice. That chair had always been Dumbledore's.

Minerva gestured him to a seat that was waiting for him at the far end of the table, on the other side from his formerly customary place.

It was, of course, next to Granger.

"Miss Granger," he said, pulling out his chair.

"Professor Granger, Mr. Snape." She did not look at him. Had not, in fact, since he had entered the Hall.

"Of course."

Behind her usual façade of practiced indifference, Hermione's mind was snapping at its own heels *Just a coincidence. No, it can't be... Why is he here? A coincidence. Just a...*

Even in the low torchlight, he could see that her hair held more silver than his own.

They ate in silence for a time, the low hum of conversation offering a ready focus behind which Hermione could have politely withdrawn.

But she remained rigidly apart.

It brooked no notice by the staff, the buzz of their conversation telling him her separation was normal. Expected. Everyday.

Except it wasn't normal.

There was something unexpected in the tightness of her posture, some betrayal that she did not hold herself apart as much as hold herself up, firmly, demanding as much of her body as it could give, and what it could not give...

Something tightened in his gut, and he knew.

He knew that Hermione Granger's shoulders wanted to droop, her head to fall forward, and her hands to clutch the edge of the table while she screamed.

He knew it intimately, without knowing her at all.

Something went quiet in her mind, and she realized he was scrutinizing her. She turned her head toward him a fraction.

"I am surprised, Mr. Snape," she said calmly, placing her utensils down.

He doubted if she had ever had enough real dueling experience to know why she had emptied her hands before speaking. He shifted easily in his seat, resting his arms on the chair back, on the table; open, hands empty, away from his wand.

"Surprised... at?"

"That you would have the audacity to appear within these walls."

The High Table held its collective breath. No one moved, but he felt them all straining through the silence so as not to miss his response.

Ghouls. No doubt exactly what she'd been counting on.

His voice was even, and it carried. "Albus is no less a presence in my own home than here."

She turned to him fully then, taking his measure, calculating him as though she were already reaching for a different angle, one with a sharper edge.

But he knew she would find none; he had already accepted her best blow.

He was not even bleeding.

Then the stray wisp of hair fell over her eye, and she reached automatically to tuck it behind her ear, and there was a grace in its escaping, in its fall and containment, a grace so at odds with the rest of her that Severus had to catch himself from catching his breath in surprise.

He'd missed the grace in the sweep of her hand earlier, in the Library. He should have seen the contradiction. Twenty-two years ago, he would have.

Summoning his voice, he remarked, "I understand from Minerva that you are nearing completion of another essay."

And all of her grace was gone, replaced by a curt nod, delivered without eye contact.

"I shall look forward to reading it, then."

She took a slow breath, and, to his eye, seemed to disappear into herself. "It's not ready."

"I understand. I would nonetheless welcome the opportunity to discuss your work..."

A wary, sideways look. "Why?"

"Your work interests me."

Just a coincidence... What she intended merely as a scathing glance seemed to catch and hold, and it grew into a challenge. "In what way?"

In her hard, tight eyes he glimpsed... something.

Despair he had expected. Shame, envy those were present; those he had seen years before.

But now, behind stone, behind ice, a corona of rage.

A rage with no object, no direction, no purpose.

His fingers twitched, obeying instincts a half-century old, but he merely inclined his head, and murmured, "Surely you will admit that I have a vested interest in the metaphysical implications of murder and the state of a murderer's soul?"

At the other end of the table, sudden silence; half-sentences left dangling from mouths half-open.

Hermione's gaze bled full cold. "I work in the realm of theory, Mr. Snape. Pure theory."

He hesitated, deliberately, for a fraction too long. "Of course you do."

Her voice low, her tone guarded. "Have you become an Unspeakable, Snape?"

He let out a short sound that might have been a laugh.

The staff flinched, but Hermione was unrelenting. "Well?" she demanded.

"Most assuredly not."

"Then why are you here?" Her voice held a low, practiced authority, but within it he detected a trace of uncertainty.

Nearly perfect, Professor, he noted, nodding unconsciously before replying, "As I told you..."

She thought he leaned toward her then, almost imperceptibly; more a change of balance than actual movement, more felt than seen.

Before she could retreat, his eyes caught hers, and he spoke directly to whatever disturbed the emptiness in her eyes, to what should not have been there, to whatever it was he had seen in Diagon Alley so many years before.

To whatever within her remembered whatever it was she'd forgotten, he said, "... I came seeking you."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, and, briefly, he saw in her eyes the sacrificial scream that no one could hear.

Fight or flight, Professor? he thought mildly.

And she stared at him, her chin dropped a nearly invisible, almost involuntary nod, and her hair escaped, and it was down, and falling, and she swept it back over her ear, and stood abruptly.

"I shall be in the Library after breakfast should you wish to discuss my research."

She rose and left the Hall.

Severus' eyes glittered strangely as he tracked her exit, sitting motionless until the great doors swung shut behind her.

The heavy echo of their closing sounded deep within his gut, and his fingers twitched reflexively with the urge to wrench them open.

Wide open.

Deep within, he didn't care if he destroyed them in the process.

Slowly the staff's conversation returned, burning, to his ears.

From her place at the center of the table, Minerva cast a shrewd, hooded eye at the former Potions professor, who seemed unaware of the magnitude of Hermione's invitation or of how legible his expressions had become during his years of self-imposed exile.

He had no way of knowing that Hermione had refused to discuss her research with any of them, stating that conversation distorted the clarity her reasoning required.

Sipping her wine thoughtfully, Minerva watched Severus do the same.

She would not be particularly surprised if his strategy proved effective on the reclusive Professor Granger. Relieved, yes. But not surprised. If, indeed, Harry had been Dumbledore's parrot, it was all too apparent whose mirror Hermione had become.

Still, Minerva's lips twisted into a wry smirk. She should be very surprised indeed if the former Potions master realized how very high the stakes had just become for himself.

Deep in the night the wind whispered, whistling through the trees, seeking, reaching for the castle, wrapping, rounding, higher, a window, a small, tiny crack...

Far underground, too far to feel the wind as it swept the castle's skirts, chased its heels, circling ever higher above, Severus stared into the space below the glowing embers in the dying fire.

It was somehow his.

He had done it, if not for her, to her. He had shown her how to hide, how to deflect, how to foreclose proximity before it began with dark civility and uncensored truth.

He had had to do that, to seem that, to be that, to survive.

He had had to.

His life, their lives, had depended on it.

Would it have been different if he had died?

The question hung low in the deepening shadows of the lengthening night.

No.

She still would have been born.

And Albus still would have been wrong.

True, he had killed Voldemort's mortal body at the end, but any knife aimed correctly can kill.

Even twice.

Slughorn could have brewed the potion for Albus, that last year, the year he knew he was dying, to keep him alive...

... for Potter.

And still, she would have been born; she, with her curiosity, her courage, her ruthless, brutal practicality...

She would have made a fine Slytherin...

But no.

She had been born to Muggle parents.

Her mind was entirely her own making.

Would it really have mattered if he'd died?

Worse... Did it really matter that Albus hadn't, until he had?

And he shoved that question aside...

... but it returned, darker, angrier, to stare at him blindly from the depths of the embers, darkening to black, lightening to ash, falling showering through the solid iron grate.

"Baron..." the dying man's voice a dry crack in the dim chamber.

The Bloody Baron drifted closer to the bed as Horace Slughorn's eyes searched through him.

"Baron?" the voice round, beseeching.

"Here, Horace."

A weary hand beseeching from the counterpane; the Baron's own removing, distant. Not touching. Not yet.

"Baron, I'm afraid."

A mournful look that Slughorn, through failing eyes, could nonetheless feel.

"As are we all, Horace. As are we all."

Her hair tangled, damp on the pink-stained pillow.

Ron's head turning to look at her, in his eyes the trees tossed, rising, consuming, the moon open empty deep within his empty open eyes.

Hoping it didn't sense her wouldn't see her couldn't touch her ...

The trees creaking, snapping underneath Ron's empty, moon-filled gaze ...

It found her, caught her, pinned her ...

But... I'm not supposed to see this part... I'm not... I

Ron's voice, "You can."

Her own, "I can't!"

The moon rising full in Ron's dying eyes. "But you did."

"No..."

And instead of spasming back to loll gazing at the sky, Ron's body smiled at her.

She stepped back, side-stepping his smile. "No..."

And it followed her, and still his body spoke, "And you will."

A whimper of a sound. "No..."

"Soon, Hermione."

A whimper.

"Soon."

Silence.

And the moon in his eyes and his dead mouth shaping the words, "You know you want to."

Make a Wish

Chapter 9 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to Anastasia, for her unerring eye and constant vigilance. Thanks are also due Melenka, for being the sounding board for the storyline.

Pay no attention to Jacques Derrida, an actual Muggle theorist whose work is mentioned briefly in this chapter. None whatsoever. That way lies madness, indeed.



Chapter 9: Make a Wish

"You know you want to."

Her first thought was that her eyelashes were stuck together.

Her second, that the pillowcase was stuck to her cheek.

Her third, that she was meeting Snape in the library.

Damn it, Granger. She rubbed her finger along her gritty eyelashes and tried to open her eyes.

She winced as her rubbing tugged an eyelash free. She opened one angry eye and glared at the lash on her finger as though *it* had arranged to meet Snape that morning.

"Make a wish, Hermione."

Her brow furrowed where had *that* come from?

Ginny.

She screwed her eyes shut and clenched her fist on the pillowcase for one urgent moment before getting out of bed.

The house-elf would find the eyelash on the pillowcase later.

If her footsteps clacking through the stone corridors that morning lacked something of their usual snap, if her eyes were focused even more inward than usual, if her hair was tied back with a ferocity she usually reserved for slashing comments on student essays, Hermione was unaware of all of it.

Why, *why* had she offered to discuss her work with him?

He knows.

She squelched the thought half-born, but it returned. *He knows.*

Sweeping around a corner, flattening herself against the rough chill of the castle's ancient stone, her heart pounded as though she were being followed.

Chased.

No.

There was no one.

She heard no footsteps behind her, no long strides nor deliberate boot-heels nor the swift, heavy rustling that had often been the only warning to miscreants that Professor Snape was...

Mister Snape. Mister.

She was the professor now, and however abreast he had stayed of developments in his field...

She shook her head and willed her wits to order.

His voice in her mind: *"I came seeking you."*

And her wits scattered again. She closed her eyes, and thumped her head softly on the wall.

What did he know?

Her eyes narrowed. There was not much to know she had killed Voldemort, she had no idea how, and she had told the Unspeakables as much the first time, and when they had returned, years later.

She was sworn to secrecy. It was supposed to have been Harry, so Harry it was. He was the perfect symbol for the Ministry's cultural reunification program full-blood, if not pure-blood; not Muggleborn, but raised as one. Yes, he was the perfect symbol of hope and the future.

Whereas she was only... she was...

And Harry and Ginny made *such* a photogenic pair.

There was talk of his going into politics when his Quidditch career ended, but thus far he had always demurred.

Exactly the way one should demur who plans to do exactly that.

Hermione sighed. He'd be Minister of Magic someday, if he lived long enough.

And then he'll know.

"Does anyone know that it was m- that it wasn't Harry?" she had asked the Unspeakables twenty-two years before.

"Ourselves and the Minister of Magic."

"Scrimgeour?"

"And whoever succeeds him. There are other, similar arrangements in place on other issues."

She had nodded, not bothering to ask more questions.

If more likely, when Harry became Minister of Magic, would they tell him?

The scene sprang to her mind, fully formed.

"Oh, one more thing, Mr. Potter. A few high-level government secrets, you understand... that business with Voldemort a few years back you remember, surely it didn't go quite the way we led the public and, hrm, well, yes, you to believe."

She closed her eyes again.

Of course they wouldn't tell him.

That had been the point.

Harry had never been a good actor. No, that role had fallen to...

And Hermione's thoughts slammed back to the present and to the former Potions master who had materialized at her elbow.

"Holding up the castle, Professor Granger?"

She glared at him, and his lips twitched.

"Repeated pounding of one's head against stone has never done much to clarify one's thinking."

"Voice of experience, Snape?"

His eyes grew still. "Perhaps."

Hermione wheeled about and headed for the Great Hall.

Severus followed, more slowly.

She had looked more like herself, for a moment.

He wondered what she had been thinking of.

He did not wonder at himself for wondering.

Minerva looked up as the Baron hovered by her desk.

"He had a difficult night, but Madam Pomfrey says seems to be holding his own now," he said.

"Has he turned a corner then?"

The Baron shook his head, his long wig flowing slowly in the air. "No, Minerva. There remains but one corner for Horace"

She closed her eyes. "One cannot help but hope, Baron."

"The living seem always to think so."

"... so you see, Professor, I am quite interested to know how your thinking has developed since," he said, setting the last volume of *Ars Necronomica* aside.

They were seated across from each other at her usual table in the library with the mid-morning sun slanting down from the windows.

She glanced at the vaulted ceiling. The contrast was always at its starkest at this time of day.

His eyes followed hers and lingered on the arches soaring overhead, but he did not comment.

Their conversation that morning a summary of her extant work, and his careful compliments on it had been punctuated at key moments by her involuntary looks skyward.

He had discerned no pattern to them.

Hermione's voice brought him back to himself. "Your familiarity with my work seems quite thorough, Mr. Snape."

He inclined his head. "I have enjoyed the luxury of ample research time for many years, Professor Granger, and your work touches centrally on matters of no small import."

"To you personally."

"Yes."

Her eyes were clinical, sharp. "I find that too emotional an investment in theoretical matters impedes clarity, Mr. Snape."

He took her measure and decided to test her. "Indeed. That way lies blindness."

"Madness," she corrected him automatically.

"Ah, yes, of course. Madness."

The hackles rose on Hermione's neck, and she placed her quill on the table. "What are you playing at, Snape?" she asked.

"As I've stated I find your research intriguing and am curious as to its current direction."

Tossing her head, as if to toss her hair over her shoulder, she countered, "Very nice, Snape. However, I present the following for your consideration. Item: You are as familiar with my research as I am. Item: You've returned to Hogwarts after a twenty-two year absence, after departing under circumstances that were how shall I put it diplomatically? less than amiable. Item: You *never* misspeak, and item: you work *alone*." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "What game are you playing?"

"I assure you, Professor, I play no game." He pushed his chair out slightly and steepled his fingers, rubbing his finger on his lips for a moment whilst he examined her eyes.

The rage he'd seen the night before was held far in abeyance.

Deflecting her attention from his purpose, he observed, "You base some of your later work on the commentaries that appeared in response to your early essays."

She nodded.

He flicked one of the library's copies of *Ars Necronomica* open. "Particularly those of the French."

She frowned, but nodded again, leaning slightly forward. "Their application of the Muggle theory of Deconstruction to Metaphysics is fascinating. I special-owled the source texts from Paris. It took me years to work it all out."

He raised an eyebrow. "You've read Derrida in the original French?"

She gestured impatiently. "Of course. He makes no sense at all in English."

"Quite," he agreed, watching her eyes. The rage in them was dissipating as she lost herself in ideas.

"His introduction of the extra-systemic to reveal a system's intrinsic flaws using something from outside the box to break the box, as it were that's what cued me to the possibility of the three-part process..."

She continued at great length and in tremendous detail, to which he half-listened as he watched her face achieve a kind of luminosity that triggered his visual memory... an advanced student; her features softening, the silver in her hair displaced, briefly, by a remembered image of a warmer tone.

"... revealing, of course, that assumptions regarding 'order' and 'meaning' are nothing more than a means of cultural control, a drugged sleep in which everyone participates, more or less voluntarily." Eyes blazing, she paused for breath. "Sheep," she spat. "They're all sheep." She paused, her eyes seeming to search for the right phrase somewhere in the vicinity of her nose. "On opium."

She crossed her arms emphatically, and glared at him, as if daring him to "Baa."

In response, he crossed his own arms and raised an eyebrow.

She blushed, and the mark near her ear disappeared briefly.

"Well summarized, Professor Granger. But do you not agree that..."

And they were off. For hours, during which mugs of tea and platters of food appeared and cooled and were whisked away, untouched, by house-elves, Hannah Abbott, and, finally, Minerva, whose curiosity regarding their progress got the better of her.

Late that night, when they had finally beaten to death a point so small that neither could remember why they were on about it in the first place, they leaned back and assumed identical expressions, part exhilaration, part exhaustion.

So alive in his mind, so tired in body, he almost missed the fact that the rage in her eyes was gone.

They were silent for several minutes, allowing their minds to return to something resembling normal speed.

Finally, he shifted his chair. "It's getting late," he said.

She nodded, a sober expression returning to her face. She flicked her books and parchments into her bag and moved to stand.

"May I join you tomorrow?" he asked.

She hesitated, searching the table's surface as if it held the right answer to his question, but saw nothing written there save a tracery of shadows in the moonlight.

"If you wish," she said finally, not looking at him.

They stood to leave, and she glanced out the window.

The wind had calmed somewhat, but still stirred the distant trees.

The trees... and she glanced upwards at the lowering shadows, sensing again the weight of the castle drawn upward from below, rising around her, over her, to lower, pressing down upon her, groaning from the relentless vaults above....

Seeing her expression change from hesitation to something like panic, he held out his hand for her bag. "Let me."

She neither moved nor gave any indication she had heard him.

"Professor Granger," he said quietly.

No reaction.

Where is she?

"Hermione."

She blinked once, slowly, her eyes dropping her gaze, uncomprehending, to his outstretched hand.

"Your bag. You're exhausted..."

She nodded and held it out to him.

A strange warmth grew in his eyes. Careful not to touch her hand, he took her bag, held the library door open for her. "Come, then."

She stepped through, and, as they walked in silence to her door, he watched her carefully for any sign of... anything.

But there was none. As she accepted her bag, she thanked him, her voice strangely thick, somehow distant.

"Good night, Professor Granger."

"Good night, Professor Snape."

After she closed the door behind her, he looked at it for a long moment, then looked down.

A tiny ghost was sitting on the floor next to Hermione's door, toying with a seeded flower stem. She solemnly put her finger to her lips and pointed to the door.

Without knowing exactly why he did so, he echoed her gesture and nodded, equally solemnly.

The ghost smiled shyly at him.

As he turned to leave, the little ghost blew the seeds off of the flower stem. Their feathery stems carried them quickly upward, hovering, then floating downward to swirl gleaming in the torchlight against the billowing black backdrop of his departing cloak.

In the torchlight, the drifting seeds were the same color she was.

The Innocent and Damned

Chapter 10 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.



10: The Innocent and Damned

In the torchlight, the drifting seeds were the same color she was.

Outside the safety of the groaning stone keep, the wind whipped the moonlit walls and windows of the sleeping castle.

In a tower beyond the reach of the others, isolated by a trick of architecture, a stone finger pointing at the sky, behind a cracked window under a feathered counterpane on sheets without the smallest wrinkle, Hermione slept.

From beneath the ground, from the rocky depths bearing the weight, a single memory drawn upward, forward from an eternal past, cycling forth, spiraling higher, whispering silently through lifeless halls, past sleeping portraits, recoiling without waking, the slowly wavering mists untouched by the force of its formless, endless passage.

Ron's body turning to smile at her...

Her head tossed on the pillow.

"You know you want to."

In the place beneath her name, beyond her dreams, she stepped back, stepped aside, too weak to brave the cowardice she bore.

Eyes firmly shut, her lips forming a silent, "No..."

"You know it. You know it. You know..."

I shouldn't hear it, he has no voice, he's dead, he's dead, he's "

The wind rose to a scream, and in the darkness beneath the wind, Horace Slughorn's eyes opened wide.

" dead, he's "

"I'm not."

She looked up, gasping.

Ron's body was not Ron's body, not lying on the ground in Godric's Hollow, and the body on the ground lay in a pool of wind-whipped shadow-laced moonlight, nude, pale and long on a bed of inky silk laid over fallen branches of deepest pine.

Dark.

The head turning slowly to look at her, a black spill of hair disappearing in the rustling folds of silk the empty shade of nothing.

She couldn't move, couldn't turn away, couldn't help but see the long, lithe limbs, a trailing finger of smoky silk curling, falling, unveiling before her...

Eyes ablaze with Darkness, gentle with an urgent, certain promise.

The voice spoke not to her ears, resonating low, deep within her mind. "You know you want to..."

She heard it, felt it, and she did not breathe; she dared not move. She wanted to reach...

Again it spoke,

"You know..."

A pale hand rising, reaching, beckoning her into the depths of the moon-touched spill of blackened silk, a tumbled emptiness of aching permanence.

It promised nothing, and nothing was what she wanted, and a pink-stained trail of gleaming salted water trailed down her throat, silenced her voice, and pooled over her heart.

Pale, moon-bleached lips licked her skin clean, and the silk lowered, covering, consuming her, and in the unlit shadows beneath her dreams, beyond her name, where she wanted everything and nothing, the lips smiled on her skin, and she knew in the dark that the teeth behind that smile were richly, newly stained with twenty-two years of scarlet ink.

Lips and breath moving on her skin, masking the howling rage of the rising wind, and, held in the Darkness beneath its scream, she forgot to remember her name.

Severus tossed, the sheets and blankets a snarling tangle of knots, the tendrils licking at his ankles, at his thighs, over and around his arms, pinning him with his own weight to a mattress that bore his impression where his body had lain for years, a dread weight upon him unmoving in the darkness; no less emblazoned, no less bound than the Dark Lord's soul in Potter's scar.

But deep within his dreams he knew the word and had long-since found it would bring about the end.

"Lumos."

And he was awake and methodically readjusting the blankets when he heard a soft tapping at his door.

Belting his dressing gown, he padded across the stones worn smooth under his bare feet and opened the door.

"Severus." Poppy inclined her head. "Something's wrong."

"Slughorn?"

She nodded grimly. "He's not dying. And he should be."

Severus felt at his pocket for his wand and followed her into the darkened corridor.

The Bloody Baron swept toward them as they entered Slughorn's chambers. "There's been no change. I must awak"

The rest of his words were swallowed by the ceiling, but neither witch nor wizard noticed, focused as they were on the elderly wizard's wide, staring eyes.

"How long has he been this way?" Severus asked, his eyes narrowing as he closed the distance to Slughorn's bedside.

"A few minutes I came in search of you once I suspected."

He leaned over the tight, unmoving form, senses alert, the skin prickling on the back of his neck.

"Is it...?" Poppy could not bring herself to complete the question.

Severus nodded once, curtly, hesitating only briefly before muttering a spell under his breath.

Slughorn's body relaxed slightly, but his eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling.

Poppy shot Severus a startled, questioning look, but his eyes were shuttered and he said nothing.

The Bloody Baron returned through the wall, and Minerva entered moments later. Seeing Severus' and Poppy's grim faces, the headmistress stepped back and drew her slight form rigidly upright. "What is it?"

Neither witch nor wizard replied at first; then, at Severus' deferential nod, Poppy raised her chin slightly and glanced at the ceiling.

Minerva's eyes followed the Healer's, but she discerned nothing and shook her head. "What, Poppy?"

"He was dying, Minerva. His eyes opened, and fixed on the ceiling, in the way that they do sometimes..." She swallowed.

Minerva nodded. They had all seen the stares of the dying, fixing on nothing as though in leaving they could glimpse within it some significance, some importance that eluded those whose eyes were veiled with living.

Poppy continued, "... and I thought he would go, but then he... he stopped."

"He stopped?" Minerva blinked. "He stopped dying? Is he still alive, then?"

The Healer opened her hands, then let them fall. "I can't say, for sure."

"No," Severus spoke quietly. "He is not alive, but neither is he really dead."

Minerva opened her mouth to speak, but Severus was already turning to the Baron, hissing, "Granger."

The Baron nodded and zoomed out of the room, bearing in a direct angle for the professor's tower.

"What? What is it, Severus?"

He sat heavily in a chair and ran his fingers harshly through his hair. "The Dark Arts, Minerva."

The atmosphere in the dim chamber seemed to shrink inward, away from itself, away from him.

"Once you allow them to touch your mind, you are never free from the temptation."

Minerva and Poppy exchanged a glance, their hands twitching toward their wands.

Severus laughed, a dark, mirthless chuckle. "Resisting temptation is the first lesson for those who would touch the Dark Arts. Those who do not learn it do not survive as long as I have."

The women's embarrassed hands fell to their sides.

"Then Hermione..." Minerva breathed.

"If she has never acknowledged to herself what she did, Minerva, then she has no way to control it now."

"Then she must be stopped," the headmistress said, eyeing Slughorn's unmoving form with growing horror.

Minerva's words echoed in the silence as the three awaited the Baron's return, but between the echoes, Severus' mind supplied the word a younger Minerva would have used: "*Helped.*"

Minerva found herself toying with the heavy ring she wore. It spun loosely, its band cool satin between her fingers. The longer she remained in the lower levels of the castle, the colder the metal grew; she felt the familiar dull ache start in her knuckles as the ring seemed to leach the warmth from her very blood.

She exhaled impatiently and muttered, "Whatever can be keeping him?"

Neither Severus nor Poppy moved. Their heads were bowed, both of them, and all of them were lost once again in the contemplation of their own hands.

After a long, choking stillness, the Baron drifted slowly through the outside wall, his hand coming last. It was held by another, smaller hand.

The tiny ghost wafted hesitantly behind him, one hand reaching upward to grasp his, the other remaining outside.

She leaned up and appeared to whisper something to the Baron, but the living heard nothing.

The Baron opened the window, and the little ghost gave an echo of a smile, as if in thanks, drawing her other hand through the opening.

In her tiny hand she held the bare, seedless flower stem, and she drifted forward and laid it on Professor Slughorn's chest.

She gazed at him sadly before turning to drift out the window.

After a moment, the Baron spoke. "The wind has died," he said.

Some dry corner of Minerva's mind registered that he sounded like a centaur again. "And Professor Granger?" she asked, with no small asperity.

"Asleep. Soundly, to all appearances, but the bedclothes are much disturbed."

Although he kept his head bowed, under his hair, Severus raised his eyes.

The Baron perceived his glance. "I sent the little one in to check," he added, apparently to no one in particular.

Neither Minerva nor Poppy caught the deep, brief flare in Severus' eyes before he spoke.

"Something stopped her," he said quietly. "She was reaching for him, and something stopped her."

The witches looked at him, confusion and alarm warring in their features.

Severus continued, "I fear that Professor Granger has discovered how to break a soul in a way that doesn't require murder. I fear it very much indeed."

Poppy recoiled, but Minerva merely raised her eyes to look directly into his face for a long moment.

"But why? Why would she do such a thing?" Poppy asked, the pitch of her voice rising with her alarm to a tone never heard from those in her profession.

"Because she has before, Poppy," Minerva said quietly.

Poppy started to speak again, but Minerva laid a hand on her arm. "I shall explain in a moment," she said.

"She has before, *insofar as we know*, Minerva, but that's not it, not entirely," Severus stated, his lips forming a thin line as his mind raced behind eyes that were suddenly old, suddenly tired.

Both women glanced at him, then back at their hands, certain only that they did not wish to hear his next words.

"No, not even the seduction of Darkness working in the mind can account for this, not fully, or it would have been tried before. She is repeating a past action, I think, in a desperate and probably unconscious attempt to undo something that cannot be undone."

"Severus, whatever do you mean?" Minerva asked, her throat suddenly dry.

Careful to keep his voice even, he said, "I mean that she is a Gryffindor, with a Gryffindor's honor, Minerva, but one whose mind is tainted, and the taint was left to fester." He paused for a moment, then continued, "I believe her to be experimenting testing whether or not a soul can be removed without a death."

"Can she be stopped?" Minerva barked, bracing herself on the nearest wall.

"I've protected him as well as I can, Minerva. No," he responded to the question she was about to ask, "no, you have no wish to know how I did it. None at all," he finished, leaning his head into his hands as his wand clattered to the floor.

The taste of the stasis spell he had cast on Slughorn lingered acrid in his mouth: smoky, overripe, an aftertaste of lemon, fallen, left too long lying in the dust.

Damn you, Albus, he thought. *Damn you straight to the abyss, and beyond.*

For he knew now, with absolute certainty, that it did not matter that Albus had remained alive, had required everything of him in a deadly sham, a distracting spectacle; but even as he realized that much with certainty, for the first time in twenty-two years he also knew that it mattered a great deal that he had lived.

Potter had failed, his promise smothered by the cloying naiveté of Dumbledore's belief in the power of blind innocence; he had failed, and a darker love had swept into the vacuum of his failure knowledgeable, silent, surrendering to Darkness to do for Potter what he dared not dream do himself.

Hermione Granger had not killed Ron Weasley, but she had accepted the sacrifice of his soul in the name of his best friend.

Severus had no doubt she'd been acting by prior arrangement.

He had some idea how that worked.

She had perverted her own innocence, preserving them all in one blinding moment of panic, and had spent the last twenty-two years willfully ignoring her own painstaking reconstruction of how she had done it.

He knew now what she searched for on the ceiling.

It wasn't something saw, or something she hoped to see.

No, she wanted to see nothing the nothing that even now transfixed Slughorn's unblinking stare.

She was too young to want to die, but too smart not to know she was already buried.

And her hand was on the cornerstone, and it was moving, and he felt it move.

And a harsh wail of searing siren song, and he felt its call, and he ached softly, urgently, to cover her hand, so smooth, so small, with his own, and help her push.

He wanted to touch her hand, to feel her skin, warm, alive, to feel the deep, cold stone of the castle bow and shudder under the betrayal of their touch.

A rush of perspiration on his skin, drying instantly to salt.

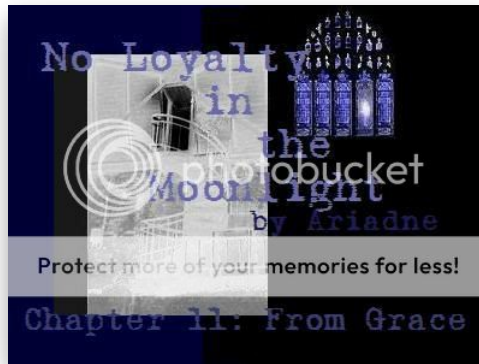
In a sudden, fluid motion, he retrieved his wand and swept from the chamber.

From Grace

Chapter 11 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to Anastasia, who flew to the frozen prairie to beta this chapter.



11: From Grace

He wanted to touch her hand, to feel her skin, warm, alive, to feel the deep, cold stone of the castle bow and shudder under the betrayal of their touch.

A rush of perspiration on his skin, drying instantly to salt.

In a sudden, fluid motion, he retrieved his wand and swept from the chamber.

He strode downward, dim torches flickering with the speed of his passage, slamming his door with enough force to crack the ancient wood.

The sound of his door slamming reverberated through the castle, rocking the nearest columns, dissipating as it traveled through massive, dense stones, interrupting the endless movement of the staircases, beating through plinth, post and lintel, rattling the suits of armor, and thudding into the gargoyle outside Minerva's office.

The gargoyle winced, but fulfilled its duty as guardian; no hint of impact penetrated into the office of the Head of Hogwarts.

The force dispersed into the very air, slowing as it lost solid contact, radiating outward from the headmistress' tower in waves until it reached the farthest tower and found the crack in the window.

A chip of stained glass clattered to Hermione's floor.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes, trying to focus on what had made the noise.

And she saw, and the moonlight pierced the crack and lanced her eye. She recoiled, retreating instinctively backward to the headboard, and curled there, squeezing her eyes shut, clinging to her knees.

In his chambers, Severus gripped the mantel, knuckles pale as he fought the bitter taste of dusty lemon on his tongue, willing his breath to ease.

But to no avail. The constriction in his chest only grew tighter.

For twenty-two years, he had avoided all but academic contact with the Dark.

For twenty-two years, he had avoided contact with anyone who had been even on the fringes of the Dark Lord's circle.

Years immersed in Darkness, before him, above him, below him, since he had fled to it, embraced it, broken himself upon it as a youth; the years had annealed his character.

Those years had given him cunning enough to survive his last duel, the one that was supposed to kill him. Guile enough to have survived the endgame. Strength enough to kill Albus Dumbledore.

Until tonight, he had not touched Darkness for twenty-two years, and now, with every sinew, every nerve, he fought the urge to touch it again.

He had railed against the inadequacy of Hogwarts' Dark Arts curriculum, arguing for the inclusion of some active application, rather than the passive, defensive strategy that Albus preached was the best weapon against the Dark.

"Light, Severus," Albus had ended every conversation. "Light is the only weapon that can succeed against Darkness."

Damn him and his barbaric twinkling blindness.

Because that stance only worked when success was possible, when there was some final, epic battle to be fought, and, even then, the light would need luck. Had needed luck.

Luck had failed Harry Potter, until it had killed Ron Weasley and placed his soul in the hands of another, one who had known what could be done.

Severus' breath rasped harsh in his throat.

He did not know for sure where Hermione had learned how to do what she had done, but he knew in his bones that in their need to destroy the Horcruxes, divorced by murder from the one Dark wizard who could have helped them, somewhere in their innocent fumbling, she must have found some arcane source that had given her the knowledge of a Darkness she had finally warped to the service of the Light.

They should not have been alone.

She should not have been alone.

Potter too blindly obedient to Dumbledore's philosophy ever to consider Darkness a weapon against Darkness; Weasley too stupid to understand half of what she had learned but a good enough chess player to see its possible application.

She never would have done it on her own. She would never have dreamed it alone.

No. Severus had no doubt that she had tearfully agreed, after the shouting had stopped, to what young Weasley must have suggested.

"If it comes to it, Hermione... if I'm down... if it will help Harry... *Sacrifice the knight, Hermione.*"

And the queen. And the queen.

She should not have been alone.

A low growl began in Severus' throat.

In the long stretch of years before the battle, how often had he used Darkness to combat Darkness.

Not pretty.

But his purpose the eventual defeat of the Dark Lord had been the stronghold of his sanity.

She had no such purpose now. With her first touch of Darkness, she had defeated the Dark Lord, and the war the external one was over.

But twenty-two years later, she was still at war.

A war with no battles, no medals.

Only casualties.

She should not have been alone. Would not have been, except for Albus' fruitless insistence on his silence...

His mind a storm, and the growl rose suddenly to a roar as the storm broke. He seized the nearest object and hurled it at the far wall.

"Damn you, Albus!"

Even before the echoes of the shattering had ceased, he had wheeled away from the fireplace and was through the door and into the corridor, his hurried stride carrying him upward from the castle's buried depths.

He would realize only later that what he had crushed to powder under his retreating boot-heels were the remnants of a small obsidian dragon given him by Albus one long-ago Yule.

The black fragments shone wetly in torchlight still wavering from his passage. The dragon's head had escaped his heel and lay in the corridor, the movement of its tiny eye slowing, fading.

A grey film spread over its eyes.

Down the corridor. Up the stairs. Through the Entrance Hall.

The Grand Staircase. Another flight. A long corridor, a conjunction of corners, and through the door that door...

Damn you, Albus. Damn you!

... and up the stairs, to burst forth into darkness on the wind-whipped Tower.

The door crashed against the stone wall on the parapet and swung on one broken hinge as he emerged into the icy moonlight, his heels striking frost from stones he had trodden through countless shadowed dawns through twenty-two indifferent winters, waking and sleeping, since that night...

... the night he had paid for his past with a single spell, a double sacrifice for duty out of love, Severus' fatalism outweighing his skepticism at Albus' certainty that their actions, their masquerade of murder, would help Potter guarantee a peaceful future.

This future.

"DAMN YOU, ALBUS! YOU BLOODY COWARD!"

The wind tore his shout from his throat, tangling it in the swirls of his snapping cloak, and shot it straight from the Tower into the brittle heart of the frozen Forest.

Hermione covered by the headboard, frozen in the moonlight, rocking slightly in the icy draft.

Leftover images of black silk swirling over her head, rustling across her bare skin, the taste of salt as lips, firm and warm, brushed the corner of her mouth, bleeding her shame back into her mouth, stifling her whimpering, replacing it with a moan...

... and the wind carried a high, thin keening to her tower, and she arose, backing off the bed, her bare feet cold on the stone floor, staring at the crack in the window.

The keening grew to a thinly pitched shout, carried on the wind, and in the aftershock of the cry, she thought she heard words.

Her hand moved silently to her wand on her bedside table, and she gripped it firmly.

Eyes still glassy from sleep, from her broken dream, she stared at the window for a moment, at the moon refracted into dozens of parti-colored decoys in the stained glass, piercing bright white through the one small chink, and she turned from her chambers and ran, her white nightgown rippling around her bare ankles, through her door, around corners, down stairs, up stairs, until she scarcely knew where she ran for the sound of her running.

The tiny ghost followed silently after her until she reached an open door. The ghost wheeled away from the door, that door, as Hermione ran up the stairs, into the wind, where Severus stood, eyes closed, face bathed in moonlight, offering his throat to the sky.

She gasped, and he blinked once, slowly, lowering his head back into shadow to look at her, a small, barefooted figure in a gleaming, stark white nightgown.

He basked in the reflection of the moon in her terrified eyes.

"You," she whispered.

His chin lowered slightly once and his hair fell, a sharp angle of darkness masking his features.

The bitter wind sliced through the thin cloth of her nightgown, carrying with it the dusty scent of snow from the grounds far below, and she wrapped her arms around herself, stepping backwards, aside, leaving black melted footprints in the glittering frost.

Without speaking, he reached toward her from across the paved expanse of ancient stone.

She pressed her back against the broken door, the rough wood catching on fabric. She shook her head, and her hair swirled over her face, wild in the rising howl of the wind. She couldn't see was he holding a wand?

She flung her own wand up in response. "No!" she shouted.

"Are you going to kill me, Professor?" he asked, his voice carrying through the wind.

She blinked, and her wand fell from her numbing fingers.

He closed the distance between them, unfastening his cloak as a gust lifted it high behind him, wrapping it around her shoulders, a swirl of descending darkness shutting off the blinding gleam of moonlight on white.

"You're going to freeze," he murmured, retrieving her wand and ushering her toward the doorway.

"It doesn't matter," she said, not knowing whence her words, or why.

Stopping at the top of the stairs, he tilted his head a fraction, and she turned, half blind, to see his silhouette an empty darkness framed by the brightly lit stones behind him.

He gathered the cloak more closely around her throat. Her errant strand of hair stretched from temple to neck, pulled taut by the restraining fabric.

"Your cloak. Take it off me," she said, her teeth chattering through lips that were slowly draining of color. She shuddered, struggling weakly against its tight folds.

"But, Professor," he began, his voice echoing low in the stairwell behind her, "isn't it what you've always wanted?"

His eyes locked on hers, and she did not move.

His voice a smooth, patient insistence, emerging from the stones, from the emptiness beneath. "It is, isn't it? You were wearing one like it in Diagon Alley, that day... so like mine... so very like mine. In cut, in color, in shame..."

Squeezing her eyes shut against the tear that trailed into her hair, she shook her head.

She felt him draw closer in the darkness.

Gentle hands released her hair from the tight collar.

She froze and stopped breathing.

"Then what do you want?" he continued softly. "Can it be that you want to be punished?"

She flinched, her eyes still closed.

"Isn't that why you've pushed them all away? Forcing their hatred upon you to expiate your betrayal, backing yourself into a corner until you've nowhere to run but straight to the murderer's tower?"

"You shouted," she whispered. "I heard you. You condemned him."

His eyes sharpened, but his hands continued to move gently on the folds of fabric at her neck. "You could not have heard my words from that distance."

"The wind," she protested vaguely, distantly aware that feeling was returning to her fingers. "And my window is broken."

He searched her face for a moment. "Open your eyes, Hermione."

She obeyed, looking at his chest in front of her.

"What do you see?"

"Darkness," she breathed.

Her hand, small, smooth, and pale emerged from the heavy black silk, and reached toward him

"Don't," he said quietly.

She looked up at him then.

"You shall not use me as a means to punish yourself, Hermione."

"But "

"No." He carefully rearranged the folds of fabric over her hand and guided her toward the stairs.

But as they descended into the deep, warm shadows of the sleeping castle, he was struggling not to choke on the sound of his pounding heart.

On the floor of the corridor deep beneath the Tower, small, translucent hands gently gathered the obsidian powder into a pile.

It took a long time.

When the hands were finished, the dragon's tiny head lay unmoving on top of the glistening powder.

It was almost as though it was sleeping.

Into thy Hands

Chapter 12 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks, as always, to Anastasia and Melenka, and to someone who inspired one of the moments in this chapter. (I can't say which, of course.) Thanks also to FerPorcel for being a voice in the, hm, darkness. *waves*



12: Into thy Hands

But as they descended into the deep, warm shadows of the sleeping castle, he was struggling not to choke on the sound of his pounding heart.

When the hands were finished, the dragon's tiny head lay unmoving on top of the glistening powder.

It was almost as though it was sleeping.

Silent portraits measured their progress down several flights of stairs, the swirling mists wavering gently to mark their passage. Still wrapped in Severus' cloak, the numb soles of her bare feet beginning to prickle with the return of warmth, Hermione blinked slowly as her eyes adjusted to the dim torchlight after the glare of moonlight above. When she automatically turned toward the corridor leading back to her tower, a slight pressure from Severus' hand on her shoulder prevented her, guiding her instead through a narrow archway toward an angled staircase.

"Where are we going?" she murmured, her low voice echoing in the vaulted passageway.

Severus' jaw clenched involuntarily as her voice surrounded him in the warm darkness. The Dark stasis spell he had cast to prevent further violation of Slughorn's death had left him raw, and, in the close confines of the stairway, the lingering taint of whatever Hermione had done called to him, a soft caress on an old wound.

If he had allowed her to touch him... he breathed carefully, staring deliberately at the stairs in front of him as they descended.

"Where are we going?" she repeated.

"To the Potions classroom," he said, more curtly than he intended.

The tingling in Hermione's feet sharpened, and she flinched, losing her balance. Unable to reach for the banister through the restraining folds of heavy silk, she leaned

instinctively toward Severus.

His hand moved to grip her elbow through the cloak.

As soon as she regained her stability, he released his hold, and she sank to sit on the stairs. "My feet," she said, pain raising her voice to a higher pitch as she shrugged half out of the cloak to release her hands. Rubbing her feet, she felt a prickling in her eyes, and she blinked rapidly. *Ridiculous*, she thought, but the dampness on her cheeks betrayed her.

Severus stood on the stairs, not moving. If he knew she was crying, he gave no sign.

"I'll be fine in a minute," Hermione said, pain warring with embarrassment as her circulation improved. "Just go on."

Severus said nothing. His eyes were tracking the movement of her hands on her feet and legs as she massaged warmth back into her skin, the thin white cloth of her nightgown a ripple of amber in the torchlight.

"Go on," she insisted, glaring up at him.

He would remember, later, how she looked in that moment: the way her small pale form appeared in relief against the darkness of his cloak; the fall of her hair a tangled memory of the wind above; in her eyes only the small anger of a moment. A minor anger, innocent of history.

She was forbidden.

And she was beautiful.

Bloody hell.

"Go on," she was saying.

The echo of her voice faded in the stair, a pleading descant from which words were soon lost.

Severus' shoulders sagged, and he leaned wearily against the vaulting walls. He closed his eyes for a long moment, and sank stiffly the rest of the way to a stair.

Hermione's hands stopped moving as she watched the play of something in his mind flicker almost imperceptibly on his features, a thin sheen visible on his skin, then a tightening at the corner of his eyes before he bent to sit, reaching behind him for purchase on a higher stair.

When he opened his eyes, she was looking at him quizzically.

"Why the Potions classroom?" she asked.

"Your window is broken," he said quietly, "my chambers are inappropriate, and there is nowhere else in the castle we may converse freely."

She had raised an eyebrow at "inappropriate"; the other joined it at "freely." "Freely?" she repeated. "What are you hiding now?"

He ignored her barb. "Not me, Hermione. You."

"I?" She started to rise to her feet in protest, but the pins and needles kept her down. "What have I to hide?"

He regarded her evenly.

She drew herself straighter and returned his gaze for a moment, but could not quite summon its usual impassive force.

He laughed quietly; a short rumble, without humour. "I invented that look, Hermione. It won't work on me. Not in private."

She drew her legs to her and held them.

In the silence that rested between them, he watched the torchlight on her hair, and she felt the stones beneath her feet, tracing an unconscious circle on her knee with a slow fingertip.

He watched that, too.

Finally, in a tired voice, she asked, "Why do you want to know?"

His eyes flickered once in calculation. "Curiosity."

She snorted, and shot him a look that was pure younger Hermione. "Tell me another."

"It's the truth."

"You're curious," she said flatly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

He rolled her question around in his mind. Why, indeed? Why not simply allow her unrestrained access to the horrors she was reaching for, why not let her test her theory on Slughorn's defenseless soul, and return home, away from the vault of grim memory that was what Hogwarts Castle was for him was, and always would be?

The torchlight threw shadows on the wall, seeming to bring the stairs closer, then to draw them farther away, disclosing then concealing their secrets with indifferent flickering that knew no pattern.

Why?

Despite what he had told Minerva and Poppy, his control was not perfect, nor had it ever been. He may have long since abandoned the impulses that had first brought him to the Dark Arts; the mark on his arm but a faded reminder of a fealty he had long-ago foresworn, but...

But...

He had turned against the Dark Lord and sworn service to Dumbledore's Order service to, but never faith in. No; he knew too well the lover's voice of Darkness, a midnight whisper, begging for violation.

A thin sheen of perspiration spread over his palms.

Innocence only shielded the innocent.

And he knew that tonight the Darkness would speak with Hermione's voice.

Finally, he spoke. "I don't know why."

She stared at him, her face openly blank. "You don't know," she repeated.

"No."

"You."

He scowled, and the corner of her lips twitched.

She made a choking sound that would have been laughter had she remembered how. "The world as I know it may just have ended." She shook her hair back from her face and looked around them, at walls of stone and stairs stretching to shadow in both directions. Then her eyes deadened, and, her voice dropping, she said, "I wonder how I'd even know if it did."

The hairs on the back of his neck rose. All senses alert, very quietly, he asked, "If the world as you knew it ended?"

She nodded once, looking down.

He shifted slightly, his muscles tensing in response to some instinct he had no wish to examine. "The same way you knew before."

Her hands clenched her nightgown, and she looked at him through her hair, her eyes calculating, measuring unimaginable distances, real and unreal.

For a fleeting moment, he thought she was going to lean in toward him, and the taste of her mouth filled his imagination.

He gripped the rough stone edge of the stair behind him.

For another, he thought she would flee, and his grip tightened to the point of pain as he fought the urge to spring.

But although she held his gaze, she only nodded, and he exhaled slowly, forcing his hand to release its death grip on the stone.

They sat for a long moment, alive in the half-light, the sharp taste of their unspoken understanding acrid on the air.

Finally, she spoke softly. "I killed him."

He didn't move.

"You knew."

He nodded.

"You knew it wasn't Harry." She watched him carefully.

"Yes. Not then; after."

Her brow furrowed slightly in question, and he answered, "Your research."

"Ah," she said, almost sadly. "That obvious, was it?"

"No."

"No? Oh... okay, then."

In the flickering shadows before his eyes, her face grew calmer, seemingly younger.

"He Ron we had agreed... if... " Her voice trailed off for a moment, and she watched the torchlight moving Severus' shadow on the stairs below. Her throat closing with unshed tears, her words slipped out between them. "I broke his soul," she whispered.

Severus' heart thudded in his throat.

Her hand balled in a fist of fabric. "I didn't want to," she said, her other hand tangling in her hair. A single, panicked word: "I "

Very quietly: "I know."

"You don't know. You can't."

"I do."

"No."

Harshly, "Yes."

Her hand twisting her hair, pulling, stretching the skin on her forehead.

The air seemed to grow closer, warmer, and then a nearby torch gave a sudden dance as she turned on him, her voice sharp. "Why are you doing this to me?"

An answering anger lit in his own eyes, but his voice was calm. "For the same reason I've done most things."

"Because no one else will stoop that low?"

"No."

A skeptical look.

"Because no one else can reach that high."

Her hand stopped twisting in her hair.

"I rather suspect you know something about that," he breathed. "Hermione."

Of its own volition, his hand moved slowly, reaching up to untangle her fingers from her hair, ensnaring them in his own.

At the touch of his skin, her eyes darkened, and closed. *Warm*, she thought, *so warm...* A vast, aching darkness opened empty within her, and she traced his palm, her finger moving with the silent, slow terror of a child's touch on a toy in the shadows of an empty room.

Yes, he thought, lost in the motion of her touch, his breath shallow, his heart the only sound. "Dangerous," he breathed.

All her being centred on that one touch.

"Hermione, we can't," he said, his eyes growing heavy, tracing the curve of her neck where her smooth skin met...

"We can," she said, eyes still closed, voice low.

As he bowed his head to touch his lips to her neck, he felt the heat of her words through his hair:

"You know you want to."

And his hands raked up her arms, clenching on her shoulders, roughly into her hair, pulling her head backward to the stone wall behind her as he leaned over her, and through slitted eyes she saw his falling hair block the torchlight, his breath rasping hot on her throat, his body a heavy, welcome amnesia.

"You should not have been alone," he murmured at her neck, her head heavy in his hands.

"You were." Her hands smooth on his neck, a rough grasp at his collar, the stone edges of the stairs a slash on her side, digging painfully into his hip...

He flung himself backward, the air a sudden chill on their newly warm skin.

"I was a fully trained adult, Hermione." His eyes flashed coldly.

"Seeking vengeance on yourself for a penance you yourself exacted!" she countered, pushing herself upright with cold, angry hands. "You asked to be hated, Severus. You damn near begged for it! Whereas I..." She faltered suddenly.

For an instant they sat, breathing heavily.

"... did exactly the same thing, for exactly as long," he finished for her.

"Longer," she spat, and then her tears flowed in earnest.

For an undying lifetime he sat with her silently.

Finally, spent, she stood and reached for his cloak, pulling it up to her shoulders, burying her hands in its folds. "I'm cold."

"I know." Trying not to touch her skin, he wrapped the cloak more tightly around her. "I know."

She leaned instinctively into his warmth, and, reluctantly, he held her.

Her hair brushed his neck.

He closed his eyes.

In the deep, scarred places in his heart, he felt as though he'd been stabbed, as though a piece of something, something that didn't belong, had been jammed into an old wound, wedging it open, forcing it to bleed.

He wondered if that was how Potter had felt when she'd taken a piece of his best friend's soul and shoved it into his scar.

The flower stem that the little ghost had left resting on Slughorn's unmoving chest turned brown and shriveled to straw.

On its shelf in Minerva's office, the Sorting Hat skittered a few inches sideways. Had it known how to Apparate to Hogsmeade, it would have.

As it was, it curled its brim over its eyes, and prayed for morning.

Sleeping Dogs Lie

Chapter 13 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Many thanks to FerPorcel, Anastasia, docmara and indigofeathers, for various reasons.



13: Sleeping Dogs Lie

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Severus shifted uncomfortably on the stair, and, from his arms, Hermione glanced up at him.

Speaking low, to avoid making an echo, he asked, "Will you be able to sleep?" His voice sounded oddly brittle in his ears.

She nodded, her face resuming the tighter visage that her students so feared.

He affected not to notice. "Goodnight, then," he said, nodding abruptly.

Hermione watched his retreating form descend into shadow. "Goodnight," she said quietly.

Her voice echoed in the stairway and his mind. When he reached the bottom of the stair, he felt more than heard her add, "Sweet dreams."

He slammed the stair door, hard, behind him.

And the slamming echoes grew in intensity as they traveled up the stairs to where Hermione was standing motionless.

Without knowing why, when the echoes washed over her, Hermione smiled.

The tiny ghost sat stroking the dragon's unmoving head with a sad, slow finger. In the dim light, the film over its eye was the same color she was.

The torches flickered, heralding movement at the end of the corridor, but the little ghost did not look up.

A pair of heavy black boots appeared in her line of vision, the leather creased in places with the familiarity of long wear.

The leather creaked as the heels rose off the floor, and long, pale hands surrounded the obsidian dust on the floor. Then they waited.

Severus looked quietly into the tiny ghost's pale, pleading eyes until she nodded and withdrew her finger, scooting backwards, skirling a trail of powder into a small, wispy spiral with the breath of her retreat.

The ghost watched as the dragon reformed, the powder coalescing into a shimmer of wings and, scale by scale, its long, sinuous tail took shape, the last grains of powder forming the very tip, which was curled across its nose.

She glanced up at the black-clad man before her and smiled.

He didn't smile back.

She looked down and saw that the film had remained over the dragon's tiny eyes.

With the film covering its eyes, it did not look at all like it was sleeping.

Her eyes squeezed shut as she turned her head away. One of her long plaits slipped forward, brushing the dragon's head.

She made no sound, but slipped up the corridor, where she seemed to be absorbed by shadow.

Severus' mouth hardened, but his hand closed gently around the obsidian figure.

"I don't have that miracle in me," he muttered, entering his chambers.

Poppy held her solitary vigil at Slughorn's bedside.

When she saw the flower stem shrivel, she jerked backwards, knocking her chair over.

The hands with which she righted the chair were clammy, but, setting her mouth in a firm line, she sat down, determined that no patient in her care should pass unwitnessed.

She'd given up trying to understand the conflicting results her periodic examinations of the unmoving Slughorn kept yielding. He was both alive and not alive.

She couldn't explain it.

On a level she barely knew existed, she was relieved that such explanation was beyond her responsibility.

On another, of which she was fully aware, she was shaking, and couldn't for the life of her make it stop.

Only two people in the castle slept soundly that night; everyone else who could sleep did so restlessly, their hours disturbed by dreams of a dark wind through darker trees, of a low trembling, almost too low to register, far, far underground.

The two sleeping soundly felt only a deep, rumbling purr and were held in its arms, comforted, sleeping quietly, safely, beneath the hushing lullaby of wind.

When Hermione awoke the next morning, she automatically made her bed herself, as she hadn't done in twenty-two years.

The house-elf arrived with her tea as she sat brushing her hair. Hermione looked up as a cup appeared at her elbow. "Thank you," she said.

Blinking rapidly, the house-elf squeaked, "You is very welcome, Professor, Miss."

Hermione said nothing further, and the house-elf pattered over to the bed and clambered up on it to change the pillowcase.

The house-elf's eyes grew wide. Wagging her ears in confusion, she smoothed her hand over its unblemished whiteness, pristine as newly windswept snow.

All over Britain, cups clanked, utensils clattered, as ears waggled, wiggled, and flapped.

Not one witch or wizard thought to question this minute stutter in the habitually smooth progression of their morning routines.

There was no accounting for house-elves. Strange creatures.

Useful, though.

Almost as one, witches and wizards reached for their *Daily Prophets* and smiled, seeing Harry Potter, with his arm around his pretty wife, smiling almost sheepishly from the front page, his three sparkling daughters laughing around him.

He'd announced his retirement from Quidditch, and his candidacy for the Ministry.

Witches and wizards all over Britain sighed happily, assured of his successful election before he'd even run.

It was as certain as their morning tea.

Two house-elves set a clattering tea tray on a low table before the fire in the headmistress' office, and as Severus leaned forward to accept the cup Minerva poured for him, he felt a sharp, hot knife in his hip and the memory, the heat of Hermione's willingness under his urgent hands flushed his skin. Adjusting his seat, the low brush of leather on the wooden chair swept her hair into and across his mind. The stabbing pain in his hip subsided to a dull throb, and he eased back in his chair, his enigmatic smile hidden behind the raised teacup.

If such was to be the legacy of their touch, so be it.

"You said you required additional information, Severus?" Minerva had not slept well, and her tone reflected the dull ache that had settled behind her eyes.

Severus nodded, setting his teacup carefully on a side table. "Has anyone died in the Castle since the war?"

Knowing she would receive no explanation for this latest of his apparently random questions, Minerva didn't bother to ask for one. "Yes, Argus Filch passed away some years ago."

Something flickered in Severus' eyes, and Minerva had the fleeting thought that something in her response had annoyed him. "And Hermione was she in residence then?" he asked.

His slightly bored tone did not fool the headmistress into believing his question a casual one. Minerva thumbed her ring, thinking. "No... I believe she was in London, settling her parents' estate."

"Ah," Severus remarked, sounding satisfied. "The first, then. No wonder..."

The ache in Minerva's forehead grew pinched as her conversation with her former colleague appeared headed toward its usual path of twisting obscurity. "Severus, I'm going to assume that your question was pertinent, and inquire," she said, her tone sharpening in anticipatory exasperation, "what its relevance is."

A slow smile spread on Severus' face. "Isn't it obvious, Minerva?"

"Of course it's not obvious, Snape, or I wouldn't have asked you," Minerva snapped, "a fact of which you are maddeningly aware." Her ring clanked against her teacup.

The Bloody Baron drifted through the ceiling and hovered there.

For reasons she didn't fully understand, the appearance of the Slytherin ghost struck her as a particularly well-timed and disturbingly apt portent of what, she had no idea. But it unnerved her, and she had to force herself to exhale.

"No one else has died while she was here?" Severus was asking.

She sniffed. "As I've told you, no."

"You're absolutely certain of this?"

"Absolutely. Severus, I fail to see "

"Yes, Minerva, you *do*. And therein lies your answer." Smirking, he stretched one leather-clad leg before him, perversely enjoying the soreness in his hip the pain, the act of hiding it, the successful deception, and, most of all, the memory of bruising it against the stair. *Oh, yes*, he breathed inwardly. *So be it, Hermione*. Without missing a beat in the spoken conversation, he continued, "It's self-explanatory, really."

Minerva scoffed, exasperated, and Severus supplied, "Your Arithmancy professor has gone farther toward understanding the mechanics of the human soul than any before her."

Something rustled in the vicinity of the ceiling, and Minerva glanced up to see the Baron nodding slowly. Through him, she saw a glint of light on Albus' spectacles.

"The mechanics of the soul," Severus was saying, again setting his teacup on the low table, "but not its purpose. Oh, no. She has quite blinded herself to its purpose." He rested one hand on his leg, running his fingers on the wrinkled leather at his knee. The leather warmed between his fingers.

"And do you know what the soul's purpose is, Severus?" Albus asked dryly from above.

"Do any of us, entirely?" Severus retorted, but the Baron was already speaking.

"It is, in no small part, connection," he said, drifting between the soaring ribs of the arched ceiling.

All eyes in the room sought the Baron and tracked him as he lowered himself, continuing, "It is why she, soul-blind as she is, could see me last of all. I have been dead the longest; it therefore follows that my soul is the least... substantive, for want of a better word."

Minerva said nothing, her mind racing to slot the various mysteries of Hermione's behavior into the possibilities suggested by this new information. But none of them seemed to fit, and she pinched her eyebrows, frowning.

"She cannot see a soul without wanting to break it, Minerva," Severus said quietly. "She does not know, consciously, that that is her impulse, but it is nonetheless fact. She has deliberately blinded herself to the ghosts, first and most of all, to those she knew as living people."

"And at the moment of death, the soul is most vulnerable," Minerva said slowly. And as she said it, she knew it was true, and ice water sluiced her veins, rushing to her headache to stab from within, right between her eyes. She paled, and choked, "Horace..." She turned to Severus, her eyes wide, unable to complete the thought, much less give it voice.

"His vulnerability is what triggered her..." Severus hesitated, "... her actions."

"What has she against Horace?" Minerva asked, her hands rising helplessly in her lap, only to fall. The ring she wore slid halfway to her knuckle, and she clenched her fist to stop it. Its stone fell heavily to rest within her palm.

Severus' eyes caught the small movement, and the corners of his lips tightened. "You should have that resized, Minerva, before you lose it."

The Baron hovered silently.

"It's supposed to size itself magically to fit the Head of Hogwarts," she muttered. "I cannot think why..." Shaking herself, she came back to the present topic. "Whatever her outward personality has become, Severus, I cannot accept that Hermione would do this to a colleague to anyone."

"The Hermione you once knew, no, of course not. But tell me or at least ask yourself how well do you truly know her now?"

Severus' words rang, a quiet challenge, in the air.

Minerva dropped her eyes, and she flipped the stone back and forth between her fingers.

"She has broken Horace's soul, Minerva. Unconsciously."

Without taking her eyes from her ring, Minerva asked, "Why?"

"Without asking her, we cannot know; even then, what explanation could she provide that would bear any resemblance to truth? I surmise that her action stemmed, in part, from pure, unconscious, amoral curiosity testing her theory outside the confines of what her conscious, civilised mind deems acceptable."

Minerva's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing.

His own eyes deepened. Her lack of response to the more palatable part of his explanation did not bode well for the Arithmancy professor's future. "Additionally," Severus began, but Minerva interrupted, "There's more?"

"Additionally," Severus repeated, his lowered voice demanding Minerva's attention, "she has no defence against the temptation of the Dark Arts. The temptation is simply too strong for her, unschooled as she is, to resist."

Still flipping the stone, trying to see through her headache, Minerva missed the accusation in his tone.

A rustling overhead, however, confirmed that the accusation had landed precisely where he had aimed it.

Minerva finally shook her head. "I confess, Severus, that I don't understand what you say about temptation."

"No," he agreed, too calmly.

Looking up in alarm, Minerva suddenly asked, "Can she be stopped?"

"I already have done."

The headmistress shot him a skeptical look. "Whatever you did, Severus, it wasn't effective. Poppy tells me "

The sound of Severus' fist cracking the table drove the headmistress' office into deadly silence. Eyes locked on Minerva's shocked face, he spoke carefully: "I stopped her. But 'stopped' does not mean 'ended.'"

The headmistress did not back down. Equally carefully, she said one word: "How?"

The look in his eyes warned her not to ask.

"How?" she demanded, the full force of her personality filling her voice.

To her consternation, Severus chuckled darkly. "The Order no longer exists, Minerva. I am no longer under your command."

Minerva drew herself up stiffly, and her eyes filled with frost. "Can you bring it to an end, then? A reasonable one?"

Severus' hip filled with hot steel as he stood, and he focused inwardly on the pain, before replying, "Far better that she end it herself, reasonable or no."

A soft snort from Dumbledore's portrait.

With an icy glance at the portrait, Severus shot his words upward. "At one time, Albus, I was willing, even eager, to die for your Order. But your short-sightedness sentenced her to something far worse than the redemptive death we both believed was my fate. She has resisted, alone, a temptation worse than any you ever knew, for twenty-two years. I know what she has endured, better than she does herself. How it has shaped her. Twisted her. She sacrificed her innocence to preserve the world, Albus for everyone except herself."

Albus sighed. "Sadly, it is sometimes thus. But what she did was beyond unforgivable, Severus, and"

Severus looked the portrait full-on, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Yes. Pragmatic of her, wasn't it?"

"Hermione saved the world?" Minerva interjected.

The former spy did not turn as he answered, still fixing the portrait under his unblinking gaze. "Young Weasley handed her the sword; she used it. And, unlike your boy hero, Albus, she at least had sense enough to keep quiet regarding actions she cannot explain."

"No one would believe her," Minerva said quietly. "I scarcely believe it myself."

"Indeed not," Albus concurred. "But still, her loyalty to our world should nonetheless "

Severus' voice cut smoothly into whatever accession Albus was about to make. "Very pretty, Albus. But I assure you, her loyalty is not to 'our' world."

Albus blinked, his mouth still open to speak.

"And why should it be?" Severus continued, before the portrait could collect its wits. "Whatever magic our world holds for Muggle-borns is gone for her, replaced by a world of convenience and bureaucracy which she, of all, can see is little more than a conspiracy of blindness. No, Albus. I refer to her loyalty to Potter."

Minerva fussed with her hands, and the rasping of her stiff robes caught Severus' attention. "Potter?" The conversation had once again gone over her head.

He turned to her. "You said yourself her problem with the Weasleys began with the wedding."

"Yes, but..."

"Minerva. Think."

But her face was blank.

"The children, Minerva. *The children.*"

The look of dawning comprehension on Minerva's face was almost too private to watch. The Baron sighed himself out through the wall of the headmistress' office.

"Your question about Ginny's N.E.W.T.s?" Minerva ventured.

"Yes. She had no problem with the girl when she was still Ginevra Weasley."

"And - and about Lily Potter... her daughter. Oh... oh, dear..."

Severus nodded once, sharply, then demanded, "Do you know how souls work, Minerva?"

"She... she can't believe... that..." Minerva faltered, unable to bring herself to say what she was thinking.

Severus turned on her, a black silhouette against the shards of light slanting through the window. "She doesn't know what to believe, Minerva. How could she? She knows that the Dark Lord inhabited Harry's mind through the Horcrux, but only while he still had his own body, his own consciousness. Do you know how much consciousness resides in a soul? Do you, Albus? How a soul fragment functions when its body has died?"

Silence.

Opening his palms in mockery of a request, he asked, "Pray, enlighten me and let us put an end to her torment."

More silence.

"You don't know, then. No more does Hermione, who has been living with the question for twenty years. And it's not as though she or anyone can ask the one person in the world who might have an answer. What form would such a question take? 'When you're touching your wife, Potter, can you tell if your best friend is watching? Can he feel it, Potter, when you make love with his sister?'"

"Enough!" Albus roared.

Minerva sat in shocked silence in the echoes of Albus' anger, the skin around her eyes growing pale. "You're mad."

Severus' eyes bored relentlessly into the portrait above. "Not I. But she may be. And if this is how those who should be closest to her think, then I, for one, don't blame *her* if she is."

Minerva looked away, at her hands in her lap, at the ring of office too loose on her finger. She touched the stone, and said quietly, "She must leave the castle, Severus. Before the students return."

Severus' lip curled. "Can't risk having such a potential danger on staff, Minerva?"

Staring at him wide eyed, it took Minerva a moment to find her voice. When she did, it was hollow. "My first responsibility is to the school and to its students." But her eyes were filling with an undeniable awareness, and, closing them before he could see what would pain her later, in private, she finished, "as you well know."

Severus exhaled; he had glimpsed the return of her conscience. His tone was strangely gentle when he replied, "Of course; the innocent must be protected at all costs... all but one. Never mind that all that has changed is that you are no longer blind to her despair. No, Minerva," he said, when Minerva started to protest, "your loyalties are perfectly placed within the strict limits of your responsibility. But who, I ask you, who will be loyal to Hermione? You? The Ministry?"

Something in his tone brought Minerva's eyes to his, and in them she found the answer to his question.

Severus nodded once, finally, before leaving her office, closing the door quietly behind him.

Despite the bleak feeling weighing in her chest, her mouth twitched. She couldn't help herself.

But then Albus' judgment fell softly from the wall: "That boy has ever needed a cause."

"You should know, Albus. You used it well enough." Still stinging from the slap of truth she'd not seen for over twenty years, the headmistress of Hogwarts spoke sharply, more sharply than she had spoken in her life.

When Albus started to protest, she held up her hand. "Not now, Albus. For the love of Merlin, not now."

Feeling himself dismissed for the first time since the defeat of Grindelwald, Albus Dumbledore looked out over the Forbidden Forest and found he had nothing to say.

Nothing at all.

Note on sources: Minerva's line "You should know. You used it well enough" is a nearly exact quotation from Ernest Hemingway's story, "The Sea Change."

Sparks Fly Upward

Chapter 14 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: The first scene in this chapter is dedicated to tinibeth, who was the first to recognize something. My profound thanks to Anastasia and Indigofeathers, who generously beta'ed this chapter.



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For the first time in twenty-two years, Hermione found herself consciously debating whether or not to go to the library.

She glanced at her window the crack was back, wider than ever, and, although the room was warm enough from the fire she had augmented with the crackling blue flames she had perfected so long ago, the draft was catching her hair at odd moments, sending shivers along the back of her neck.

Distracting.

Then, too, she had a nearly overwhelming urge to go back to bed. She was not tired on the contrary; her skin fairly hummed with energy, and her focus seemed sharper than usual but there was something she'd been dreaming, something dark, and warm, and important. Dangerous, comforting, and...

Home

... and she wanted it back.

Hermione finished her tea and smiled slightly at her reflection in the mirror, as though the reflection remembered the dream, too.

A draft caught the back of her neck, and she shivered again, the skin on her neck, on the back of her arms freshly alive.

Well, no time for this now. Her research awaited her, and the morning was getting on.

Hermione stood straight through the arms of the little ghost, who'd been standing behind her chair, leaning her head on her shoulder.

She knew the teacher couldn't feel her embrace, but when she saw the teacher smile, she couldn't help herself.

The reflection of the tiny ghost replaced Hermione's in the mirror, and the ghost sat in Hermione's chair.

Watching herself very seriously, she started undoing one of her long, silvery plaits.

In the blue light of Hermione's trademark fire, she was exactly the color of moonlight.

The passage of an hour found Hermione sitting at her customary table in the library, but the usual sound of her quill scratching sharply on parchment was absent.

Hannah hadn't noticed, at first, what was different about the morning, but after hearing no sound from the professor's table for a half an hour, and working up her courage

for fifteen minutes more, she peeked around a long bookshelf to make sure the professor was, in fact, still there.

Hermione was sitting just outside of a shaft of sunlight, her quill held ready in her hand, the sunlight warm on the brown feather.

While Hannah watched, Hermione twirled the quill first one way, then the other, stirring dust motes to swirl spiraling upwards in the sunlight.

As unusual as it was for the professor to be unable to concentrate on her work, Hermione was unperturbed. She had spread her parchments and research materials on the table before her, as always, but the dust motes in the sunlight caught her eye as they traveled upward, and her mind followed, and the soaring stone arches overhead sent her thoughts unwinding...

And as her mind stepped aside and her thoughts wandered backward, the interlocking stonework of the library ceiling became a canopy of branches...

... and the branches swayed darkly in a rush of wind, an abyss of shadows backlit by the moonlight arcing through the sky, outlining each individual black needle with a piercing clarity that was almost too sharp to bear...

... and she turned her eyes away from the moonlight to the depths of eyes whence no light ever shone, and at once she was safe, restrained, hidden deep within a pool of midnight silk, held fast, firm in the insistent, brushing cadence of the palest skin...

The twirling of her quill slowed, and stopped, and in the shadow just beyond the reach of the sun, Hermione's lips curled softly as the sparkling dust drifted lazily toward the recesses of the ceiling.

Her smile startled the librarian, who found she had been holding her breath.

Having no idea what it was she was watching, but absolutely certain that she didn't understand it, Hannah eased herself quietly backward, out of the professor's line of sight.

And backed solidly into something that ought not to have been there.

"Madam Abbott," Severus said politely.

Hannah squeaked and turned to see her former Potions master leaning casually against the bookshelf.

His lips twitched in amusement, and she dropped her eyes and stared at his boots. She had caught a glimpse of tight-fitting black riding leathers, and blushed.

"Intriguing morning, isn't it," he drawled.

"P-professor Snape, sir," Hannah stammered, blushing harder.

"Is something amiss, Madam Abbott?"

Hannah's mouth went dry, but she managed to choke out, "No, sir, nothing. Good morning. What are you doing I mean, is there something I can help you with, sir?"

"Oh, I doubt that, Madam Abbott. I doubt that very much indeed." Severus' eyes gleamed with just enough amusement for her to see.

And Hannah suddenly found that she was urgently required in her office, with the door closed.

Locked, even.

When he heard the tell-tale click, he smirked, but his satisfied look was soon replaced with one of still, patient hunger, and he stood for a long moment in the shadows in contemplation of Hermione's smile.

Soon, her smile deepened, and his muscles tensed, and the pain in his hip shot a bolt of heat into the base of his spine.

Still smiling, she lowered her eyes from the ceiling to return his gaze.

Calmly.

And her damned lock of hair chose that moment to fall, and it fell through the sunlight, scattering the gleaming swirls of dust motes into sparkling spirals that fell softly on her small, smooth hand, holding a feather still against the naked parchment.

And his mouth went dry, tasting of dust and bitter lemon.

"Professor Granger," he said, stepping from between the bookcases.

She looked up at him and nodded, her hair still unfettered, trailing through the light. "Professor Snape," she said quietly.

"May I join you?"

"Of course."

He eased himself into the chair across from her and inhaled sharply as his belt dug into his bruise.

She looked an involuntary question, and he replied, "The legacy of your... offer."

Her eyes deepened. "The stair edge?"

He nodded, easing back carefully.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He leaned his arm across an empty chair, absently rubbing his thumb against a finger.

In the brief silence that followed, she watched that movement.

"And how is your research progressing this morning?" he asked blandly, tracking her eyes.

"Fine."

Severus cocked an eyebrow, and the corner of Hermione's mouth twitched. "No, not fine. I can't seem to get started."

He nodded once, not taking his eyes off her.

Forcing her gaze away from his hand, Hermione looked out across the snowy grounds to the silently swaying green-black firs standing in the heart of the Forbidden Forest.

Dark, even in the sunlight. Always dark, except at last or first light, if the sun caught them properly. Darker than the sky, even when there was no moon.

Hermione shook her head, and the errant strand of hair fell across her eyes. She blew it aside, and turned to Severus, sitting quite still before her. Quietly, she asked, "What's the most important thing you've ever done?"

A flicker in his eyes betrayed his surprise at her question. "Important to whom?"

She shrugged. "To the world, I suppose."

It wasn't what she'd wanted to ask, he knew, but he answered regardless. "Killing the Dark Lord's mortal body."

"And since then?" she asked, ruffling the edge of her quill with her fingernail.

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his leathers crinkling almost silently in the hush of the library.

At the sound, Hermione's fingernail stopped, then started again.

"My work." He spoke almost dismissively, as if the subject was of little import, but his eyes were alert, absorbing every nuance of her movement.

Hermione nodded, apparently absorbed in the way the edge of the feather separated, then rejoined, and she slowed her finger. "Research?"

"Initially. For the last several years, though, the journal."

She glanced up, and her finger paused. "Journal?"

"I edit a research journal," he said, his voice sounding distant in his ears, his eyes still fixed on her fingers, waiting for the motion to start again.

She set the quill down, and he squelched a fleeting disappointment. "You're telling me that the most important thing you've done since Voldemort is the ruthless eradication of the misplaced comma?" Her eyes flashed a challenge.

He looked at her coolly. "I have seen to it that work of the sort that others might find too dangerous has found its audience, Hermione."

"Ah." She paused, but did not pick up her quill. "Which journal? I've not seen your name on any of them."

His snort was over-loud in the deserted library. "Do you honestly imagine that any self-respecting publication would wish to be associated with *my* name?"

Hermione brushed her hair behind her ear. "A pseudonym. Of course." Her hand stopped, and faint color rose in her face. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said again, his voice roughly gentle, and it danced over her skin, and her flush deepened.

At the sight of her blushing, her hand poised, directionless, Severus's mind slipped back to the night before, to the feel of her hand on his collar, on his skin, and his mind filled with her startled breath...

... as her skin flared to life beneath the demanding strength of his hands, her body falling beneath his as he leaned over her, leaned her back, the warmth of her flaming through the impossibly thin nightgown, thin enough to whisper away under the flickering torchlight in the empty stone stair...

... and in the library, Hermione's hand poised, and the faint blush of her skin...

Innocent... tainted... vulnerable...

... and in his dream... *Hermione swathed in inky silk beneath the tree-shadowed sky, trapped, willing, desperate, rising, arching at his command, her sharp, wordless cry tearing at his control, driving the trembling darkness deep within him to break in endless, aching thunder...*

"So the journal you edit is in Potions, then?" she was saying.

Journal? Snape blinked once, slowly. *Ah. Yes.* He said nothing.

"I'm afraid I don't follow that field..." Her words trailed off, and the look she shot him was at once trapped and relieved. "Of course," she breathed slowly, her voice scarcely above a whisper, "that's how you're so familiar with my... *oh.*" Her skin grew cold, but her blush deepened.

Severus' hand twitched, but he mastered the urge to reach out to her, to trace the limits of her blushing skin. "Your work might not have seen publication otherwise, Hermione. Did you never wonder what happened to the former editor?"

"I didn't pay much attention; I assumed she had retired."

"So she did, but her retirement was not without certain... incentive."

Hermione's eyes widened slightly, then tightened. "The Ministry?" she asked flatly.

He nodded.

She looked at him skeptically, and he felt her retreat. "Isn't that a bit paranoid? They don't have any control over independent publishing, Severus."

"Don't be naïve, Hermione. There are always means of persuasion; controlling the actions of another is a simple matter it merely requires the possession of knowledge."

"Knowledge," she repeated, but her mind was racing. "*Persuasion?*" "*Possession?*" *Which conversation is this?* And images of long pale limbs under blanketing silk flooded her thoughts, and she was suddenly conscious of her heartbeat sounding quietly, insistently, in her throat. Unconsciously, her hand fell to her collarbone.

Giving no outward sign that he was aware of her reaction, he continued, "Most people do find the Unspeakables somewhat unnerving."

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head slightly. Reaching a touch too carefully for her quill, she asked, "So why did you take it on, then?"

He chuckled darkly. "Perhaps they find me unnerving it is not outside the realm of possibility. No," he began, leaning back slightly, "I don't fear the Unspeakables, Hermione." He shrugged. "In any case, the Ministry prefers to ignore my existence."

Hermione nodded, and her eyes fell to contemplation of her hands. She knew more of that than she wanted to.

Without realizing it, Severus leaned slightly closer. He knew her mind, knew that it would seize the crumbs of the mystery he had laid out before her. Far better the mystery of an unanswered question than dwelling in her own troubled relationship with the Ministry.

And he knew he would see the realization form in her mind before she said a word, so he waited, watching her eyelashes flicker as her logical mind came back to the fore.

"So..." she began.

Here it comes...

"So... so you took the editorship because... because of my work?" She looked up at him through the shaft of falling sunlight.

"Yes," he said smoothly.

Something deep within her core tightened, although in pleasure or fear, she could not tell. "Why?" she demanded quietly. "Because it was dangerous?"

"In part."

Hermione stared at the blank parchment before her as if reading her next question on it, and slowly her quill started to twirl again.

Severus waited patiently.

Still looking at the parchment, Hermione asked, "How did you figure out that I... what I did?"

"I was your teacher for six years. Your theories were never without a practical catalyst."

Her eyes snapped instantly to his. "My work has always pushed the limits of theory, Severus."

Fire, he thought, unbidden.

"Pure theory," she insisted. In her eyes, an unbanked anger; she gripped the quill tightly

He watched her hands, fascinated

and tighter, her knuckles whitening

and his lips parted slightly

until it snapped.

As he forced a veneer of icy calm into his eyes, a wild thought: *We're going to kill each other.*

Ignoring the unnatural angle of the feather in her hand, he summoned his most practiced tone the ironically civil sneer she remembered all too well. In her ears the scathing echo of her childhood: "You've always pushed the limits of theory, yes, but only by leaping from one point of practical application to another, usually years beyond your ability to truly grasp, let alone master." His eyes flicked once to the broken quill, and back to hers, for a moment too long.

For an instant, she was his student; in the next, she saw the nothing she wanted before her, lurking patiently in his unfathomable eyes.

It was hers for the taking. All she had to do was reach

And he wanted to reach across the table and wrench her hair free of its knot, to draw her body to him through the dusty light.

No. His breathing measured, he resting one hand casually on the table, he continued conversationally, "That was the signature flaw in your work, Hermione often the only one, but there, nonetheless."

She fought the urge to cross her arms over her chest by focusing on the silky, jagged edges of the broken feather she still held.

Before her thoughts found words, he continued, "Always, that is, until your work on Horcruxes. In the Dark Arts, your thinking has been flawless, from the beginning."

"*Flawless*"? She blinked. *From* him? But even as one corner of her mouth was curling in private satisfaction, she realized the public implications of his words, and whatever smile had begun vanished instantly. "So everyone knows, then."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Everyone?"

She gestured impatiently. "You know what I mean."

"Other than the Unspeakables, Minerva, and myself, only Poppy knows, and she only knows a piece of it. You know quite well that few have the wit to understand the *true* revelation of your research. Or the desire."

The word hung suspended in the swirling dust between them.

"You do," she said.

He nodded, deliberately looking away. *Good, Hermione. Now ask me why.*

"Why?"

Dark amusement lurked his eyes. "Because it interests me."

"Not just theoretically." It was a statement, not a question.

"No. I assure you, Hermione, I share your flawed insistence on the practical theory is fascinating, to a point, but ultimately frustrating unless it leads to a real, tangible result. If you cannot touch it, it cannot touch you. And then, I ask you," his voice deepened, "what is the point?"

They regarded each other carefully through the dust, and she did not speak.

"I wished to test my theory, Hermione."

She turned his words over in her mind. "An audience of one, then. You."

"Yes."

"Flattering..." she said.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"Which, of course, begs the original question, Severus."

He blinked.

And in her own best classroom tone, she reminded him, "My thinking is important to the world how?" She smiled at him, if anything, too sweetly, and allowed her eyes to glint with self-satisfied amusement.

His eyes boring into her, he unleashed the truth. "Your work defies the world, Hermione at its foundation, at the darkest level of its assumptions of sweetness and light. A world that betrayed you, that continues to betray you, for your loyalty to its best-kept secret: that allegiance to the light requires a blindness that is, perhaps, the deepest darkness of all."

Hermione examined his words inwardly. "For such is the state of the faithful murderer's soul."

"A subject that interests me." He leaned into the dusty light between them. "Deeply."

Slowly, she raised her eyes to his, and slowly smiled a smile at once triumphant and despairing. "So much for the world, then. A pity."

"Indeed." And his smile answered hers wiser, less wistful, but the same smile, nonetheless. "And you, Hermione..." he asked quietly, "what is the most important thing you have done since you murdered the Dark Lord's soul?"

Something in Hermione remembered what she had lost, and, as she searched the eyes of the man before her, his eyes filled with their own emptiness, and she knew he remembered losing the same thing.

Far earlier, and far more publicly, but in the end, they were both sitting in the library.

And the words were out before she could stop them: "I touched you."

Crime and Sensibility

Chapter 15 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My devoted thanks to those intrepid scholars who assisted with the timely completion of this chapter. My additional thanks to Annie Talbot, for her clear understanding of something I couldn't see, and to Anastasia and Melenka, for their brilliantly fast beta-read. I am indebted to Fyodr Dostoyevsky and Jane Austen for the bastard offspring that is the chapter title.



And the words were out before she could stop them. "I touched you."

Severus Snape had endured the worst the wizarding world or any world had to offer. Over the course of his lifetime, he had schooled himself to reveal nothing neither pleasure nor pain, agony, hope, nor despair. All could be exploited, used against him; all had been.

It was worst when they used his hope.

Yes, he had endured, even as much as the woman sitting before him, though she did not know it all.

He had endured the blows one must endure when one maintains an honorable, generous, even compassionate silence.

The perfection of Severus Snape's façade was matched in the last century only by the Dark Lord's pettiness, Dumbledore's maddening serenity, and Ronald Weasley's blunt courage.

The four pillars of Hermione Granger's work in the Dark Arts.

No wonder her work was flawless.

Lovely.

Yet perhaps...

The woman sitting before him was dangerous, indeed, and for a long time there was silence in the library.

She could read nothing on his face a nothing that was absolute.

A nothing behind which she was sure she, her history, and the history of the world were being analyzed, evaluated, weighed, and combined, with practiced motions and flawless concentration.

She waited patiently, although whether for some potion to simmer or some axe to fall, she neither knew nor, strangely, seemed to care.

"Touched me," he said, finally.

She nodded and refused to meet his eyes. "It's the only new thing I've done since I... since then." Her eye traveled to the window, through it, over the blinding sunlight on drifting snow. She could barely make out the forest for the glare.

He followed her gaze and saw nothing but the forest and the darkness at its heart.

"Hermione," he began quietly. "How did you break your wand?"

She did not turn back to him. "I fell."

Keeping his voice low, even gentle, he pressed, "The truth, if you please."

Her face still turned toward the window, she glanced back at him. "That *is* true; I *did* fall. From...." Her voice trailed off, and she turned her gaze back to the light. It seemed to waver through the old glass. "It's a bloody metaphor," she murmured, with the exasperation of a lifetime of teaching.

He said nothing.

"I broke it myself," her voice an almost bloodless whisper, "as you well know." The cold was rising off of the window, and she found herself strangely drawn to it, wanting to lean her cheek on the cool glass in the blinding sun.

She did not move, other than to close her eyes. She could still see the light through her eyelids the glare an afterimage of green, slowly filtering to red.

But the glow of red grew, then grew too bright, and she blinked and turned her eyes back to the man sitting still across from her.

They sat in shadow with the light between them, and the shadows seemed to gather, falling, descending from the arching ceiling, and in her eyes, he saw her shame and her envy.

And he was deeply, profoundly, unnerved.

Not by her envy; no, he understood that.

But because her answer about touching him was true.

Interesting.

"How have you survived, all this time?" she asked quietly, not certain where the question had come from.

His eyes flicked to the side before he responded. "Certain temptations are best resisted by remaining alone."

"The Dark Arts?" she inquired, turning back to face him.

He inclined his head as he agreed, "Among others. Experience inflects temptation slightly differently for each of us."

"*Each of us?*" Hermione's mind caught the pronoun, and her implication within the group she had traded her life to defeat, but, with effort, she kept her voice steady, asking only, "Differently? How?"

"With your first foray into the Dark Arts, you destroyed the inviolate perfection of a human soul, Hermione. Can you imagine minor hexes will satisfy your desire now?"

"Desire?!" she protested, but he was still speaking.

"No, you have instinctively held yourself apart. To touch another soul would prove too great a temptation for you; you would, inevitably, I think, attempt to break it."

"Thus 'remaining alone.'" She scrutinized his face.

He nodded, returning her gaze, watching her decide on her next move.

Her robes rustled as she leaned slightly closer to the table. "Yet last night you said I should *not* have been alone."

"Preparation is not the same as aftermath, Professor," he said quietly. "And if I had known of your contingency plan before the battle, I would have done it for you." *Or tried to*, his mind supplied.

She bristled. "You would not have known how."

She's proud of it... "I assure you, I can take instruction, when it suits my ends to do so."

Hermione's stomach tightened reflexively, and she could not keep the disbelief from her voice. "You would have let me teach you?"

For the first time in several moments, the dark amusement returned to Severus's eyes. "Far preferable to take instruction from a student than allow any student to commit such a horror."

"'Allow'?" she shot back, leaning in even closer. "As if you could have stopped me."

He matched her movement, resting one arm on the table. "Make no mistake, Hermione, I could have done."

She raised a cool eyebrow at him.

Now. "I have done, Hermione."

Hermione blinked, and her brow furrowed. "You what?"

He paused slightly, then said, simply, "Slughorn," leaning back to resume a more casual position.

The blood drained from Hermione's face. "Explain yourself, Snape."

"Almost at the moment of his death, you broke his soul."

Hermione stared at the space between them.

"In your sleep, I think."

Her mind a whirlwind of half-remembered images *cold... trees... the night... the night of... No! ... and the moon... Ron... his face, turning... "... and you will again... soon..."* and the foundations of the castle seemed to tilt, the walls of the library skewing crazily on a sharply angled axis ... *Ron's dead smile empty in the moonlight... "You know you want to..."*

"No!" she cried aloud, hands grabbing out, clutching the table. "No!"

As he watched her eyes lose focus, Severus's hands twitched, and he touched the table almost unconsciously, knowing something of the vertigo she was feeling as, unbidden, the word "coward" rang in his ears as if shaken loose from the bedrock of memory by the sudden lurch in Hermione's understanding.

He willed his mind to calm, and hers to peace.

In the echo of her cry, he sensed more than heard the distant rushing of the Floo from the librarian's office.

When the echoes had finally faded, her eyes had still not regained their clarity. "Breathe, Hermione," he said softly.

She closed her eyes once, slowly, feeling the table's edge splintering in her fingernails.

Breathe? Who said that? Breathe... very well. I shall focus on that, she thought, rubbing a rough groove in the tabletop with her thumb.

When her breathing returned to normal, the dullness of her eyes weighed heavily in his chest.

"Almost?" she said, finally, as though speaking through a wall.

"Almost what?" he inquired, holding himself very still.

"You said 'at almost the moment of his death.'" Her mouth moved strangely, as though language itself tasted new to her.

"Ah... yes," Severus confirmed, carefully, as though she might explode if his voice resonated too near her. "When you..."

She closed her eyes and gestured with her head.

Severus obliged her unspoken wish and omitted the words that would name her crime. "He was not yet quite dead."

The shadow in her eyes grew almost opaque; her tone ever more hollow. "And how do you know?"

Her resignation was almost more than he could bear. Again, the word "coward" seemed to whisper from the ceiling, carrying with it the scent of the long-dead fire in Hagrid's hut, the howls of an animal trapped in flames. "Poppy called me almost immediately."

"So I left him alive with a broken soul."

"Yes, and no. He will never again speak..." Severus hesitated, glancing at the parchment sitting before her. "His body may have already started to decay."

Hermione's mouth fell slightly open, and she pushed herself away from the table. Her voice thinning, stretching: "With him aware of it? Conscious?" she demanded. "Severus, can he feel it?"

"I fervently hope not, Hermione."

"How can we find out know for sure?" she gasped, shock sending jagged breath through each word.

"We cannot. We could ask him, but he lacks language, now, to answer, even if he could." He found himself studying the texture of her blank parchment, unable he, who had looked Dumbledore in the eye until his body had twisted to fall over the parapet, he was unable to look at Hermione Granger.

He swallowed. "There are simply no words for it, Hermione."

The tiny ghost sat expressionless in front of Hermione's mirror, her hair fully unplaited, long, wavy, reflecting a low blue gleam from a grate no longer warmed by even a hint of real flame.

Hermione's mind was weaving the thin, fragile strand of a thought into a wispy, insubstantial cloth, and, seeking for something, anything to attach it to, she asked, "If I did... that, to Horace, in my sleep, what stopped me? Why haven't I tried again?"

"I do not know the answer to either, Hermione. But rest assured you cannot touch him now."

She looked puzzled for a moment, but remembered his earlier words. Her eyes warming with an indefinable warmth hope, fear, courage and guilt, all warring with each other on her transparent features, she stared at him in amazement. "Severus. What have you done?"

"I took the soul fragment you had created, and placed it back within his body."

"Into his body?!"

His voice cracked into the air. "Better that than the bedpost, Hermione, with Poppy standing mere centimeters from me! She is no metaphysicist, but, I assure you, she is neither stupid nor blind. The same diagnostic spells that tell her Horace is both alive and dead would certainly indicate that the bedpost was suddenly alive in a way it had not been before I entered the room!" His nostrils flared, slightly, and although his face remained stern, Hermione somehow perceived a faint trace of sadness around his eyes.

Slightly subdued, she asked, "How did you know how?"

"Your " he began, but she was already answering her own question.

"My research, of course." She sagged wearily in her chair, check-mated, examining herself, expecting to find revulsion.

What she had done was too much; every time she reached for a way to name what she was feeling, the castle seemed to swim away from underneath her, leaving her wondering how all the books could stay so sensibly on their shelves with gravity wavering so strangely.

Her memory reached again for something solid, and she found she could name only one of her tumbling emotions with any certainty:

Gratitude.

Her eyes sought his and met in them an icy warmth, a glittering brightness that reflected no light at all.

In barely a whisper, she mouthed, "Why, Severus?"

He looked at her for a moment too long before shifting slightly and stating, "It was the action of a moment. Instinct." He paused. "Loyalty, perhaps."

"To...."

Leaning an elbow on the table, fingers to his lips to worry them slightly, he hesitated again before suggesting, "Perhaps to myself as a child."

"Perhaps," she echoed.

It was an evasion, and they both knew it.

"Always paying your debts to yourself, Severus?" She exhaled, and straightened a bit in her chair, her strand of hair falling unheeded against her neck.

His fingers stopped moving.

"Well, I shall obviously have to undo it," she said, a little briskly, reaching for her quill.

He dropped his hand to the table. "It cannot be undone."

Dipping her quill in the ink, she brushed the impossible away with her other hand. "Then I shall fix it."

Shifting the chair to an angle to stretch his legs before him, he asked, "Do you know how?"

"Not offhand, no." A weirdly wry smirk crossed Hermione's features. "But when has that ever stopped me?"

He knew there was but one thing to be done, and that she hadn't seen it yet.

He watched her twirl her quill, slowly, poised to begin writing, to organize her thoughts, but she did not reach for any of the volumes or scrolls stacked neatly beside her.

She twirled the quill first one way, then the other, three times.

Then it stopped.

"You've seen it."

She nodded, staring at the tip of her quill. The angle of the sun had changed, and dust motes no longer sparkled above them.

"Are you willing to do it?"

"Kill him, you mean?"

"Yes."

She sat silently.

For a very long time.

Then she set the quill down and nodded.

He leaned in, an unmistakable urgency in his voice. "You shall have to venture further into the Darkness."

"I shall not do it with magic, Severus."

"Ah... Hermione, you cannot reverse a Horcrux by smothering it with a pillow."

"Oh... no, of course not." She leaned her head into her hands, into the shadows that grew deeper between them as the shaft of sunlight angled away.

"Then you are determined?" he asked.

Her head shot up and her eyes flashed through the dim light. "Better that than allow you to do it for me," she said.

His hands to the edge of the table again. "Hermione I am not sure you fully realize what that means."

"I'm sure I don't realize, but..."

"And you are willing, regardless? You must know that this will be different, Hermione. You shall have to embrace the Darkness not with the reflexes of a child, watching your world die around you, but consciously. As a decision."

Her head in her hands again, but she nodded.

Picking up the quill, he ran his finger down the edge of it. "Do you remember," he began, "how casting the spell left you feeling, before?"

Through her falling hair, she watched his finger, and shook her head, sitting straighter. "No, I could, I suppose, if I tried, but no."

"There is no need," he said easily. "It would have been useful, but only as a starting point. My own memories of that night are confused, at best." He pressed the point of the quill into his finger and watched the small dent it left refill, then he repeated the motion as if to check the results of a complex experiment. "Even should you summon the desire to kill him, Hermione and there is no doubt that it is all that can be done the spell required shall leave you as broken, as wanting, as empty... as..." He could not finish, and set down the quill. "You are willing to risk Azkaban? To set it right?"

Lifting her chin in an echo of the Hermione her friends would have recognized, she stated, "It would seem I have no choice."

He searched her face, for what he wasn't certain and in her preternaturally calm regard, he found fear, regret, and resolve to be expected, he supposed, admired, even. No hesitation, none at all, but there was something else...

Relief.

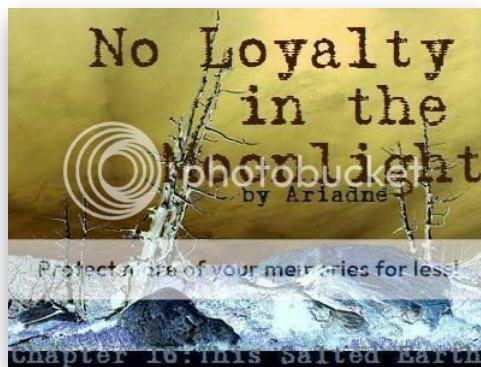
And at once he knew that there was no saving either of them now.

This Salted Earth

Chapter 16 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to my writing group: Anastasia, my partner-in-dark!writing and uberbeta (who beta'ed this chapter under the most extreme circumstances); Indigofeathers; Potion Mistress; FerPorcel, my art!beta; docmara, my psych!beta; and AnnieTalbot... and my thanks to all who voted for this foray into Darkness in the recent OWL Awards. I am touched by your support of my tale.



He searched her face, for what he wasn't certain and in her preternaturally calm regard, he found fear, regret, and resolve to be expected, he supposed, admired, even. No hesitation, none at all, but there was something else...

Relief.

And at once he knew that there was no saving either of them now.

"Funny," she was saying, "that we should end up so similarly, with what we've done, yet..." She did not know how to complete the thought, and looked at him.

"Yet my worst crime, and its censure, were public."

A small flash of envy in her eyes.

There it is. "Your envy is misplaced, Hermione. My time in Azkaban was largely symbolic, a panacea for a world that prefers not to understand the meaning of sacrifice, nor to question too closely its own hand on the knife." He paused, brushing his fingers almost speculatively over the parchment. "Mostly, it was peaceful."

"I can see how it would have been."

"My real sentence began long before, in temptation and guilt, circling in on themselves in an endless chain. Neither has ever left me; neither ever will."

After a long moment, she nodded.

"Whether they bury us in Azkaban or raise us on a plinth matters not at all, Hermione. For us, in the end, the result is," and her voice joined his, "the same."

They regarded each other in silence.

Finally, she spoke, "You said there were ways to guard against... some of it."

Her voice was, to his ear, higher than normal, but only slightly. He marveled at how well she held in check what he knew was rising within her, but it was there, growing, and the ache in his hip intensified, and his riding leathers creaked as he flexed his side to alleviate the pressure. "Yes. Some."

Hermione's eyes searched automatically for the source of the sound. "And the rest...? That cannot be prevented?"

He closed his eyes briefly, reason warring with instinct for a brief moment. It would be so easy to reach out, to take what she did not fully realize she was offering. A muscle jumped in his thigh, and he focused for a moment on holding himself very, very still.

It was not a question whether or not he would answer her just how.

In the near-silence of the library, he could hear her fingertip moving on the table, heard the motion change to a small tap as her patience trickled away.

But the book of Severus Snape would not be read quickly.

Hermione finally stilled her fingers and muttered, "You do have some experience with these matters..."

"Indeed," he said, opening shuttered eyes to her, allowing her to glimpse an existence he both longed for and despised.

Hermione inhaled sharply, not fully knowing why.

"It is possible to divert some of the desire, Hermione."

Her gaze fell away briefly, and her color deepened, but she rallied. "I assume your choice of words is not accidental."

A slow half-smile appeared on his face. "Not at all. You can prevent the temptation from growing if you satisfy it in an alternative way."

"I see." Hermione exhaled slowly, and the flickering torchlight of what had flared briefly between them seemed to deepen in the sunlight.

"It's not without cost, Hermione." His voice seemed to feed the wavering light, slowing its agitation, smoothing its depths.

As his gaze rested intently on her features, one corner of her mouth raised, half ruefully, half in...

Anticipation... he breathed inwardly.

"Well, it would have a cost, wouldn't it." It wasn't a question.

A brief cast in his eyes acknowledged what must be lost, but he leaned in slightly, the ache in his hip seeming to melt, spreading slowly, heavily. "It is not without compensation. If one's control is sufficient, there are ways to alter temptation, to reshape Darkness into..." He waited.

Her mouth went dry. "Into?"

"Incandescence."

She closed her eyes, wanting to let go, to give herself over to the release of gravity, to allow herself to finally fall. She was tired, so very tired of holding herself still against the sharp, cutting edge... better, perhaps; warmer, certainly, just to bleed...

And his voice followed her, carrying the smoothness she sought. "The desire to reach through shadow into Darkness can be satisfied if the touch, the mind, the being of another is similarly driven, their desire matched by similar Darkness, similar desire. If the one you touch is sufficiently, equally dark, then touching them will serve, being touched by them will serve, and together you substitute for Darkness for, and in, each other."

Hermione drifted in the promise of his words even as a warning rose in her mind, a warning she wished deeply to ignore. "But..."

His voice a gentle, patient heat, "But?"

"But you said that I would try to break the soul of... of whomever..." Her eyes open, seeking a way around what she knew in her core must remain true.

"You would break the soul of almost anyone were you to connect with them, Hermione."

Her voice rounded by the war of reason and instinct, she managed to choke out, "Then how?"

Her struggle so imminent that he closed his eyes, both in sympathy and to better savor the agony of the moment. "To avoid doing it, you will have to want to do it, more than you want to breathe, more than you want to live, more than you want your heart to beat, alive, within you."

Her eyes regained some of their focus, and she frowned as though he had interrupted her sleep. "You're making no sense."

He chuckled. "You *have* read Derrida, Professor?" he drawled. The satisfaction in his tone was unmistakable.

"I have."

She glared at him, and his smile deepened.

Delicious.

He thumbed the edge of the blank parchment, brushing it firmly enough for sound, but cautiously enough that its placement remained unmoved. "To control the temptation to break something, you must both want to break it and have enough control to deny yourself that end. To hold it at the breaking point just there, no further. Temptation is desire, Hermione. Not satisfaction."

Her eyes gleamed as her understanding unfolded. "Satisfaction would just initiate more temptation."

"Exactly. And you, I fear, are not equal to the task."

Another flash of pride; a warning in her tone. "I have been."

"Until recently very recently. Satisfaction initiates temptation, Hermione, and with each satisfaction your temptation must grow."

"And you are, I suppose? Equal to that task?"

His eyes glittered dangerously. "I am."

Before she had a chance to even form an inquiry about that, he was denying her an answer. "No, at a fundamental level, what you seek is not control, but knowledge."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and the shadows deepened around them. "Knowledge is control, Severus."

He appeared to be watching his thumb on the edge of the parchment. Far too casually, he countered, "And when your reason slips away?"

"Into madness?!"

"In your case, sleep is sufficient." *Check.*

She stared at him, frozen.

"Even in the safe darkness of sleep, Hermione, what you seek is knowledge, not control. No," a deep rumble that might have been laughter, "to demand control with each breath, each touch, with each caress of thought seeking skin, to dictate another's desire... to deny them what they believe they want, revealing instead what they cry out for from beneath their dreams... to desire *that*, to demand it of oneself and bestow it on one's partner, requires that as you slip beyond reason your primal, driving need be, ultimately, control to control your own pleasure, your fear, your terror and your pain through the creation, and denial, and delay, of those same desires in your partner... as with a single breath of air moving on waiting, open skin, you begin a primal dance of heat, of light and darkness playing out, unfolding, becoming and then, as you wish, if

you wish, allowing a taste a brief, fleeting taste of satisfaction, however small, however tainted, however compromised... no, Hermione."

He laughed low, and darkly. "That kind of control is simply not in your nature."

Her breath shallow through parted lips, yet somehow she managed to speak. "How do you know?"

"Because it is very much in mine."

And a clear intelligence returned to her eyes.

Excellent.

"So that's it, then?"

His eye fixed on her, and she held her breath. "Even at the height of Voldemort's power, there were only a few in whom the taint of Darkness was equal to what you require, and yes, I am one of them."

He looked at her until she nodded.

"But your situation, your temptation is complicated by guilt; guilt is separate. There are those who touch Darkness and feel no guilt Lucius, Bellatrix, some of the others." His eyes unfocused briefly, and she caught it.

"Who, Severus?" she asked quietly.

A shadow crossed his features. "Narcissa. Narcissa Malfoy. Fear held her back from the complete experience," he said, his tone slightly brittle. "Lucius considered it a weakness, of course." *There was no way to save her, or her son,* he told himself, as he had so many times before.

Mastering whatever thoughts he would not share, he returned to the present, to the troublesome woman before him. "Any of the Death Eaters could divert temptation, even those with small minds and less wit. It need not be erotic; physical violence will do just as well. But guilt... guilt was rare. Having a conscience, knowing regret even as you kill, or break a soul, however necessary in some larger constructed scheme that knowledge, that guilt lends a nuance, a twist to the temptation. Whether it manifests as a need for punishment or as a refusal to accept any more is, again, largely a matter of character."

She nodded slowly, her eyes resting on the stack of parchment.

Willing an air of intense calm around them, he stated, "I told you, on the Tower, that I would not allow you to use me as a means to punish yourself."

She nodded again, still not meeting his eyes.

Lying his hand flat on the parchment, he eased toward her. "I did not say that I would not do it for you."

Her eyes raised instantly to his.

"Can you do it, Hermione?" His eyes searched her face. "Your first contact with the Dark was made in panic. If the decision is made consciously, deliberately, methodically... then, even when civilization gives way to instinct, you retain a core of ownership which may allow you to come back afterwards, when you have achieved your ends."

"May," she repeated.

The intensity of his regard did not waver. "There is always a point of no return."

"And how do you know when you get there?" She did not expect to like his answer.

"You don't. Bellatrix Lestrange was quite mad, long before the end."

He waited in silence while her eyes moved rapidly over his hand on the parchment, as though he kept some inscription hidden from her.

Slowly, he moved his hand aside, resting it flat on the table, noting that her eyes followed it. "You went from Shield Charms to Horcruxes, Hermione, skipping years of study and theory. You should not have been able to do it. You're not that powerful." He studied her for a moment. "Or, at least, you weren't."

He studied her for a moment more, then leaned back, his hand lying, casually, on the table between them.

Palm down.

Still tracking her eyes, he asked, "You were a sweet child, weren't you? Generous, caring, sensitive..."

She winced, as though from a remembered blow, and nodded, too sharply.

"I was not," he said, and her eyes met his in question. "Sweet," he supplied, as though that had been her question.

"No, I wouldn't have expected you to be," she said, uncertain as to where he was leading. "But sensitive..." She considered him carefully, measuring. "Yes," she decided, "you would have to have been sensitive."

His eyebrows twitched. "And on what do you base this conclusion," he breathed, "Professor?"

One shoulder raised in a half-shrug. "With your morals, you would otherwise have been a thug."

His eyes glittered with dark amusement. "Quite," he concurred. He shifted slightly, and his hip protested. "My home was not kind."

Her eyes guarded, but curious, she ventured, "The Slytherin Common Room must not have been much of an improvement."

"Ah, but it was. You see, Hermione," he said, tracing a knot on the table, "if one expects cruelty, there are ways to parry it. Cruelty in Slytherin House was expected almost casual." She was tracking his finger, and he watched her. "Quite the opposite of the cruelty you experienced in Gryffindor."

She glanced up. "I never..." But memories of her first months at school flooded in. "Oh."

He nodded, as though approving her at lessons, and began tracing the circle in the opposite direction. "Deliberate cruelty can be anticipated, shaped, twisted back on itself. Other cruelty " he opened his palm briefly " inadvertent, thoughtless, careless is impossible to guard against. No," he continued, his finger resuming its slow, careful path around the knot, "deliberate cruelty is far, far preferable. To survive its wounds, it only requires that you not be innocent. To triumph, you must expect the wounds, and inflict your own, far greater, on your opponent. You must be forever on the offensive, actively seeking power in each interaction, especially when seeming not to do so, your weapons readied by constant, deliberate attention to detail, to nuance, to betrayals of vulnerability and craft it into the cutting remark your opponent will use to carve out his own heart. At its best, it is a slow, artful dance.

"Innocence will shield you, at least partially, from thoughtless cruelty until you are convinced of your moral superiority, strong enough to ignore the bleeding, numb enough not to care. To survive deliberate cruelty, all you need do is expect it," his finger slowed, and stopped, "and the innocent never do."

"The flaw in Dumbledore's thinking," she offered.

"Precisely."

She sat straighter in her chair. "And to win?"

A low triumph grew in his eyes. "To win, you must strike first. You triumphed over the Dark Lord because no one thought you a threat. You would have been a target, you would not have remained standing, otherwise."

She blinked once, but her eyes were widening.

"Which you already knew. Well played, Hermione."

She blinked again.

"I truly believe that your morals would have kept you from doing it again, had you a choice, but you touched it once, and the temptation remained with you, growing, unchecked, until it could not be restrained. You buried it valiantly, to be sure, but the foundations were imperfect, and the slightest breath on the cornerstone shook the highest tower."

She flinched as her eyes flew up, then dropped back to his.

"At the level of instinct, you are pure curiosity; only one level higher, you are pure rage. Neither is civilised, and, unconsciously, you touched it again. And now, only one question remains: Are you willing? I would have wagered, before you reached for me last night, before I felt your skin respond beneath my touch, that your character would prevent you, that you would stumble blindly into madness rather than..." His voice trailed away.

"Than what?" she demanded, against the ragged pulse in her throat.

"I would have thought you would choose madness over my embrace, Hermione."

"And now you think otherwise?"

"Ours is a dangerous game... one from which there may very well be no return." *For either of us*, he thought. "The taint goes deep, Hermione, and has changed you."

"What makes you think so?"

"I do not think it; I know."

"Fine, then." She gestured irritably, tossing her head, and her lock of hair brushed her throat, and the memory of her skin warmed his hands. "How do you 'know'?"

"You wished me sweet dreams."

She waited, but he spoke no further. Finally, she demanded, "And?"

"Your dreams may roll you under into rippling anesthesia, and leave you spent breathless, exhausted, your skin slick, your body flung, limp, brutally twisted beneath hot, tangled sheets but somehow I doubt that they are ever 'sweet.'"

As he watched, her eyes grew distant, then returned. Flat.

"Deliberate cruelty, Hermione."

Her eyes hardened, and the pain in his hip knifed through him in response.

"Well played," he acknowledged, scarcely breathing. "Yet my question remains." He leaned in and murmured, "May I have this dance?"

He slowly opened his hand, extending it toward her.

There was no softness in his gaze, and none in her smile, when she reached her hand across the table to feel, once more, the smooth, cruel sweetness of his skin touching her own.

In Hermione's tower, the tiny ghost gasped as a hot, real tear slicked down the image of her skin.

It was the first sound she'd made in twenty-two years.

Turning from her reflection, she fled Hermione's mirror, another tear spattering to the stone floor as she swept into the corridor.

One sound, one tear, and a tiny, feathered flower seed.

She had blown it and it had fallen, rent by her breath from its stem, and, as the tear rounded beneath it, it balanced, poised on its end, and a lone, wayward draft lifted its feather to send it, sparkling and salted, adrift in the castle.

Passion

Chapter 17 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Many thanks to IndigoFeathers and Anastasia for beta-reading. This chapter is dedicated to IndigoFeathers for reasons that, were I to explain them, would remain, nonetheless, maddeningly obscure.



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"Minerva, I tell you, there's something going on." The librarian's eyes were round as she looked pleadingly at the headmistress.

Minerva's face was sour. "Of that I have no doubt, Madam Abbott, but it need not concern you."

The former prefect was pale, but she insisted, "Forgive me, Headmistress, but they are *in the library*, which is my responsibility, and strange things are happening, and... I think I... I think I heard..."

"Heard?"

Hannah swallowed as her superior's piercing eyes examined her over the top of her square spectacles. "I think I heard her... the professor, I mean... I think I heard her scream."

"Did you not check? The library is, after all, your responsibility."

"I... I Flooed here at once."

"Your attention to duty is admirable, Madam Abbott." Despite the weighty matters with which her day had begun, Minerva's lips twitched. *The child was always so easily flustered...*

What little color remained in Hannah's cheeks drained away and she shook her head. "I am no match for..." her voice dropped to a whisper, "... *him*."

Minerva pursed her lips and summoned her patience. "Yes, yes, I suppose you're right," she said, not unkindly.

She rose and took the librarian by the elbow.

"Where are we going?"

"Why, to the library, of course."

Hannah's feet seemed to want to stay planted firmly in the safety of the Head's office, but she somehow managed to follow the headmistress toward the fireplace.

"I shall go first, of course," Minerva assured her. *The child is shaking*, she thought. *Well, as well she might be.*

A few moments later found them peering cautiously out of Hannah's office into the main library. The sun was at its full height, and the entire space was cast in soft midday shadow, and Minerva's eyes took a moment to adjust.

Lifting her eyebrows in query, Minerva tilted her head toward the long bookshelves and study areas.

"The usual place," Hannah mouthed.

Minerva nodded and eased the librarian's door open, careful to keep her fingers clamped firmly together. It would not do to have her ring tick against the wood.

Peering between two very tall bookcases, the headmistress and the librarian inched cautiously toward Hermione's customary table.

And they almost instantly backed up, out of the library, and back to Hannah's office, both clamping their hands firmly over their mouths.

Hannah's face was a fury of scarlet when they closed the door safely behind them, her eyes enormous, and her breath coming in short gasps.

"Madam Abbott, do take hold of yourself," the headmistress snapped, but her tone lacked some of its usual asperity.

"Did you... did you *see*?" Hannah breathed.

"I did. They were holding hands, Miss Abbott. I believe we may safely conclude that whatever magic is afoot in your library, it is not Dark. Now, if you will excuse me..." The headmistress Flooded back to her own office as quickly as she could. It would not do for Hannah to hear her laughing, and Merlin knew she could do with a laugh.

The noise of the Floo brought Severus and Hermione out of their conversation.

"Come," he said, releasing her hand only briefly to stand.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him, but joined him at the end of the table.

"I do wish you would not do that," he murmured, even as he extended his arm to her.

She had been reaching for his hand, and accepted the proffered arm only a little awkwardly. "Rather formal of you," she said blandly, "considering."

"Consider this, Hermione" he reached up with his free hand and brushed her hair off her neck, his thumb lightly grazing her pulse.

Her eyes fluttered, and her color rose, and his heart tightened in response.

"Given... *that*," he continued, drawing her close to his side, "I believe it prudent that we maintain a certain distance in public."

"Distance?" she said, bemused, as she felt his solid warmth her through her robes.

He leaned to murmur into her hair. "Leather has many uses. And my touching your skin, Professor, poses something of a risk... in public. It would not do, would it, for me to take you here?"

His voice traveled straight to the base of her spine and curled there. She turned admonishing eyes up to him. "Do please keep talking," she retorted. "I appear to have some use of my knees as of yet."

Her tone was light, if somewhat breathless, but the heaviness of what lay between them seemed to weigh Severus' cloak and her robes as they made their way into the main castle.

The muffled snapping of Severus' cloak rustled through the deserted corridors. Cloak and robes flowed together, catching between their legs at odd moments as they walked, deterring them from the determined efficiency of their usual, individual paces.

The rough liquid sound of his heavy silk cloak whispering in her ears, the chill mustiness of the corridors retreating before the rich, earthen tang of his leathers, and his arm a solid, immediate, warmth against her shoulder, Hermione was barely conscious of their path through the castle until they paused on the landing above the marble stairs in the Entrance Hall.

Only then did she realize that her free hand was shaking. Balling it into a fist in her robes, she murmured, "Where shall we go?"

He had discerned her trembling, the heady fragility of the balance between her growing desire and increasing trepidation, and now, as he heard her fingers clutch her robes, a delicate sheen bloomed on her skin, and he knew, without moving, the taste of her fear.

In violation of his own spoken discretion, he trailed one finger across her brow, brushing over her ear, along her jaw, and down her neck, tracing the line where skin met cloth.

Her eyes wide, her trembling deepened, and, as he raised his finger to her lips, her breath caught.

"Taste."

Hesitating only a moment, she flicked her tongue to his finger, and he groaned, fighting the instinct to turn on her, to spin her off-balance, to pin her roughly between his body and the sharp-hewn stone of the wall.

His eyes rapt by the errant lock of hair, vibrating slightly against her neck, a single hair trapped by the dampness of her skin, he inhaled slowly, then tucked her hand more closely into his arm and headed down the staircase.

"To the dungeons, then?" Hermione murmured.

He shook his head. "The Great Hall."

She glanced up at him, but he said nothing until they stood before the doors.

As the doors swung open before them, he turned and spoke into her hair, his voice low, "*You will* need all of your strength."

"A challenge?" she murmured, her lips barely moving as the moving doors revealed the high table.

His voice impossibly low: "A promise."

Their faces deadened to masks as the doors creaked to a halt.

Alone, Severus Snape had always had the knack of silencing all conversation merely by entering a room, when he chose. The sight of the two black-clad scourges of Hogwarts standing in iron-clad stillness cast something akin to a Freezing Charm on the high table.

The silence was broken only by Hannah Abbott dropping her fork onto her plate.

Enigmatic smiles grew on Severus' and Hermione's faces as they approached the table, and deepened as the staff watched him hold her chair for her.

Exchanging a look that would have sent even the bravest Gryffindor to the hospital wing, Severus Snape and Hermione Granger started lunch in shared silence.

Not one staff member spoke. Hannah couldn't even bring herself to eat, but she refused to leave as long as doing so meant turning her back to either of... of *them*.

For so they had become in her mind, and the minds of all the staff, with that one entrance.

Other than Hannah, only Minerva seemed at all troubled, but as the headmistress' periods of distraction had become more frequent in recent years, no one noticed.

Well, then. Minerva thought. *Beside her, alive or dead, is it? Very well, Snape. As long as it's out of my castle.* Still, something deep within her resolutely insisted on its right to be amused, try as she might to snuff its chuckling.

And its chuckling was very amused, indeed.

The seed drifted aimlessly through the castle.

On the third floor, it caught briefly in a swirl of a translucent cloak as one of the ghosts flickered out of a wall.

It spiraled upward briefly, passing through the ghost's hand on its path through a nearby archway.

The ghost winced, then frowned. It paused mid-flight and examined its hand.

A spot of red had appeared in the center of its palm, and was swelling, growing, gathering itself to drip heavily, thickly to the floor.

The ghost's eyebrows flew up and it darted directly toward the hospital wing.

The seed drifted through the archway.

Far below, in Slughorn's chambers, the Bloody Baron glanced at the ceiling. "Impossi-"

His words were cut off by the wall.

Poppy's hand smoothed the coverlet at Horace's side. She couldn't bring herself to touch him.

Which was just as well.

Her hand continued its smoothing motion long after she was aware it was doing so.

Neither could eat for awareness of the other.

He caught her eye and quirked an eyebrow.

She nodded, and they rose, as silently as they had come in.

Tucking her arm through his, he shortened his stride to match hers, but more than one staff member blinked at the illusion of his boot heels striking sparks from the stone floor.

When they reached the doors, her cloak tangled in his steps and his stride came up short.

The pain in his hip exploded into blinding light, and he reached instinctively for his wand, but his hand found Hermione's, and his impulse would not be denied, and he turned on her.

The darkness in her eyes matched his own, and, as he bent and brushed her lips with his own, his hand tightened on hers and he released his restraint, his whole being resolved into a single thought: *I am here*.

The doors to the Great Hall exploded outward, slamming into the walls with a resonant clang that shuddered through the stones of Hogwarts and echoed into the rock below.

His hand under her head, the other solid in the curve of her back, drawing her body firmly into his, he deepened the kiss, tasting her moan, demanding entry into her very soul.

The staff stared, unblinking, as they watched his cloak swirl around her robes, surrounding them, tightening around them both until no one could tell they were two people save for the warm glinting contrast of a single lock of Hermione's hair sweeping across the field of black with the unerring rhythm of a heartbeat-driven pendulum.

As one, the staff watched the shock of his pale hands against the black, stroking downward, her robes and hair filling them, spilling between his fingers as he pressed her body into his.

Minerva had frozen with the rest of the teachers, holding a goblet halfway to her mouth.

The strength in her hand failed, and the goblet fell onto her plate, shattering the porcelain into tiny, pointed shards that floated, briefly, on the surface of the dark wine as it pooled and ran off the table.

White specks sank beneath red as Minerva's hand fell.

And her ring flew from her finger to roll crazily toward the edge of the table, spinning through her wasted wine to drop with a dull tinkling onto the dais, again to the floor, the spinning noise loud in the vacuum of silence that threatened to smother them all.

And Severus and Hermione did not move, other than to turn two pale faces toward the source of the sound.

The ring spun faster and faster on the stone floor as though it were fighting to stay upright until, finally, it fell.

Only then did Severus look up to the high table.

The headmistress was dead.

His hands flew to Hermione's face and turned it roughly toward his. His eyes bore into hers as within them he saw a sharp gleam he understood all too well.

"No," he murmured through barely parted lips, too softly for the staff to hear.

She struggled weakly in his hands, and the gleam in her eyes sharpened.

"No, Hermione," he said again, his voice ragged in his closing throat.

Legilimens.

And he was in her mind and she, they, were reaching outward for an ephemeral shape that glowed white round, whole, and aching perfect and Hermione's mind drew his toward its growing light, reaching to

Imperio.

And Hermione's eyes were instantly calm, instantly soft as she looked up at him, lips parted, relaxed, awaiting his command.

He closed his eyes, hard.

The curtain of his hair hid his face from the staff; only Hermione could see the agony etching ever deeper around his eyes, and a wish grew warm from her heart until it suffused her entire being, awaiting the words that might allow it to grow beyond the limits of her skin.

And he spoke. "Save us," he whispered, his eyes still closed, a refusal against the willing obedience he knew her eyes must hold under his forbidden curse.

Her wish encompassed him, and her mind seized on the only way out.

She didn't know what they were fleeing, or why, but it didn't matter. She dropped the anti-Apparition wards from the castle, and with a *crack*, they were gone.

Minerva's ring lay glinting, red, gold, and heavy, in a fall of winter sunlight.

Instinct

Chapter 18 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: To my readers: I'm sorry about the last chapter - it had been coming for a while, and had to happen. *hands you tissue*

To my friends who know my wee black cat: Yep. Mary Cat. Guilty!

Special thanks to Anastasia for permission to use the photograph in the chapter art.



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Finite Incantatem, he thought, and, with a cry, Hermione sank to the ground.

Falling to his knees beside her, ignoring the pain that had spread into his leg, he forced himself to look at her.

"No," she moaned. "Minerva." And she gripped his knees with pale hands, her head bowed, her shoulders heaving as she tried to control her breathing.

After a long moment of silence, a sound reached his ears, the high, thin keening of an animal trapped and broken, awaiting, begging for the blow that would release it.

He knew the sound; heard its plea.

He would not deliver the blow.

He waited, his eyes hooded, glittering strangely, until she lay, spent, in his lap.

Only then did he brave her distress, smoothing his hand on her hair, over the traces of tears on her face growing chill in the sharp air.

The Great Hall was in chaos when Poppy arrived in a rush of breathless efficiency.

She would save her tears for later.

For now, there were protocols.

And, even as her heart swelled in her chest in the wordless expansion of loss, she would follow them.

It was her duty.

She Summoned a stretcher.

She sent one of the staff to owl the Board of Governors and the Ministry.

And she repaired the wards.

Only when she bent to retrieve the ring did her hands betray her.

It was several sizes larger than it had been, even that morning. Her hand closed around it and she leaned heavily on the dais.

"Madam Pomfrey?"

The librarian's voice brought her out of her brief reverie.

"Madam Pomfrey... was it... was it *them*?" The librarian's eyes were wild.

"Them'?" she repeated, her voice a dull echo of its usual calm tone.

"Did they... did they kill her?" Hannah's voice was pleading, almost begging for something.

"No one killed her, Madam Abbott. Her heart was weak. It has been for years."

Hannah clutched at the Healer's hands, terror obvious on her face.

"What is it, Hannah?" Poppy asked, professional compassion entering her voice from long habit. "Who has scared you so?"

"The Professors," Hannah said, her grip painfully tight.

With practiced speed, Poppy extricated her hands from Hannah's, patting them maternally. Really, the librarian was a borderline hysteric. "What did they do, dear?"

"They were..." But Hannah couldn't say, exactly, what they had done, and she blinked. "He kissed her," she finished lamely, feeling the fool even as her reason insisted that *something* had happened to shake the castle.

"No one as stout as Minerva—" Poppy swallowed, hard, and shook her head. "No. No one ever died from witnessing a kiss, Madam Abbott."

Hannah nodded, but something inside her wasn't entirely sure.

After muttering a Calming Charm over the younger woman, Poppy left the Hall and began her long, slow ascent to the now-empty office of the Head of Hogwarts.

There were protocols.

She would follow them.

"Where are we?" Hermione murmured finally, sitting up, her hands melting small prints in the snow.

"In my garden," Severus said softly.

Hermione shook her head as if to clear it. "How..." but she hadn't the strength to finish the question.

"Legilimency, I imagine. You reached for the place of greatest safety, getting the location, no doubt, from my mind." *And she chose mine*, he thought, *because she has none of her own*.

He stood and raised her out of the snow.

Where she had collapsed, the snow lay depressed in very nearly a perfect circle, and his breath caught, remembering the luminescent shape hovering before them, for which he had instinctively violated Hermione's will.

"Come," he said tightly, gathering her to him gently and leading her into the house.

Minerva's portrait blinked, confused, as her eyes adjusted to the sun angling through the windows. Feeling automatically for her ring and finding it absent, she smiled tiredly.

"Finally," she said.

"It's that way sometimes, isn't it?" a low, pleasant female voice drifted down from somewhere above her. "Welcome, sister."

Minerva inspected her portrait. A low, comfortable armchair sat before a cheerful fire, and she found it fitted her perfectly. Sighing, she rested her feet on a worn ottoman that had once belonged to her mother. From the edge of her frame, a small black cat appeared, and leapt into her lap, purring.

"Hecate," she smiled. "I haven't seen you in an age."

Hecate curled into a ball and blinked seriously at the former headmistress.

Minerva sighed again. She hadn't been this warm in years. From somewhere in the distance, she thought she heard bagpipes.

Hermione was barely aware of entering the house, scarcely felt his hands at her collar, his gentle guidance to sit, his removing her shoes, the strangely gentle care with which he covered her with something soft that smelled faintly of wind.

She was asleep before he gestured the heavy curtains closed.

Drawing a chair beside the bed, he leaned his arm on an armrest and watched her sleep, his eyes moving from her hair to her brow, the soft lines at her eyes, traveling down to her hand where it rested in the air, just off the mattress.

The book of Hermione Granger was open to him, as it had ever been.

But the next page was blank.

As it had ever been.

His eyes traveled from her hand to her chest, to the soft rise and fall of her breathing.

The loss of Minerva, violating Hermione's mind, and the hollow shudder at the base of the castle – even the perfection of Minerva's liberated soul – were as nothing to the profound, perfect stillness of Hermione asleep in his bed.

He closed his eyes and listened to her breathing.

He remembered her breath on his skin, the urgent offering of her mouth on his, the feel of her beneath her robes, and felt his heart beating.

"How did you break your wand?"

"I fell."

"The truth, if you please."

"It's a bloody metaphor."

As a metaphor for happiness, offering to master her Darkness with his own, to match the moves of her body with his own – his palms grew warm – no, not a bad metaphor for happiness.

The arrangement would suit.

Rather neatly.

His eyes fell on the lock of hair that always escaped the rigidity of her knotting, and his throat closed.

Perhaps not so neatly after all.

As the shadows lengthened, hours dissolving distinction into uniformly blended twilight, he found himself staring at her hand, still resting in the air off the edge of the mattress.

He had no idea how his hand had come to be holding it.

Breath

Chapter 19 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks, as always, to my divine beta, Anastasia, and to the online coven (Indy, Jen, Min, Fer, Mara and Annie) and Melenka for holding my howling writing self together.



As the shadows lengthened, hours dissolving distinction into uniformly blended twilight, he found himself staring at her hand, still resting in the air off the edge of the mattress.

He had no idea how his hand had come to be holding it.

"Natural causes, you say?"

Poppy nodded to the Minister of Magic, whose head was sitting complacently in the green flames.

"Board of Governors notified?"

"Yes."

"Right. Well, then all seems in order. No need to come through, then." He paused. "A shame. Fine woman, McGonagall."

Poppy's throat was too tight to speak.

Severus' mind was not working properly. Every time he attempted to start to reason his way around the fact of his hand around Hermione's, it slid off its course into an endless space of empty, twilight blue, in which there was no gravity, no sound, and nothing impossibly, perfectly nothing to hold onto.

Except for her hand, held impossibly in his.

He had no idea what he should do what he would do when Hermione woke up.

His eyes fathomless, opaque the very eyes that had held the world in dissembling trust, had held its future in the mundane fact that they'd been born illegibly black his eyes were open, unguarded, determined and lost.

His eyes darkened with the inevitable end into which they were both falling. It would fall to Hermione, in the end.

He eyed the curtains, which had begun, softly, to glow. The moon was rising.

"My window is broken."

The moonlight on the Tower... the shape of Minerva's soul...

And an idea took imperfect shape in his mind, and, as he exhaled, its perfection dawned clear.

He bowed his head, and his hair brushed his shoulders as it fell forward.

"Bleeding?"

The Bloody Baron nodded. "Actual blood, Madam Pomfrey. Not this..." He gestured to the silvery splashes of blood on his doublet. "Red."

Poppy was at a loss, but she returned to the hospital wing, where all of the castle's ghosts had assembled. As she approached, they backed away from a solitary figure hovering slightly over one of the beds. Wordlessly, it held its hand out to her.

It was still bleeding.

No one saw the look of surprise appear on the face of the tiny ghost at the back of the crowd; no one saw her flit urgently out of the infirmary; no eyes marked her progress back along the red spattered trail.

It ended at an archway marking a downward stair.

She hovered for a moment, then flew downward, her pale eyes disappearing almost entirely as she moved between pools of flickering torchlight.

Her search for the seed would take her most of the night.

She even braved the library, with its whispering ceiling.

But just before dawn, she found herself hovering next to the portrait that had once marked the entrance to the Ravenclaw Common Room.

And found herself staring directly into the misty, translucent eyes of a tall young man.

"Hello," he said politely, although he sounded a little bit confused. His head and arms were coalescing out of the pool of mist that had marked his only presence for almost twenty-two years.

She backed up quickly.

"Please don't be scared," he said, and she raised one hand in a small wave of greeting. "I'm Neville. Neville Longbottom."

"I " she whispered, her breath blowing her body backwards into the wall.

Neville reached for her hand and pulled her back out of the wall.

"Talking's tricky, isn't it?" He smiled kindly. "Didn't think I'd get the knack of it, initially." He looked at her closely. "I think I remember you. From the train?" He paused. "And... after?"

She nodded, and released his hand.

She looked down to see that she was holding the small seed. Her eyes widened.

"That yours?" Neville asked.

She nodded.

"Thought it might be."

She smiled at him shyly.

"Do you like Herbology?"

She nodded.

"It was always my favorite subject, in school," he said.

She tilted her head at him.

"You didn't get to take regular classes, did you?"

She shook her head and started to whisper something, but shut her mouth as she started once again to drift backwards.

He laughed and caught her hand.

"It's okay. I've got you."

She laughed then a dim echo of a laugh, as though a faraway church bell pealed sparkling off of a snow-covered hillside.

Neville smiled down at the little ghost next to him. His feet had appeared, and he stretched.

"So. It's been a while since I was really here, I suspect."

She nodded, her eyes alight.

"Care to give me a tour? I bet you've found all the best places in the castle by now."

The two drifted up the corridor.

He awoke to the feel of another hand covering his own, to the feeling of a softness brushing his forehead, to the sight of a lock of hair moving against a field of black as Hermione knelt in front of him to look into his eyes.

Her face was solemn, pinched, but strong; the shadows under eyes lending her an otherworldly air.

"Thank you," she said quietly, giving his hand a faint pressure before drawing her own away.

The air that replaced the warmth of her hand seemed chillier than it actually was, and he ran his hand through his hair to erase the feeling.

Hermione bent to put her shoes on.

"Did you... did you sleep well?" he asked, somewhat dazed.

A curt nod before turning to him. "I have to go back."

He exhaled. "I know."

"I've put the kettle on for you. I'll just be " Her eyes flew around the room a little wildly, and she brushed her hair behind her ear.

Grace.

"Thank you," she said again, and left the room.

He sat stunned by her exit for a moment, then followed, delaying only long enough to kill the flame under the kettle.

By the time he reached the garden, she was gone.

A moment later, he was outside the gates, just in time to see the corner of her black cloak rippling through the castle doors.

He ran.

His cloak snapping around his booted ankles, he reached the Entrance Hall and turned for the stair that led to Slughorn's chambers.

"Professor Snape." A voice from before.

He whipped around and was brought up short by the sight of Neville Longbottom. His eyes widened.

Neville and the tiny ghost hovered at the bottom of the Grand Staircase.

"If you're looking for Hermione, sir, I think she was going to the library."

"Longbottom, isn't it?"

The taller ghost nodded.

"Thank you." Severus' footsteps echoed up the stair.

Neville turned to the tiny ghost. "A 'thank you' from Snape, but not as much as a 'hello' from Hermione?"

The small ghost regarded him sadly, and shook her head.

Tugging on his hand, she pulled him through the floor, through the dungeon chambers, into the room where the dragon had lived.

A small stack of parchment stood on a desk long-unused. Reaching for the quill, she began to write in a careful, precise hand.

"How do you do that?" Neville asked, reaching for another quill. His hand slipped through the table.

The ghost shrugged, and concentrated on writing. *She can't see us.*

Neville frowned.

The quill scratched as the tiny ghost continued.

I think he likes her.

Neville's eyes grew wide. "Professor Snape likes *Hermione*?"

He was a teacher?

Neville nodded. "Scared me silly."

The tiny ghost looked amused, but then her face grew serious and she went back to writing.

The scratching of her quill continued for some time, then she set it down and drifted over to the mantel. The house-elves had replaced the dragon in its usual position, but its eyes were still filmed over with grey.

She sighed, and ran a careful finger down its back.

Neville's eyes grew wide as he read the brief story of the last twenty-two years in the small ghost's eleven-year-old hand.

When he reached the account of that morning in the Great Hall, he inhaled sharply, and the little ghost turned around, hovering by the statue of the dragon.

"We have to go see the headmistress' portrait," he said quietly. "Now."

The tiny ghost nodded, and took Neville's hand.

The two drifted slowly through the ceiling.

Poppy sat in a wooden chair by the fire in the Head's office.

Try as she might, she had been unable to stanch the ghost's bleeding, and had finally given up just after dawn, leaving the ghost to the ministrations of its fellows, including one of her predecessors, who had had no more luck with ghostly bandages than she had had with solid ones.

"I don't understand it, Minerva."

"A vexing problem," Minerva agreed calmly, stroking Hecate.

Hecate arched her back and kneaded Minerva's lap, turning suddenly to butt her head against the former Headmistress' chin.

Minerva chuckled. "That used to give me the worst headache, Hecate." Gathering the cat close to her chest, she stroked its whiskers with her knuckle. "You were always a great one for driving me to distraction."

Poppy sighed. Whatever was amok in the castle was no longer Minerva's problem, and she closed her eyes.

"Do you have the ring?" Minerva asked.

Poppy nodded, her hand moving automatically to her pocket. The ring lay heavily within her robes.

"Minerva, do you have any idea who "

"No more than I did when you asked me this morning. Someone with larger fingers than I have. Had?" Minerva eyed her hands, into which Hecate promptly thrust her head.

Poppy eyed the portrait and sighed again. The headmistress had grown so frail in her final months that that left just about everyone.

"And Horace?" Minerva asked, rubbing Hecate's ears.

"No change."

"The Board of Governors?"

"Arriving this afternoon. The Minister," Poppy frowned, "is staying in London." A moment's silence spoke eloquently of Poppy's opinion of the current Minister. "I took the liberty of notifying Harry Potter. Like as not, he'll be Minister for the new Head of School; he should be here."

"Capable, as always, Poppy," Dumbledore's voice floated down from the ceiling.

Poppy glanced up.

From her position nearly two stories below Albus' portrait, it was difficult to be sure, but his eyes did not seem to be twinkling.

His gaze swept the treetops of the forest. They had stilled overnight, but were once again starting to wave in the wind.

Hermione was standing in the window, looking out over the forest.

Severus' stride caught when he saw her.

"Hermione," he said.

She turned her head to look at him, but said nothing.

He fought the urge to move to her side, and scowled. "What am I going to do with you," he muttered.

"I don't know, Severus. *What are you going to do with me?*"

Her tone was inexplicably icy, and he went still, his eyes growing wary.

"You saw what I did what I tried to do. I couldn't stop it" She turned back to the cold windowpane. "She was my teacher, my Head of House... I worked for her for over twenty years. Whatever else, I respected her, Severus tremendously yet it didn't matter. I couldn't stop it."

"No more could you be expected to."

Her hand clenched in a fist at her side. "I "

"It's the way of Darkness, Hermione. Individual personality, connections none of them matter. It will be satisfied."

She stared unmoving at the distant trees. "Perhaps I should let it, then."

"That *is* an option, of course," he said, moving to stand beside her at the window. "Is that your choice?"

Something hard crossed her face, and her eyes went flat for a moment. "Do I really have a choice, Severus? Given what must be done to Horace, and..." She closed her eyes, unable to speak further.

His tone was stern. "A choice, certainly. You can gamble on your strength, kill him, and let events play as they will. Or you could refuse the task before you, leave the castle and not return, and live alone, as safe as any can be from their own legacies."

Short, brittle laughter preceded her response. "Or a compromise kill him, serve my time in prison, and retreat to a hermitage somewhere in the wilds of England, perhaps with a cat for company."

He did not move. The truth had long-since lost the power to hurt him.

"Or do cats have souls, I wonder?" She shook her head, the lightness of her tone completely at odds with the panic rising in her eyes.

"Hermione," he said quietly.

"Best not to risk it? The cat, I mean," she said, the edge in her voice rising.

"Stop," he said.

"So, okay, not the best idea..."

He reached out and took her shoulders roughly. "Look at me, Hermione."

She turned to him.

Only her eyes betrayed her.

He held her gaze with his own until she sagged, leaning against the window ledge.

"I couldn't stop it, Severus. I couldn't stop myself."

"No," he agreed quietly. "You couldn't. Which brings us back to the original problem."

Hermione's hand flexed as though she were gripping her wand. "Of course," she said, summoning the mask with which her students and colleagues were familiar. "Horace." Only the tension around her eyes betrayed her knowledge of the chasm that lay before her. Straightening her shoulders under his hands, thereby dislodging them, she tilted her chin and looked at him dispassionately. "So is it best that we... well... before? Or after?"

Her courage and despair shot deep into Severus body, and he closed his eyes briefly. *Oh, Hermione.* His voice as heavy as if the stones of the castle itself were resting on his chest, he answered simply, "Before."

Her eyes widened slightly, but her manner remained clinical. "Where shall we go, then?"

"You would perhaps be more comfortable in your own chambers?" he asked quietly.

Her eyes flashed, and she shoved her hair roughly behind her ear.

"Very well," he said smoothly. "Mine, then."

With one deliberate finger, he took the lock of hair she had just captured and released it to trail down her neck, tracing its curve slowly until it brushed her collar.

Her breath caught as her skin strained for the air where his hand had been but a moment before.

He turned and led her out of the library.

Calling

Chapter 20 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to my beta-readers for this chapter, Indigofeathers, AnnieTalbot, and the inestimable Anastasia, who understands the art of white space. And, as always, my additional thanks to FerPorcel and Melenka, who, along with my betas, always listen patiently to writerly whinges. Finally, a nod of gratitude to docmara for recommending the artist who provided the chapter title: Leonard Cohen, in the song "Who By Fire?"



Her breath caught as her skin strained for the air where his hand had been but a moment before.

He turned and led her out of the library.

Hermione's thoughts flayed themselves into wild spirals of individual coherence, beckoning her with a screaming urgency, each negating the other whilst insisting on primacy.

All because he had trailed one promise down her throat.

A contract, nothing more...

Don't lie to yourself, for once... you want him...

Not what I wanted.

Liar.

He will drink the stain ...

Only he can.

I've done nothing to be ashamed of!

Liar.

But he was your teacher....

But he's done enough....

He wants you.

Liar.

He's taken you, left you broken in a hundred dreams.

You're already broken.

Liar.

You want him to take you.

Liar.

You want to lie, helpless, strong beneath him.

You want him to use you.

You want it to be real.

It is real.

Liar.

You want to him to lie over you, his breathing hot, ragged on your skin as he arches, straining...

It's going to happen.

To break you, leave you broken... you deserve it....

But his soul

Soon.

But what if I

Now.

What if I

You know you want to.

The door closed and clicked locked behind her.

She jumped, although she pretended not to.

He looked at her, his eyes a strange, unreadable shadow.

He held his hand to her, and her mind went quiet.

Too quiet.

A fleeting sweep of something

Worry?

on his face, in his eyes, only fleeting, then it was gone.

"If I reach for your soul, you can stop me?" she asked, her voice low.

"I can." *Probably.* He extended his hand a fraction closer. "Come, Hermione. We haven't much time."

"No, I suppose we no," she agreed, and her fingertips brushed his palm and her hand small, cool slipped into his.

His fingers closed.

He saw a sharp edge of something in her eyes and knew he would cut himself on it.

Badly.

His hand tightened.

But the spiral of hair trailing on the curve her neck called his eye, unbearably, and his hips tightened with a low, insistent heat, and he ached to make that one lock of hair tremble in hesitation before the rest of it spilled down upon him, and his fingers tightened around hers and he steeled his arm, drawing her inexorably, inevitably to him, his skin alive beneath rough wool and worn leather.

Forward, compelled, drawing her hand downward to rest at his hip, a sharp inhale, his jaw clenching.

Between his leather, her fallen sleeve, his finger a slow, twisting, intricate spiral on her forearm, drawing an answering flare from her breath.

He did not know what he was tracing, nor the words he was breathing.

His hand rough, heavy, under her hair... her eyes falling closed... his breathing a slow rhythm on her throat... hers slowing in answer... his voice a whispered compulsion: "Closer."

Her mind still, she obeyed.

His fingers trailing up her arm, fabric dragging upward, his palm insistent, warm, at her elbow.

His grip powerful, deepening; his nails sharp, dragging on her skin; her eyes widen, open, drawn into his dark, piercing, aware

He was your teacher.

I don't care.

Liar.

A sharp gasp that might have been a strangled sob clutching in her throat.

You want him to use you.

His hand smooth to her throat, gently stroking, a soft, gentle stroke, closing, pressure, increasing, intensifying...

So easy, to fall ...

... and he felt her tension dissolve, relax, felt her lean into his closing hand...

... so easy, to fade... black...

And she was spun sharply against the wall, her arm twisted fiercely behind her back, her cheek pressing into the gritted roughness of stone.

Light blurring to shadow at a gesture, his dark chuckle on her neck eclipsing her thoughts and masking the sound of his wand clattering to the floor.

"Did you forget, Hermione?"

"I " she gasped.

"I will not permit you to use me to punish yourself."

She shook her head.

His weight more firmly against her, forcing her breath out of her lungs.

"Did you forget?"

She nodded.

His lips a heartbeat from the pulse at her ear, he whispered, "Liar."

And the corner of Hermione's mouth raised.

He felt her lip curve against his skin. *Interesting.*

But a brief image of her as a schoolgirl swept away by flashes of envy imprinted in her eyes, an echo of a memory reflected in a cloudy mirror, a memory that never was, a memory that should never have been; an innocence lost, a woman too far gone her allegiance to the truth but a moment, lost, forever receding into incalculable distance.

And his heart twisted in passion, compassion and shame; his eyes tightened and closed and she felt his eyelashes as his head bowed over hers, and even as *"Why?"* knifed through her heart, her smile deepened, and she arched her back against him.

And the pain in his hip an instant reminder of the night on the stair, and a low growl escaped his throat, and his muscles surged forward and he was lost.

Her breasts pressed into the wall, aching for the weight of his hands, she inhaled, shifting her back against the length of him pressed close behind her.

His hips flexed against hers.

"Reflex?" she murmured.

"Bitch," he chuckled.

"Language," she whispered against the stone.

His hips flexed again, a deeper movement.

"Oh," she breathed.

Another chuckle.

Hermione closed her eyes. She had never done this before.

She wondered if she should tell him...

Another movement against her hips slow, intent and he stepped back only enough to turn her toward him, then leaned against her, easing her back against the wall, his fingers releasing the clasp at her throat...

... a fall of fabric, spilling to her waist...

... and in his eyes a feral glow, glimpsed hard, long, then his mouth sought hers, warm, urgent, imperative, undeniable...

... and she couldn't remember the thought she'd just lost to save her soul.

Between them, silence.

A brush of leather on skin.

A sweep of a hand down an arm, lower.

A clutch of hands on shoulders as she fell; a fall to forearms on softness as he braced, and held

A smudge of darkness in shadow.

A distance closed, a melt of snow.

Buried deep within the other; fast, strong, deliberate

A flare of shadow on stone.

A light, a heat, a darkness.

And far, far beneath the castle, deep in the ground where its great stone rested on rock far older, far more solid, a crack.

A fault.

A flaw.

Stone groaned against stone; metal anchors twisting, screaming; a slow grinding; a sudden release of heat as far beneath the castle, the ancient iron anchors of the castle flowed, molten, out of pattern, into shape, reclaiming their buried purpose, deep within stone.

Rock dislodged, fell raining into spaces long left buried, into empty caverns that had never felt summer, never seen sunlight, never known rain.

Far above, Hermione's eyes flew open.

Out of the vacuum, a wind was rising.

And in the place beneath her dreams, in his arms, held in the steel of his long, smooth body arching, straining, beyond place, out of time, she felt it rise, and, her small hands driving long, burning gouges into his pale, pale skin, she called it to her.

And out of time, it came.

Fast.

Strong.

Deliberate.

And it flew to her outstretched hands, silencing her cry of triumph as it buried itself deep within her.

He knew it was soon, knew it was impossible, knew it was now.

Lost within her body; alive without; nerves tensed, screaming with restraint, with need lost, buried, alive, he sensed its presence, its agony, its rage.

It had destroyed, and annealed, and, insatiable, promised destruction.

And he welcomed it, and, deep within her, a recognition, an acknowledgment, and it opened, yielding back, easing aside, and finally softly... finally... it closed behind him.

And far beneath the castle's bed of rock and metal, where the molten earth consumed itself in an endless cycle of birth and regret, it swirled black on its sudden cooling surface to dissolve again and again into pulsing waves of rising, insatiable hunger.

In the silent shadows of his chambers, he dredged a stillness out of memory, forcing himself to pause, to look, to breathe.

He would not be able to hold himself for long even now he could feel the fingers of darkness curling low, slow, around the base of his spine, urging him forward and she opened her eyes and it was there, in her eyes, as he'd known it must be, as he'd feared, as he'd hoped, and his breath caught, satisfied, terrified, and her eyes blinked once, long, slow, lazy, and the fingers at his spine trailed lightly down, dancing, sharp, reaching for the dark bruise at his hipbone, for the broken place in his skin...

... and the salt of her sweat entered the wound and he hissed, throwing his head back, and her hand small, slow, unbearably smooth left a blazing trail upwards, smoothing over his chest, smooth on his throat, a small pressure....

Not looking down, a dark chuckle tinged with the sparkling salt of sweat and blood, acknowledging pain shared, a confession of pain enjoyed, the release sharper, sweeter, deeper for the small delay.

"Adequate compensation, Severus?" she breathed, the lightest touch to his bruise.

His eyes stilled in anticipation, and he eased a finger into her hair on the blanket, tracing its length, a trail of barely lighter darkness against the field of black, feeling its ends twisting between his fingers.

Her fingers tensing, flexing, her nails resting gently on his abraded skin.

She felt his smile far above her, felt his breathing liquid against her in the darkness, and, with her eyes, and something more, saw the perfection of his soul gleaming whole in his eyes.

It was exactly the color of moonlight, and she reached

"Use my body," he breathed.

Her reaching paused, but she could not stop it.

He ground his hips against her deep, sharp and her aim flew aside.

"No. My body," he growled. "If you must break something, break that."

Her sharp, mocking laughter slashed through the shadows, and she reached again for his soul.

But again he moved; again, she missed.

The gleam in his eyes drew closer as he leaned down to her, his hands closing in her hair.

"Do you want it, Hermione? Do you?"

Another thrust, a cry of frustration, and she reached, again.

"No." His teeth closed on her shoulder, hard, and he tasted blood. Forcing her head aside, his breath hot, voice heavy on her ear: "Use my body."

And again.

His fists in her hair, and he wrenched her head backwards, sharply. Very quietly, "I said, 'No,' Hermione."

His lips the softest pressure at her temple, leaving the soft pink tinge of blood.

At the sharp tang of her own blood, she paused, trembling, aching, and a single hot tear slipped from her eyes, and slowly she withdrew from the Darkness and forced her rage into her hand

He knew what was coming

Hand tensing, fingers flexing, nails dragging over broken skin, fingers driving, digging deep into muscles torn and bleeding, forcing a deep, wrenching agony down through his bruise.

And he drove his hip deeper into her fingers.

It was always better when you met it halfway.

Through the blinding flash of searing white, a single thought: *Finish it now, Snape.*

And he snatched her hands away and pinned her arms over her head, stretching painfully, shoulders extended just this side of much too far, and the storm within him broke.

And as he drove her beyond the last shred of reason, Hermione thrust her bloody hand into the fabric of time, her fingers tangling in the dropped threads of their lives. She closed her fist around them, and pulled.

Hard.

Alas, Babylon

Chapter 21 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

Summary: Above and below, before and after.

A/N: My thanks to FerPorcel, Anastasia, Indigofeathers, and Melenka, for their assistance with this chapter. My profound thanks to Enigmatized for the several-hour layover in Atlanta, during which much of this took shape the old-fashioned way on actual paper.



"We have to go see the headmistress' portrait," he said quietly. "Now."

The tiny ghost nodded, and took Neville's hand.

The two drifted slowly through the ceiling.

On the Astronomy Tower, Neville and the wee ghost paused in their flight.

Neville eyed the widening crack in the tower floor. "You're sure that wasn't there before?"

Rolling her eyes at him, the smaller ghost nodded.

Something about her manner caught him off guard, and he looked at her more closely, then shook off the echo of a memory. "Come on, then." He took her hand.

As they swept through deeply angled sunlight toward the Head's Tower, their progress was so swift they seemed at times to disappear.

"Excuse me, Professor," Neville said.

Minerva's portrait opened one sleepy eye, which widened as she recognized the figure before her. Her hand raised from Hecate's back, and she glanced down at the cat in her lap then back at the speaker. She sat a little straighter, disturbing the sleeping cat, who turned to blink balefully at Neville as he hovered at eye level.

Searching her way out of sleep, Minerva peered skeptically at the earnest eyes of the tall ghost floating before her, trying to piece together the presence of the cat on her lap, her mother's ottoman, and Neville Longbottom. The three should not exist at the same time, unless...

She glanced at her hand. No ring. Of course.

"Professor, I'm sorry to disturb your sleep, but I had to speak with you. It's about Hermione."

Neville's open face was turned upward, looking seriously at the headmistress' portrait.

"Longbottom?" she mumbled vaguely.

Neville waited patiently, still holding the smaller ghost's hand.

"I believe you will find that the confusion lessens, in time," said Dumbledore's voice from its place near the ceiling.

Glancing up, Minerva saw only the limits of her portrait frame. She straightened slightly, turning an echo of her former piercing stare toward Neville. "Aren't you supposed to be a mist?"

Neville glanced the question at the smaller ghost, who nodded.

"I trust you can explain yourself?" Minerva inquired, sounding as though she were weighing how many house points to deduct for Neville's unexpected transformation.

Neville shook his head. "I can't, actually although I think it has something to do with her," Neville nodded toward the small ghost, who had retreated slightly behind him. "But that's not why I woke you."

Minerva's eyes grew clearer, and she focused on Neville. "You wished to speak with me about..."

"Hermione. She's not herself. Not who she should be, anyway."

The tiny ghost floated next to him, anchored by her hand in his, looking up calmly.

"What do you mean 'who she should be'?" Minerva's brow pinched slightly.

"Well, she isn't she's turned out..." Neville searched for the right word. "Wrong. She's turned into well, into Professor Snape." He glanced at the little ghost for confirmation, but she merely smiled at him. "Oh, of course; you couldn't know." A small smile for her, then he turned back to Minerva's portrait. "She has, hasn't she?"

Minerva turned troubled eyes back to Hecate; again, Dumbledore's voice intervened. "That resemblance has not gone unremarked."

"How do you know about her..." Minerva searched for the right word. Finally, she concluded, "... her personality?"

Neville gestured toward the tiny ghost, who was drifting toward the bookcases. "She told me."

"She 'told' you? But she doesn't speak!" Minerva looked over her glasses at the small ghost, who floated downward to examine something on a low shelf. "As far as I know, she never has... I never even knew her name," she mused.

Neville shrugged. "She can speak; I think she just chooses not to. It's not easy. Anyway, she wrote it for me."

Dumbledore arched his eyebrows. "Ghosts can't write, Mr. Longbottom."

"I know most can't, sir. I can't do it I can't even hold a quill, but..."

"Even should they have that rare talent, they freeze the ink," Dumbledore stated mildly, as the Bloody Baron drifted in through a high arch.

"I can write, Dumbledore," the Baron said. "But those few of us who can generally prefer not to."

"Prefer?" Minerva tilted her head up to try to see the Baron, but the angle was impossible.

"There is always a last letter that goes unanswered... for eternity."

Dumbledore said nothing, but the quality of his silence changed.

Neville floated backwards a bit to look up toward Dumbledore's portrait. "So what's she hiding, then?"

Dumbledore's gaze sharpened.

"She must be hiding something, something painful, to have grown so stunted."

"Stunted?" Dumbledore repeated, as though he'd never heard the word.

"It's simple Herbology, sir," Neville explained earnestly. "Something grows in the dark, something that's not supposed to, it turns out wrong. And if Hermione's acting like Professor Snape, it's just wrong. And it has to be because his example was all she had. She always did that, modeled herself on the best examples, just the way plants grow toward the light. And if he was her only source of light a bad one, as lights go well, he hid himself in the dungeons, hiding his secret allegiance to you, sir, down there in the darkness. Literally." Had Neville required air, he would have paused for breath. His brow furrowed. "So she must be hiding something something big, something dangerous or she wouldn't be acting like him. So what is it?"

The portraits said nothing.

"The war is over, isn't it?"

"It is," Dumbledore said firmly.

"Well..." A serious determination shone in Neville's translucent face. "Then who's she protecting?"

"Protecting?" Minerva echoed faintly.

"Hermione never lied to get out of trouble, at school." Neville smiled faintly. "She'd only lie to protect someone else."

Minerva looked at him sharply.

"The troll. First year." Neville's smile deepened with the memory. "She was protecting Ron and..." his face fell. "Ron. He died. I remember hearing that, I think?"

Minerva nodded.

He nodded thoughtfully. "So," he began quietly. "It has to be Harry."

The portraits were silent.

"Or maybe everyone."

Minerva blinked. "Your reasoning?"

"It's what Professor Snape did lived a lie to protect Harry to protect us all." He glanced up, almost apologetically. "I had a long time to think about that, while I was waiting for ..." He seemed to grow more solid for a moment. "Did she... what happened to Luna, Professor? I... I never heard."

"Miss Lovegood completed her education at Beauxbatons," Minerva stated. "She's an only child, and her father thought it safer, during the war."

Neville's face was alight. "She survived, then?"

Minerva nodded.

"Oh," Neville said, and something on his face made them all look away. "Oh," he said again, his voice hollow. "Right," he said finally, and mustered his focus back to the portraits. "So what do we do about Hermione?" His voice was firm, his gaze still open.

"It is our choices that make us who we are," Dumbledore intoned sadly.

Minerva's shoulders sagged.

"I'm sorry, sir," Neville countered, "that may be true, but it's not good enough. The war's over; she shouldn't lie forever. That's not life. That's not even death, not as we know it. And I'm sorry, but ..." he gestured behind him toward the little ghost, "... haven't enough of us died already?"

The little ghost did not hear him; she had floated to a rapt halt before the high shelf where the Sorting Hat rested.

She reached for the Hat with a tentative, wistful finger. She had heard about the Sorting on the train, but... she sighed, drifting backwards, her finger still extended.

The Hat opened one eye and looked at her.

She blinked.

It opened another and blinked back.

Her mouth fell into a small o of surprise, and the Hat screwed its wrinkled brim into a moldy, moth-eaten smile.

Her hand flew to her mouth and she dissolved into a blurry fit of silent giggling.

The portraits were silent as they watched her.

"She never even got to be Sorted, did she?" Neville asked quietly.

Before either portrait could answer, a low shudder arose from the foundations of the castle, forcing wide ancient cracks gone too long unnoticed. The tremors shot upwards, and towers trembled outward from their bases. Dust fell from splintering cracks that rose through columns and staircases to etch themselves across entire walls, shifting pebbles and mortar and block after heavy block.

Deep in the kitchens, the house-elves' ears flapped frantically; in classrooms and corridors, portraits clung to swaying frames; in the Head's Tower, the Sorting Hat fell off its shelf.

And the shuddering reached higher, through turret and tower to the angled rooftops, where slates clattered, skittering downward, falling as the castle strove to keep itself

upright.

And as the castle was wrenched from shifting layers of uncertain stones, every pennant snapped once in the wind then fell, and for a moment an expectant hush fell over the grounds.

And as he drove her beyond the last shred of reason, Hermione thrust her bloody hand into the fabric of time, her fingers tangling in the dropped threads of their lives. She closed her fist around them, and pulled.

Hard.

She did not know what she had done, only that it had been before her, and that she had had to do it.

Her wrists clamped firmly in Severus' hands, she wrenched her hand around and managed to reach his palm with one finger, then another.

Slowly, he became aware that she was trying to hold his hand. Trying and, within the immutable limits his grip was imposing on her, succeeding.

And although the storm roaring through his body was untamable, his skin was suddenly, intensely aflame with awareness wherever it touched hers.

Which was everywhere.

Forcing his will into his hands, he unclamped her wrists and eased his weight back to his forearms, threading her seeking fingers with his own.

Softly. Gently.

She could feel his heart pounding within his chest, and closed her eyes to listen.

At first she could not separate the sound from her own breathing, her own heartbeat, the low, dragging sweep of the blanket on the sheets.

She knew she could hear it if she lay still enough.

As she quieted, Severus drew her arms into her body, enfolding her aching shoulders in his warmth, his hands cradling her head against his shoulder.

"I want to hear your heartbeat," she whispered, her breath on his neck sending sparks dancing across his skin.

He nodded, his lips at her temple.

And as the warmth of his breath infused the small, bloody mark at her hairline, diluting it, she finally heard his heart beating heavily, warmly, in perfect rhythm; a low, aching endurance against the outer limits of her soul; endlessly hungry, endlessly patient in an endless void of time, and her soul opened, and her hand closed within his, and her eyes were washed clean of blood by the slow, simple fact of his breath on her eyelashes.

Make a wish.

And as she closed her eyes and curled small and tight against his skin in the shadows, the Darkness she had held denied within her bled away to lurk in the recesses of the shadowed ceiling.

And she exhaled softly, and Severus heard her, and, closing his eyes, rested his lips gently on her forehead.

And as inward cracks melted back to solid stone, as far underground molten iron flowed into solid shape, re-anchoring the castle to a single, primal certainty, far above, the constant wind touched each pennant gently, a single caress beckoning them, bearing them upwards to wave, bright slashes of colour against the thin winter sky.

Revelations

Chapter 22 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

Summary: Outside, a shadow falls, and in the darkness, light.

A/N: My thanks to Annie Talbot for the conversations that inform the deep structure of this story. As always, thanks to Anastasia, my beta and partner-in-crime, and docmara, my psych!beta, whose words lend clarity to my silences.



And as inward cracks melted back to solid stone, as far underground molten iron flowed into solid shape, re-anchoring the castle to a single, primal certainty, far above, the constant wind touched each pennant gently, a single caress beckoning them, bearing them upwards to wave, bright slashes of colour against the thin winter sky.

To the casual observer, nothing had changed. The castle rose in its usual way against the usual hills, the grounds rolling in their usual way to the shores of the frozen lake. Under the ice, had there been light, the waters would reflect the sky and stones that marked the permanence of Hogwarts in the usual way.

But Harry Potter was anything but a casual observer, and Hogwarts' place in his mind nothing but exact. He knew without looking the exact angles its keep, towers and turrets should form against the curve of the lake and the outlines of hills and sky, knew them as well as he knew the flecks of gold in his wife's eyes, knew which shade of gold invited which kind of kiss, to deepen to amber with burnished desire.

Walking up the lane from Hogsmeade, his attention half on the polite conversation his companion was making, his mind was open and eager for his first glimpse of his first remembered home.

But when his eyes fell on the castle, his breath hitched in his throat.

His companion heard and chuckled. "Take your breath away? It always does mine."

"Quite," Harry said, his tone affable enough, but his eyes were raking the roofline, seeking the source of his discomfiture, and he felt a slow, sinking feeling.

He couldn't put his finger on what, exactly, was causing it, but he knew the feeling well enough. Ginny was not the kind of woman to hide it when her husband disappointed her, and he had devoted the better part of twenty years to avoiding it.

And now it was exactly the same thing, only worse.

His companion's amiable chatter continued, and he tried to shake it off... perhaps his glasses... but no, he'd just charmed this pair last week... He straightened his shoulders. Wouldn't do for the youngest-ever candidate for Minister to seem dotty.

So, although he couldn't shrug off his sense that the castle was watching him, neither his face nor his tone betrayed that anything was at all amiss. But as they neared the castle, as the chill winter shadow of the outer walls fell across his face, his stomach went cold.

Hermione lay held in Severus' arms strong, safe, and deliberate.

She did not want to move.

Ever.

The Sorting Hat crumpled into shapelessness when it hit the floor, and the tiny ghost swooped after it instantly, her face a mirror of its wrinkled form. Before the collected Heads of Hogwarts could do more than register her movement, she had whisked it into her arms, where she held it carefully, her eyes crinkling as it lay unmoving.

"Put it down, child," Dumbledore's voice echoed in the uncertain silence.

Neville's face flickered with confusion, but he did not take his eyes off the little ghost.

Her eyes brightened as she cradled the still Hat in her arms, peering at where she thought its eyes had been.

"You must replace it for its magic to return," Dumbledore continued patiently.

Casting huge eyes to Neville, then to Dumbledore's portrait, she shook her head. Her long silvery hair flowed around her shoulders and fell protectively over the bundle of moldy cloth in her arms.

Minerva's portrait hissed sharply, remembering a ragged cloth blanket wrapped around an equally precious burden from decades before.

"Put it down-" Albus repeated, but Minerva interrupted, "Leave her be."

From his position far above, Albus could not see his successor's portrait, nor could she see his raised eyebrows.

"Minerva," he countered.

"No, Albus. There was a time when I begged you not to abandon a small burden at a Muggle doorstep. You ignored me then; it was part of your plan. I'll not have you force your choice on her."

"Minerva..." Albus began, completely at a loss. "That was Harry. This is a Hat."

"It's a memory, Albus," Minerva snapped. "And who better to guard one of those than that wee echo of a lass? Let her hold the thing until the governors arrive."

There was a long moment of silence during which Neville had the sense that the portraits would have glared at each other, unblinking, had they but hung differently. He glanced toward the smaller ghost, whose mouth was open slightly as she looked from Dumbledore to Minerva and back.

"I don't understand, Minerva," Albus conceded finally, shaking his head.

Her voice was only slightly softer as she agreed, "No."

"So, Minerva, any idea who it's to be, then?" The Board of Governors was filing into the Head's office, and Harry's companion from the lane chuckled as he adjusted his robes and sat.

"I'm afraid not," Minerva replied pleasantly.

The small ghost and Neville withdrew further into the curtained archway that led to the Head's private quarters.

"Larger hands than yours, eh?" The school governor chuckled. "A wizard this time, is it?"

Minerva sniffed and held her hand up in her portrait frame.

"Ah, take your point. Doesn't narrow it down much, does it?" He glanced around the office. "Where did you say it was?"

Minerva's eyes narrowed, but voice remained even. "The ring is in Madam Pomfrey's possession, as is customary."

The Bloody Baron drifted down a few feet. "The Healer does not wish to leave Professor Slughorn unattended. If you will excuse me, I shall relieve her and inform her of your arrival." He was through the floor before he finished speaking.

"Professor Slughorn?" Harry inquired of Minerva's portrait. "Is he ill?"

"Quite, I'm afraid."

"Is it... Is he..." Harry glanced at her, and she nodded, confirming what he left unsaid.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, dropping his eyes and fingering the edge of his robes. "If Madam Pomfrey has no objections, I'll stop in after the meeting, then, to say..." He swallowed. "To say goodbye." He looked at Minerva with the small hope that he had misread her nod.

"That would be good of you, Potter," Minerva said softly.

Harry sighed, and the conversation turned to inconsequential matters whilst they waited for the Healer to bring the ring.

"-vernors have arrived, Madam Pomfrey." The Bloody Baron emerged from the wall and hovered at a considerate distance.

He needn't have concerned himself with her temperature; she was bending over the still-bleeding hand of the tall, serious ghost, who, backlit by the deeply angled light from Slughorn's small window, was nearly invisible. She shook her head, still mystified, and the ghost dropped its hand and hovered at the window.

Turning to the Baron, Poppy nodded. "Thank you. I shall attend them directly." A quick flick of her wand and her hands were washed clean. Smoothing her apron, she felt the ring, heavy in her pocket, and nodded.

There in the darkness, all he could feel was her skin.

All he could smell was her hair.

And all he could taste was her blood.

He exhaled slowly.

"What is it?" she asked quietly.

And the Darkness would speak with Hermione's voice. The corners of his eyes tightened. "Nothing."

But the way she held herself changed. "What?" she asked again.

He did not know what she had done, but he seemed to feel the bones of the castle resonating firmly, deep underground, as she spoke.

"Temptation. Nothing more." Even to himself, in the darkness, his voice sounded hollow.

She tensed. "Temptation? To do what?"

Chuckling darkly, he drew her body more securely against his. "I have no designs on your soul, Hermione."

In the darkness, she smiled sadly. "Then what is it you want?"

His lips a hot trail down her throat, a sweep of hair against her collarbone. "To help you push."

"Push?" She ran her hand under his hair.

"Your temptation is not gone," he murmured, his lips against her skin. "Merely pushed aside." Another movement, another sweep of hair. "For now."

She drew a shuddering breath as his movements drew the blanket down, replacing its warmth with the chill of the air. She reached for his shoulder. "Severus, I don't want to leave."

He closed his eyes. *She doesn't mean you, Snape.*

Her voice a tight whisper: "I wish I didn't have to."

Then don't. But he said nothing. His motion ceased, and he held himself very still.

"I wish I didn't have to kill him, I mean."

He had expected that, but his heart tightened anyway. *It was worst when they used his hope.* Then, *Damn it, Snape. Focus.*

"I have to go."

He opened his eyes slowly, but in the underground chamber, the darkness was complete, and he could not see her.

"Soon, yes," he agreed smoothly, his tone betraying nothing.

"How long will it... will what we did ease the temptation?" she asked.

"Ah," he said, easing himself to his back, not releasing her fingers. "That varies, depending."

"On?" Her voice was tight.

"On how long it has been."

He felt her confusion before she spoke.

"Been... ? Since?"

He turned his head toward her. "For you. Since you last..."

"Since I... oh." Then she muttered, "Damn."

"Hermione?"

"So it depends on frequency of sexual contact, then?" Her voice was brisk.

"Yes," he said cautiously. "Satisfaction breeds temptation, Hermione. There is no breaking the cycle. One may merely interrupt it."

She released his hand, and he heard her fists clench the sheets, felt the blankets sweep aside as she swung her legs off the bed.

"My wand," she muttered, and he heard her moving around the chamber.

"Hermione," he said, in his tone a growing awareness.

"Where's my wand?"

A thump as she bumped into his desk.

"Could you please provide some light?" Her tone was clipped.

"Of course." But as he rose to comply, she made a small noise of discovery, and across the room a light flared.

He sat, leaning back on his hands, and watched her, his eyes alert as he tracked her movements, resting on the curve of her waist, the smooth lines of her shoulders, the fall of her hair on her skin.

He forgot to breathe until he found himself staring at the handle of his wand as she held it before him. "Here," she said, keeping her eyes averted.

Raising his hand to accept it, he glanced down.

The sheets were black, and his hand was red.

He froze.

She glanced at him through her hair, and followed his gaze to his hand.

Blushing furiously, she muttered, "*Evanesco*," and the blood vanished.

His hand closed around her wrist as his eyes sought hers. "Hermione."

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," she said, the words coming in a rush.

His grip tightened more than he intended, and she shook her head.

The sweep of her hair across the blackness of her robes released his voice. "If I had known, I would not have been as..." He could not finish the sentence truthfully, and his voice trailed in the shadows.

"As what? You did what you had to." Her voice was calm.

"Indeed," he nodded, but his heart would not stop beating strangely.

They looked at each other briefly then her eyes grew steely. "I don't have much time," she whispered, a hint of her voice echoing hollow in his chamber, and he released her wrist.

Picking up her shoes, she took a step toward the bed but hesitated, returning instead to the desk, using it to support herself. "It's quite all right, Severus. It had to happen sometime." Bending to slip on the second shoe, she paused. "Best not before now, considering what I might have done."

"Indeed," he said again, his face impassive as his eyes reflected the light from her wand.

"I appreciate your willingness to... for this arrangement," she said, her voice betraying a tremor of fear as the enormity of the task that lay before enfolded her in a heavy, wavering fog.

But from across his chamber, his voice curled around her, refusing to admit the distance she was erecting between them. "It suits me."

Her eyes were wide as she looked at him, but slightly glassy, and in one fluid motion he stood, balanced, poised to react should she panic. "We can discuss the details afterwards." His words were neutral, but his voice stayed soft. "Clarity is paramount, for now."

She nodded, turning away to lean on his desk. She forced herself to draw an even breath, then another, forced her eyes to focus, to trace the wood grain of the worn desk and the curling edge of the parchments that rested there.

And her eyes fell on the topmost parchment, covered in childish hand, and she read *think he likes her*.

Her breath caught, and her eyes flew to his face, and she saw it was true. Her hand rose to where he had bitten her, and she dabbed at the wound.

He could not read her expression, so his motions toward her were wary. "Your neck, Hermione. I was perhaps..."

"A bit avid," she finished for him. A hesitation; a shadow of a smile. "I didn't mind."

Her voice was so low he barely heard her, but at her smile, a tendril of warmth licked at the base of his neck. Raising his wand arm slightly, he offered, "Shall I heal it for you?"

"No," she said quickly, shaking her head.

A strand of hair caught in the blood on her neck, and he inhaled sharply, his fingers closing reflexively.

"Leave it," she said, turning to face him fully.

He looked a wordless question at her, and she smiled.

Soft.

Slow.

Ancient.

His breath caught and held in his throat.

"I didn't mind," she said firmly.

In the time before breath, beyond wish, bare beneath the falling blade of "Yes," her lips brushed his, and she reached for the door.

A ghost Harry didn't recognize hovered before him in the torchlit corridor.

Unconsciously pushing his glasses higher on his nose, Harry asked, "Excuse me... could you direct me to Professor Slughorn's chambers?"

The ghost regarded him sorrowfully.

Harry swallowed, and nodded. "I know. I... I've come to say goodbye."

The ghost gestured him toward an archway.

"Thank you," Harry said politely.

He was halfway toward the archway before he registered what he had seen. *Blood?* He turned, but the ghost was gone.

He headed down the passageway the ghost had indicated. He couldn't remember if wounds continued to bleed after death; his home was new, far too new to have any ghosts. *I'll ask the Bloody Ba-*

A door opened beside him, and, for the first time in two decades, he stood face to face with Hermione Granger.

Seeing Eyes Blind

Chapter 23 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: I'm ba-ack. Miss me?

My gratitude for all that went into this chapter transcends words, so, to Anastasia, AnnieTalbot, Psychokelli, Tinibeth, Melenka, Indigofeathers, FerPorcel, Machshefa, Arynwy, Poultrygeist, Timestep, Subversa, Bambu, Chiara, and Emmacrew, and everyone on LJ during the difficult summer of 2007, I can say only this: Impossible without you.



A door opened beside him, and, for the first time in two decades, he stood face to face with Hermione Granger.

Her mind refused to function as she took in the face of Harry Potter.

His eyes swept her face, seeking the familiar amidst the changes wrought by time.

Grey? Already? he thought, his eyes tracing a strand of silver from her brow to her neck, where it caught in a trail of *First that ghost, now Hermione?* he thought. *What's happening here?*

"You're bleeding," he heard himself saying, instinctively reaching a hand toward her.

As he moved, torchlight reflected off his glasses, obscuring her view of his eyes.

In the dim light of the corridor, they could have been any color.

Green. Or red.

Any color except blue.

Ron's eyes.

Ron.

Her eyes flew to his scar, and, unconsciously, she stepped backwards. She heard herself snap, "It's nothing."

Behind his glasses, Harry's eyes widened. His daughters had told him that her tone could cut stone, and Merlin knew, Ginny had shaken her head sadly at the transformation the girls had reported but... well, war changes people, and his family, at least, had moved on. Sad, really, but well, what was past was past.

Still, when he went to speak, he had to clear his throat. "Right, then. I'll be off; just paying my respects to Professor Slughorn."

A sharp nod. "Of course." Then, very quietly, "Oh."

Harry turned back toward her. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, but her eyes fixed again on his scar.

A hint of brittle politeness seeped into his tone. "Quite." Turning on his heel, he made to head down the slanting corridor.

From his place behind her in the shadows, Severus felt her deflate, and his lip curled. "Potter," he said, stepping closer behind her.

Hermione threw a startled glance over her shoulder and stiffened as she realized he had not dressed.

Harry stopped short, but did not turn around. "You."

"Indeed."

"I'm surprised at you, Snape," Harry said, turning slightly. "That you should have the nerve to show your face in these halls. I wonder at your welcome."

"No less than I wonder at yours," Severus said dryly, silently reaching down to unclench Hermione's hand from the folds of her robes and to draw her back against him.

Hermione inhaled audibly. *What is he doing?* she thought wildly.

"Mine?" Harry said, still refusing to look back. "And why should *my* welcome be a question at Hogwarts?"

"Times change, Potter," Severus said, "as those who align themselves too closely with the philosophy of one moment realize too late, if at all."

"Still playing both sides, I see..." But Harry faltered as he turned to face them fully.

His eyes raked the pair standing still before him, and his mouth gaped.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, dropping his gaze to the floor, blushing furiously. He had almost offered to heal her neck, still bleeding from... from *that*. "Impossible."

Hermione straightened slightly, watching him with narrowed eyes.

"I'm not seeing this," Harry growled at the floor.

"How unremarkable," Severus said evenly, not taking his eyes from Harry's discomfiture, "that you, of all people, would refuse see what is right before your eyes."

"I I..." Harry examined his shoes, searching for his reason. Finally, remembering that he was a Ministry candidate, he announced, "I won't be spoken to this way." Turning on his heel, he headed downward toward Slughorn's chambers.

But he misjudged his path in the wavering light, and he bumped his shoulder on the side of an archway. "Bloody *hell!*" he said again, slapping his palm hard against the offending column.

The stone stood implacably, unmoved.

Hermione watched him leave, then leaned back against Severus' chest. She blew her hair out of her eyes before closing them and exhaling fully. "Well, he had one thing right," she said, rather more conversationally than Severus had expected.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

She continued, "'Bloody hell' covers things quite accurately, wouldn't you say?"

He drew her closer to him and leaned his chin on her hair. "You perceived it, then."

Unbidden, a pinched, rueful smile crossed her features. "Rather. They were my closest friends for years, after all." She exhaled again, attempting to ease the tightness in her chest. "That wasn't Harry angry, Severus," she sighed.

"No," he agreed quietly, resting his chin on her hair.

"That was Ron. Embarrassed, and trying to hide it." Turning her head to rest her cheek against his skin, she swallowed hard against the lump welling up in her throat and squeezed her eyes shut. "How does Ginny not see it?"

"I should think that would be obvious."

She nodded softly. "It would seem we have two problems, then."

We?

In the silences of the flickering torchlight, they stood, unmoving, for a moment.

"You did that deliberately, didn't you," she said quietly.

A dry chuckle, utterly without mirth, into her hair. "Flushing the game."

Another long silence, during which the torches' flames settled from the movement of Harry's passing.

Finally, very softly, she said, "Thank you."

His heart threatened to choke him at her courage, and his arms strengthened around her.

"There's nothing to be done about it, of course," she said, not moving. "About Ron, I mean."

"You are the expert."

"It's not as though I can kill Harry to release Ron, Severus," she said, finally loosening herself from his embrace, turning to face him.

"Weasley knew there would be risk," Severus said carefully.

Hermione tossed her hair back. "He was a teenaged boy. I'd say his risk assessment skills were zero to none, especially where souls and Advanced Dark Arts were concerned."

Severus said nothing.

"Mine weren't spectacular either," she said, her gaze darkening as the enormity of what she had done to Ron began to sink in.

His eyes sharpened at her tone, and he placed a crooked finger under her chin, raising her face to his. "Nor were mine, Hermione, not at that age, and yet here we are." *We. Then, Later.*

"Yes. In the dungeons." Her eyes, resolute, held his. "Severus," she said, her voice dropping, "Slughorn. How much time do I have?"

His eyes flickered to the passageway down which Potter had so recently retreated. His mind raced, calculating. "Your... situation is somewhat outside of my experience."

Her laughter echoed against the stone walls. "Situation?" She laughed again, in spite of herself.

"You would perhaps prefer 'condition'?" He scowled.

"I believe the appropriate term is 'state,'" she said, brushing his diplomacy aside with a wave of her hand. A confident, dismissive gesture, one that made him draw a sharp breath a memory again, of her as a student, sure of her success at lessons, before she had learned, too sharply, to soften the distance between her intelligence and that of her classmates.

The gesture was utterly innocent of derision, of bitterness, of anger. And utterly unlike anything he had seen from the troublesome professor since returning to the castle.

She stood before him, more a victim of her own strength than he had ever been.

Untrained, untaught, untutored.

She should not have been alone.

She was still alone.

Despite what they had done, what they would continue to do, lest they lose her, unrestrained, on the world.

Troublesome, indeed.

Yet now, right now, she stood with him, her innocence seemingly restored by the loss of it.

Ironic.

An innocence whose taint would grow again, unbidden, invisible, but...

... but no longer unheeded.

He wanted to taste it again.

To taste *her* again.

Before the first blood was even dry, he knew that he would return, again, and again, to re-open the new wound to hold the old at bay.

A small sound escaped his lips.

The pain in his hip was sudden. Sharp.

He hissed, and she was looking at him.

In her eyes, all she had endured in silence.

Clear, whole, and luminous.

In her eyes, he saw it shining, and it was exactly the color of moonlight.

Bloody hell.

"Your hip?" she asked.

He nodded curtly, and she smiled knowingly, and he looked away, knowing it was coming.

Delay made it all the sweeter.

And he felt rather than saw the shadow return.

Yes. "Hermione, I " he began, his voice hoarse.

She shook her head. "Later."

But later was now, and, closing his eyes before he turned to her, he closed the distance between them with a breath.

As his lips met hers, she murmured, "Time, Severus?"

His hands threaded into her hair as his lips moved down her throat. "Not enough."

Easing her head back into his hands, she whispered, "Liar."

But her hand dropped to his hip, and she pulled him to her in the open archway, and, at his groan, she felt her smile darken, and she knew it was true.

Neville smiled as he passed them. So, it was true, then.

Politely, he averted his eyes, and the torchlight remained steady.

In the curtained alcove off the Head's Office, the little ghost was staring at the Sorting Hat, still held cradled in her arms.

The old portrait had said to put it back that its magic wouldn't return unless she did.

But the new one had said she didn't have to, at least not right away.

Maybe they'd forget she had it.

Maybe they'd forgotten already.

Maybe.

She sighed, and the curtain fluttered slightly at her breath.

She put her hand over her mouth and waited, but no sound came from the outer office.

She held the Hat in both arms.

She'd never been able to carry solid objects through walls.

She wasn't sure it could be done.

But there was no other way out no other way, except past the portraits, so she settled herself in the air.

She smiled.

It didn't matter.

She didn't have anywhere to be.

Exodus

Chapter 24 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: I am indebted to Neville for part of this chapter; he will not leave me alone, even when I should be sleeping. My thanks to Indigofeathers and Annie Talbot, for betaing, and, in advance, to FerPorcel, for translating. (Have fun with this one, Fer.)

And, as always, my humble gratitude to Anastasia, my partner in dark architecture. She took the day off from beta duty, but, as ever, her words inform every shadow and stone.

A special thanks to Indigofeathers for recommending the music that has provided the soundtrack for Chapters 23 (Within Temptation's "Our Solemn Hour") and 24 (Within Temptation's "What Have You Done?" [Harry and Neville] and Nightwish's "Ghost Love Score" [Hermione and Severus]). Damn, woman.

Summary: Forward through time, beneath her dreams, beyond her name.



It didn't matter.

She didn't have anywhere to be.

"Harry?"

Neville's pale form refracted the torchlight outside Slughorn's chambers into a bright haze, and Harry paused, blinking at the sudden change from the hushed shadows inside.

"Neville?" Harry said, his eyes widening. "Is it you?"

Neville nodded. "It seems that I'm back now." He cocked Harry a crooked smile. "You're older."

Harry nodded, still unable to believe he was seeing his old friend. "Yeah." He returned Neville's smile. "Yeah, I am."

Neville's smile widened, and he said, "Awkward, isn't it."

Harry nodded again, shivering a little bit as Neville drifted into place next to him.

"Whoops. Sorry about that." Neville adjusted his distance. "Better?"

"Yeah... thanks." Harry pushed his glasses up farther on his nose, raking his hair back. "And yeah. Awkward."

"It's okay, Harry. It's not so bad, really." Neville's glance fell upon Harry's scar.

"Why does everyone keep doing that today?" Harry muttered.

"Sorry," Neville replied easily. "I just wondered if it was still there."

"It is," Harry replied, more irritably than he'd intended.

Neville drifted backward a bit.

Harry frowned. "Sorry."

Neville laughed. "Lot of apologising we're doing."

Harry laughed too, but uncomfortably. "I just feel like... I don't know. Like I should apologise for living, or something."

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Neville nodded. There was no censure in his tone, just acceptance. "So, you and Ginny... ?"

Harry nodded, and the two moved up the corridor, Harry enthusiastically describing his family, Neville listening only a little wistfully.

When they arrived at the passage that marked the most direct route back to the Entrance Hall, Harry paused and shook his head.

Neville glanced up the rejected passage. "Yeah, we probably shouldn't go that way."

Harry's response was a measuring glance.

The ghost's face was unclouded, as open in death as it had been in life, and Harry frowned.

"Harry?" Neville asked quietly.

Harry walked a few more paces, slowly, then stopped and leaned against the wall. "Neville, do you have any idea what happened to Hermione?"

Neville paused and hovered, looking at the man his friend had become. "Well... not all of it, no. I mean, I was already dead, wasn't I?"

Harry looked sharply at him.

"Before the war ended, I mean," Neville explained.

Harry shook his head. "I don't follow. She seemed all right, after."

"Did she?"

"Well, she was quieter, maybe, but..." Harry opened his hands vaguely. "She was Head Girl, and studying, as always, and I think she started teaching, really, before we finished." He shrugged, then continued, "Gin was really hurt about the wedding."

Neville looked at him blankly.

"She didn't come. Sent the invitation back. Gin was really upset."

Neville drew in a breath, angling himself awkwardly in the air. He righted himself, but his expression remained troubled. "Ginny wasn't the only one," he said quietly.

Harry looked at him for a moment then nodded. "No. We couldn't figure out what we'd done."

Neville tilted his head, bobbing slightly. "Harry," he said seriously, "I don't think you did anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she did. Hermione, I mean. During the war."

Harry shook his head. "She would have told us. We were her best friends."

Neville looked at him, confused.

"Me and Gin. The three of us were always together."

"Four."

The word was out before Neville could stop it, and a shadow fell across Harry's face.

"Sorry," Neville said softly.

Harry nodded and looked at the wall, where tiny inclusions were reflecting the torchlight. He watched the light play on the stone for a while before responding. "It's okay. It's just even though it's been so many years, it's still there." Still staring at the stone, he murmured, "You'd think I'd be used to his being gone by now."

Neville said nothing, drifting slightly in a breath of air that stirred in the corridor.

Harry shook his head. "Even if she has some big, dark secret, that doesn't explain what she's doing with Snape."

To Harry's astonishment, Neville laughed, and Harry's eyes flew to his former school friend's face.

"It's disgusting."

Neville just smiled, shaking his head slightly.

"It's sick, I tell you," Harry insisted. "And her a teacher now. What does she think she's doing?"

Neville only smiled, gesturing to the nearly empty halls. "It's the hols, Harry."

"Her behavior is reprehensible," Harry stated flatly.

"They like each other. It's normal."

"It's not," Harry objected. "You haven't seen them." He hesitated only a moment before confiding, "She was bleeding, Neville."

"I know. I passed them on my way to find you." Neville looked at Harry, and the smile left his face as he realized his former friend was really troubled. "Sure, it is a little strange to see Professor Snape with Hermione, but Harry, he's not her teacher any more. She's at least forty years old. What's the problem?"

"He murdered Dumbledore."

"He served his time, Harry, and besides, his punishment was shameful." Neville shook his head. "Shameful. He didn't deserve it."

Harry's eyes blazed. "He deserved worse."

Neville sighed. Knowing it was probably hopeless he tried again. "They like each other, Harry. Other than age, there's no difference between them" he gestured toward the other passageway "and you and Ginny."

Harry drew himself to full height, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "There's every difference in the world. When I kiss my wife, she doesn't bleed." With that, he turned and stalked up the corridor.

After a few moments, Neville drifted thoughtfully after him.

The Bloody Baron hovered in Slughorn's chambers, floating idly in the current left by the closing door.

He'd never liked the Potter boy, but he could not fault the boy's sense of duty.

If there was a right thing to do, the Potter boy would do it.

Boy?

He bobbed pensively.

Well, they were all children, these live ones.

Still...

There had been nothing particularly inspired about Potter's brief expression of thanks to the professor's inert form, but he couldn't fault him.

The Bloody Baron came to stillness by the side of Horace's bed.

The shriveled flower stem lay stark and brown against the smooth white coverlet.

The Baron looked at it without any particular interest.

It would end as it would end.

Outside, the moon was rising.

A rustling from one of the frames above roused Minerva from her nap. Startled, Hecate jumped off of her lap and padded out of the frame.

"Minerva?" Albus' voice floated downward, devoid of any tonal indication of mood or purpose.

Her throat felt dry.

Nonsense. I'm dead. How can my throat feel dry?

Out of habit, she cleared her throat softly before responding. "What is it?"

"May I join you?"

She straightened in her chair and smoothed her robes. "Of course." She examined her surroundings. "But Albus," she warned, her steel-grey eyes glinting with an energy she'd not know for years.

"Yes?" More cautious this time.

A satisfied twitch of her mouth. *Good.* "If you're planning to argue with me, you will want to bring your own chair. I seem to have just the one, and this could take quite a while."

A sound of dry leaves drifting over parchment that might have been a chuckle. "Indeed."

A moment's delay, and Albus Dumbledore joined her in front of her fire.

He'd been dreading this argument for years.

While he was still making himself comfortable, Minerva cast an unerring first stone. "If a paradigm shifts and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?"

In the very deepest level of the castle, Severus and Hermione slipped through darkness, strong, certain, driven within the other until the only call of reason they heard was their own.

His body seeking deeper purchase within an endless receding heat, hands braced against the bones of the castle as again and again she sought his soul.

And he denied her nothing... nothing but the one thing she sought.

His brow glistened with his efforts at control. His voice harsh against her neck, "You shall not have that, Hermione."

And, despising her desire even as she was held powerless against it, she cried out in horror, in madness, in shame.

Smooth against the surface of time, pinioned between denials and demands, enflamed by demands met and desires denied, pinned between the heat of his skin and the cool, smooth, unbearably permanent column at her back, from beneath her horror, her madness, and her shame, Hermione opened her eyes and found herself falling.

And he was watching her, and in his eyes, his soul gleamed, achingly perfect, controlled, demanding, and...

Easy. So easy...

And she released her hold on his hips and relaxed her head against the stone.

The burning in his hip suddenly ice where her hands had been...

Held between the castle and her former teacher, she whispered, "Close your eyes."

A flicker of incomprehension, of hesitation, and he sought a reason to deny her small, quiet request...

... any reason...

"Please."

And he closed his eyes, and, released at last from the reflection of his soul, Hermione pressed her lips to the corner of his eye and, with the last shred of awareness, whispered, "Bring me back?"

A sound half groan, half growl from deep in his throat...

"Can you?" Her breath ragged.

He tensed, his skin salty at her lips.

"Can you?" she asked, and he felt her poised to let go, to fall into the darkness that spoke within her veins and echoed in the dim recesses of the ancient stone.

His voice a low, rasping rumble. "I can." *If I want to...*

Weightless over the edge, she dared him. "Tell me to do it."

Their breathing a straining heartbeat in the waiting shadows...

He tasted copper, and rock, and dust. "Go."

Falling, she beckoned, "Come with me."

... and the Darkness spoke with Hermione's voice, and his fingers clenched in mortar and they fell in a shower of shattering stone.

The last sound he knew was her laughter.

In the dungeons, anonymous in darkness, the two through whose blood the bones of the castle flowed fell forward through time and found it meant nothing.

Below, far beneath the feet of the castle, the echoes of Hermione's laughter fell into molten depths that flowed and cooled and darkened and flowed again, ever hungering, endlessly silent.

Lamentation

Chapter 25 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to Anastasa, AnnieTalbot, IndigoFeathers, Macshefa, and FerPorcel for their assistance with this chapter. Special thanks to AnnieTalbot for beta duty, and to Hans Zimmer for writing "Up Is Down."

Summary: In which some things resolve, and others fray, and still others must wait.



... and the Darkness spoke with Hermione's voice, and his fingers clenched in mortar and they fell in a shower of shattering stone.

The last sound he knew was her laughter.

...

Below, far below the feet of the castle, beneath the solid Highland bedrock, the echoes of Hermione's laughter fell into molten depths that flowed and cooled and darkened and flowed again, ever hungering, endlessly silent.

The echoes of her laughter died away as she drew her legs under her, scraping on the fallen stone, and she arose, hair wild, her robes fallen from one shoulder.

Stepping over the man with whom she had fallen, she moved through the corridors, the torchlight flaring into her eyes, her vision fragmenting and waning as she obeyed a single impulse, a single call...

She did not remember...

Darkness.

She knew its name, and, in its depths, she need not remember that she'd ever known her own.

Long she wandered the corridors, moving in a memory of shadow long-denied, her arbitrary turnings matching an arbitrary sequence of long-ago events leading her farther into the past, leading her deeper, to depths far below her very soul, all the while reaching for a silence in which she could finally, finally be free.

In her blood, a wind was rising; beyond the limits of her skin, the torchlight bowed back, drew aside, parting before it.

The ghosts sensed her passing and vanished into corners, through stone, losing themselves in the walls.

She moved in shadow, as shadow, and even the dead gave way before her.

Only their eyes could pierce the darkness she had drawn around herself. Only they knew that she went to kill, and they gave her place whether because they remember, or because they are curious and some time after they followed.

She remembered him falling. Long before, another had fallen.

She remembered falling with him, as she had fallen, long before.

She checked her wand, and this time, although she closed her fingers around it with the brittle strength of old worked iron, this time, she did not break it.

She had something to do.

And after many more turnings, and many moments spent poised in timeless freedom between the memory of what once was and the knowledge of what was now, after, long after she left the darkened man lying somewhere behind her in a pile of fallen stone, Hermione disturbed the torchlight outside the chambers that housed the remains of what had once been Horace Slughorn.

The Bloody Baron looked up from his vigil as the strip of light around the door went out, although whether it died or had merely been eclipsed, he did not know.

The door opened silently, and a small, slight figure slipped in.

She comes in darkness, he thought, drawing back reflexively, although he knew she could not see him, and could not harm him if she did.

Turning slowly, quietly, a pale hand emerging from her dark robes as she eased the latch back into place.

A pause, and had he but had breath to hold, the Bloody Baron would have done and then the hand turned the key.

Only a ghost could have heard the slight touch of metal to metal as the bolt slipped home.

Only a ghost could have heard the faint rasp of metal as the key was withdrawn from the lock.

And only a ghost could now enter the chamber in which Hermione stood.

As she pocketed the key, Hermione's hair rippled away from her face, and her robes slipped past her shoulders in a soft rustle of black silk.

In the dim light cast by the Bloody Baron's misty glow, her skin was the color of a shadow, cast by moonlight, on the snow.

The Bloody Baron eased away from the bed, his gaze wary on the professor's hands as she raised her head and fixed her eye on the still form on the bed before her.

The small window high in the wall gave a slight rattle as a tendril of wind twined around the base of the tower that marked Slughorn's resting place, but Hermione paid it no heed.

Her eyes raked the pale coverlet, tightening as she spotted a single, deeper shade that marked the presence of the flower stem. Her mind shrieked in scorn at such wasted sentiment, and she reached into her robes and withdrew her wand.

Mine, she thought. *All that you were, all that you are which isn't much, not really all mine. It is mine to do, it is mine to decide.*

The mind of Horace Slughorn made no response; it could no more awaken to her presence than his exhausted form could prevent the end she had long carried with her.

The Baron watched, mesmerized, as her wand traced a pattern in the air.

He frowned. Her movement formed no spell he recognised.

So focused was he on following the movement of her wand that when she spoke, he did not at first realise that there were words in the sound.

"I know you can hear me," she said, her voice low and even. "I know you can, you see well, no, you don't see, really, do you? Not any more." Her laughter a sliver of ice in the chill of the dungeons, breaking away once again to a blanketed silence.

She spoke again. "I know you can hear, you see. Ron tells me you can. He tells me, in his own way, always. Every night." She moved a step closer to the bed, trailing her free hand against the coverlet.

"But Ron is dead,' you protest." Another shard of laughter fell in the deadened room. "Yes, he is. And yet " Her hand trailed aimlessly on the coverlet. " yet he's not. No, not really." She shook her head, her hair a mockery of sadness against the endless darkness of her robes. "A terrible thing, it was. Terrible." She looked at Slughorn's unmoving form for a long, slow moment, and the Bloody Baron watched as some last warmth caught, held, and faded, replaced in their brown depths with broken steel.

"I did it," she breathed. "I snapped his soul he knew I could. 'Give it to Harry. Replace Voldemort, in Harry, with me,' he said." A shudder under her skin, of horror, of ecstasy, she didn't know didn't care. "Oh, the sound it makes, when a soul breaks." Her hand stopped on the coverlet, and her tone quickened with curiosity. "Did you hear it? When I broke yours? I always wondered if Ron heard... he's never told me..." Her voice trailed away in a low whisper, and her fingertip brushed the flower stem. "Did you hear it? Did you"

Slughorn made no answer.

She placed her palm over flower stem, and she leaned over Slughorn's body, slowly, closer, until her breathing moved his hair on the pillow. "Could you hear it, Horace, when I broke your soul?"

A caress away from his cheek, her wand resumed its tracery in the air.

The Bloody Baron's eyes narrowed.

"I asked you a question, Horace," she breathed, pressing on his chest.

Some air moved through his body at the pressure, and his body sighed.

Hermione frowned.

Deep in her mind, she felt the edges of the stasis spell Snape had placed on the body, and she reached for its edges and pulled.

Snape's spell unraveled into nothingness around her.

And then she could sense the fragment of Slughorn's soul a pale, insubstantial afterimage, the misty halo edge of what had once been fully formed, round, and perfect, and as she felt it, a wispy corona around a permanent, empty center, the ghosts of Hogwarts castle slipped into the chamber, one by one, drawing around her in her darkness over Slughorn's recumbent form with a hazy, indistinct glow that only they themselves could see.

The Bloody Baron took automatic tally as their numbers swelled to a brightness that was, to his eyes, almost unbearable.

Hermione saw nothing but the frail empty circle of a once-human soul.

All the castle's ghosts were somehow in the chamber.

All, that is, but two.

The stones of the castle had carried the rasp of the key in the lock far below to the alcove in the Head's office. The tiny ghost heard it and clutched the Sorting Hat, burying her face in its moldy folds.

In the Great Hall, Harry Potter was left suddenly alone as Neville veered sharply upwards, disappearing through the hazy recesses of the vaulted ceiling.

Hermione's hands traced the air where, in her mind, she felt the remnant of Horace Slughorn. She took her wand and placed its tip within the vacuum at its center, stirring it slowly in the emptiness that rested there.

At first the movement was a slow circle, and none of the ghosts dared move.

But the movements grew sharper, and curves grew into lines grew into a sudden, jagged series of lines followed by a series of low, jerky curves, ending with a small, punctuated pause.

The ghosts waited.

Nothing happened.

"Is that a spell?" one of the student ghosts asked quietly.

"No," the Baron murmured. "At least not one that I recognise."

The ghosts watched intently as Hermione, unhearing, her gaze fixed on an empty space of air, sat absolutely still, then they moved closer as her wand, seemingly of its own volition, began the series of movements once more.

"I don't want to go down there," Neville said softly, floating through the curtains to where the tiny ghost sat clutching the Hat.

She shook her head, her hair swirling silently around her shoulders.

"I'd rather sit here with you," he said, and eased himself to floor level beside her. "Is that okay?"

She peeked out at him through her hair.

He met her gaze. "Did you hear?"

She nodded.

"Do you have any idea what's happening?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head again, burying her face back in the Hat.

He sighed, and slipped slightly into the floor.

After a moment, a small hand appeared within his and drew him out.

"Thanks."

She nodded, regarding him seriously for a moment before turning back to the Hat.

It didn't look back.

She traced where its eyes should have been with a careful, insubstantial finger.

"You were never Sorted, were you?"

She closed her eyes.

"Well," Neville said, shifting his position slightly, "what do you say we do it now?"

Her eyes flew open, glancing to the inert Hat and back to Neville.

He grinned. "Dumbledore seemed to think it's sort of broken at the moment, so what can it hurt?"

She stared at the Hat in her hands then looked questioningly at him.

He smiled. "Professor McGonagall placed it on our heads. I'd do it for you, but I can't hold onto it."

She hesitated.

"Well, go on."

She put the Hat on her head. It slipped down over her eyes and rested on her shoulders.

Hermione's wand made that final, punctuated movement again, and her hand stopped in the air for a moment before falling back to the coverlet.

"You all must have thought me quite mad," she said, her tone so conversational that a few of the ghosts started. "Afterwards, I mean. Long after. I don't suppose you all noticed anything, initially. It's possible, so very possible to just go through the motions, and everyone will think everything is fine, getting back to normal, to the way things *should be*." She spat the last words, and several of the younger ghost flinched, drifting backwards through their elders. "I just..." Her hand clenched around her wand, and another shard of laughter fell and shattered on the stone. "I couldn't bear it couldn't bear to see their children, those children with those eyes, staring at me, every day, an accusation sitting in the fourth row of desks, every day their trivial dramas, their arrogant ignorance that plagued my every move, my every step. I drove them out away all of them, as quickly and efficiently as I knew how. I'd learned, after all, from the best. And then then I didn't have to remember. I could not remember. Not think. Not be forced to think. And all of them with their happy smiles, their promising futures, their little happy lives... all of them ignorant, all blissfully, *stupidly* ignorant of the fact that nothing ever happens without some cost. *Nothing.*"

There was no movement in the chamber.

"The cost was nothing. Nothing at all. Everything *everyone* was *fine*." Her vision blurred. "Except..."

She shook her hair out of her face. "I'm here to kill you, you know," she said, standing abruptly from the bed.

The ghosts drew back.

"It's the right thing to do." She laughed sharply.

But she didn't move.

"For it to work, I have to want to. That's the way that spell works, they say."

She drew her breath and raised her wand.

"Which is fine, except except I don't want to."

"What do you want?" one of the ghosts asked, moving forward through the palely glowing circle.

She didn't hear him.

"I didn't want to do it to Ron, either. Oh, I didn't kill him, of course, but I didn't want..." her voice trailed off. "It was the right thing to do," she said, her tone flat, monotonous with the final voicing of endless internal repetition. "It is the right thing to do."

She leveled her wand at Horace's heart and stood poised on the edge of speech.

Then her wand fell.

"That's not a good enough reason, not any more. It was, once."

And the darkness left her side and she stood, just Hermione, at Professor Slughorn's bedside, and soon her wand began to move again against the coverlet in those same movements, tracing...

Writing, the Baron realized, his eyes following the letters she traced.

And as she finished, again, the ghost who had spoken reached out and covered Hermione's hand with his own.

She didn't feel it, just sat staring at her wand tip moving on the coverlet as though within its movement she would find some answer.

And as she again made the final point, she felt something touch her hand.

It was warm.

She looked down.

Blood.

Her eyes widened.

Another drop.

And another.

And another.

Hermione stared at the blood spattering on her hands, and leaped back from the bedside and fumbled blindly with the lock, fleeing the chamber.

As the bleeding ghost followed her echoing retreat, one of the student ghosts asked, "What was she doing?"

"Writing," the Baron answered.

"Writing? What?"

"Her name."

"Anything?" Neville asked, as the wee ghost removed the Hat from her head.

She shook her head and tried to smile.

She hadn't expected anything. Not really.

"Well, Dumbledore did say it had to be replaced for its magic to return. Why not put it on the shelf and see?" Neville glanced meaningfully toward the curtains that separated the alcove from the main office. "They can't stop you, can they?" he whispered.

The tiny ghost placed the Hat very carefully on the shelf, and floated backwards to stand with Neville.

One eye blinked open.

"Well, child, what are you waiting for? We haven't got all the time in the world." The Hat twisted its mouth into a broad, lopsided laugh. "Except, of course, we do."

She reached for the Hat and in an instant the world went dark as it settled itself onto her shoulders.

"Hmmm... well, you're dead, of course, but that poses no real problems," the Hat began.

The smaller ghost giggled audibly, and Neville floated backwards several paces in astonishment.

"It's easier to speak when you've something to ground you, isn't it?" the Hat continued conversationally.

The little ghost nodded happily, and the Hat bobbed precariously. "Easy, girl! I've no wish to fall again, even if I've no real feelings."

The tiny ghost giggled again, but remained obediently still.

"Hmm... don't speak much, do you..."

She shook her head carefully.

"Of course, of course... and what's this?"

An image of the teacher formed in her mind.

"O, ho," said the Hat, and what passed for its eyebrows flew up.

Neville would have given much to know what it was saying to her.

The Hat continued, "So, you're thinking Slytherin, because you like the teacher, eh?"

The ghost nodded once, carefully.

"But my dear, she wasn't in Slytherin House at all... she was in Gryffindor."

The little ghost's eyebrows flew up in surprise.

"Spend a lot of time with her, do you? And you never knew she was a Gryffindor? Interesting... and troubling, very troubling. No, not you, dear. Let me see... no, you're definitely not a Slytherin..." The hat chuckled as it continued to read the small ghost. "Oh, yes, *he* was most definitely in Slytherin, although he was a challenge... could have gone anywhere, really... viciously loyal, that one... and yes, I see he's been worried about her too, eh? Hm... I almost placed him in..." It chuckled again. "Quite setting a cat amongst the pigeons, to loose that one in Hufflepuff."

The little ghost frowned.

"Hm, yes... very interesting... not often I get this sort of feedback, you know..."

The ghost waited patiently.

The Hat gave itself a small shake. "Right. Well, we're supposed to be Sorting you, then. Best get on with it. Hm... yes... right."

At the Hat's sudden cry of "Hufflepuff!" Neville shot backwards into some bookshelves from which he had a bit of difficulty extricating himself.

When he finally emerged, the small ghost beamed at him proudly, and he found he had to clear his throat before congratulating her.

She took his hand and, waving to the Sorting Hat, drew him urgently through the floor.

She knew now where she had to be.

Hermione was staring at the blood on her hands in the torchlight when she heard a small droplet hit the floor.

She looked up. She couldn't tell where it was coming from, but her eye moved from one drop to the one before it, spreading darkly into the stones.

The sad-eyed ghost hovered before her, watching her, as the blood from his hand fell to the stones.

A very fine trembling started in her limbs as she followed the droplets back into Slughorn's chamber, where they ended at the bedside.

I'm going mad, she thought wildly, raising her wand. *It's the right thing to do.*

Closing her eyes, she whispered, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

And the bleeding ghost stood sad-eyed in a flash of green.

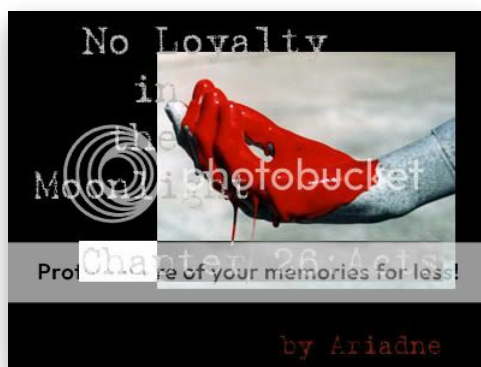
Acts

Chapter 26 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

Summary: In which acts lead to consequences, and consequences to acts.

A/N: Once again and always, I am indebted to Anastasia for arranging occasion to pick up this story where I let it lie so many months ago, and to whatever forces conspired to create the island of New Providence, where the last chapter and most of this were written. I am also grateful to Annie Talbot for the conversations which continue to illuminate this story and for beta duty, and to Hans Zimmer for writing the soundtrack that plays as I write, a soundtrack Muggles commonly call *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. To those of you who are still reading so long after JKR finished writing her stories, a flourishing bow of humble gratitude. :touches heart: :twirls quill: ~ Ari



Closing her eyes, she whispered, "Avada Kedavra."

And the bleeding ghost stood sad-eyed in a flash of green.

"Under usual conditions, the human soul will adhere to its material housing. The metaphysical rationale for this is obvious; any O.W.L. holder in Transfiguration may be applied to for an explanation of the basics. For a more exhaustive interrogation of the underlying principles, I refer my readers to the work of Sir Isaac Newton (Order of Merlin, 1st Class), particularly his First Law, which reads, in part, as follows:

"An object at rest tends to stay at rest and an object in motion tends to stay in motion with the same speed and in the same direction..."

"The dearth of theoretical inquiry into the kinesthematic bond between soul and housing provides entrée for this study, which seeks to advance current discourse by proposing several possible outcomes should the usual mechanics of that bond be interrupted via means necessarily extraordinary or, in Newton's terms, '...unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.' In the absence of controlled experimentation (an absence likely to continue in perpetuity, given the scarcity of voluntary subjects), the hierarchical merits of said outcomes may only be ascertained and evaluated according to internal merit and established best scholarly practice. Nonetheless, and despite the limited practical value (limited by virtue of the intrinsic limitations of purely theoretical inquiry), such inquiry is essential to redress (~~stricken out:~~ widespread and willful misunderstanding) (~~stricken out:~~ the vacuum at the center of wizarding culture) the unfortunate lacunae in current discourse, lacunae predicated on adherence to assumptions that have gone too-long unexamined.

"I shall therefore begin my inquiry with an etymological examination of the term 'Horcrux'..."

from "Of Horcruxes, Arithmancy, Etymology and Newtonian Kinetics," work-in-progress, Prof. H. Granger (Order of Merlin, 3rd Class), Arithmancy Mistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

In the rubble of the fallen archway, a pale hand twitched in the dust, reaching for the companion who was no longer there.

A moment's time brought him to his feet. A whisper of command and he was enveloped in his cloak.

Another moment's hesitation, and the clash of his boots cast eddies of dust, scattering bits of stone to clatter into corners as his cloak furled around the corner, leaving only a trail of footsteps heading away from where two had once had lain.

The Bloody Baron looked up at his entrance, taking in the glittering sharpness in his eyes as they swept the chamber.

"She's gone."

Brought up short by the voice, Severus went absolutely still. "And?" he inquired, his tone bland.

The Baron merely gestured toward figure the bed.

Two steps brought Severus to Slughorn's bedside, and he felt for the edges of his stasis spell.

"She banished it easily, Severus. Very easily."

Only a lifetime of duplicity kept how troubling he found that fact from registering on his face. "And him?" Severus nodded curtly toward Slughorn's body.

"She tried."

"Which spell?"

"The obvious one." The Baron floated a bit closer, catching the torchlight from the corridor in his wavering form. "It had no effect, of course."

Blast.

"Apparently the good professor did not stop to think. She might as well have tried to kill a ghost."

Severus said nothing.

The Baron considered the figure on the bed. "Unusual for her, wouldn't you say?"

A glint deep in Severus' eye betrayed his agreement as his mind raced. "And her demeanor?"

The Baron looked at him blandly. "Really, Severus. One would imagine you, of all wizards, would need not inquire."

Blast, he thought again, even as some corner of his mind acknowledged the Baron's allusion to the usual methods of controlling Dark impulses. "Quite," he said, scowling.

He nodded curtly to the Baron and swept out of the chamber.

"Harry? Is that you?"

Harry Potter looked up the stairs in the Entrance Hall, where his footsteps had taken him automatically after Neville's abrupt departure.

"Hannah?" he said in mild surprise, seeing the Librarian heading toward him.

"Oh, Harry, thank goodness you're here." Joining him at the foot of the stairs, Hannah cast her eyes about sharply.

He nodded. "I was here for the meeting the Board of Governors' invitation bodes well for their confidence in my candidacy, I think." He smiled genially, but Hannah hardly seemed to be listening.

"Did you feel it?" she asked, still glancing about her as if expecting he couldn't think what.

"Feel what?" he said politely.

She turned wide eyes to him. "Something's shaken the castle, Harry. It happened earlier, before you'd have arrived, I think, and then again, just now. Whatever it was knocked the glass loose from half the windows in the Library. You *must* have felt it." She searched his face beseechingly.

But he merely looked at her and shook his head. "I was in the dungeons, paying my respects to "

"You have to call the Ministry," she interrupted.

"The Ministry? Whatever for?" He examined her face, trying to remember if she had always been this pale.

"Please, Harry. Please," she said, her voice rising. "You have to help us."

"Hannah, steady on you're trembling. Here, come with me we'll have the house-elves bring you some tea." Reaching his arm to steady her, he started to turn for the Great Hall, but she shook his arm away.

"It's Professor Snape. And..." she shuddered, before continuing, "and *her*. You have to do something." Grasping his sleeve, she drew him toward the faculty lounge, her words continuing in an incoherent tumble.

Surreptitiously, Harry checked his wristwatch as he followed the terrified woman. Several of his former classmates had been not quite right afterwards. He'd not heard Hannah was among their number, but well, he was already late for the family dinner. A few more minutes wouldn't hurt...

As their footsteps echoed up the marble stair, Severus Snape eased his way around the entrance to the dungeons. *Bloody hell.*

He waited until he heard the door to the lounge echo through the upstairs corridor, then took the stairs toward Hermione's chambers two at a time.

She had returned to her chambers with no memory of her path there. The door closed with the familiar echoes, the wind at the window whistled in the usual way through the familiar crack, and her books sat in their customary places on her bookshelves.

After a moment, she twisted her hair up in an automatic gesture, waved an absent wand at the grate on the hearth, and, reaching for her bag, sat in her usual chair.

Within moments, her quill was scratching on parchment in its usual way.

Everything was in its place, exactly as it should be, but for the single fact that in the washbasin the water was stained the palest pink.

"But... Hannah, she had a weak heart," Harry explained patiently, for what felt like the tenth time. "Madam Pomfrey told the Board of Governors so. As I've told you, I was there."

Something blazed in Hannah's eyes. "I know they had some part in it. And I know *he* was down with Professor Slughorn, as well. He should have died days ago. Poppy told Minerva so, and *I* was present for *that*." She swallowed hard, glancing around at the walls as though expecting them to crumble. "Please, Harry. Floo the Ministry. They'll listen to you."

"But "

"Please," Hannah begged. "You have to help you're the only one left who can."

After a long pause, during which he could not look away from Hannah's imploring face, he nodded and strode to the fireplace. Tossing a handful of powder into the flames, he said, "Ministry of Magic."

After a moment, Percy Weasley's face appeared in the flames. "Harry? What are you doing at Hogwarts? The meeting concluded an hour since."

"Hullo, Perce terribly sorry to bother you, but apparently there's lingering some question as to the exact cause of the Headmistress' death?"

Percy shook his head. "The paperwork's all in order. I received the memo from the Bureau of Magical Records an hour ago."

"Could you double-check, just to be certain?"

Percy peered at Harry then looked down. Hannah heard a shuffling as he consulted some parchments. "Yes, right here. There's nothing amiss in the paperwork, Harry. The school's Healer made the initial diagnosis several years ago and signed it off this afternoon."

"Right, then. It's all in order?"

"Quite."

"Well, then, thanks I'll "

"And Slughorn?" Hannah hissed at Harry's elbow.

Harry looked at her, confused, but relayed the question to Percy.

Percy adjusted his glasses. "Harry, I must remind you that you're not a school official, nor are you connected in any capacity with the Ministry not yet, in any case and therefore you are in no way authorised to initiate inquiries on behalf of the school. McGonagall's death is a matter of public record, but any other inquiries must come through official channels."

Harry nodded apologetically. "I'm really grateful for your checking, Perce. Will we be seeing you on Molly's birthday, then?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Regards to Ginny." Percy closed the connection.

Harry turned to Hannah. "That's all they'll tell me. And I'm afraid I really must be off Ginny's held dinner far longer than she was expecting to. I'll just have the house-elves fetch you some tea, shall I? Before I go?"

Without waiting for a reply, he called down for tea, but the request was an automatic, recorded refusal: "Only faculty and members of staff are authorised to order from the kitchens. Further attempts at unauthorised orders will be reported to the student's Head of House."

He gave a short laugh. "Sorry. I forgot myself."

After waiting for Hannah to make the request herself, he left her seated by the fire and made his way out of the castle, still chuckling.

But as the great doors closed behind him, he felt lighter. He had never before felt relieved to leave Hogwarts, but with his thoughts already turning toward home, it didn't

occur to him to wonder why.

Neville's eyebrows arched as he and the smaller ghost drifted downward through the ceiling. Turning to her, he opened his mouth to ask why they were there.

She put her finger to her lips.

The knock was repeated several times before she heard it. Frowning, she raced to the end of her sentence, capturing the thought entirely before rising to answer.

Hannah did not wait for her tea before tossing an overlarge handful of powder into the flames. Keeping her voice as steady as she could, she said, "Ministry of Magic Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

The connection was made.

"I'm calling about... about..." Hannah swallowed, and her voice came out in a dry shake. "About Hermione Granger."

"One moment."

"But "

She sat back on her heels as a pleasant voice intoned from the flames, "Your call is being transferred to the Department of Mysteries, Unspeakable Division. Your call is very important to us. Thank you for holding."

Severus didn't wait for Hermione to invite him in. Wrenching the door from her grasp, he whirled about and closed it, hard.

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "What gives you the right "

"It didn't work."

"What do you mean 'It didn't work'? I... I said it, and there was a green flash. I've seen it done, Severus." Her eyes were hooded. "Several times."

It cost some effort to keep his voice even. "Slughorn was already dead, Hermione. An Avada Kedavra won't work under such circumstances."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me that you miscalculated, Snape?"

"It would seem we both did, *Professor*."

The flash of her eyes met an answer in his own, and they glared at each other through a crackling silence which finally settled to a dull cadence in which they heard only their own heartbeats, loud in their ears.

In a lower but no less urgent tone, he continued, "And it would seem we have a further complication."

Far below, what remained of Horace Slughorn's soul drifted about the chamber, unseen by watching ghostly eyes.

It had no language, no thought, and only the faintest trace of what had once been the Potions Master's indomitable will; it responded only to what might, for want of a better term, be called impulse.

Had that impulse had words, they might have registered, *Tired... so very tired. Dead, finally? Ah. Must rest then. O ho, what's this? A place? A good place, as good a place as any...*

And it settled into the nearest available lifeless form, rounding itself with the small sleep of a broken soul.

The smaller ghost cocked her head as Neville frowned, both of them looking sharply upwards.

From somewhere far above them, carried downward by the bones of the castle, a shout, followed almost instantly by a shattering fall of glass.

The thousand fractured shards of glass arced through the frosted air. As they fell, each for a split-second caught and refracted the light of the rising moon, casting for an instant a frozen rainbow against the dark tower stone.

When they finally hit the snowbank far below, they made so little sound that they could almost be said to have made none at all.

Note on Sources: The passage quoted by Professor Granger is Newton's First Law of Motion. "Kinetics" is her term for what Muggles commonly call "Physics."

Through a Glass Darkly

Chapter 27 of 41

Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP (Round 3). Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried.

A/N: Some chapters are more exhausting than their word counts would indicate, thus, Anastasia, Melenka, and AnnieT, two more: thank you.



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The flash of her eyes met an answer in his own, and they glared at each other through a crackling silence that finally settled to a dull cadence in which they heard only their own heartbeats, loud in their ears.

In a lower but no less urgent tone, he continued, "And it would seem we have a further complication."

"Complication?" she echoed, her voice cutting into the high-pitched whistling that was coming, as always, from her cracked window.

He nodded curtly, standing before the door. "The Ministry."

"What?!" Her strident pacing came to an abrupt halt as she wheeled to face him, her hair coming loose from its knot.

"I heard that librarian begging Potter to summon them in the Entrance Hall. Even if he managed to resist her appeal to his heroism, she's doubtless done so herself by now."

"To what end?"

His lips thinned. "Yours, I imagine."

Her gaze swept the room. A shard of moonlight fell on her bedspread, and she glanced automatically to the crack in the window.

Unrelieved by texture, the purity of light seared her eyes, and reflexively she turned away.

He saw her flinch and tried to read her purpose. "Are you planning to run?" he asked.

"Of course not." Her eyes blazed.

"To surrender yourself, then?" He kept his tone deliberately neutral, although the hairs on the back of his neck were prickling with urgency.

"I knew what I was risking when I decided... when we... this. Besides. The curse failed."

"The casting, not the result, is Unforgivable. And then for some unfathomable reason you left without bothering to ascertain that your task was complete."

She flared. "I saw the green flash, Severus."

He was tempted to shake her and crossed his arms to stay the impulse. "You left your work not only unfinished, but unchecked. Very unlike you. Not at all up to your usual methodical standard."

Hermione's fingers twitched toward her wand, but she merely stood straighter and fired back, "You know I dismantled your stasis spell, thus releasing the fragment of his soul to where? Do you know? Did you stop to check your work, *Professor?*"

He scowled, and the air around them crackled with the imminence of magic held in check, underscored by the wind's high-pitched whistling through the cracked window.

"No? Then I'd hardly criticise, were I you." She turned succinctly to her window. "*Repara*," she muttered, knowing it was ultimately a futile gesture.

The crack disappeared and the whistling, blessedly, stopped.

A retort was on his lips but it died as he registered some resignation in her stance and couldn't place its source.

"I'll surrender my wand, and go to Azkaban, and Harry will be elected regardless, and... it can all end."

"Until someone dies and you start snapping souls again."

Her look was bleak. "Assuming they do figure it out, it's not as if they'll admit that such magic is possible. Really they can't afford to undermine Harry now."

"They may never admit it, Hermione, but you may be sure that they will figure it out. You're as much of a danger to them in prison as out of it."

"I'm amazed they didn't just kill me twenty-two years ago," she said bleakly.

His eyes snapped. "I'd be very surprised if they'd not considered it."

She stared at him, ready to laugh, to insist that theirs was a civilised society. She waited, but neither laughter nor words came.

His eyes held hers for a long moment.

A *clink* as a shard of glass hit the floor, and she flinched as the wind resumed its keening through the crack.

"That always happens," she said tiredly, turning to repair it again, bracing herself against the moonlight.

But as she endeavored to keep her eyes away from inevitable moonlight, she caught her reflection, blue in the colored glass. Her hair ghostly pale, her eyes smudges of shadow in the distorted oval of her face, the image rippling in the ancient, uneven glass as though she lay still in a slow current, held fast beneath an indifferent layer of ice.

"Oh, gods," she said, dropping her wand.

Startled, he was behind her in an instant. "I believe I can keep you out of prison, Hermione... if nothing else, we could... my..." His voice trailed away as he realized she wasn't listening.

He followed her gaze to her reflection.

And in a moment, he saw, and thought he understood.

"They didn't kill you, Hermione."

"They didn't have to," she whispered. "I more or less did it for them."

His throat tightened, and he drew her to him, his chin coming to rest on her hair.

Instinctively she looked for his face, reflected above hers, but saw only the crack, and the moonlight through it pierced her eyes, and, squeezing her eyes shut, she drew back toward the warm darkness that was Severus behind her.

"What is it?" he whispered, pressing his lips to her hair.

"The light. It hurts."

He looked into the light, but his eyes adjusted quickly.

"Severus, why doesn't it work? I've tried and tried to fix this window. Every night, I fix it, and every night..."

He held her and had no idea what to offer, although his mind was racing. He'd seen her stare unblinkingly into the sun... where? In the library... at the sun, reflecting on the snow... much brighter than the moon... what was it? "What is it?"

She said nothing.

"Tell me, Hermione."

She shook her head, turning her face into his cloak. It rustled... so soft... like her dream...

He will drink the stain...

"Your soul is fine, Severus."

He blinked at the non sequitur, going instantly alert, but refusing to allow any hint of tension to invade his limbs. "You're sure?"

She nodded against his chest. "... I saw it. It's whole, and complete, and perfect."

"How can you be sure?"

She smiled sadly against him. "I wouldn't have wanted to break it otherwise, would I?" Her tone took on a mocking self-deprecation he'd only heard in the echoes of his own voice, and his heart tightened. "What would be the fun in breaking it, if it weren't whole?"

"You say you saw it."

"In your eyes. Shining, round, and whole..."

He sucked in his breath. "You saw Minerva's?"

She nodded.

"And... " *Blast... had there been a moon the night of the battle?* His mind frantically sorted images confused, urgent, mortal and at once, he knew. "You saw Ronald Weasley's."

She paused, and he heard her breath catch.

"And then you didn't."

She nodded again. "When I opened my eyes, his eyes were open, staring at the sky, and the moon..."

"Oh, Hermione," he breathed.

"I can't bear it any more. The trees, overhead, their branches... it was the last thing he saw... it must have been... before I... and then I... the sound... I can't bear it."

In his mind he saw the skeletal fingers of trees reaching, creaking in the cold, fracturing the moonlight beyond their vaulted shadows...

For long moments, he held her and said nothing as the rising moon through the cracked window traced its slow path down his face, seeking hers.

She finally sighed, her memories spent, and leaned against the darkness of his cloak, the warm, breathing man it enshrouded, and tried to memorize the feel of him holding her.

The single, broken ray of moonlight slipped from his lips to touch her forehead, nearing her eye...

"Hermione," he breathed, carefully drawing his wand, "you cannot fix what is meant to be broken, and you cannot remain in this darkness forever." He closed his eyes. "Forgive me."

Sensing his intentions, but having no wand of her own with which to block him, she shouted, "No!" just as he cast a quiet *Reparo*, and her window shattered.

The thousand fractured shards of glass arced through the frosted air. As they fell, each for a split-second caught and refracted the light of the rising moon, casting for an instant a frozen rainbow against the dark tower stone.

Author's Note to *Petulant Poetess* readers: This story is now caught up on this site; future chapters will be entirely new. Thanks for reading! ~ Ari

Nor Words to Speak

Chapter 28 of 41

SSHG Awards Nominee: Best Angst, Best WIP. Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Almost everyone I know midwived this one. My especial thanks to my betas, Anastasia and Annie Talbot. Thanks also to IndigoFeathers, Potion Mistress, Melenka and Enigmatized for their generous responses to the first scene in this chapter. :serious bow of profound gratitude:



It had waited so long.

So very long, the castle's great cornerstones had rested on bedrock rock that stretched far under the Highlands on the great veins of stone carrying the timeless past, the memories of the land, the blood from which a single seed, or perhaps a pebble, drew its strength to arch toward the sky, to grow with a slow, deliberate, violent hope.

Some few called that hope "life." Fewer still called it "magic."

Most didn't think of it at all; most registered the presence of a tree or a bush, or a stone and went about their business.

Creatures of language name things, imagining that names matter, and they almost always get it wrong.

And, almost always, language doesn't matter not to stones, nor bushes, nor trees. Always they reached for the sky, in a burning fire of hope, fueled by the blood of the land, drawn from the bed of rock on which it rested the rock which had for millennia kept land separate from pounding, roiling sea. The sand, the grass, the cliffs had no need of names, not for themselves; it was enough that they *were*, and slowly, imperceptibly, they reached forever for the sky, under the blind gaze of burning sun, the soft caress of falling rain, the endless calling of impossible stars.

For almost always, language didn't matter.

But not very many years before, one of the creatures had taken this life and named it love, and another had taken this magic and called it power, and both had claimed the violence the slow, heavy, urgency with which mountains grew, robing themselves in forest both had claimed that violence and called it their own.

One ignored the darkness and called it light. One rejected light, claiming its absence, calling it dark.

They were both wrong.

And from that wrong, a crack. A crack that never widened, never shrank.

For years the castle had stood frozen, a crack beneath its immense stone feet, waiting, not reaching; waiting, to stand or fall.

And then the boy but the crack had not healed.

And then the girl and still it waited.

Waited as, without hope, she grew. Listened as, without language, she was silent.

It drew upon its foundation of the past, the burning memories of molten stone ever rising from beneath its magic, from beyond life, it drew the past forward through time, up, through its bones, into the high arches of its vaulted ceilings, where, from the shadows, it whispered to her in the way of stones.

It had neither mind nor words to speak, drawing its breath from the crack below and the window above, and its whispering kept her awake.

Barely.

For twenty-two years.

No time at all, to stone.

And then the man.

And then ... as he drove her beyond the last shred of reason, Hermione thrust her bloody hand into the fabric of time, her fingers tangling in the dropped threads of their lives. She closed her fist around them, and pulled.

Hard.

And the crack in the rock beneath its great cornerstone ground closed and, finally, stone on solid rock, it rested.

But still, it waited.

"Hermione... you cannot remain in this darkness forever." He closed his eyes. "Forgive me."

...

The smaller ghost cocked her head as Neville frowned, both of them looking sharply upwards.

From somewhere far above them, carried downward by the bones of the castle, a shout, followed almost instantly by a shattering fall of glass.

To Neville's surprise, the little ghost turned to him and beamed.

He regarded her with mild astonishment, but the only response he received to his silent inquiry was a deepening of her dimples. "Do you know what that was?" he asked, gesturing upwards toward the source of the sound.

Her eyes sparkled in the darkness, and she nodded.

Neville looked at her for a moment then laughed. "You enjoy your secrets, don't you?"

She tilted her head slightly then nodded again.

He smiled at her and gently tweaked a loose strand of hair. "Okay, little enigma. You were pretty serious about getting down here." He gestured to the dark chambers where they floated. "Was there something you wanted to do?"

Smiling softly, she took his hand and floated toward the stone fireplace. With a pale hand, she reached out to touch a small, black statue.

It wasn't moving, and Neville saw that its eyes were filmed over with grey.

"Oh, no," he said, watching as she touched its head with a careful, misty finger. "Was it broken?"

She nodded, not taking her serious eyes from the dragon's still form.

"That happens, sometimes," he said sympathetically. "There's no reversing that when it happens, though. Professor Flitwick was clear on that in class 'Some Charms only work once,' he told us. Professor McGonagall agreed. Sure, you could Transfigure something that was broken into something else that was whole, but it would never be what it was before." He squeezed the little ghost's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

She hung silently in the air, contemplating the statue.

"Was it you?"

She looked a question at him, and from the faraway look in her eyes, he knew she hadn't been listening.

"Did you break it, I mean?"

She shook her head and went back to contemplating the pattern of scales on the dragon's back.

Neville bobbed silently, his thoughts traveling upward to whatever the shout had been, and he wondered why they were there. Still, it did seem important to her, so he settled in the air to wait, wondering what had happened up above. His eyes wandered toward the ceiling, and his memory replayed the sound of shattering glass.

A movement caught his eye, and he saw her hand emerging from the pocket of her robes.

"What have you got there?" he asked quietly, his thoughts returning to the present.

She opened her hand to reveal the seed.

His eyes widened slightly. "Is that the one that... hm... woke me up?"

She nodded.

Squinting, he examined the seed closely. "Ordinary dandelion, is it?"

She nodded again.

Something flitted through his memory, but he couldn't quite trace it. He shook his head; ordinary dandelions had, as far as he knew, no magical properties. Mystified, he reached for the seed again, but stopped himself. "Do you have any idea how that worked?"

She hesitated then shrugged, tipping the seed into her other hand.

Neville floated quietly beside her. He thought he knew what she was about, and he tried to keep his sigh silent, his presence still. He remembered now Hermione and Ginny talking, laughing, of stars and eyelashes and dandelions, the two of them blowing seeds in sunshine in a long-ago, late Spring courtyard.

And Luna; Luna, with a look of mild astonishment at the other girls' superstitions.

He swallowed hard and blinked, turning his face up toward the shadows, willing his vision to clear before he looked once more at the small ghost.

Her hand was hovering over the dragon's tiny head, carefully positioning the seed over its grey, lifeless eyes.

And although he knew it wasn't going to work, Neville couldn't help smiling at her seriousness; he remained, floating patiently at her side.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on her memories of hours spent in the dragon's company, of floating about as it flew after her, of countless games of silent tag in the low, long-forgotten room.

She remembered and, opening her hand, let the seed fall.

... and her window shattered.

The thousand fractured shards of glass arced through the frosted air. As they fell, each for a split-second caught and refracted the light of the rising moon, casting for an instant a frozen rainbow against the dark tower stone.

In the silence that followed, the full force of the Highland winter invaded the room that stood suddenly open before it. The wind was a torrent of darkness, its passage whipping Hermione's hair to a frenzy and snapping Severus' cloak about their ankles.

Hermione recoiled, pressing the side of her face into his chest, her eyes screaming shut against the moonlight, her face contorted in the sudden, blinding clarity. As the wind howled and died around them, he stood at her back, his arms dark around her, unmoving.

The wind relaxed with an easy sigh, skittering a curl of parchment across her table before it wisped upward into nothingness.

Eyes closed, half in darkness, half in light, she felt the icy air settle around her until she was warm only where he touched her.

His voice velvet in her hair: "Open your eyes."

She shook her head.

"Hermione. Please."

Another voice, younger, older, long ago: "*Hermione, please.*"

Ron? NO!

She struggled slightly in Severus's arms. "I can't."

"You can."

Again, a breath of an echo. "*You can.*"

She concentrated on the man, warm at her back. Swallowing hard, and nodded.

And opened her eyes full toward the moon.

It shone silently, implacably, over the gently moving tops of the tallest, darkest trees in the Forbidden Forest.

She felt her vision blur, the scene before her eyes merely an echo of another, far older, far more real...

Other trees another moon another night...

Ron's head turning to look at her, in his eyes the trees tossed, rising, consuming, the moon open empty deep within his empty open eyes.

Hoping it didn't sense her wouldn't see her couldn't touch her ...

The trees creaking, snapping underneath Ron's empty, moon-filled gaze...

It found her, caught her, pinned her...

Ron's voice, "You can."

Her own, "I can't."

The moon rising full in Ron's dying eyes...

And before her window, Severus strong at her back, she gasped, "It was his soul."

Severus rested his cheek against her hair and said nothing.

And instead of spasming back to loll gazing at the sky, Ron's body smiled at her. And his soul in his eyes, and his dead mouth shaping the words, "Thank you."

She smiled back.

And the wind rose in the trees, and whispered, and Ron's voice joined the whisper, and the castle itself seemed to whisper, "Finish the dream."

"Finish... how?"

"You know you want to..."

Ron's voice fading, the falling away of a shadow under the whispering trees in Godric's Hollow, twenty-two years before...

... and the wind in the trees became the whisper of black silk around her, warming her, and, from the shadowed recesses of the vaulted ceiling, the last of the memories sighed a blessing and were gone.

She stood in his arms at the empty arch where the heavy leaded glass had hung for twenty-two years.

In radiant moonlight, the two before the window cast a single shadow on the floor.

And their shadow far above made no sound at all in the room far below where two ghosts hovered breathless over the form of the broken dragon, watching a single seed as it fell to rest gently on the silent dragon's tiny, ridged forehead.

As they watched, the grey film slowly receded from its eyes.

It blinked sleepily, and lifted its head to look about.

The little ghost's smile melted Neville's heart.

Seeing the tiny ghost, the dragon launched into a dizzying spiral flight upwards, its wings seeming to leave the faintest tracery of darkest purple wispings behind it in the air.

Before Neville was certain what he'd seen, he blinked, and the colour vanished against the pale radiance of the little ghost.

The seed drifted lazily back to the mantel.

Neither the little ghost nor the dragon seemed to notice. The tiny black dragon was hovering, its wings brushing softly against her pale cheek; she held herself absolutely still, her eyes round with joy.

And the dragon crooned a single, soft note of triumph in the darkness.

Genesis

Chapter 29 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: I don't even know where to start with my thanks for this chapter, so I'll dedicate it to everyone who's at Portus this weekend and to all the Cinderellas who are at home, missing the ball. And of course my thanks to my betas, Anastasia, Machshefa, and Melenka.

This one's short, but the rest of the story will follow more quickly now. ~ Ari



In radiant moonlight, the two before the window cast a single shadow on the floor.

The eyes she turned to him were brimming full with unshed tears, and, in that moment, the soul he saw within them was one that any man might see.

Not the soul of a hero, who had sacrificed life so that others might live.

Nor the soul of a witch, who had revealed her secret in coding so arcane only he might comprehend, wrapped in language none but he understood.

Nor a soul on the edge of madness, tethered to sanity only by the force of his will.

No.

He saw the soul of a woman held, crying, in his arms.

Hermione moaned, and in her moan the hollow despair of a world built on a lie.

In a lesser silence, not even he could have caught the words in her cry.

"How could they?"

Yes. It was the right question.

He held her head close to his heart, pressing his cheek against the cold roughness of her hair, and he closed his eyes in a vain effort to blind himself to the piercing clarity of moonlight reflecting the truth of Godric's Hollow on the bitter snow of the castle's silent grounds.

"How?"

Knowing she deserved an answer, wishing desperately he had a better one to give, he opened his eyes to hers. "I don't know, Hermione. I don't know."

A wisp of air through the arched windows caught a strand of her hair, and it fell across her cheek, and he watched her gaze turn inward to seek the only real answer she could ever receive.

The dragon backwinged delicately as it tried to determine whether or not it could land safely on the tiny ghost's insubstantial shoulder.

Her eyes warmed, and she smiled.

Without knowing quite why, Neville stopped blinking as he watched.

Alighting carefully, the dragon held its wings outstretched for a moment until it was certain of its perch. Then, with a soft peep, it folded them and looked at Neville as if to say, "Well, what did you expect?"

Neville laughed, an easy sound of delighted surprise, and the smaller ghost beamed, holding her hand out to him.

"Where to, then?" he asked, finally blinking.

She gestured in the direction of the Hospital Wing, and, after a moment, his eyes widened.

Her smile deepened, and she nodded, taking his hand as firmly as the substance of mist and memory would allow.

When Hermione's eyes returned to focus, Severus saw within them a resolve he only then realized had been absent since his return to the castle.

Startled, he was once again struck with a brief image of her as his student, but he quickly filed that image into the recesses of his mind, asking only, "So you've decided?"

"How did you know?"

"How did I know which?"

A brief flare of exasperation in her eyes. "That I've decided on a course of action regarding Horace, of course."

Excellent. "Of course."

"Although I shall expect answers to the myriad questions I have regarding my window – or, more precisely, why your spell had quite the opposite of its usual effect."

"Naturally," he drawled, something dawning in his heart – something any other man might have recognized as hope.

But Severus Snape was not a usual man, and hope held no quarter against immediate pragmatics. "So what is your decision? I presume we shall not spend the remaining moments before the Unspeakables arrive attempting to conceal the evidence of your..." Uncharacteristically, he hesitated, uncertain, lest he upset some delicate balance.

"My soul-breaking?" she said, her eyes flashing a challenge to the very concept of evasion.

He nodded.

She raised her chin slightly. "Let them find it."

"They will know it was you," he ventured neutrally, but inwardly, he held his breath.

A flash of pride. "Who else could it have been?"

"So...?"

"I intend that they know, Severus," she said, her voice as hard as the castle's carved stone. "I intend that they know."

Glorious. He raised a hand to the fallen strand of hair and traced the curve it made on her cheek, her neck, brushing his fingers to the back of her neck to release the rest from its haphazard knot.

And she shook her hair free, and she laughed, and, although it carried with it an echo of the Darkness that was permanently etched into her being, he heard within her laughter a note he had never expected to hear.

Hermione Granger was *happy*.

She's mad.

She read his thoughts on his face looked at him seriously. "Perhaps I am mad. Perhaps not. I find that insanity, or the lack of it, is largely dependent on context, don't you?"

A speculative gleam grew in his eyes. "Quite."

She gestured toward her window. "Contexts can be changed."

He nodded once, slowly, his lips curling into a predatory smile.

She laughed again.

He knew as no other could that she had but begun to come to terms with the loss she had wrought on herself by her silence, and that she would continue to face her memories in nightmares that, now, she would remember.

He knew, because his own returned nightly.

But he knew the word that would end them, and, after all, he had been her teacher.

Arrangement or no, he knew with absolute certainty that he would be there when she woke, sweating, shaking, unable to remember that the simplest spells were, finally, the most important.

That *Reparo* couldn't erase a crack of truth in a façade of lies.

And that *Lumos* was the only cure, albeit a temporary one, for Darkness.

There were other, less literal ways to deal with Darkness.

His predatory look deepened, matched by the arrogant rippling of her cloak as she turned through the arched shadows.

As he followed her into the corridor, he found himself rather looking forward the Unspeakables' reaction when she demanded the answer to the question whose truth they'd buried, along with her childhood, twenty-two years before.

Minerva's steely eyes bored relentlessly into Dumbledore's. "Fine, then; we can table that discussion for a century or so whilst you gather your wits."

A shadow of relief threatened to turn smugly into twinkle, but it was swept away by her next words.

"What happens, Albus, when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?"

Dumbledore's portrait began, ever so slightly, to sweat.

I

Chapter 30 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to my betas, Anastasia and AnnieTalbot.

Summary: *A fall of blood and a seed of hope.*



And still, it waited.

...

When they finally hit the snowbank far below, they made so little sound that they could almost be said to have made none at all.

Almost no sound but he had heard.

From far in the depths of the castle where he drifted, a small splash of blood masked by a solemn, quiet hiss as a torch sputtered in the breath of his passage, he had heard.

A simple spell.

A tear in the fabric of lies.

It had called him, and, as the shards of Hermione's windows fell softly into a quiet blanket of snow, he had heard its calling in their fall, and he had come.

The sad-eyed ghost hung motionless above the softly pocked snow where her window had fallen, and he raised his face to the moon and wondered.

And as he wondered, a drop of blood fell, impossible, unheeded, from his hand.

In the negative landscape of blinding whiteness, it fell amidst the remains of her window and, no colder than the snow on which it fell, it stayed liquid, smooth alongside shards of fallen glass.

In the moonlight, he was nearly invisible, and he placed his hand against the great cornerstone.

He seemed to listen for a moment then he smiled.

It was almost finished.

It had waited so long.

Her smile deepened, and she nodded, taking his hand as firmly as the substance of mist and memory would allow.

All was quiet in the Hospital Wing as Neville and the tiny ghost wafted down the long aisle between rows of empty beds, disappearing in the bright patches of moonlight, glowing softly in each fall of shadow. The smaller ghost released Neville's hand and shot with purpose straight toward a small, oaken door at the far corner. She paused, tilting her head toward the dragon, which peeped again and left her shoulder, coming to light on a pile of freshly starched linens. The ghost waved to the dragon and disappeared through the door.

Neville cocked his head at the dragon, curious as to how it seemed to know what she wanted, then followed her into the Healer's office.

Poppy sat, contained in a small glow of lamplight, her head uncovered, staring quietly at a gold ring on her desk blotter.

The smaller ghost glanced beseechingly at Neville, and, although he was reluctant to intrude on the Healer's thoughts, he spoke quietly from the shadows by the door. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes, child, wha..." Poppy began automatically, looking up from her contemplation. "Goodness. Longbottom." She blinked hard once, staring. "Where have you been?" She swallowed. "Forgive me. You startled me. I was..." Glancing back at the ring, she rose. "I've not laid eyes on you in years, boy."

"No, Ma'am," Neville confirmed.

Poppy's eyes widened. "How did you resubstantiate?"

"I..." he hesitated apologetically. "I've no idea."

The small ghost slid between them, looking first from one to the other with large, urgent eyes.

"But she seems to," Neville continued, "and she needs to talk to you, I think."

"She does?" Poppy looked at the smaller ghost as if trying to place her. "Very well," Poppy said, turning to the smaller ghost. "Go ahead, child."

The little ghost gave a small, shy smile, then looked to Neville again.

"Um... oh. Right. Have you a quill handy? She prefers writing to talking."

"Writing?" Poppy blinked again, amazed.

"She can write," Neville stated quietly.

Poppy nodded crisply and gestured for the smaller ghost to sit at her desk. Neville drifted closer, and, flanked by Healer and friend, the tiny ghost picked up the quill and began to write.

Her round, childish letters read, *"I think this did it"* She placed the seed carefully on the blotter, next to Minerva's ring.

Poppy leaned in to examine the seed then backed away as the chill of two ghosts reached her. "Dandelion?" She frowned, thinking.

"*Leontodon taraxacum*," Neville confirmed, smiling when the Healer's eyebrows shot up.

"Nothing wrong with your memory, is there, Longbottom?" Poppy turned to the small ghost. "No, child, I'm afraid that's just an ordinary dandelion. No magical or medicinal uses whatsoever."

The little ghost turned in her chair to implore Neville to speak.

Neville nodded. "Madam Pomfrey, I know it's impossible though I'm not sure she does but it also refreshed a broken singular-use Charm. I saw it myself."

"Ordinary dandelion can't!" She fell silent as the smaller ghost interrupted her by tugging at her sleeve, pulling her toward the door. "My word!" Poppy exclaimed as her entire arm turned blue with cold.

The smaller ghost paled and darted behind Neville, hiding her face in her hands.

"If you'd just come out into the ward and see for yourself, Madam Pomfrey. We couldn't bring the dragon through the door," Neville said, placing his hand on the wee ghost's trembling shoulder. He turned his back to the Healer to crook his finger under the smaller ghost's chin. "Don't be scared. She's not angry."

The smaller ghost moved her hands to peek skeptically through Neville.

"Of course I'm not angry," Poppy said briskly, reaching for the door. "Show me this miraculous dragon." Gesturing for the ghosts to precede her, she asked, "Longbottom, does this child have a name?"

Severus followed the sharp pace of Hermione's heels on the stone floor, the sweep of her cloak, her hair casting softly behind her as she marked a determined path through the castle.

She swept past the Library.

Past the staircase leading to the dungeons.

Past the turn that would take them to the head's office.

As he followed through long, windowless corridors, he watched the way the torchlight gleamed on her hair, falling loose around shoulders, the chill in the air seeming to retreat before its warmth.

As he followed along high, open arcades, he watched the way the moonlight beamed on her skin, the shadows falling away before her.

And they passed the door to the Astronomy Tower, and he didn't notice.

Finally, she halted at the head of the grand stairs leading down into the Entrance Hall.

He joined her, their cloaks whispering to a quiet, dignified stillness, and he waited for her to speak.

"Our guests should be here soon," she said grimly, not taking her eyes off the castle's great door.

At the word "guests," he could have sworn he saw a vicious hint of a dimple at one corner of her mouth.

"Indeed," he drawled.

"I thought it appropriate to greet them." Her eyes flashed feral, focused, deadly.

"By all means, Professor Granger, let us do them the honour they deserve." He smiled slowly, wickedly, offering her his arm.

Resting her fingertips lightly in the crook of his elbow, but not taking her eyes off the door, she nodded, and, as one, they descended the stair.

Hannah did not know what had smashed the Library windows; nor had she stayed to find out.

The librarian sat by the empty grate in her office, her hands shaking violently, too violently to hold her wand.

She had managed to bolt the door. Rocking slightly, she hoped that would be enough.

But they were coming. They would fix everything.

And there was always Harry. Harry, who had saved them all before. Harry, upon whom you could always count to be strong, to know what to do. Harry, to whom the world had always looked, would always look when the things of Darkness threatened to break loose and consume them all.

Her hands calmed.

What were those professors that murderer and... and *her* to He-Whom-She-Still-Wouldn't-Name?

Nothing.

Nothing at all, to Harry Potter.

He'd be Minister of Magic soon, and the Unspeakables would work for him.

They'd tell him they'd have to. And then he'd *know*.

And if they didn't fix it, Harry would.

Of course.

Her breathing slowed, and, on her third try, she managed to light a fire, although only one side of it actually caught.

No matter. They'd be here soon enough.

She still didn't unbolt the door. She'd know when they arrived; you could hear the great door opening all over the castle.

Time passed, and a small patch of moonlight crept across her floor, slipping unnoticed to illuminate the side of Hannah's grate that lay untouched by her badly-cast *Incendio*.

The dragon looked up at Poppy quizzically as she examined it.

"Broken, you say?"

Neville glanced at the little ghost for confirmation.

She nodded.

"Eyes filmed over?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said. "I saw that for myself."

Straightening, Poppy smiled at the dragon and turned to the little ghost. "Who broke it, child? Was it you?"

The tiny ghost shook her head, her hair a pale cloud behind her as she darted back into Poppy's office.

The dragon took wing after her.

Poppy and Neville followed more slowly.

"You don't know her name?"

Neville shook his head. "She's only spoken once, and nearly blew herself backward through a wall."

"Interesting... well, what did she say?"

"She said, 'I.'"

Poppy's mouth twitched. "Not much to go on, is it?"

Neville's brows furrowed, but he was too polite to disagree with the Healer. "Perhaps not, Ma'am."

The small ghost had finished writing, and they leaned over her shoulders to read.

"Severus?" Poppy glanced sharply at the dragon, her eyes narrowing as she tried to remember something. "Oh, dear."

"What is it?" Neville tossed a reassuring look at the small ghost, whose hand had moved protectively toward the dragon, who was flitting curiously from object to object on Poppy's desk.

"If I'm not mistaken, that would have been a gift from Albus. He was forever twitting him about flapping about like some great...." She sighed. "Oh, dear."

The small ghost's eyes flitted from the Healer to Neville and back.

Poppy shook herself out of her memories and turned back to the dragon, which was hovering above Minerva's ring. "Oh, no you don't, you little scamp." She swept the ring into her pocket. "Now, I want a closer look at that seed. If you'll excuse me, child..."

The little ghost scooped the dragon out of the air and rose to give the Healer her chair.

The seed lay on its side on the pristine white blotter.

The Healer took a pair of forceps from a small, leather case and picked the seed up carefully.

Where it had lain, it had left a small spot of blood.

Poppy and Neville stared at the spot, then turned, amazed, to the tiny ghost.

She looked at them solemnly and nodded.

Judges

Chapter 31 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Special thanks to Hypnobarb, who generously agreed to assist in invaluable ways. :blows kiss: You're a dear. Thanks are also due my friends and betas Anastasia, Melenka, Annie Talbot, Machshefa, and Indigofeathers. I am especially indebted to Ana for one particular moment in the second scene.

Summary: *Some ideas are light; some are dark. All of them are important.*



Where it had lain, it had left a small spot of blood.

Poppy and Neville stared at the spot, then turned, amazed, to the tiny ghost.

She looked at them solemnly and nodded.

Poppy vacated her chair and handed her quill to the little ghost. "Sit, child, and write. Quickly, now I've only a few minutes before I have to sit with Professor Slughorn."

The wee ghost nodded and dipped the quill.

"I made a wish. I was sitting outside Professor Granger's door and she was sad, and so I made a wish. I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

"Don't be ridiculous, child. Who could you hurt with a wish?"

The little ghost just kept writing. *"The other tall one one of the other ghosts. His hand was bleeding, and I thought the dandelion seed might have done it. I couldn't find it it wasn't with the others in the corridor. I looked everywhere, and I found it with Neville afterwards. He was just re-forming."*

"And you think the seed did it?"

"Strange things used to happen around me before. Why not now?"

Poppy smiled indulgently. "Were you Muggleborn?"

The little ghost nodded.

"That's just uncontrolled magic before you came to Hogwarts and learned how to..."

"She wasn't even Sorted," Neville interrupted softly.

But the little ghost was still writing. *"But it brought Neville back, didn't it?"*

The Healer threw a startled glance toward Neville.

"The seed definitely brought me back from... from where I was." He closed his eyes. He'd never had the courage to approach Luna, and, over time, he'd faded into that single, endless regret.

"Did you know her before?" Poppy's voice brought him out of his reverie.

Neville shook his head. "I saw her on the train, just before the lights went out and the Death Eaters "

The little ghost's eyes grew wide, and she tried to write something, but the ink was freezing.

"I'm sorry," Neville apologised, putting his hand on her arm. "I don't like to remember it either."

He watched as the wee ghost closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them, the ink flowed smoothly again, and Poppy's brow furrowed.

"How did you do that?" the Healer asked.

But the small ghost just shrugged and continued writing. "*I thought the professor might be lonely. She can't see me. And it brought me a friend, too.*"

"You wished for her to have a friend?"

The little ghost took on the faintest pink tinge.

"What is it, child?"

"A..." Her hand hesitated, and she glanced up at Neville.

"You can tell Madam Pomfrey anything. She's good at keeping secrets."

"*A boyfriend.*" Then, very quickly, she scribbled, "*But for me just a friend.*" She underlined the word "just," and the pink tinge deepened.

Neville laughed and ruffled her hair. "It's okay. Someday I'll tell you about my..." He took a slow breath. "... about another one of my friends. You remind me of her, a little."

Poppy's mind was racing. She was no metaphysicist, but even she knew that a ghost, once faded to mist, did not resubstantiate. Could not. It was an elemental principle, no less certain than the singular efficacy of a singular-use Charm. Certainly beyond the power of a wish. Except... the strange little thing had just unfrozen her ink by force of will. And if she'd never had even a speck of training... *Strange.*

The dragon perched on the wee ghost's head and started nuzzling her hair. Her eyes crinkled with delight, and she set down the quill.

Neville gestured to the Healer, and they withdrew to the door. "It's as I said, Madam Pomfrey," he began, softly enough that the smaller ghost couldn't hear. "I don't think she knows what's supposed to be possible and what isn't."

"Well, no, but..." The Healer raised her hands helplessly, then let them fall. "Ghosts can't bleed, Longbottom not real blood. And he was miles away from the Professor's tower when it happened. I can't explain it." She frowned. "An ordinary wish on an ordinary dandelion... still... the seeds *do* fly...."

Neville considered this. "Is the blood real?"

Poppy nodded.

"Then could the seed maybe have come in contact with something else before reaching him?"

The Healer's gesture seemed to encompass the entire castle. "Of course an infinite number of things."

"Well, then, Professor Snape would be able to tell, wouldn't he?"

Poppy nodded. "I'll speak to him if you and she would find him and ask him to join me in Professor Slughorn's..." Her voice trailed off.

Neville waited respectfully for her to finish, but she remained silent. "Madam Pomfrey?"

The intensity of her gaze startled him. "Find him. Tell him I need to speak with him. Hurry. And bring that seed."

The little ghost slipped the seed into her pocket and clasped Neville's hand.

A moment later, the Hospital Wing stood empty, its beds filled with moonlight.

Resting her fingertips lightly in the crook of his elbow, but not taking her eyes off the door, she nodded, and, as one, they descended the stair.

A bolt of pain shot through his hip with every step.

He didn't wince.

But a slight shift in his stance as they reached the bottom stair betrayed him. In the deep silence of the abandoned Entrance Hall, a small creak of leather.

Hermione leaned her head toward his slightly and murmured, "Your hip?"

He nodded shortly, his eyes forward.

"I'm sorry," she said, her focus shifting from the doors to his face.

Don't break now. His voice a smooth, heavy hand deep within her: "Don't be. I enjoyed it."

Her brow furrowed, and he saw her gaze shift inward.

No! "As did you, if you would but admit it, *Professor.*" He turned the last word over in his mouth, a soft hush of steel.

She said nothing.

A hint of the former Potions Master cracked into his tone. "Which you had better do sooner rather than later."

A startled glance upward. "Why?"

"You have but a few moments to admit to yourself what and who you are, Hermione, and that the Darkness you carry within you can be your ally; that its ruthlessness and

your logic may *may* keep you out of Azkaban tonight. I have seen more than one duel decided before it began." His eyes darkened with a shadow of memory, and anger seemed to rise palpably from his skin.

"Harry."

He nodded. "He was in no way prepared."

"No more was I," she countered

"For the singular moment, you were, but overall, no," he agreed, "which was to your advantage, as I've told you. Had you intimated even with your posture that you were prepared to do what you ultimately did, you would have been killed instantly."

"So your analogy between tonight and Godric's Hollow fails, then."

"No."

"No? You said we weren't prepared."

"Weasley was."

"But I was the one who..."

"Logic alone is insufficient you must admit who you are. Weasley used you that night, Hermione." *And thank Merlin he did.* "And you let him."

"So what you're saying..."

"Is this." He grasped her hand and brought it to his hip, turning her suddenly against the sharp stone column at the base of the stairs.

Her hand retreated as far as his grip would allow, and her eyes flew wildly to his face. "What are you doing?"

He leaned slightly into the pressure of her hand, trapping it between their bodies. The bruise on his hip warmed with a slow, deep ache.

"You have never seized power consciously, and, in a few moments, you will have to. Weasley handed it to you, blade first. As do I, now." He leaned further into her hand. "Which of us would you cut, Hermione? Yourself, or me?"

Rage flared in her eyes. "Them."

He leaned down to her neck, his hair brushing her cheek. "Wrong answer, Miss Granger. If it comes to it, who are you willing to sacrifice to guarantee your future?"

She had no answer.

His voice deepened to a growl at her throat, and he moved his hip more insistently into her hand. "Who?"

She was losing the power to think.

As he intended.

He felt her fingers flex against his hip as she struggled against what her inevitable answer must be, and he leaned into that pressure, allowing a small groan to thread through his lips, against her ear. "Who? Tell me, Hermione. Who?"

An image of moonlight on black silk invaded her mind, and she heard herself in memory crying out, *!can't!*

And Ron's voice, *"You can."*

And her own: *"But..."*

Ron's: *"Finish the dream."*

"Who?" Severus demanded softly at her ear.

"Everyone," she hissed.

"Do it," Severus said, his hand falling away from hers, his body hers for the sacrifice.

Even as her fingers tightened to dig deeply into the wound she had made, her free hand flew to the back of his neck and she grasped his hair, seizing his lips with her own, and she drove her fingers against the leather, clenching against where the bruise must be.

"Yes." His voice a low, moan of silence and relief as the pain flared, shooting from his hip to send a blinding whiteness behind his eyes. He tangled his fingers in her hair, easing himself through the first sharpness, riding it, his neck arching backwards, his eyes falling closed.

And she watched him surrender, and a low, dark light grew in her eyes. He was hers, hers as surely as Ron's soul had been hers for the breaking, for the using, his sacrifice a blade in her hands, the only blade with the power to force the last relic of Voldemort's soul out of Harry's scar.

Hers, the hand on the blade.

It cut her, and she would bleed forever...

Hers, the courage to drive it home.

Her own soul screaming, driving her blind as she buried the shard of Ron's soul deep into Harry's being, the final remnant of Voldemort's soul bleeding outward from his scar into the oily night...

Hers, the light that would be ever-tarnished with Darkness a legacy she had accepted blindly and buried in the place beneath her dreams, but not now, no, not now...

As she watched her former professor's long, lean body shudder in the darkness before her, she knew again that strange burst of exaltation that had come when she had committed, irrevocably, to the Darkness that was their only hope of victory.

Finally, he inhaled, and, feeling her fingers moving against his raw awareness in keen, delicate threat, he knew she wanted nothing, nothing more than to send him again in a spiraling fall of shattering reason...

Mastering his mind, he exhaled and saw the Darkness in her eyes. *Later.* He would follow her to Azkaban, if necessary.

And his eyes glinted in a grave, unholy dance. "I trust you perceive my point?"

"As if you need to ask," she said, trailing a finger over his hip in a slow, reluctant farewell.

He chuckled darkly, easing himself upright. "Remember this," he breathed, his lips against her forehead as if in benediction. "Remember this when they ask where your loyalties lie."

From where he hung in the air by the castle's massive cornerstone, the sad-eyed ghost saw a group of black-robed figures working their way slowly up the path toward the great door. He drifted around the base of the castle, nearly invisible in the moonlight.

They had come before, he knew. Sometimes they were absent for years, sometimes for centuries.

Their brief visits always boded strangely for the living. They never altered anything for the castle or for its permanent residents—the ghosts, the portraits, and the Sorting Hat. The living remembered the visits, or not, but never for long. But they whose substance was memory—of mind, intent, or soul—they remembered forever.

They always knew of their visits, knew the same way they had known when the castle had shifted, however slightly, only a few hours before.

The ghost glanced up at the Astronomy Tower and squinted into the moonlight. Yes, the angle it made against the sky was different—not markedly; not to a casual observer—but the Astronomy professor would nonetheless return from holiday to find that her instruments required recalibration.

He returned his gaze to the black-robed figures.

They had reached the door, and he watched them stamp the snow from their boots. He drifted to float in the air behind them, his blood falling silently into their footprints.

The door opened before any of them could knock.

Stepping out of the shadows and full into the moonlight, a small figure—graceful, proud—stood alone.

As one, the group of black-robed figures stilled, balanced—the ghost could almost feel their eyes locking onto her.

The air around them tanged with a sharp, metallic tension.

He could almost taste it.

Her voice was low, calm and even in the midnight air.

"Welcome to Hogwarts."

After You

Chapter 32 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: It is too bloody hot to write anything but dark!dangerous!Snape. My thanks to Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Machshefa, and Melenka, who were extremely patient and exacting with this chapter.

Summary: *Conversations in the Entrance Hall.*

32: After You

"Welcome to Hogwarts."

Her voice skirled away over the snow, and the castle grounds were absolutely silent.

In the shadowed Entrance Hall, Severus' hand closed around his wand. His eyes automatically measured the distance the Unspeakables were keeping from her.

Dueling distance.

There were four of them.

His face a mask of utter stillness in the darkness behind her, but behind his silence, his mind was calculating. *Four? Impossible that as many as four should know about Godric's Hollow.*

One of them spoke. "Hermione Granger?"

"As you very well know, Billings. Or have you forgotten my face as quickly as you did your lessons?"

She regarded him coolly for a moment, then another, older voice broke in. "I'll handle this, Billings."

"Yes, Sir."

Before the older man could speak, Hermione's tones spilled acidly over the threshold. "Shriver. I've not seen you in twenty-two years."

Severus cursed silently as he understood her meaning. They'd sent the one who'd handled her interrogation after the battle.

"You have a good memory, Granger," Shriver replied smoothly, "considering how distressing the circumstances under which we last spoke."

"My memory is excellent," Hermione said flatly.

Shriver's eyes narrowed. "Of course."

A creak of snow as someone shifted their stance on the frozen ground. Severus' hand tightened once more on his wand.

Hermione met Shriver's gaze evenly. "And you are here regarding... what, exactly?"

"We are here at the behest of the school administration." Shriver's eyes flicked meaningfully to his subordinates and back to Hermione.

Hermione snorted. "I believe you mean the librarian."

"Any witch or wizard has the right to request our assistance."

"So they're led to believe." The challenge in her eyes was unmistakable.

Not here, Hermione, Snape thought, gathering himself to intervene. *Not here.*

"If you would inform Madam Abbott of our arrival, and let us wait inside?"

"I'm here," Hannah's voice echoed from the top of the stairs.

As Snape stepped back into the shadow of the great doors, Hermione turned and swept inside. The Unspeakables entered, and the door swung shut, its echo booming throughout the castle.

At the sound of the door, Neville and the tiny ghost paused in mid-flight to exchange a worried look.

"The Unspeakables must be here," Neville said. He couldn't explain how he knew.

The wee ghost nodded, and the two floated more cautiously toward the Entrance Hall.

The only light in the Entrance Hall was the lantern in Hannah's hand.

Neither Severus nor Hermione made any move to light the torches.

"Madam Abbott? Augustus Shriver, Head of the Unspeakables, Department of Mysteries. My junior colleagues, Messrs Billings, Smythe, and Baysgate."

The younger men nodded formally in turn.

Shriver continued, "You had some concerns, I believe, regarding the recent demise of Headmistress Minerva McGonagall?"

Hannah, her pale face illuminated by the lantern, seemed stuck on the topmost stair. She had spotted Severus and Hermione, dark against the door, and would not could not descend closer to them. She nodded mutely.

Shriver looked at her for a moment, expecting her to come down, then shook his head. He gestured for two of his men to go to her. "We understand your fears, Madam, but please, do come down so that we can talk?"

Hannah shook her head. "I don't want to come any closer to... *them*."

"Really, Miss Abbott," Severus said, "you and your lantern make a far better target up there than you would lower down."

"Snape." The ice in Shriver's tone was palpable as he turned toward the former Death Eater, reflexively protecting his back against a tall column of stone. "What an unexpected pleasure."

"Neither, really," Snape said mildly.

Billings edged into the space between them, trying but failing to make his movements seem casual.

"Oh, do come down, Hannah," Hermione snapped, breaking the moment. "You look like Filch up there with your lantern."

Hannah was halfway down the stairs before she realised it. "Mr Shriver, they had something to do with the headmistress' death. I just know they did."

Glancing briefly at Billings to make sure the junior man was, in fact, between him and Severus, Shriver turned to the librarian. "They' being Hermione Granger and Severus Snape?"

"Yes," Hannah confirmed.

"And why do you believe they are culpable?"

Hannah just stared at him. "Because... because they're *Dark*. Both of them."

"I see," Shriver said noncommittally. "If you could just tell me what happened..."

"Well..." Hannah drew a deep breath. "We were at the high table, eating lunch, and they came in, and... and he..." She paused, looking down.

"He..." Shriver prompted her.

"They kissed," Hannah spat, "and a moment later, Minerva was dead."

Her statement hung stupidly in the air.

"Some kiss," one of the younger Unspeakables muttered, and Billings shifted uncomfortably. A sharp glance from Shriver stilled them both.

An involuntary laugh from Hermione a short, sharp sound startled them all. "Really, Hannah kissing as a Dark Art is a *metaphor*."

"Rather a tired one," Snape murmured.

A very dark, very private awareness passed between them, unseen in the shadowy hall, and Severus' eyes glinted with a promise.

"Let me be sure I understand," Hermione stated. "You called the Ministry out in this cold because Severus kissed me." Some edge belied the amusement in her tone.

"He was a *Death Eater* and our *Professor*. That's just *sick*."

"Sick," Hermione echoed.

The edge of whatever had lurked beneath her tone bled fully into her eyes, and Severus saw it blossom into something strangely sad. His throat closed in acknowledgment of the truth in Hannah's words. There was a time when Hermione would have shared her revulsion...

"Perhaps," Hermione said, very softly, as if to herself.

Hannah's eyes hardened in triumph.

But no one moved.

All of the recent images Severus had had of her as his student flashed through his mind, all the images he'd dismissed in the moment... no, he couldn't deny what those moments had been, nor that they brought a certain edge to the pleasure he had taken from her. *With her*.

His eyes flickered towards her, but her face was unreadable as her eyes locked with Hannah's.

"Perhaps you might call us 'sick,' Hannah, and there are those who would agree with you. But things change, and sometimes... sometimes you realise that there are some truths strange, complex, even wondrous truths that can only be understood by moonlight." Some pity flickered in her eyes before her face became, once again, a mask of detached disdain. "No, Hannah. Some truths are far too subtle to see during the day, but just because you prefer not to see them doesn't mean they're not real. Viable. Necessary."

Slow, aching warmth suffused his chest, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from sweeping his cloak around both of them and heading into the night. He satisfied himself with a slight touch to her elbow. Just enough to tell her that he had heard, and understood, and was there.

He turned his attention back to Shriver.

The Unspeakable was eyeing Hermione speculatively, no doubt measuring her words against the one particular truth it was his duty to contain.

Hannah's voice pierced the shadows. "See? *See?* She's *Dark*. She just *said* so."

Hermione's voice cracked across the space between them. "It was a *metaphor*, Hannah, about perspective and the passage of time." She drew herself taller, and a thread of steel slipped into her voice. "Yes, Severus Snape *was* a Death Eater and our professor."

She did not need to add, "Twenty-two years ago."

They all heard it anyway.

Minerva had had a similar talent.

Hermione's gaze rested calmly on Hannah's pale face, and the librarian looked away.

From the flush spreading on Hannah's cheeks, Severus knew she was far from silenced.

But then Severus heard a sharp intake of breath from Hermione. Her brow furrowed slightly, and he followed her glance.

In the heartbeat that followed, he saw a soft glow in the upper arcade.

As they caught sight of the scene below, Neville put a warning hand on the smaller ghost's arm.

She didn't need to be told. She didn't like the librarian.

Shriver, too, had followed Hermione's glance, but saw nothing unusual. After a moment, he continued as though her exchange with Hannah had never happened. "Madam Abbott, if we can continue?"

She nodded nervously, fixing her eyes on his face as a lifeline.

"So, they kissed," he prompted her. "After that...?"

Hannah took a shallow, hitching breath. "There was a crash something happened to the doors and the headmistress collapsed. Something happened I don't know what, but *something*... something *big* the doors to the Great Hall haven't closed properly since!"

"Madam Abbott," Snape said, his voice as smooth as were he calming a nervous Thestral, "Minerva had a weak heart. Madam Pomfrey would have filed the paperwork with the Ministry straightaway. There was no irregularity, or the Ministry would have sent Aurors "

Something flickered in Shriver's eyes. "Familiar with procedure in these matters, eh, Mr Snape?"

Severus did not deign to acknowledge that, continuing, "So the fact they did not send anyone, that you had to call them "

Hannah shook her head, closing her eyes as if she could block Severus' voice. "Stop it, both of you, with your twisty words you could have *imperio'd* Poppy! You killed the headmistress you both did just like you killed Dumbledore!"

"Please, calm yourself," Shriver began. "We understand your concerns, and will do everything in our "

"Just ask her portrait! Ask her portrait if you don't believe me!" Hannah's voice was thick with tears, and her eyes were wide, too wide.

Shriver saw the opportunity and took it smoothly. "An excellent suggestion. Smythe, Baysgate, if you would accompany Madam Abbott to the head's office and take her statement, and the portrait's?"

"And... and what about Madam Pomfrey?"

"I shall examine her myself, Madam Abbott," he said reassuringly. He tilted his head sharply toward the upstairs corridor, and Smythe and Baysgate easily maneuvered the

crying Hannah up the stairs and out of the hall.

Neville and the smaller ghost drew themselves into the column until the Unspeakables and Hannah were past them.

Severus' attention was back on Shriver. The man had taken maximum advantage of the librarian's hysteria, removing his subordinates from Hermione's vicinity, ensuring as few witnesses as possible. So, Shriver's and the Ministry's real fear was as Severus had suspected: that Hermione had, in fact, remembered what she had done in Godric's Hollow.

The man was good. How good, Severus didn't know on the surface, a dribbling Hufflepuff was no real test, but she had been unpredictable, and he had used it well.

He bore watching.

What was that? Hermione could not decide what, if anything, she had really seen behind Hannah. The moon, perhaps, through one of the many-faceted windows.

Shriver's voice intruded into her thoughts, and they fled. "However good your memory of events, Miss Granger..." A slight pause emphasized that his omission of her title was deliberate. "I will need to speak with the Healer."

"For the *official* version of your report, I presume?" she asked.

The air crackled with her veiled accusation.

"Whatever do you mean?" Shriver said, but he automatically adjusted the distance between them.

Hermione's only response was to flick the sleeve of her robe away from her wand hand.

Billings coughed quietly.

They ignored him.

Shriver looked amused. "Now, really." His tone was dismissive, but Severus saw his weight shift slightly forward, felt the air go taut around them...

No. "The Healer is generally in Professor Slughorn's chambers at this hour," he interjected.

Hermione stepped back; only then did Shriver step aside.

The air seemed to breathe back into the hall.

"If you'd lead the way?" The Unspeakable gestured for Hermione to precede him.

Severus' hand on her elbow stayed her impulse to step forward. He shook his head slightly.

Shriver's eyes narrowed. "So. It's like that, is it?"

"Just so we fully understand each other," Severus confirmed.

The Unspeakable's eyes swept the pair standing before him, dissecting them, cataloging them, and, as finally the man nodded, Severus caught a flicker of something on his face.

Ambition.

Condescension.

And hunger.

Bloody Hell. The man was aroused.

Severus' words fell like knives of sleet. "The entrance to the dungeons is through that door. After you." Severus did not release Hermione's elbow until the Unspeakable was on his way down, with Billings following a careful distance behind him.

The wee ghost shot a confused look at Neville.

"Professor Snape doesn't trust him. He didn't want him to have a shot at Hermione's back."

Her eyes widened with distress.

"He taught Defence Against the Dark Arts, you know. He was really good at it. She'll be okay."

A small, hesitant smile.

"I wonder if Professor Snape knows Hermione's secret," Neville mused.

The little ghost nodded.

"Do you know what it is?"

She shrugged, looking worried. She tugged his sleeve, and they disappeared through the floor.

The bleeding ghost bobbed outside until he was sure the Entrance Hall was empty. Then he angled through the wall.

As he drifted downward through the castle, he nodded to himself at the wisdom of his decision to remain outside whilst the living had their conversations.

It had been quite unpleasant enough without his bleeding through it.

The Valley of the Shadow

Chapter 33 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: With my gratitude to AnnieTalbot, who beta'ed, as well as to Indigofeathers, Anastasia, Machshefa and Melenka, for their inestimable contributions and unstinting support.

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who was at the sneak preview at Terminus. *blows kiss* ~ Ari

33: The Valley of the Shadow

It had been quite unpleasant enough without his bleeding through it.

Four dark-robed figures made their separate ways down the stairs.

In the low-arched stairwell, their footsteps echoed sharply. Hermione heard each step as a single question spoken into silence.

No one step answered any of the others.

Out of time.

"Turn left and continue down the corridor," Severus told Shriver and Billings, who had reached the bottom of the stair.

Hermione paused, waiting for Severus to draw even with her. In a whisper low enough to blend with the echoes, she said, "They mean to arrest me tonight. Billings is an Auror."

Severus shot her an inquiring look. "Not an Unspeakable?"

"His marks were too low."

He nodded, filing that information away.

As she stepped out of the stairwell, Hermione saw that the torches were lighting only as the Ministry wizards neared them, snuffing out as they passed. She and Severus followed, wrapped in shadow.

When a torch hissed out by his left ear, Billings flinched.

Hermione cocked a glance at Severus. His eyes, dancing with dark amusement, stayed locked on Shriver.

With the corridor stretching endlessly downward before her, each single light flaring, snuffing out, its shadows seeming to bid her onward, beckoning, welcoming, Hermione somehow sensed the certain, absolute weight of the castle's massive stone vaults, somehow felt them soaring, stories above.

Finally, the last torch flared, revealing the door to Slughorn's chambers. "No further," Severus said quietly, leaving that torch lit.

The Ministry wizards halted and turned to face them.

As Severus and Hermione drew past the last torch, their steps fell together, their shadows stretching upwards to the Ministry wizards' faces.

Shriver's lip curled. "Bit dramatic with the torches, there, Snape. But then, you always did prefer the dark." He worked his mouth as though enjoying the taste of something.

Severus' expressionless eyes flicked to Shriver's wand. "The word you seem to have forgotten is *Lumos*."

The Unspeakable's nostrils flared once, but he said nothing, mouth still working.

"Sir?" Billings asked quietly, nodding toward the door. "Technically, the Head of School has to give us leave to enter any private quarters."

The unwholesome movement of his face stopped. Shriver frowned then jerked his head at Hermione. "The professor will have to do."

"Sir?" Billings repeated.

"Just knock, Billings," Hermione ordered quietly.

He obeyed.

They all heard Poppy's muffled, "Enter," and Billings held the door open for the others. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait outside, Mr. Snape," he said. "Procedure."

In the torchlight, Shriver smiled a slow, oily smile. His eyes glinted with triumph, and again, Severus saw his hunger.

He gambled. Brushing around the Unspeakable, Severus strode into the room, his cloak rippling as he turned smoothly, his eyes boring into Shriver's back.

Finding himself between Hermione and Severus, Shriver held himself absolutely still.

"I think you might be more comfortable were you not standing between us, Mr. Shriver," Hermione said quietly. "I give you my word I will not hex you in the back."

"Your word?" Shriver snorted.

"I have made no such promise," Severus observed from behind him.

Scowling, Shriver turned abruptly into the room.

Hermione followed, a small shadow limned in torchlight.

Billings closed the door behind her.

The *snick* of the latch catching echoed in the empty corridor.

Billings' quiet knock had disturbed Poppy's silent vigil. She'd been expecting some interruption, whether from Severus or the Ministry, but when Severus entered only to silently whip about, Poppy gasped.

She was reminded that she had never seen him in a duel but realised that she might very well be about to.

Severus angled back to allow an older wizard to enter, followed by Hermione.

All three of them bursting with raw tension, fairly itching for an excuse to draw.

Not on my watch, Poppy thought, instantly on her feet. "I presume one of you will explain."

Billings and Shriver both drew breath to speak, but Severus' voice slipped smoothly through the shadows. "Madam Pomfrey, our apologies for the intrusion and its manner."

From his tone, Poppy assessed where he laid the blame.

"Yes?" Poppy turned to Shriver, smoothing her robes. Her hand brushed over the pocket where Minerva's ring lay, and she felt something some spark, some warmth she wasn't sure which, but she knew what it meant: the castle had chosen a new head, and that person was nearby. Her eyes flew instinctively to Severus. *Wouldn't that set the Ministry on its ear? Well, with them sniffing about... best say nothing just yet.*

As Shriver stepped forward, Billings stayed by the door, effectively barring any exit. "Madam Pomfrey," Shriver began, "you are, I believe, the school's Healer?"

"Of course I am."

Shriver's eyes swept over the form of Horace Slughorn. "Tell me, Madam, is it your usual practice to sit vigil at the bedsides of those who have already passed on?"

Poppy sniffed.

"An answer, if you please."

"If this is a formal inquiry, Mr..."

"Shriver," Hermione supplied quietly. "He was head of the group that dealt with us after Godric's Hollow."

Poppy threw a startled glance at Hermione before turning to the Unspeakable. "Mr. Shriver, then. If this is a formal inquiry, what is its object?"

"Could you please describe the circumstances surrounding the late Headmistress Minerva McGonagall's death?"

Poppy's hand moved over her pocket. Again, that small spark of something. "She'd had a weak heart for years as I've sworn to officially."

"I'm speaking of her actual death, Madam, not her condition." A patronising smile. "Was there anything... hm... unusual about the circumstances?"

Something about the way he said "unusual" raised the hair on the back of Poppy's neck. "Unusual?" she repeated frostily. "The only thing unusual about it was that it was so long in coming."

Shriver's face radiated scepticism, and again the patronising smile.

Poppy bristled. "If that's why you've come, I'm afraid you've wasted your time." Something in her tone added, "And mine."

"Madam Abbot notified us, quite properly, of suspected Dark Arts practices at the school."

"The Dark Arts?" Poppy didn't trust her eyes. She came around the bed, placing herself between Shriver and her patient. "The Dark Arts had no hand in the headmistress' death, Mr. Shriver. Of that I am *quite* certain."

As the Healer passed in front of him, Severus countered her movements. Half a step brought him closer to Hermione, leaving ample reaction room for them both. A small flicker in Shriver's eyes revealed that his movement had not gone unnoticed.

"Your certainty is precisely why, with your permission, of course, I'll need to examine you for traces of Dark magic; specifically, the Imperius Curse."

"Are you questioning my professional judgement?"

"Of course not, Madam," Shriver said dismissively, reaching for his wand. "But where there are suspected abuses, the Ministry feel it best to be absolutely certain."

Poppy could no longer control her eyes, which ranged from Severus a contained pillar of coiled tension to Hermione strangely small, almost invisible in shadow. The Healer tried to rally. "Do you mean to tell me that because of a perfectly natural death one that was *expected* you come from London in the middle of the night, to throw your flashy Dark-detection spells about this place of rest?" Poppy sniffed. "How very... *flimsy*."

Billings shifted uncomfortably.

Shriver merely raised his wand. "If you're ready?"

Poppy felt the air go out of her. *What a nasty piece of work he is... Determined to destroy Professor Granger, right or not...* "You're going to do it with or without my permission, aren't you?"

"It's for your own safety and peace of mind, Madam."

"Both were significantly better before you arrived."

When Shriver gave no indication of lowering his wand, she opened her arms. "Get on with it, then, but be quick about it."

The Unspeakable concentrated and began a low incantation. A thick strand of viscous smoke emerged from the tip of his wand.

Knowing what Shriver's spell would reveal, Severus took advantage of the man's diverted attention to steal a glance at Hermione.

She was standing somehow alone in the increasingly stuffy chamber, seemingly untouched by the closeness of the air and the thickening smoke.

As if she felt his gaze upon her, she turned her head slightly toward him and gave a slight nod, as if to say, "I'm ready."

It comes. Although she could not see him, he nodded back.

The smoke rose from Shriver's wand, a single immense pillar that separated into four undulating strands. Each strand coiled upon itself, rearing to strike.

Shriver slashed his wand upward. One smoky strand shot almost lazily around the Unspeakable himself, twining slowly around his neck. At a short gesture, that strand evaporated.

Two of the strands shot straight to Hermione and Severus, surrounding their necks and bathing their faces in an eerie glow.

The fourth hovered uncertainly around Horace Slughorn. Slowly, the rope of smoke thinned, flattened, and settled like a shroud over his form.

No one breathed as Shriver brushed past Poppy to stand at the bedside. Twice the Unspeakable passed his wand over the former professor's body, both times hesitating over his heart, where the withered flower stem that was the tiny ghost's silent tribute lay.

Finally, Shriver frowned and, pointing his wand directly at Slughorn's chest, he muttered a short, harsh incantation, an incantation having only one purpose: to identify a Horcrux.

Billings stood suddenly straighter.

Shriver turned toward Hermione, his face a leering mask of triumph, his voice seeming to carry with it the winds of Azkaban Island. "So."

Hermione lifted her chin and said nothing, her eyes glittering in growing challenge.

"That dead flower there is a Horcrux, Healer," Shriver said shortly, not taking his eyes from Hermione.

Hermione's gaze was aloof, but behind it, Severus felt more than saw the intensity of years of restraint waiting, just waiting.

Give her an excuse, you bastard.

"A Horcrux?" Poppy's voice shook, but she stood resolutely by the bed. "That's impossible. The professor wasn't murdered—he died of natural causes."

"Another weak heart?" Shriver breathed, his eyes gleaming as he stared at Hermione. "Quite an epidemic of 'natural causes,' Healer. You've sworn to that on his certificates as well, have you?"

Poppy sputtered, but there was no mistaking his tone: no documents had been filed on Horace Slughorn, and he knew it.

Severus broke in. "As your junior colleagues are no doubt learning from Minerva's portrait, both the late headmistress and I can testify that Horace Slughorn was not murdered."

"Your testimony being above reproach, eh, Snape?"

Neither Severus nor Poppy missed the fact that the Unspeakable's voice had grown thicker, huskier, since finding the Horcrux. Severus balanced himself carefully.

Billings coughed. "Excuse me, sir, but..."

"Arrest her," Shriver ordered shortly.

"Which one?" Billings asked.

"The one with the noose of smoke around her neck. The one who's tainted by the Dark Arts."

Billings drew himself to attention, but made no move toward Hermione. "Of course, sir, but I need to know the specific charge?"

"Murder."

"ere have been no murders committed here," said the Bloody Baron, drifting through the wall with Neville and the tiny ghost in his wake. "As all of the ghosts will attest. Unforgivable curses are recorded in the castle's very bones." He sniffed haughtily. "This *is* a school."

Shriver didn't notice that Hermione's eyes had grown wide—enormously wide—nor that tears had appeared on her face as she gazed, for the first time in over twenty years, on the face of Neville Longbottom. "The testimony of ghosts is problematic," Shriver noted blandly, "as they cannot sign their statements."

"I can," the Baron countered. "The little one as well."

"Neville?" Hermione's voice rang into the small chamber. "*Neville?*"

"Billings!" Shriver barked. "Arrest her immediately."

"Hi, Hermione." Neville waved.

"*NEVILLE!*" Hermione flew past Billings, the coils of roiling smoke that branded her as Dark trailing, forgotten, from her neck. She opened her arms and then stopped, short. "I oh, Neville," she said, her voice softening from tears to mist. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Well... you sort of did, you know," Neville said, his face alight with a quiet smile. "For a while, anyway."

Hermione felt a light tug at her sleeve, and she looked down to see a small, open face looking shyly up at her from a soft cloud of translucent hair.

"Hello," Hermione said.

The tiny ghost waved.

Glancing toward Neville, Hermione kneeled down. "You interact with corporeal matter?"

A confused look crossed the small ghost's features.

"You can write and pull my sleeve?"

The little ghost nodded.

"Then... if you don't mind too much, could you maybe give something to Neville for me?"

A shy, trusting smile appeared on the little ghost's face, and she nodded.

Hermione opened her arms, and the tiny ghost flew into them, embracing her fiercely, freezing her tears solid on her cheeks.

Then the little ghost darted to Neville and hugged him with such force that they were both carried backward.

Then she blushed the faintest pink, her outline blurring as she giggled silently.

Neville ruffled her hair. "It's okay. I get it."

She blushed harder, her entire being the color of a single drop of the teacher's favourite scarlet ink diluted by twenty-two years of tears.

Shriver cleared his throat. "How touching. Nonetheless "

Hermione ignored him, her gaze resting, amazed, on Neville. His face shone with the confidence it had always held that she would devise a clever path through whatever trouble presented itself.

But Hermione wasn't planning. Straightening up, she said, simply, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you, Neville."

"Well," he began, "I think you had something important to do, didn't you?"

Hermione nodded slowly.

"And whatever it was worked and of course it would, because you thought of it."

"Not just me," she said, but the softest echo of the smile that had once revealed her joy in her own intelligence crossed her face, and Neville recognised it.

"Maybe not just you, but I know it had to have been your idea," he countered gently.

"Ron had something to do with it too, Neville." She couldn't meet his eyes.

"And it cost you both, enormously, didn't it."

She looked up, and saw in Neville's eyes what she had never hoped to see again.

Trust.

He smiled sadly.

With a last, amazed look at him, Hermione stood straighter, turning to face the Unspeakable. Her low voice carried a sweep of silk on stone. "Shall we do this now, Shriver?"

"Billings, take her into custody," he ordered.

Billings moved forward, his wand pointed steadily at her throat. "Professor "

"Her name, Billings," Shriver barked.

"Sorry Hermione Granger, on the authority of the Ministry of Magic, I am placing you under arrest for..." He glanced at Shriver. "I still don't know the "

"The commission of an Unspeakable crime," Shriver supplied.

"She has committed no such crime!" Poppy finally found her voice. "You see I've not been Imperio'ed, and Horace Slughorn's death was brought on by a wasting illness there have been no murders committed here!"

"Billings!" Shriver ordered, his face darkening.

"How stupid." Hermione's voice slid home in the darkness, and her eyes glinted with the memory of Ron's soul in the moonlight. "How very stupid of you to presume on my silence yet again."

"Outside," Shriver ordered Billings.

"Sir?"

"Now."

The Auror left, closing the door softly behind him.

Hermione was still looking at Shriver. "I'm quite surprised at you, Shriver."

"For?"

"For making the same mistake as Voldemort. Underestimating me is what killed him. Funny that you, who know the truth of what I'm capable of, should make the same mistake." The corner of Hermione's mouth twitched mockingly. She cocked her head toward the door Billings had just exited. "That junior Auror could cause a bit of a problem for you, I'd say."

"He'll do as he's ordered."

"Perhaps." She pursed her lips. "But the thing people miss about Hufflepuffs is that they're not always obedient. Give them cause to question their loyalties, and..." She let her words hang. "No. For that kind of blindness, pick a Gryffindor, every time."

"You knew he was an Auror."

Her shrug was deceptively light. "Only a 'Pass' on his Arithmancy N.E.W.T. Not nearly high enough for the Unspeakables. No, Mr. Shriver. There is nothing wrong with my memory. Not any more."

Of Dust

Chapter 34 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks are, as always, due my writing furies: Ana, Indy, Melenka, Annie, and Machshefa.

34: Of Dust

"There is nothing wrong with my memory. Not any more."

Shriver stiffened. On a purely physical level, the change in his bearing was nearly imperceptible, but the atmosphere in the room thickened.

Severus didn't need his eyes to know that the Unspeakable's breath had turned shallow, that Poppy had instinctively withdrawn, pulling even her skirts away from the sudden, imaginary line that Hermione had just drawn between herself and the man she deemed responsible for slamming the cell door on her so many years before.

Shriver ran his tongue over his lips. "The state of your memory is of little interest to the Ministry, Granger."

"Liar." Hermione's voice was quiet, the slap of a soft leather glove on a paving stone.

Shriver matched her tone. "You dare?"

Her eyebrow slashed upward in challenge.

Trapped between Slughorn's bed and their acid stares, Poppy took an involuntary step backwards, bumping the footboard with her spine. The bed frame creaked in protest, and the tiny ghost fled behind the Bloody Baron, her small hand finding Neville's.

"Let us be absolutely clear, Shriver," Hermione said smoothly, and he nodded in a mockery of graciousness. "My research has made you nervous for years nervous enough to send a delegation to investigate."

"Standard procedure for Dark Arts research."

Her voice took on an edge of scathing derision as she mimicked the questions they hadn't dared ask her. "'How much does she remember?' 'Is she going to reveal what really happened? Expose the cover-up?' 'Will she shake the foundations of our kinder, *inclusive* wizarding world?' 'Destroy the myth of the heroic, practically perfect Harry Potter?'" She spat the name of her former friend, rage gracing her features with incandescence. "If I made you nervous enough to force an editor into retirement, to try to silence an entire field of study to keep me quiet, then you know exactly what I did in Godric's Hollow."

Shriver's eyes raked over her face, measuring her, before he blandly responded, "What you did?"

"Please," Hermione scoffed. She shook her head, her angry curls spilling gloriously over her small shoulders. "Tell me, Shriver... have you decided what to tell Harry when he takes office?"

"There's nothing he needs to know."

"Interesting," Hermione replied noncommittally, her eyes taking on a calculating edge as she examined him.

In the flicker of the bedside lamp, the practised blankness of Shriver's face seemed to oscillate between patience and malice.

Hermione's eyes sharpened suddenly as she made some decision, and Neville squeezed the smaller ghost's hand reassuringly. "Tell me, then," she began, a thread of certainty in her voice, "Whatever do you think to accomplish by arresting me?"

In the shadows, Severus' eyes deepened as he realised the path her logic was taking. *Well done, Hermione.*

But Shriver smiled too that oily smile again and Severus saw his shoulders relax. Just a fraction, but enough to send his senses flaring acutely.

Severus' eyes swept the room. Poppy hadn't caught it; she stood clenching her apron in her fists as though it contained some lifeline. Neville and the smaller ghost hovered behind the Baron, one small, wide eye just visible between the Baron's elbow and Neville's slim form.

"It is incumbent on the Ministry to remove practitioners of the Dark Arts from wizarding society. For everyone's protection, including their own," Shriver was saying. He sounded almost bored.

Severus' mind was racing. The man was playing at something, and was confident no, certain of victory. He shifted his weight slightly.

"I reiterate," the Baron interceded, "that all Unforgivables are indelibly etched into the awareness of the school itself and, by association, the ghosts."

"Perhaps so," Shriver replied.

"Rubbish!" Poppy snorted. Her voice was a bit too bright, her hands still twisting her apron, but she continued valiantly, "It's a central feature of the castle's magic to safeguard the students and staff."

"Whether her crime is Unforgivable is immaterial," Shriver repeated. His oily smile rose into his eyes, and again, his mouth started working in that unwholesome manner. "A crime had been committed, nonetheless."

Severus stepped forward, trading precious dueling space for a better view of the Unspeakable's chest. If he were to make a move, his chest would reveal it before his eyes. "State your business and be done," he said flatly.

"Suspicion of Dark activity warrants bringing her in for further questioning." Shriver's tone was as bland as if he were reciting an elementary procedure manual, but his eyes

betrayed a far darker investment in arresting Hermione. One that was...

... *personal*. Any doubts Severus may have had regarding Shriver's hunger evaporated, and, eyes blackening, that accusation sprang to his lips even as Hermione spoke.

"Suspicion'?" Her voice was laced with condescension.

She doesn't see it, Severus realised.

"Suspicion'?" Hermione repeated. "It's not suspicion when you *know*. No one here has the slightest question regarding what I did in Godric's Hollow, nor the Dark origins of that spell."

"Your Darkness certainly explains his presence," Shriver said, his chin thrusting toward Severus. "Couldn't keep away from that temptation, Snape? Or did you teach her everything she knows?" Shriver's eyes glinted at the word "everything," and he let his gaze fall on Severus.

Severus hissed.

The little ghost's panicked eyes shot from Severus to Hermione, and she darted through the wall.

Eyes flashing, Hermione shot out, "I deduced the three-part spell breakdown on my own, Shriver. The Black family library contained all the resources I needed."

Shriver returned his attention to Hermione, but did not look at her face.

She blushed, eyes flashing hotly, and, as Severus fought to control his wand arm, Hermione raised the fingers of her near hand, very slightly, toward him. He frowned, but acceded to her desire to handle things. *For now*.

"I think we all agree that bringing me in for questioning is pointless, Shriver. I freely confess that I have used the Dark Arts. As you bloody well know."

Easy, Hermione, Severus thought.

"It's procedure."

"My debriefing after Godric's Hollow would satisfy procedure," Hermione countered.

"Nonetheless, procedure dictates "

"Questioning me further will establish nothing of which you're not already aware, as you damn well know."

"Surely you don't want to risk a trial," Shriver said smoothly.

"Really? Whyever not?" she retorted coldly.

"Your reputation is at stake..." Shriver began.

"The professor's reputation is only slightly better than my own," Severus eased in, seeking to deflect. "Doubtless worse, amongst her own former students."

"Indeed," Hermione agreed readily.

"... and your position," Shriver finished, as though they had not spoken. "Teaching is, I believe, your livelihood?"

Hermione's eyes turned to ice. "Not that old saw about 'those who can't, teach' really, Shriver. Enough of these games."

"Games?" Shriver's eyebrows raised in a farce of innocence.

"If you attempt to question me, I shall insist on a trial. It's well within my rights."

Shriver made some show of demurring. "You can understand our position, surely we've no wish to cause you embarrassment."

Hermione's eyebrow arched up again. "What rot considering you're the one who stands to lose."

"How do you figure?"

"I shall insist on Veritas serum."

"There will be no need of that," Shriver hedged, but something about his bearing sent Severus' wand hand twitching again.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "It's my right. You assume that any guilty party will lie, will wish to conceal the true nature of their actions. I give you Counter-exhibit A, Shriver, right there, in the person of Severus Snape."

Shriver's eyes flicked noncommittally to Severus and back.

"I rather expect you'll find me quite cooperative under questioning. Oh, yes, I shall be all too happy to speak. About everything."

"You couldn't stop her tongue, that one, even as a student," Poppy confirmed.

Shriver's chuckle raised the hair on the back of Severus' neck. "Couldn't stop her tongue? Was that your experience of her as a student, Snape?"

Severus' eyes bled flat, and Hermione clenched her wand, their efforts not to hex Shriver charging the air.

Almost too casually, Shriver turned back to Hermione. "So, you wish to set up housekeeping in Azkaban, do you?"

"That course of action is inadvisable." Severus' voice shivered in the low chamber.

"It is the standard sentence for Dark wizards. For everyone's protection, as well as "

"As well as her own, yes, you've mentioned that." Severus spoke over him.

"I fail to see your point."

"Yes, you do," Hermione said.

Poppy glanced at her, startled.

Severus continued, "Even assuming that you could keep her quiet in court which would raise questions you would not wish to answer she would pose no small threat to the other prisoners. People *do* die in prison," he observed quietly. "The Ministry might encounter difficulties if all prison deaths suddenly resulted in spontaneous Horcruxes."

Shriver's eyes narrowed as he considered Severus' words for several moments. "Your point?" His voice conceded nothing.

"The moment of death is the time when the soul is most vulnerable. Any death not just murder. You concealed that truth long ago, with this as the result." Severus gestured toward Horace Slughorn. "His plight is as much your doing as hers. You cannot bury her again and expect a different outcome."

Shriver's expression was illegible. "One of the times. Death is one of the times, Snape." He turned to Hermione. "Did you, or did you not, create this Horcrux?"

"I did not."

Shriver laughed shortly. "Who's lying now, Granger?"

"She didn't," Poppy confirmed. "I'll swear to it myself."

Shriver ignored her. "You did split his soul."

"I seem to have done."

"Seem'? Memory slipping?"

"I was asleep when it happened. Therefore, yes, 'seem.' Having no conscious memory of it, I cannot swear to it."

Shriver snorted.

The Baron drifted forward. "I can confirm the professor's statement, having been sent to check."

"Sent?"

"By the Healer and the headmistress. The flower stem was not even in the chamber; the little one brought it with her when we left the professor's quarters."

Shriver's eyes grew hungry. "So how did it become a Horcrux, then? For it is, undeniably, a Horcrux."

"Do you know how souls work when in schism, Shriver?" Hermione asked quietly. "It is your job to question such things, isn't it? Your Dark detection spell proves that you, too, bear the taint of the Dark Arts. Surely you've not wasted the years since Godric's Hollow ignoring the potential implications of my spell."

"Dark echoes are an occupational hazard," he said, "for which I and members of my Department are granted statutory immunity."

Hermione's eyes sharpened. "You've not answered the question. Do you know how a soul fragment works? If it has volition? Awareness? Agency?"

Shriver made a smacking noise with his tongue. "The Ministry doesn't make it a practice to destroy souls."

The twenty-two years since she'd preserved their world crashed down on her through the bones of the castle. "Literally or figuratively, you bastard?"

"Your soul is not the Ministry's concern."

"Like my memory?" Her eyes blazed dark. "Tell me does your statutory immunity also make you immune to the temptation?"

Shriver said nothing, his eyes glittering eerily in the lamplight.

"Not going to ask me 'What temptation?' Allow me to refresh your memory: temptation is the cost of meddling with Darkness. Which you didn't bother to tell me after Godric's Hollow. Are you asking me to believe that, with all the resources and history of the Ministry itself behind you, you didn't know that that temptation exists? That no matter how deeply buried it would find its own way out?"

Shriver opened his mouth, but Hermione went on, "Tell me... to satisfy my curiosity, if nothing else. How can you resist the temptation offered by a vulnerable soul? So many war criminals still in Azkaban... surely no one would object."

He said nothing, and Hermione nodded sharply. "I know something about situational ethics, Shriver, and the dilemma implicit in free will."

Shriver nodded absently, returning to his interrogation as though following a checklist. "You broke Horace Slughorn's soul involuntarily, you say?"

"I did."

"Then what's to stop you from doing it again, if, by your own admission, that temptation exists?"

"My conscience."

Shriver's laughter reverberated harshly off the stone walls.

"It's true," Severus said. "She has broken no law you can name, as you've never admitted the possibility of the crime. In twenty-two years, she has split two souls: Once to save the world surely an extenuating circumstance and once because she obeyed the Ministry's suggestion to forget that she could do it at all. Untempered by conscience, Darkness will out."

"It's consistent with similar patterns in other areas of Healing," Poppy supplied quietly.

"Circumstances are irrelevant " Shriver began, but Hermione cut him off.

"Then yours is the greater fault." She shook her head slowly, and a single curl caught in her collar. Severus caught his breath. "The real crime wasn't committed by me, Shriver, and not at all recently. And I wasn't the only victim. Not at all."

All eyes in the room turned to Shriver, who refused to buckle. "Average witches and wizards are unprepared to wrestle with such fine distinctions, Granger. Broken souls are an abomination. Government protection is what they want."

"Because their education is insufficient and has been since Dumbledore," Hermione spat.

Poppy gasped, and her hand went again to her pocket.

"If you bring me to trial, you risk revealing yourself as incompetent for how could you have failed to detect the pall of Darkness hanging over a distraught, wandless teenager? No one will believe that. So you'll be revealed as dishonest complicit in a conspiracy to perpetrate a fraud on the world. Those are your choices. Incompetence or fraud."

Shriver's face betrayed nothing, and Hermione shook her head again. "I'm rather surprised you didn't kill me when you had the chance."

Something flickered on his otherwise impassive face, and she continued mercilessly. "It would have been easy enough to provide a convincing explanation for my death 'Stress, trauma, losing her boyfriend, watching him die under such horrifying circumstances...' Hermione's eyes glinted with rage. "'Poor thing.'"

In the flickering lamplight, a small gleam grew in Shriver's eyes.

Hermione saw it, and her voice dropped. "You suggested it, didn't you? What stopped you from killing me? I had no wand I couldn't have stopped you."

Shriver said nothing.

"Where was it to have happened then? Not in prison, surely they still considered me a secondary hero. And not St. Mungos too many witnesses. No." Her gaze held his as her mind raced.

He waited. Expectantly. Eagerly.

Her eyes widened. "The Department of Mysteries..."

Shriver's slow smile clashed jarringly with his dead eyes as he reached around Poppy to remove the Horcrux from Slughorn's chest. "You perceive my third option."

Even as Poppy and Severus opened their mouths to protest, Hermione spoke. "You cannot mean to kill me now."

"Kill? No. But the Department has certain..." Shriver paused to moisten his lips. "... theoretical questions regarding temptation and how to put it? occasions of vulnerability. And, as you are the only living, hrm, expert..." He opened his meaty hands, and a small, satisfied triumph crossed his features. "Our investigations indicate that death is not the only time the soul is vulnerable, *Professor*. As I'm sure you'll agree."

Hermione's skin crawled as his meaning came clear. She heard Severus swear even as Shriver intoned, "Hermione Jane Granger, you are hereby remanded to the custody of the Department of Mysteries."

To Dust

Chapter 35 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Many thanks to Indigofeathers for the late-night beta, and to Melenka, Indy, Annie Talbot, and Machshefa for reading an early version of the chapter. My humble gratitude, as always, to Anastasia, without whom there would be much flinching.

WARNING: CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

If you have a button, this chapter may hit it - please skip this chapter; I'll do a plot summary in the author's notes of Chapter 36.

35: To Dust

"... Hermione Jane Granger, you are hereby remanded into the custody of the Department of Mysteries."

A moment of crashing silence in which Hermione froze; into her terror, Shriver smiled.

"You can't mean..."

As she voiced her disbelief, the silence collapsed into motion. She was dimly aware of Neville zooming in front of her, an ineffectual obstacle to the Unspeakable's designs. Peripherally, she saw the Baron dart through the door; stumbling involuntarily backward, she saw Poppy reach, staggering, for the footboard, inadvertently cutting off Severus' path to her, blocking any shot he had at Shriver.

Severus' automatic hand steadied Poppy, and he drew her hastily aside, back to the shadows by the wall.

Poppy hissed, more at Shriver than at Severus, her wand already pointing toward the Unspeakable.

Hermione saw Severus' hand closed over the Healer's, saw more than heard him murmur an injunction for Poppy to wait.

His eyes turned intently to Hermione and blazed into her soul.

As if from a great distance, she vaguely heard Poppy's protest and Severus' repeated rejoinder to wait.

She looked into his eyes and knew he was willing to fight or to accompany her into whatever hell the Unspeakable had planned for her. But, even more deeply, she felt his hope that she would somehow prevent her own imprisonment.

After looking at him for a long moment, Hermione dropped her head, her hair falling in front of her face.

Severus swore softly and felt the Healer's hand tighten on her wand.

"Wait," he murmured.

"Severus, she is distraught as well she might be."

He shot Poppy a tight look.

The Healer's eyes were doubtful, but no hex flew from her lips.

From behind her fallen hair, Hermione waited for her mind to stop shouting at her that she had been stupid.

Another voice in her mind, a voice that had spoken nothing but truth since her childhood.

Teaching her deception. Honour. Ruthlessness.

And cruelty.

"Deliberate cruelty can be anticipated, shaped, twisted back on itself... To survive its wounds, it only requires that you not be innocent... To triumph, you must expect the wounds and inflict your own, far greater, on your opponent..."

Very slowly, she nodded.

"...your weapons readied by constant, deliberate attention to detail, to nuance, to betrayals of vulnerability..."

Behind her hair, she opened her eyes.

" and craft it into the cutting remark your opponent will use to carve out his own heart."

And another voice not Severus', not Ron's but the words she heard clearly: *You know you want to.*

And she realised the voice was her own.

She raised her head slightly. Neville was still hovering between her and Shriver.

And in her mind, Neville's death became Ron's, and Ron's death became her own, and, by the light born of death and truth, she looked upon the Unspeakable with new-fallen eyes.

Compared to what had killed Neville, he was nothing.

Compared to truth, he was a lie.

And compared to her, to what she had done, he was innocent.

Vulnerable.

She wanted to break him, and she found she knew how.

Within the Darkness she had once embraced out of desperate panic, she claimed her own deliberate place.

"Cruelty... is a slow, artful dance."

Schooling her expression to resignation, to fear small, empty, afraid, she raised guileless eyes to Shriver. "So let me understand..." She hesitated deliberately. "What you want is to..." She feigned the need to swallow. "For your research, you want to use me as..." She pretended to be too overwhelmed to finish the sentence.

Shriver's smile deepened. "I assure you that our research is purely theoretical."

She shook her head, still feigning fear. "There can be no 'pure theory' in the Dark Arts it is too dangerous a dance. There can be no stopping, Shriver, once the dance is begun."

In the shadows, Severus' eyes went quiet.

Shriver looked at her, bemused, then he gathered his cloak about him and turned toward the door. "If you're ready, then, Miss Granger."

Dropping her voice, Hermione muttered quickly, "Neville please go. I don't want you to see me like this."

Neville turned in the air to regard his friend. "See you like what? I'm not leaving you."

But her eyes pled with him, and, when she held his gaze, he looked more closely into her eyes.

She made no effort to hide the Darkness she knew must be visible to the ghostly memory of her friend's soul.

"Oh," Neville said. "I see." But his face was determined. "Whatever you have to do," he whispered, "do it. But I'm not leaving." He backed away to hover near Severus and Poppy.

"A moment, Mr. Shriver," Hermione said, allowing a fine edge of trembling back into her voice. "Please?"

He turned back to her.

"When you call me 'Miss Granger,' it makes me feel like a child." A pale hand emerged from her dark robes as she stepped forward, extending a pleading hand toward Shriver's arm.

Fascinated, his eyes tracked her hand.

Turning slowly around him, she reached for the door and turned the key, slipping it quickly into the folds of her robes.

She shook her head, her hair rippling away from her face, and her robes slipped past her shoulders in a soft rustle of black silk. An abrupt wand movement and the bedside lamp was snuffed out.

In the dim light cast by the Neville's misty glow, her skin was the color of a shadow, cast by moonlight, on snow.

Shriver's face betrayed him. His gaze had dropped to her throat, to the curve of her shoulder, lower

Mine, she thought. *It is mine to do, it is mine to decide.* But her voice was still soft, still low, as she turned to Shriver. "You say you really want to know when the soul is at its most vulnerable."

Shriver watched, mesmerized, as she ran her hand through her hair, loosening its curls so they fell more softly around her shoulders.

Her laugh a shatter of glass falling to ice. "So how does it work, then? I don't imagine you to be the sort of man who's content to watch."

His eyes widened, and it was only with visible effort that he said nothing, swallowing rapidly.

"Do you want to watch, Shriver?" She stepped toward him slowly. "Severus and I have experimented, you know. It takes some effort to keep me... hm... controlled. It's not pretty, I don't think. But we'd be happy to show you, if you want." She dropped her voice. "Do you want to?"

He moistened his lips but said nothing.

"No... when you've no Scrimgeour in your way, you're more a 'hands-on' sort, I'd say..."

In her eyes a memory of innocence, a history of ancient, feminine promise.

Shriver's breathing increased, but still, he said nothing.

Hermione moved toward him, her pale hand extending to his shoulder, a small finger tracing a line down his arm.

"Miss Granger, what do you mean by "

She rested a finger softly on his lips. "Shhh..."

His eyes glittered strangely, and he made a choking noise but did not attempt to speak.

"You don't really want Severus there, do you? You want my vulnerability all to yourself, to test it, to master it... to break it over your knee..."

She moved closer. "You want it you crave it, don't you?" She paused, tilting her chin in a mockery of consideration. "You want to grab me, ripping my robes down to my elbows to pin my arms, kick my legs apart as you force my face into the desk and finally, after so many years you thrust yourself hard, hungry, brutal into the soft, forbidden, vulnerable darkness between my legs?"

His breath was shallow. Rapid.

"Do you want to make me scream?"

She moved to stand against him, her breasts brushing the front of his robes.

"Or do you want to make me cry?" she whispered, rubbing her breasts more firmly against him. "But then I could never cry on demand... however shall I summon tears?"

"You won't have to pretend," he growled, his breath hot against her hair.

One corner of her mouth raised.

Very slowly.

"Do think you can make me cry? With your fat, sweaty palm slick on my wrists, your other twisting my hair, forcing my face down hard against the splinters of your desk, my breath lost amongst your memos, your files, your statutory immunity?"

He growled again, and, in the darkness, Severus released Poppy's wand hand and raised his own.

"Helpless, terrified, and powerless to escape. A distraught, wandless teenager. That's what you want, isn't it? I can taste your temptation, Shriver. It's in the very air." She licked her lips slowly and smiled as his eyes tracked her tongue, her eyes unfathomable shadows of a rising, silent, wicked laughter.

Pinned by her eyes, Shriver's breath hitched in his throat.

"Do you know the sound a soul makes when it breaks, Shriver? I do..." She stretched, leaning in close enough to feel the flush in his skin at his neck. "I've only heard it once. I don't know if Ron did, and he could never tell me. No more could Horace and I slept through it, that time. But you you I can ask, after you rape me, Shriver, and you can tell me. Your soul will be vulnerable then; I shall reach for it, and break it, and you won't be able to stop me." A low, dark chuckle emerged from deep in her throat, and she felt his skin prickle. "*I don't need a wand.*"

The crack of her hand across his face broke the spell of her voice, and Severus and Poppy were beside her in an instant, Shriver's wand flying to Severus' hand.

"You bitch," Shriver spat, his voice strangling with frustrated carnality.

Her eyes glittered clinically. "You expected anything less? How stupid. How truly stupid." She opened her hand. "His wand, Severus."

Severus placed it in her outstretched palm, but she didn't close her fingers.

Shriver's wand clattered to the floor and rolled. Hermione stopped it with her toe, and, without taking her eyes from Shriver's, she snapped it under her heel.

"It fell," she said finally, her voice containing a knifing echo of the teenager she had once been. "What a shame."

Shriver gaped at her.

"It's no more than could be said of me," Hermione said quietly, her eyes returning to their normal humanity.

"There shall be consequences, Professor Granger."

"There always are."

"And there is still the matter of this," Shriver continued, raising the Horcrux flower stem. "Horcruxes are illegal. Breaking someone's wand is also a crime."

Severus' robes rustled softly. "I believe she said it fell."

"She did," Poppy announced in a firm, clear voice. "I heard her myself."

Shriver swallowed thickly. "Do you really believe the creation of a Horcrux can go unpunished?"

She smiled quietly. "To punish me for it, you'd have to admit that it's possible to split a soul without murder. I believe you have a choice to make."

"What sort of choice?"

Hermione continued as though he'd not spoken. "Dumbledore used to prattle on about our choices making us what we are, but then I don't think he ever fully appreciated paradox."

"Spit it out, girl."

"Girl? Really." She shuddered. "Severus, do you suppose I can split his soul without killing him or touching him?"

"It may be possible," he drawled. "Speaking purely theoretically, of course."

She sensed an edge of dark, silent laughter around his voice, and her eyes flew to his face.

Well done, Hermione. He didn't say the words. She could hear them anyway.

A hint of a dimple returned to her cheek.

Shriver glowered at her mulishly, but her eyes dropped to the Horcrux he held and flashed back to his. His shoulders slumped. "What is this choice?"

"It's quite simple," she said quietly. "Are you going to tell Harry, or shall I?"

Before Shriver could respond, a sharp rap on the door. "Sir?" they heard Billings call from outside. The knock repeated more insistently. "Sir? There's something out here you should see..."

Billings' voice trailed off, the reason why immediately apparent as, from wall, ceiling, and floor, the ghosts of Hogwarts castle drifted silently into Slughorn's chamber.

All of them.

At a gesture from the Baron, the host parted to make way for the smallest among them, who was leading the sad-eyed ghost by one hand.

His other dripped a slow trail of blood across the floor.

Flights of Angels

Chapter 36 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: First of all, here's the promised plot summary for everyone who chose to skip the last chapter.

Summary of Chapter 35: Hermione figures out what Shriver wants to do to her. After remembering what Severus told her about "intentional cruelty" and turning the tables on people, she asks Neville to leave. Neville refuses to leave her, sees the Darkness in her, and says, "Whatever you have to do, do it. But I'm not leaving."

Poppy wants to hex Shriver but Severus tells her to wait he wants to give Hermione the chance to take the power over Shriver.

Hermione tells Shriver in detail what his plans must be and exposes him in the process (thus the warning on the last chapter she doesn't pull any punches). He finally admits it, she slaps him, and Severus disarms him. Hermione drops Shriver's wand and breaks it under her heel. Severus and Poppy agree that the wand "fell" and imply that they'll swear to it if Shriver presses charges for breaking his wand. Shriver reminds Hermione that creating a Horcrux is illegal, but before that can go anywhere, Billings interrupts with a knock, saying there's something Shriver should see. Before Billings can explain, all of the castle's ghosts come into the chamber. The Baron gestures for them to part to give the little ghost and the bleeding ghost a path to Hermione. Chapter ends there.

--- end summary.

A/N2: With thanks, as always, to my writing furies: Ana, Annie, Indy, Machshefa, and Melenka. The title of the chapter is from *Hamlet*, spoken by Horatio over the body of his friend: "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

36: Flights of Angels

At a gesture from the Baron, the host parted to make way for the smallest among them, who was leading the sad-eyed ghost by one hand.

His other dripped a slow trail of blood across the floor.

The tiny ghost looked from Hermione to Severus to Shriver, and her eyes hardened. Insistently, she pulled the taller ghost forward, and looked with urgent eyes to Neville, who drifted to Poppy.

"Madam Pomfrey," Neville said quietly.

The Healer glanced at Severus, who was still holding the Unspeakable at wandpoint. "Severus? There's something these children well, ghosts well, they were children anyway yes..."

The Healer's uncharacteristic flutterings drew a sidelong glance from Severus. Poppy's eyes were determined, but her demeanor was flustered. Severus jerked his chin toward Shriver, cocking an inquiring eyebrow at Hermione.

"I have him." Hermione's voice was calm, her wand aimed directly between Shriver's eyes. The Unspeakable was going slightly cross-eyed as he focused on the tip of her wand. She flicked it slightly, smiling viciously at him as he reflexively tracked it, his skin flushing painfully whenever she moved it.

"Play with him as you deem appropriate, Professor," Severus said mildly, turning his attention to Poppy.

After a glance at Hermione, during which Poppy's mouth gave a decidedly grim twitch, the Healer gestured toward the small ghost. "She seems to have found a way to subvert a single-use animation Charm."

"That's impossible," Severus said flatly.

"Yes, well," Poppy replied, "nonetheless." Turning to the small ghost, she asked, "Did you bring the dragon, dear?"

The little ghost gestured toward the door and gave a small shrug.

"Oh, yes. Of course. It's in the corridor?" At the small ghost's nod, Poppy started for the door. "The key."

The corners of Severus' mouth twitched as he stepped to Hermione. Slowly, he reached into her robes to extract the key, trailing it softly up Hermione's arm, dragging her robes up with it, exposing her skin to the cool air.

Hermione laughed a laughter rich with understood promise, deep with a promise in return but she did not break her eyes away from the Unspeakable.

Shriver broke into a sheen of sweat, and Hermione's laugh deepened, her eyes gleaming.

Severus chuckled deep in his throat.

A moment later, a tiny black dragon flew into the room, cheeping its frustration at being left in the corridor. As it shot through the translucent crowd of ghosts, its wings left light trails of purple lingering in the air.

An ashen-faced Billings appeared in the doorway, his eyes wild as they traced the path of blood left by the sad-eyed ghost. Seeing Shriver held at wand-point, he shook his head as if he should do something, but his eyes kept drifting to the droplets of blood on the floor, and he stayed on the threshold as if planted there.

The dragon shrilled a single note when it spotted the little ghost. It shot to her and swirled excitedly through her hair, coming to perch on her shoulder with its wingtips tangled in the tendrils of her softly glowing hair. It let out a tiny, satisfied *Peep* before trying to shake its wings free.

She smiled, a small smile that did not quite reach her serious eyes.

Severus stared at the dragon and blinked.

The dragon paused in its efforts and blinked back, cheeping a complaint, rustling its tangled wings and staring at him with imploring eyes.

"But it can't be," Severus said, leaning closer to examine it.

The little ghost nodded shyly.

"That's impossible..." he breathed, gently removing her hair from its hooked wingtip.

The tiny dragon snorted, emitting small puffs of smoke.

"Show him the seed, child," Poppy said gently.

The small ghost carefully placed the seed in Severus' hand.

"She made a wish on a dandelion she scared up from somewhere. Somehow it drifted through the castle, and..."

"Muggleborn?" Severus interrupted, turning toward the little ghost.

She nodded, bobbing slightly in the air. The dragon spread its wings to keep its balance.

"Somehow, the seed brought me back to this form," Neville finished.

Severus' brow furrowed. "The headmistress mentioned that you had faded, somehow? What happened?"

Neville nodded. "I don't remember anything except missing, um, Luna Lovegood, Sir. I was quite fond of her." He paused briefly, and Severus nodded. "The seed drifted into me, somehow, and I found myself reformed. My little friend there sort of filled me in on how long I'd been, um..." Neville searched for the right word. "... gone."

"They brought the seed to me, Severus, after using it to somehow restore the broken dragon. The seed left a trace of blood on my blotter." Poppy glanced at the sad-eyed ghost briefly but looked away as if he were something too large, too profound to contemplate. "Who knows what else it might have come in contact with before it drifted into Longbottom." She opened her hands helplessly.

"Blood?" Severus echoed, turning the seed over in his hand.

The sad-eyed ghost opened his bleeding palm. "Mine. It drifted through my hand."

Severus' eyes raked the ghost's palm, and a wide-eyed Billings shifted uncomfortably in the doorway.

"We were hoping, Sir, that you might be able to tell us if there's anything else on it? Something that might make an ordinary dandelion seed have an effect on ghosts?" Neville looked at him hopefully.

Dark eyes stared intently at the bleeding ghost, then at the seed. Severus turned the seed over in his palm again. "Impossible," he said again, amazed, but his wand was already forming the tight pattern that would separate and identify most potion ingredients.

Small strands of light arose from the seed and resolved instantly into three symbols. "Blood. Tears. And..." He glanced at the little ghost. "You made a wish?"

She nodded earnestly, looking up at him with large, hopeful eyes.

Severus trailed his wand through the third symbol and murmured a low incantation. "Hermione... could you confirm this symbol, please?"

"Send it over here, if you could? Wandless or not, there's no telling what this ape might do."

A flick of Severus' wand, and the symbol drifted into Hermione's line of vision. "It's the Arithmantic symbol for 'breath,'" she said, drawing a tiny circle with her wand and smirking as Shriver's eyes followed her wandtip.

"Fascinating," Severus said. He frowned for a moment, his eyes intent on some abstract space in front of him as he pieced together the potential implications.

Poppy waited, scarcely breathing, as she awaited his thoughts.

Suddenly, his eyes flew to hers. "Horace?" he said urgently.

Poppy nodded. "Despite its apparent impossibility, it might work. If whatever's on that seed can re-animate the dragon, restore some vitality to the echo of Longbottom's soul, and bring our tall friend here a different kind of step closer to human with the blood - it could maybe work to release Horace's soul from its Horcrux. It shouldn't hurt to try the seed should be inert, but... well... and the seed is from this stem, after all..." Her voice trailed off in a question as her theory spun out into the unknown.

Their eyes held for a moment.

"It seems to have a demonstrable resonance with aspects of the soul," Severus agreed quietly. The implications of what the little ghost had achieved with a simple wish struck an inarticulate but profound chord deep within him.

"Severus..." A fine tremor frayed around the edges of Hermione's voice, and Severus heard within it an echo of his own hope. "According to principles of sympathetic Arithmancy, if we can reconstruct the elements of the seed's path from the stem to Neville, this could work. Is there a particular inflection for sympathetic echoes in Potions?"

Severus' robes rustled as he shrugged slightly. "The same elements added in the same order do achieve consistent effects. Beyond that, it's all a question of metaphysics."

"In other words, the study of magical kinesthesia or motion or whatever animates a soul..." Hermione continued, still holding Shriver at wandpoint.

"Perhaps it sounds awfully thin, even as theory..."

Billings finally found his voice. "Can I ask what's going on here?"

"No," Severus, Poppy and Hermione said simultaneously, and the Baron loomed menacingly at the Auror.

"Bugger, man, do you have to hover so close? I've gooseflesh enough from that bleeding gent there; I'm not going in there unless I have to," Billings muttered.

The Bloody Baron drifted a pointed centimetre backwards.

Hermione continued as if Billings hadn't spoken. "Severus, if you repaired my window not by filling in the crack but by removing it, then could this not work similarly? Removing the crack that should not exist in Horace's soul?" The hope in her voice was growing more palpable.

A glow of motion in his peripheral vision drew Severus' attention back to the small ghost's face. She glanced to the dragon and back to him.

"Hermione," Severus began, his voice sounding oddly hollow to his own ears, "could you bring the Horcrux here?"

"Someone will need to guard this bit of business," Hermione said, poking her wand on the bridge of Shriver's nose.

He blinked, his eyes toxic with malice.

She flashed an icy dimple at him.

Severus started for her, but Poppy laid a hand on his arm. "Let me."

He looked at her, and she smiled. "It's my duty to see that he does no more damage to our girl there. Preventative Healing."

Severus nodded. He found he couldn't speak.

And Hermione was at his side. "What do I need to do?" She looked at him and was startled to see that his eyes were bright.

"Take them," he said, blinking.

She caught one of his tears with a tentative fingertip, and looked a question at him.

"You can't summon tears on command," he said quietly, "whereas I"

She nodded, her eyes gentle on his face. "So... what do I do?"

He held out his hand for the flower stem, and she placed it in his palm.

"Breath. Tears. Blood. In that order, if our theory is correct."

Hermione glanced at the sad-eyed ghost. "If you're willing?"

He smiled at her, and she felt a peace settle into her soul. She smiled back.

The bleeding ghost placed his palm over the flower stem. A drop of blood fell onto it, and he looked at Severus.

Severus just nodded. "All right. If you're ready, Hermione?" She nodded. "Little one? If you will?" He held the seed out to her.

The tiny ghost drifted closer and picked up the seed.

Hermione shot her an encouraging smile. "Quickly, little one before the tear freezes."

The tiny ghost closed her eyes and blew the seed from her fingertip.

It drifted upward, caught on her breath.

Hermione followed its path and intercepted its flight, its tip piercing the pale roundness of Severus' tear.

Surface tension broken, the tear drained from her fingertip.

Hermione was dimly aware of the ghosts drawing closer, almost as if they were herding the seed toward its intended place.

The seed swirled in the air then settled into a lazy, downward drift.

Downward it fell, propelled and guided by the ghosts' collective breath, downward, until it met the spot of blood on the tall, sad-eyed ghost's hand...

Downward, through his hand, the tears of a man who never cried mingling with the blood of a ghost who had none...

Downward, the ghost's wound closing as it fell...

... and it hovered, uncertainly.

No one knew what had originally disturbed its random drift to send it, finally, toward Neville.

No one knew that, hovering unseen in a corridor, it had caught an eddy from the skirling edges of Severus' cloak as he had passed.

No one knew, but, as the seed hovered, the dragon took flight from the little ghost's shoulder, angling in for a closer look at whatever everyone was staring at.

It lighted on Hermione's outstretched finger, and its softly waving wings guided the seed to rest against the flower stem whence it had come.

And then a pause in which not a soul stirred.

And then a wind the slightest hint of a wind arose in the center of Severus' palm, and the seed feathers caught it and it rose, poised, tip to tip with the stem, and the castles' ghosts drew closer until they overlapped, blurring into each other.

The seed clung to the flower tip, and its feathers rustled in the slight, infinite wind still rising from Severus' palm.

"Hermione," Severus murmured.

Hermione closed her eyes and heard herself whisper, "*Reparo*."

A gentle sigh as the ghosts drifted backwards, a single thread of ghostly light rising, barely visible, from the flower stem.

The seed feathers waved gently, caressing the rising thread of Horace Slughorn's soul as it trailed away upwards.

They all followed its invisible passage.

Only the dragon saw the flower stem in Severus' hand turn green. Only the dragon saw the seed-head reform. And only the dragon saw the original seed change.

Alone in a perfect whole of gently waving white feathers, the original seed blushed red.

In the pale light of the assembled ghosts, it was exactly the color of Darkness.

Ex Hiberna

Chapter 37 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Many thanks to Melenka and Machshefa. The title translates to "From [Out of] Winter" ~ Ari

37: Ex Hiberna

Alone in perfect whole of gently waving white feathers, the original seed blushed red.

In the pale light of the assembled ghosts, it was exactly the color of Darkness.

Of all of those assembled in the late Horace Slughorn's chambers, Billings was the first to notice that the seed had changed. "Merlin..." he breathed.

The little ghost drew in a startled breath, and reached for Neville.

Before anyone had a chance to react, she had grasped the flower stem and she, Neville, and the dragon were gone, passing through Billings as he stood gaping in the doorway.

A cry from Poppy caught everyone's attention.

Shriver's hand had flashed out and caught her wrist, twisting her arm around behind her. Even now, she was struggling to keep her hold on her wand.

"Sir!" Billings' voice rang with authority. "Stop!"

As quickly as he'd grabbed her, Shriver stopped. "My apologies," he muttered blandly. "I forgot myself."

The young Auror's eyes narrowed. "Sir. What's happened here?"

Shriver adjusted his robes. His efforts to collect his wits read too clearly, and Severus' lips curled into an involuntary sneer. "Nothing," Shriver said finally. "Nothing you need to know about."

Billings looked doubtful. "Excuse me, sir, but this entire situation is beyond my authority, and your move there with the Healer defies procedure." He looked to Poppy. "Are you all right, Madam Pomfrey?"

"Physically I'm quite well, Billings," Poppy huffed, still bristling from Shriver's manhandling. "But this man seems unstable. I suggest," she began, glancing to Severus as if for permission.

Severus nodded slightly.

"I suggest that you have this man evaluated. I quite doubt whether he can be trusted to perform his professional duties. We had to disarm him lest he harm the Professor."

Billings glanced at Hermione, who was standing quietly at Severus' side.

"And her?"

Shriver started to speak, but Billings interrupted him. "I'm sorry, sir; I need to ask you to say nothing further here." Billings looked from Poppy to Severus as if uncertain to whom to address himself. "There's something not right about any of this; I need to report back for orders." He shuddered. "Bleeding ghosts aren't my department."

"Do that," Hermione said quietly. "And make sure you direct that inquiry to the Minister of Magic."

Billings blinked. "Uh... I'll have to speak to my immediate superiors, Professor. Only Department Heads or the Headmaster of Hogwarts can initiate an inquiry at that level."

Poppy reached into her pocket. "If you could perhaps wait a moment, young man. The castle's been making its choice known for the last hour." She drew out Minerva's ring, relighting the lamps.

The ring gleamed softly, its ruby stone glinting deeply in the suddenly warm light. The ghosts hovered at a respectful distance.

"When the ring is in the presence of the castle's choice, it sparks a bit, grows warm, that sort of thing." She looked almost apologetically at Severus. "I'm not certain, Severus, but it seems..."

He swore softly. Over his own voice, he heard Hermione's voice rising in sympathy: "Oh, no."

He looked at her.

"You hate teaching, Severus," she murmured.

"Indeed," he muttered, feeling an echo of an old emptiness growing in his soul.

"You can always say no," Hermione said, and Poppy clucked. "True enough, he can. Minerva did say that if, for whatever reason, the castle's choice didn't wish to serve, a spoken rejection was sufficient. We tried to remember if we'd heard of that happening." The Healer smiled wistfully. "We couldn't. But that doesn't mean anything."

Severus stood silently, his eyes searching Hermione's face. Finally he nodded once. Angrily. "Let's discover the truth of it, then." He reached his hand out for the ring.

He closed his fist around it, and felt it shooting sparks of energy onto his skin, felt the heaviness of its heat in his palm. *Blast*, he thought, jamming it onto his finger.

It stretched around his finger, having to grow as he slipped it on.

He didn't know what he was expecting, but as the ring settled loosely at the base of his finger, he felt nothing.

"Where are we going?" Neville inquired softly, flying after the little ghost as she darted upwards through an arched ceiling.

She flashed a glowing smile over her shoulder and zoomed through a column only to angle outwards toward the large stones marking the castle's giant foundations.

Neville heard the dragon cheeping plaintively far behind them, following them as best as it could on its own more mundane path through the castle.

The tiny ghost slipped through a particularly large stone, and Neville followed.

Severus understood the theory behind the ring's connection to the castle its memories, its secrets, its alignment beneath the stars of the Scottish skies.

He waited to feel something, some corner of his mind alert with curiosity as to what form the sensations of that connection might take.

Emerging from the base of the castle into the quiet night, Neville drifted to a halt.

The little ghost was sifting through the snow at the base of Hermione's tower.

In her hands, almost invisible in the moonlight, tiny fragments of blue glass sparkled like bits of fallen sky.

As Neville watched, her small hands scooped a hole in the snow next to the strong vertical stones of the castle. She sprinkled the glass into the hole and, very carefully, she plucked the red seed from the flower stem.

Neville smiled and shook his head. He had no idea what she was on about, but stood bearing mute witness as she planted the red seed in the snow.

A few short moments later and she had refilled the hole and was gently smoothing the snow where the seed lay sleeping.

She carefully backed away, allowing the moonlight to fall full on the seed-bed.

A few moments later, a small tendril emerged from the snow.

Neville felt a small, cool hand slip into his.

He smiled. He didn't know what to believe any more, and found he didn't really mind.

What he was feeling, Severus realised, was nothing.

The ring was just a hair too big too big by the most invisible of margins.

He felt a tightness release from his chest.

Not him, after all.

He eyed Shriver speculatively, allowing a hint of triumph into his voice as he smiled a stark smile.

"The new Head will indeed contact the Minister," he said smoothly.

Billings nodded. "I'll just take Mr Shriver to the Ministry and await further instructions, then." He turned to escort the Unspeakable from the castle.

"A moment, Billings," Severus said, and the younger man turned, instinctively obeying the note of command in his voice. "Do collect your colleagues from the Head's office," Severus continued. "It's traditional for a new Head to discuss the state of the school with the portraits, and such conversations are confidential." He smiled. "Procedure. You understand, I'm sure."

Billings nodded sharply. "Of course." He took Shriver from the room.

Hermione waited for the door to close before turning to Severus with skeptical eyes.

Before she could speak, Poppy spoke briskly. "Whatever's between you two, settle it out of my sickroom. I have arrangements to make for poor Horace, and this is still at last a place of rest. We in the Healing profession have our own protocols, and his respects have been delayed long enough. Baron, if you'll assist me..."

Severus offered Hermione his arm, keeping the ring on his finger with his thumb.

As Neville and the tiny ghost watched, the tendril reached for the moonlit sky.

Leaves unfurled.

The tendril waved lightly in a gentle swirl of snow, a slow bud forming at the tip of the stem.

Neville glanced at the smaller ghost. Her eyes were shining in the moonlight, and her smile warmed his soul.

The gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the spiraling staircase regarded Severus and Hermione speculatively, eyeing the ring on Severus' hand curiously.

"Paradox," Severus suggested to it, and it rustled its wings, considering. Finally, it nodded, moving aside to reveal the entrance to the stair.

Hermione watched Severus out of the corner of her eye.

His face revealed nothing, but his eyes were determined.

A single flower bloomed in the snow.

Its petals were exactly the color of moonlight.

At its center, a single, faint blush of pink.

"Wild," Neville breathed.

The wee ghost squeezed his hand, giggling silently.

Her hand within his was the only part of her that did not blur.

They entered the Head's office to the echoes of the stone gargoyle grinding closed on the floor below them.

"Ah, Severus," Minerva said. "I see you've succeeded." She smiled at Hermione. "I'm sorry, dear." Hecate jumped up onto her lap and started kneading at her robes.

Hermione looked at her former headmistress' portrait.

Hecate blinked at her and yawned, butting her head into Minerva's hand.

"I don't really know what to say, Minerva," Hermione said quietly. "I assume you know what really happened in Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, dear. Severus explained how your research had cued him to the possibility that things did not go quite as we'd all believed, and your... hm... condition, I suppose..." Minerva looked at the younger woman, and resettled herself in her chair.

Hecate glared at her mistress, keeping purchase with her claws.

"But there will be plenty of time to discuss that later. For now, know that I'm sorry we didn't know, dear and allow me to thank you. It was a marvelous thing you did, child."

"I echo Minerva's thanks," said a quiet voice, a rasp of old parchment from farther up the wall.

Hermione's eyes sought Dumbledore's portrait, and she felt Severus tense beside her.

"But "

"Hush, Albus," Minerva snapped.

"But I maintain..."

"Albus." Minerva glared upward as if in silent threat.

"I maintain that Harry must never know."

Minerva turned in her chair, dislodging Hecate, who stalked off. "The child is old enough to make her own decisions, Albus, without further meddling from you."

"Heeding the wisdom of those who have gone before," Albus intoned, "is a humility many of us learned too late."

"And she learned it far too soon," Severus countered, his voice laced with a hint of danger.

"If you would all stop speaking of me as though I'm not present," Hermione said, "Severus, I believe you have something that belongs to me?"

Albus' mouth snapped shut, and Minerva's eyes sparkled.

Hermione extended her hand calmly.

Severus looked at her seriously. "You knew?"

"Of course. You didn't quite lie but close enough. Slytherins do that, you know. You develop an ear for it after a while; after that, it's obvious. It's not you; it's not Poppy. It must be me."

Severus eased the ring off his finger then hesitated. "May I?"

She nodded, swallowing hard.

He slipped the ring onto her finger, and it shrank snugly, nestling home.

A sigh rose from the depths of the castle.

Its long wait was over.

For the first time since the rise of Voldemort, the Sorting Hat relaxed.

Adsum

Chapter 38 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: The chapter title alludes to the service for the ordination of priests and translates to "Present" or, less formally, "I'm here."

38: Adsum

He slipped the ring onto her finger, and it shrank snugly, nestling home.

A sigh rose from the depths of the castle.

Its long wait was over.

For the first time since the rise of Voldemort, the Sorting Hat relaxed.

From his place on the wall, Dumbledore looked with tired eyes through ancient glass. The distant branches of the Forbidden Forest, dark against an eternal field of midnight blue, seemed hungry for the stars.

The tree-tops reminded him of broomsticks.

And the pennants on a long-ago Quidditch pitch, where he had once protected the young man prophesied to stand against the Darkness him, and his father before him.

He had done his best to hold the castle and its students fast against Darkness.

Had Tom played Quidditch for Slytherin?

He couldn't remember.

He was so tired...

And then Severus... he hadn't played Quidditch, although he was a brilliant flyer.

Hermione couldn't bear to fly.

Dumbledore frowned, his wrinkles deep in his pale skin, disappearing into the curves of his long beard.

No. He could only have done as he had done.

And yet the castle had wanted Hermione.

Something must have shifted. He didn't know how, or when. He didn't like it.

But he couldn't know that between them, he and Tom had divided the world; couldn't know that the castle held them equally culpable, equally dangerous, equally wrong.

He couldn't know the foundations had cracked; he was part of the crack.

He only knew he was tired.

He would sleep for a while. Maybe a century? When he awoke, Hermione would hang near Minerva, and he would know no peace until they had reasoned him into a corner.

Maybe two centuries.

With a last look toward the darkened Quidditch pitch, he spared a thought for Harry before closing his eyes.

Within moments, he was snoring.

Hermione held her hands before her, looking at the ring on her finger.

A fire crackled on the hearth, gleaming red and gold on yellow metal and a blood-red stone.

She exhaled softly and flicked her wand at the flames. They changed to blue, their light leeching the color from the ring. She would examine it in the sun tomorrow, but now,

for now, the brightness hurt her eyes.

"Severus," she whispered.

In answer, he moved to stand behind her, his arms enfolding her, his hands closing around hers, warm in the pale darkness of her trademark fire.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

For a long time she said nothing, and he stood, his breath soft and even on her hair.

Finally, she murmured, "I'm not ready."

"I know," he said. "I know."

"-ryone says that, initially." The Baron drifted through the wall mid-word. "It's best if you don't lose that feeling." He glanced at Severus. "Has the castle spoken to her yet?"

Severus shook his head.

Still leaning against Severus' chest, Hermione looked at the Baron through slitted eyes. "Is there some sort of curse on the Head's position that causes people speak around you rather than directly to you?"

The Baron spared her a diffident look. "Rest assured, Headmistress, that when no one addresses you directly, all is as well with the school as may be possible."

She nodded. "What do you mean by 'spoken'?" She was reluctant to give up her place in Severus' arms.

The Baron gestured to the stone columns that ran up the walls, aligning into perfect arches above. "The castle makes itself known to each new headmaster or headmistress in some way."

Hermione chuckled. "It's been speaking to me in some way for years, I think. It feels... quieter, somehow."

"If you concentrate, you should be able to sense those Unforgiveables you cast this week," the Baron said quietly.

She closed her eyes and heard, dimly, Severus' *Imperio* and her own *Avada Kedavra*. She nodded. "I hear."

"Hear?"

Hermione opened her eyes. "Yes. I heard them."

The ghost raised a gloved hand to his face and smoothed his moustache. "Odd."

"In what way?"

"Usually it's visual." He continued tracing his moustache with a gloved finger. "Perhaps not surprising, in your case, given the blindness... yes, I think so."

"Have you any idea why I couldn't see any of you?"

He nodded, bobbing in the air. "You returned for your final year as a student changed. We seem to glow to live eyes; you took on something similar to dead ones."

"I... I glow?" Hermione stepped out of Severus' arms as though afraid to contaminate him.

"Not any longer."

She stared at him, baffled.

He smiled, amused at her discomfiture. "Did you think live ones were the only ones who can see souls? Yours has been leaking out around you for years. Its brightness was quite unbearable at times."

Severus softly mentioned a few dates.

The Baron looked at him quizzically. "Yes... it was at its worst right around then. How the devil did you know?"

"It would follow that the intensity would abate somewhat as each work appeared in print..."

"Ah," the Baron intoned. "Confession is good for the soul."

"Still here," Hermione muttered. "I assume I no longer glow?"

"No. I believe I speak for all of us well, all but one, perhaps when I express relief that your soul has returned quite sensibly to its usual space. You were quite troublesome. Hurt our eyes. Badly. All we could see, when you were present."

"And none of us could see you at all," Minerva added sadly from her frame. "My dear... I am sorry."

Hermione nodded once toward her former Head of House. Something about the set of her jaw told Minerva that she was not forgiven but would be eventually.

Hermione was already turning to the Baron. "It... the soul has a 'usual space'?"

"Of course. We usually can't see them at all." At the look on her face, he sighed dramatically. "Do not ask me where that space is, Headmistress. We've no more idea than you do, really."

"All but one of you, you said?" Severus inquired quietly. "The little one, I presume?"

The Baron nodded in affirmation. "For some reason she did not find the professor's pardon, the headmistress' unseemly luminescence as painful as the rest of us."

"Interesting," Severus mused.

"She breaks our rules as well, Severus. It's our hope that she learns better as a student."

"A student?" Hermione repeated.

"She was Sorted into Hufflepuff earlier today. Did you not know?"

Hermione shook her head.

The Baron suppressed a sigh of irritation. Heads of School were usually faster to pick up on the possibilities of the connection. Still, he supposed, she had had a rather eventful few hours. "Concentrate..."

Hermione did, and in her mind she heard the little ghost's name and House as clearly as if the Sorting Hat had spoken to her.

She glanced at it in its usual spot on the shelf.

It winked at her.

"Ah." She smiled, nodding decisively. "We'll have to see about getting her a wand then."

"Given that she can do the impossible without one?" Severus drawled mildly, a look that was part admiration and part pride growing on his face. There could be no doubt who the little one reminded him of.

Minerva's lips quirked into a smile.

"Baron," Severus said, "do ghosts sleep?"

"Of course not," said the Baron with a look of mild contempt.

"I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am to hear it," Severus replied. "Who knows what wonders she might work in her sleep."

Hermione chuckled. "We shall see that she gets a wand, but I shall personally see to it that her impossible abilities are not trained out of her."

Something in Severus' eyes grew intent as she spoke, but only the Baron saw it.

Hermione walked to the desk, trailing her fingers over its surface as though touching it risked some disrespect. Her fingers brushed a deep scoring on its edge where one of her predecessors must have clutched the carved wood in a moment of extreme distress. "I wonder the house-elves never polished that out," she mused.

"They tried," the Baron said, "but were unsuccessful."

"So many shadows," Hermione murmured.

"Indeed," the Baron confirmed.

Hermione looked at the massive chair, but could not bring herself to sit. "I'll need to speak to Harry," she said quietly.

"In the morning, Hermione. In the morning."

Hermione looked up. A shaft of moonlight illuminated Severus' pale skin, and she thought she saw something in his dark eyes.

The Baron coughed politely and indicated a door Hermione had never seen before. "Your private chambers are through there, Headmistress." He bowed formally and withdrew.

As soon as he left, Severus drew himself straight, still looking at Hermione with an intensity she couldn't quite place.

"What is it?" she asked, still trailing her fingers over the gouges on the desktop.

"Did you say 'we'?"

Her fingers froze on the desk, and she found herself examining the shadows they made in the moonlight.

Finally, she whispered, "Yes."

But

Chapter 39 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to the Furies. *blows kiss*

39: But

Finally, she whispered, "Yes."

"I don't want to ask you to stay," Hermione said, still not daring to look up. "That would be asking too much the castle holds too much of your past, and too much of it... yes, well. And you hate teaching." A furrow crossed her brow. "I'm going to need a new Arithmancy professor."

Staffing? Despite the seriousness of the moment, Severus smiled briefly. Only Hermione would think of staffing in the midst of... wait. "It's not the teaching I find tedious; it's the students. And both are immaterial to this discussion." The words came out a bit more formally than he'd intended.

Hermione's fingers left the desk as she turned to him. "You can't stay, yet I can't leave."

"You will be unable to control the Darkness on your own, Hermione," he said, glancing at the portraits, all of whom had gone very still.

Their listening was palpable in the dim blue light.

"Minerva," Hermione said, "are there any proscriptions against... well..."

"Do what you need to to sleep, child. The castle keeps its secrets, and those of us who hang here are bound to discretion."

A sniff from one of the older portraits.

"Hush, Phineas," Minerva chided him. "Your years are over, and these children have earned some peace. Let them find it however they can."

"As long as their Silencing Charms are effective," Phineas Nigellus retorted.

Severus raised an arch eyebrow even as Minerva's tone grew sharper. "They've realigned the castle and released the soul of one of your Slytherins. If they wish to dance naked in the Entrance Hall, I, for one, will not stop them."

Hermione giggled.

"There are certain negotiations to be had with the portraits, I see," Severus said, closing the distance between himself and Hermione, unconsciously but effectively placing himself between her and the portrait of the former Slytherin headmaster. "And those will wait for tomorrow."

Hermione's eyes were bright in the moonlight as she looked up at him.

His breath caught, and he guided her to the door the Baron had indicated.

The door swung open as she approached it.

"Headmistress," Severus said, stepping back and aside to allow her to precede him.

Inside the door, she turned and extended a small, pale hand toward him.

His fingertips brushed hers, and she grasped his hand tightly.

The moon slipped behind the tallest branches of the Forbidden Forest.

A silent while later, the sky paled in the East.

At the base of Hermione's old tower, the flower turned to seed, and a pale, translucent hand picked the stem.

The small ghost turned to Neville and handed him the seeded flower stem.

Her eyes shone as she smiled at him, and Neville found that he knew exactly what to do.

When Hermione arrived at her desk the next morning, the seeded flower lay on its smooth, dark surface, together with a parchment bearing one word.

She examined the seeds closely, the delicate feathers interlacing as intricately as the vault-work on the arched ceiling overhead. As the portraits watched, she sat, taking her place as Headmistress.

The same house-elf who had changed twenty-two years of pillowcases appeared with a tray. "Good morning, Headmistress-miss. Miss is sleeping well?"

"Very well, thank you," Hermione replied, accepting a cup of tea. She tilted her head. "And you?"

The house-elf blinked at her, wagging her ears in surprise. Half-nodding and half-bowing, she squeaked, "Oooo, yes, Headmistress-miss."

Hermione smiled. "Are you assigned to individual staff members, then, rather than specific rooms?"

The house-elf's face broke into a large, lopsided grin. "Yes, Headmistress-miss."

"I'm glad," Hermione said quietly. "You've taken such good care of me. I would have missed you."

All over Britain, pink stains faded from the pillowcase garments of countless house-elves.

Their masters and mistresses did not notice, or, if they did, it was to idly note that their elf seemed perkier than usual. "Strange creatures, house-elves," they mused again, picking up their *Daily Prophets*.

Something odd had happened at the Ministry some reshuffling of the Unspeakables, the article said. The Minister of Magic had appointed Percy Weasley to chair the oversight committee. "It's time we cleaned house. Wouldn't do to leave a mess for Potter he's cleaned up enough of those!"

Countless witches and wizards bobbed their heads in unconscious agreement as they sipped their morning tea.

"What's that, then?" Phineas Nigellus barked, sneering down through his monocle at the parchment on the desk.

Hermione picked up the parchment, holding the written side away from the portraits' line of sight. She tapped its corner on the desk, running the edges through her fingers, repeating the action for each corner.

"Well, chit? What is it?" Phineas Nigellus repeated.

"I am the headmistress of this school, and would thank you not to address me as 'chit,'" Hermione said distractedly.

Phineas Nigellus snorted.

"He tries that every time," a pleasant feminine voice said from somewhere up and to the left. Hermione didn't recognize her, but she nodded an abstracted thanks.

"Well, chit? I asked you a question. Share with your betters."

"If you don't address me as 'Hermione' or at least 'Granger,' I shall forget everything I know about Silencing Charms," Hermione said in the same distracted voice.

"Ooo, this one's feisty," Phineas Nigellus cackled, leering at her.

Hermione raised her eyebrow at him. "Minerva, by any chance do the house-elves keep a store of black baize draperies? Approximately portrait-sized?"

Minerva's eyes sparkled delightedly. "They do."

Hermione looked coolly at Phineas Nigellus.

He said no more but continued to crane his neck to try to see what was written on the parchment.

Hermione crumpled the parchment in her palm and picked up the flower stem. "And how do I request the presence of one of the ghosts?"

"Concentrate," Minerva supplied.

A moment later a chime sounded from the spiraling stair, and Neville and the smaller ghost drifted through the door.

"Good morning."

Neville cracked a shining smile. "You look good behind that desk, Hermione. Um, Headmistress."

Hermione laughed, standing and coming around to join them where they bobbed in front of her fire. "Hermione's fine, Neville, really."

She dropped to her knees in front of the smaller ghost. "I don't think we've been properly introduced." Hermione held out her hand.

The little ghost blurred as she giggled, taking Hermione's hand and giving it a gentle shake.

"It's nice to meet you, Cassandra."

The little ghost held up her thumb and forefinger and moved them close together.

"Oh, shorter?"

The little ghost nodded.

"You prefer Cassie?"

Hermione was rewarded with a shy smile.

"How'd you know her name?" Neville wondered.

"Magic, Neville," Hermione teased. "The castle told me. All the students' names are recorded in the book, of course; I think it works like a Protean Charm in a way, but with a variant I've not had time to determine yet." She turned back to Cassie. "So... I understand you've been Sorted into Hufflepuff?"

Cassie smiled.

"Well, dear, welcome to Hogwarts." Hermione stood, only to find herself enveloped in a ghostly hug. She laughed again. "We'll need to get you a wand, of course, and... hm. A moment." She removed her plain teaching robes and tapped them with her wand. A hush of fabric as the robes re-sized.

Cassie's eyes widened as Hermione held out a set of Hufflepuff robes to her.

"May I?" Severus' voice interrupted from the doorway. He reached for the robes and held them for Hogwarts' newest, and oldest student.

Cassie slipped her arms into them, screwing up her face in concentration to keep the robes from slipping through her shoulders.

"Now, about this flower..." Hermione said, showing it to Severus.

"She planted that seed in the snow with some broken glass. It sprouted, bloomed and turned to seed before the moon set. This morning, there's half a field of them." Neville pointed to the single blood-red seed in an otherwise perfectly white globe. "Considering what one of those did for Professor Slughorn's soul, I thought you should know. We left it for you at sunrise hope we didn't disturb you?"

"Not at all, Neville, thank you," Hermione said. "Professor Sprout should be informed. Would you speak with her when she returns from her holiday?"

"Of course. We both will."

Cassie had drifted backward a bit.

"We will, Cassie. No need to be shy; you've been attending her classes for years. You could probably sit N.E.W.T.s tomorrow," he said.

She shook her head.

"We'll determine your course of study tomorrow. For now, why don't you go show your robes to the dragon. He's waiting for you down with the gargoyle, isn't he?"

Cassie nodded and waved.

Neville drifted through the door, but Cassie bounced off and hovered, startled, in the air.

"Your robes," Hermione said, but made no move to solve the problem for her.

Cassie frowned.

"There is a handle," Phineas Nigellus supplied, "as anyone with half "

Hermione held up her hand and he sputtered to silence. "Concentrate, Cassie."

Cassie shot a look back at her headmistress and nodded. She steadied herself in the air and then, robes and all, slid slowly through the closed door.

"Impossi-" Phineas Nigellus started, but then Cassie darted back through the door, her smile radiant in the sunlight.

Her robes had become as translucent as she was, but the piping remained undeniably Hufflepuff yellow.

She spun in the air, and her robes spun around her. A happy wave, and she zoomed through the door again.

"Cassie?" Severus inquired quietly, placing his arm around her shoulders.

"Cassandra, actually," Hermione replied, staring at the door. "But I think Cassie suits her."

"And that?" He indicated the flower stem.

"Apparently they're multiplying beneath my window."

Severus quirked his eyebrow. "Interesting."

Hermione stared at the red seed. She had no idea how any of it had happened, and as yet, none of it seemed real. "How did it pierce that tall ghost's hand?"

"She made a wish."

"That's not an answer," Hermione said.

"Isn't it?" Severus countered.

The gargoyle chimed again. Glancing at Severus with a half-smile, Hermione said, "I believe I will miss my solitude."

Some shadow crossed Severus' face, but he said nothing.

The sad-eyed ghost drifted in. "You required my presence, Headmistress?" he inquired politely.

Hermione blushed. "I'm going to have to figure out how that works," she muttered. "I apologize for disturbing you."

He smiled peacefully. "It happens initially. And we ghosts are patient. We have plenty of time, after all."

"I suppose you do at that." Hermione smiled.

"Headmistress, if you'll excuse me?" Severus said formally. Before Hermione could respond, he had retreated through the door to the private chambers.

She spared a hesitant glance toward his departure, but turned to the sad-eyed ghost. "I'm sorry I don't know your name."

"It's unimportant," he said. "You couldn't pronounce it anyway."

She looked more closely at him. "I don't remember you from when I was a student here..."

He smiled again, that same, peaceful smile. "No more would you, but I've always been here."

"Always?"

He inclined his head. "Nearly. Since before the first stone was laid for the castle."

"And who were you in life?"

"I scarcely remember. No one important, surely." He opened his hands in the sunlight. "But I will help you and the school however I can."

"You've already done much," Hermione said, "and the school and I thank you."

He bowed his head and left.

She returned to her examination of the seeded flower.

Severus was reading in an armchair before the smaller hearth in Hermione's new chambers when she slipped in, saying nothing as she took the chair next to his.

He marked his page and set his book aside.

"I've two things to ask you about, Severus," she began. "And I can't for my very life begin either."

"Then the need to address them both is obviously pressing. Begin with the most important."

She nodded, and drew a deep breath. "Are you planning to leave?"

He schooled his feature to neutrality. "For me to leave would pose some problems for you, I fear."

She nodded sadly. "I've no wish to imprison you in this castle, but when you said that your kind of control isn't in my nature you're right. It's not. I can feel the edges of temptation building even as we sit here."

The fact that he registered that showed in his eyes, but all he said was, "I understand."

"And we can't very well have the headmistress of Hogwarts sneaking out to meet her Dark lover..."

"Then don't sneak." The words were out before he considered them.

She smiled sadly and opened her hands. "Obviously but while school is in term, I have to be here."

He nodded. "I shall think on it, Hermione. As you say, I've no wish to be imprisoned."

She swallowed and said nothing.

"The other matter?"

She held out the seeded flower stem. "I've been staring at it all morning the way you do when your mind is working on something even though you've no idea where it's going. And Severus... I think..." She had to swallow again. "Harry," she choked out.

Severus' eyes widened.

Reparo

Chapter 40 of 41

Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: And again, my thanks to the Furies... ~ Ari

40: Reparo

And Severus... I think... She had to swallow again. "Harry," she choked out.

Severus' eyes widened.

Hermione sat quietly in the chair by her office fire. She had called the Potters' residence into the green flames a moment before.

Ginny's face appeared in the flames, and her mouth fell open. She couldn't find her voice.

"Good morning, Ginny," Hermione said softly. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but it's about Hogwarts."

Ginny recovered from the shock of seeing Hermione and nodded. "Hermione," she said, a little stiffly. "What can we do for the school?"

Hermione closed her eyes. "We're in need of a new Arithmancy professor. I don't know if you'd be..."

The sound of something metal clattering to the floor behind Ginny made her turn around briefly. "Sorry dropped the ladle." Ginny blushed, and Hermione felt her heart tighten. She wanted to smile. She didn't dare. "You want me," she said flatly.

"The castle's chosen me to replace Minerva, Ginny."

Ginny's eyes narrowed, but Hermione held her hand up. "Please, don't answer yet. And you can of course say whatever you like to me, whenever you like, but... I assume you saw the *Daily Prophet* this morning?"

Ginny nodded, launching into a taut description of exactly what she thought of allegations of corruption at the Ministry coming right before the election. "... and Harry will have to clean things up. *Again*," she spat. Her eyes grew wide as she realised that she was ranting with her head in Hermione's Floo. She blushed again. "Sorry," she muttered. "You were saying?"

"There's something I need to tell Harry, Ginny. Think about the offer but please, don't make up your mind until I talk to Harry? Please?"

Ginny opened her mouth to say no, but her heart tripped over Hermione's "please." "Bitch," she said finally, but her eyes were already working over the possibilities of pursuing Hermione's offer. Hermione knew it, and Ginny knew she knew it.

"I was a bitch, Ginny and I'm sorry it's what I need to talk to Harry about. Please, Ginny, is he at home?"

Ginny's eyes were hard, but she nodded.

While she waited, Hermione could scarcely breathe over the pounding in her chest.

"What the hell did you say to Ginny?" Harry was fuming before his face was fully in the flames.

Hermione flashed as hotly. "I offered her a job."

"*You?!*"

"Yes, me. Now, if you'll stop being a hotheaded prat for two seconds and come through this Floo, there's something Minerva needs to tell you." Hermione held her breath and found herself crossing her fingers in the folds of her robes.

The mention of Minerva brought Harry up short. "I'll be there straightaway," he muttered angrily. His head disappeared from the flames, and they rose higher.

Minerva's voice drifted down from above as Hermione retreated to stand before her desk. "I've got your back, dear."

A moment later, an angry-eyed Harry Potter faced the new headmistress. He wheeled around and looked respectfully at Minerva. "Good morning, Headmistress," he said, something in his tone betraying that he refused to so recognise Hermione.

"Potter," Minerva said. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

"Of course, Headmistress."

Behind him, Hermione wiped her hand across her brow. Must he go on with the title?

"What can I do for you and Hogwarts?" Harry continued, pointedly omitting Hermione from the offer.

"You can hold your tongue until you've heard her out, Potter. Headmistress Granger has something of urgent importance to tell you, and, although I doubt you'll understand half of it, do yourself and the world a favor and try."

"I what "

"Once again, Potter, the world depends on your courage. She can't be as terrifying as Voldemort." Minerva looked at him with pinched nostrils.

"Of course." Harry inclined his head and turned to glare at Hermione. "Well?" he said shortly. "I've an important meeting."

"Not more important than this, Harry," Hermione said quietly.

He sniffed.

"Oh, stop acting like Percy," she snapped.

"The meeting is with him, actually there's a right mess at the "

"At the Ministry. *I know.* That's one of the reasons I "

"So you can read the paper! You called me here to tell me you can read? I've known that since we were children. It's all you *can* do, Hermione, while the rest of us " Harry's hands were balled into fists at his side.

"It's not," Hermione said, her voice low. "I wish it were."

"You what? You what?!" Harry bellowed.

"Really, children " Minerva interjected, but Hermione raised her voice, "You didn't kill him, Harry."

Harry blinked, then shook his head. "I'm sorry?"

"I did. Ron and I. It was mostly Ron."

Harry whipped around to face Minerva's portrait. "You summoned me to listen to this tripe?"

"Hear her out, Potter," Minerva said sternly.

His nostrils flared as he stared at her portrait. "She's raving."

"She's not," Minerva countered.

"Some respect, young man, for the office, if not for the chit "

Hermione snapped her fingers and Phineas Nigellus' portrait was covered with yards of black drapery. His muffled, affronted voice took umbrage behind it.

"A week, Phineas. Next time, a year."

He went quiet.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm more sorry than you can know, but the mess at the Ministry Shriver "

"How do you... we kept his name out of the papers."

"The Ministry has always been good at silence." Her eyes blazed at him. "How much have they told you about what really happened?"

"He's had some kind of breakdown. Something about secret files. I don't know much; they can't really tell me until the election's held properly."

Hermione bit her lip. "I think you should sit down."

"I prefer to stand."

"Sit, Harry," said the voice of Albus Dumbledore. All the yelling had woken him up. "And know that I disagree with the decision to tell you."

Harry's head whipped around, startled.

"Albus," Hermione said coldly. "How kind of you to add your voice to this mayhem."

"The portraits can only speak the truth, and are compelled to give voice when theirs is required."

Hermione considered that briefly. "So the castle kicked you in the arse because you're the only one he'll listen to?"

A stifled laugh from behind Phineas Nigellus' drapery.

Dumbledore didn't deign to respond, and Minerva interjected, "Do sit down, Potter. You'll need to."

Harry nodded, confused, and sat. "If you would hurry. My meeting..."

Hermione inhaled, as much to slow her heartbeat as anything else. "In the last moments of the Final Battle, Harry, when you were fighting with Tom inside yourself, your eyes turned red."

Harry shook his head, but she continued, "Please don't interrupt. Let me get it out. Ron was dying. He knew I'd discovered something that would... that might help. Like an idiot, I'd told him about it. We argued, but he insisted. And he was right, Harry. He told me to do it if your eyes turned red. They did." Her voice fell. "And I did."

Harry's eyes were ice. "What did you do?"

"He was dying. I'd found a spell an old one, a Dark one that required multiple casters. The principles were the same as a Horcrux spell. And I extrapolated."

"You what?"

Hermione clenched her teeth. "I thought a Horcrux spell might work the same way. Multiple casters. When your eyes turned red, Harry, it meant that Tom had won. Ron was dying. No one else was close enough, or free enough, to do anything to help. I had a choice to kill you, or to destroy the Horcrux."

Harry looked at her impassively.

She wasn't getting through.

"Your scar is still a Horcrux, Harry, but it's not Voldemort anymore. It's Ron."

From the next room, Severus heard a muffled shout. He clenched his fist around his wand but forced himself to stay still.

"It is true, Harry. Shriver knew it. So did Scrimgeour. So does the current Minister. It's in the red file, they said. Only the Minister of Magic can know. Shriver didn't want to tell you, Harry. Nor did Dumbledore. Said it would weaken you. I hoped otherwise."

She handed him a bottle with a silvery substance in it. "My memory of Godric's Hollow. I don't expect you to trust me, but the choice is yours to look or not."

Harry held the bottle of memory in his hands and turned it over, watching the silvery smoke roil.

"I don't believe you," Harry said.

"Dumbledore knows, Harry. Minerva, as well."

"I don't," he repeated.

But his mind was literal enough to believe in the fact of what he was holding.

He ran his fingers into his hair and clenched, hard, the heel of his palm pressing against his scar. Still staring at the bottle, he gritted out, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"The Ministry "

"We were *friends*," Harry hissed.

Hermione flinched as though she'd been stabbed, but she stayed standing. "I know, Harry."

"So you just let the Ministry tell you what to do? When did we ever not tell each other everything? You're a coward, Hermione. A coward."

She closed her eyes. "It wasn't the Ministry."

"You're still a coward." But Harry clenched his hand harder in his hair as though something, some pain, would feel real.

"Maybe I am. But it wasn't the Ministry, Harry. I would have told you, maybe not right away. Darkness does strange things to people, and I wasn't prepared for that but I would have. I like to think I would have..."

"So why?" Harry whispered, still staring at the bottle of memory.

"Ginny," Hermione said simply.

The blood drained out of Harry's face.

"I didn't think you could be happy with her if you knew."

"Merlin..." Harry's throat was dry.

"And better you lose me than her."

For a long time, Harry said nothing. "You bitch," he said finally.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Why tell me now?" He couldn't seem to speak above a low rasp.

"Because I can fix it. I think."

"You think," Harry said, two decades of harsh judgment and confused separation and the ease with which he'd focused elsewhere draining all life from his voice. "You think."

Hermione nodded, her throat too tight to speak.

"That I believe." Harry nodded once, decisively. "Do it. Get it out. Get him out of this hell that you've made of my head and his life and my marriage. Get him out."

Hermione said nothing but walked to the desk to pick up the flower stem. She pulled the red seed from the head.

"Look at me, Harry," she said simply.

His knuckles were white as he clutched the bottle, but he lifted his head.

"Move your hair."

He held his hair away from his scar.

It stood out, hotly red on his forehead as if in accusation, or judgment, or supplication.

Which in all ways, it was.

She sighed, and blew the dandelion head. *Reparo*, she thought. *Goodbye, Ron*.

The red seed drifted lazily but directly to Harry's scar.

It rested gently against his forehead as though held fast by an invisible breeze.

As Hermione and the portraits watched, Harry's scar bled away to nothing.

The seed fell, pure white, to his outstretched hand.

Epilogue

Chapter 41 of 41

Complete Because some secrets aren't meant to stay buried. Years after the final battle, Hermione will have to

confront her own, including those she's kept from herself. Winner ~ Best Drama, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: This story is, as always, for my writing partner-in-crime, Anastasia. *hands you dandelion* Make a wish!

The Petulant Poetess edition of this story is dedicated to notsosaintly, in gratitude for her kindness and her supportive words in fostering this story in its early days. Courage, strength, and beautiful words! *raises toast*

~ Ari

41: Epilogue

As Hermione and the portraits watched, Harry's scar bled away to nothing.

The seed fell, pure white, to his outstretched hand.

Hermione sent a deeply shaken Harry back through the Floo. "Ginny," she said, "give him some time. The rift at the Ministry stretched back to Godric's Hollow, and it's raised some unpleasant memories," she said.

Ginny's eyes held no warmth, but she nodded, Flooing through to help Harry home.

Hermione sank into her chair and rested her head in her hands.

She'd no idea she'd fallen asleep when she felt Severus' hand at her shoulder. "I've called for some Firewhisky, Hermione."

She shook her curls out of her face, and he tucked the one, always errant, behind her ear, resting his fingertip at her temple for a moment before drawing her out of her chair to sit by the fire.

"I'm not ready," Hermione said some hours later, setting her glass on one of Dumbledore's spindly-legged tables that Minerva had kept for sentimental reasons. "I'm simply not. I've too much work to do with Poppy, and really..." She let out a shaky laugh. "I'm a bit of a wild card."

"Do you think Ginevra will accept the position?"

"Eventually, I think. She had that calculating look she used to get when faced with a challenge, and she couldn't hide it."

The topic they'd not addressed loomed large between them.

"I've been thinking," Severus began, even as Hermione said, "Severus, I've been —"

At Hermione's gesture, Severus spoke first.

"There is a larger problem here than simple logistics, Hermione."

She nodded. "I know."

He reached for her hand, and rubbed his thumb over her skin. "Given our ages, you will eventually find yourself alone of all who were touched as strongly as we by Darkness. I've no wish to contemplate what you might do, even with your conscience and better training than Dumbledore, in his infinite foolishness, sought to keep from you."

She nodded, looking at the ring, heavy on her hand.

"I've decided to stay."

He was not talking only about Hogwarts.

She looked into his eyes through her tumbled curls but did not raise her head. "No."

"Yes, Hermione. If the little one can interact with matter, it's possible, and when I know a thing to be possible, I've never once failed to achieve it. If I die first, I'll stay."

Hermione rested her hand gently on his face. "As will I."

He closed his eyes and gathered her into his arms, enveloping them both in the warmth of black silk as he exhaled his relief into her hair.

After a time, when their heartbeats had settled, Hermione's voice came muffled from against his chest. "Then you won't mind if I ask you to serve as acting headmaster until the year ends?"

He winced, but chuckled. "If I must."

"I was going to ask Percy, but —"

"Hush. I've said yes."

"No. You said, 'If I must.'"

His lips twitched again.

"I can't redesign the Defense curriculum when I don't know what it should be," Hermione said, sitting up and nestling less closely but no less permanently into his arms. "Just because there's no great force of Darkness abroad in the world — excepting us, of course — doesn't mean one won't appear in the future. Our students must be prepared. Really prepared, starting with the truth."

"You could ask your colleagues at Durmstrang," he offered.

"But I trust you," she said, as though it settled the matter.

Which it did.

"And besides," she continued, her eyes beginning to close drowsily as she leaned more closely into his shoulder. "My portrait will spend an eternity with Dumbledore's. I'll spend the first century or so hexing him. As acting headmaster, you'll get a portrait too."

"How do you know?"

"Minerva. She's been a placeholder since he died."

"Indeed?"

"The Ministry kept that quiet, too."

Harry Potter, sans scar, was in due course elected Minister of Magic, and his wife took the day from her teaching duties to attend his investiture. After a long photo session and an even longer dinner, she excused herself to attend a staff meeting.

"Don't wait up, Harry," she said. "We're going to Hogsmeade after the meeting. I've not finished raking her over the coals for Lily's fifth year."

Harry chuckled.

However they had settled it between them, they had.

They'd really had no choice, and sometimes, it's what you do when you've no choice at all that makes you who you are.

Harry chuckled again as he turned that insight over in his mind.

A knock at his office door interrupted his thoughts. "Enter," he said.

Percy came in bearing the red file.

Harry sighed. "Is it time, then?"

"It's time." Percy opened the folder and started to read.

If both men choked up at times during the truth of Ron's sacrifice at Godric's Hollow, neither ever said.

The little ghost never did speak, but led her class at Hogwarts just the same.

One early night just before the Yule Ball in her Sixth Year, Neville found her outside in the snow, watching the snowflakes bloom with the rising of the moon.

"I thought I'd find you here."

She turned to him, and he gasped.

That afternoon, she'd decided she'd been eleven for long enough, that perhaps fifteen would be better.

From the look on Neville's face, she'd both succeeded and chosen very wisely indeed.

At the ball, the headmistress and assistant headmaster complimented them on their dancing, and the next year Cassie celebrated her 40th birthday by turning sixteen.

And there, she stopped, and she and Neville were sometimes seen to be holding hands.

Finite Incantatem