

'Til We Have Faces

by deathbyshikon

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs,
 readying itself for the final blow.
Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's
book- can Hermione find it in time?

Shadowlands

Chapter 1 of 17

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time?

It was Christmas morning.

Hermione Granger had always loved Christmas – it brought to mind carols, eggnog, and gingerbread men just waiting to get their heads bitten off. She picked up a gingerbread man with red frosting hair from the plate Mrs. Weasley was passing around and bit the head off savagely.

Stupid Ronald. She couldn't even bear to call him Ron anymore. Ron was warm butterbeer and Quidditch, her best friend for seven years. Ronald was the slightly lemony taste of Veritaserum, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

At the beginning of their seventh year, Ron had decided that he and Hermione were perfect for each other and had begun to court her with all the zeal of a hungry Hippogriff who's sighted a field full of dead ferrets. While he'd gotten over the habit of screaming at girls he liked (it's a wonder that Fleur Delacour ever came near a Weasley again), he was still... well... Ron. It would be like sleeping with her brother, if she had one. She'd tried to explain this to him only to have him retort, "Well, if you're not good enough for your family, then who are you good enough for?"

She'd hexed him.

Ronald, refusing to believe that someone could resist his manly charms, made up his mind that Hermione must either be a lesbian or involved in some kind of torrid library love affair. He'd spiked her evening tea with a whole bottle of Veritaserum, and with the aid of a well-placed Locomotor Mortis charm, she'd been stuck in the Gryffindor common room for two hours answering any and every question that came into Ron's head.

Unfortunately for Ron, there was no torrid love affair – or any love affair, for that matter. She just didn't like him that way.

Unfortunately for Hermione, a Ron with hurt feelings was not a Ron who used his brain. He'd left her at the mercy of the common room, where she admitted that she thought Lavender Brown was an insipid whore, that she'd Confunded Cormack McLaggen in sixth year to make sure Ron got on the Quidditch team...

...and that she'd never even been kissed.

The only reason she was at the Burrow now was that her parents were off skiing, and she didn't want to go. Harry had made her come there as opposed to spending the break at Hogwarts. Ron was being civil, though perhaps that was due to Harry threatening to tell Mrs. Weasley about the Veritaserum Incident if he misbehaved. Harry was

rather militant about Christmas being a joyful occasion.

It was probably for that reason, then, that Harry was selected to play Santa that year, handing out the presents and preventing a rabid mob of Weasleys from destroying the tree. It came as quite a shock after all the presents were open that Harry had forgotten one.

"I never forget presents! I know I got them all! That one wasn't there before. Where did it come from?"

"Harry, dear, I'm sure it just got stuck underneath something. Your eyes may be great for Seeking, but that doesn't mean that you see everything. Only mothers can do that. Now, who's it for?" Mrs. Weasley said, Vanishing wrapping paper and bits of string.

"Hermione."

"Maybe it's from her girlfriend..." Ron muttered under his breath. Hermione felt tears welling up in her eyes – but Ron hadn't counted on Harry hearing him.

"Hey, Mrs. Weasley, did you know that Ron and Hermione aren't speaking to each other because Ron put Veritaserum in Hermione's tea? That's illegal, isn't it?"

"RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY!"

Molly grabbed Ron by the ear and dragged him back into the kitchen. The rest of the Weasleys followed suit, because as Fred and George once wisely said, "It's funny as long as it's not you!"

"There you go, Hermione. Now you can open it in peace."

"Thanks, Harry."

She took the slim purple package from him and undid the gold star-spangled bow. Inside was a book – *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. She hadn't read that since she was in primary school. Who would have sent it? Not her parents, their presents had arrived by owl last week. There wasn't a note, so she flipped to the inside cover. There, in narrow, loopy writing was a message:

Miss Granger-

The Laws of the Stone Table still hold. All is not lost, and I, like Aslan, will return to you.

Keep Lucy safe, and tell them not to blame Edmund. It wasn't his fault.

-A friend

"That writing looks familiar..." said Harry, leaning over her shoulder. "Who's Aslan? And we don't know a Lucy or an Edmund."

"Honestly, Harry, this is a Muggle book. Haven't you ever read it?"

"I don't need to read; that's why I have you!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Harry. It's nice to know you care."

"I do, Hermione. I do. In all seriousness, though, do you know what that message means?"

"Well, let's see. The book is about four children who find another world in a wardrobe. One of the children, Edmund, commits a crime by going to the side of the White Witch – the villain. Aslan, who is a very powerful Lion, sacrifices himself to save the boy. The 'laws of the Stone Table' refers to the laws of their land, which was called Narnia. According to that, if an innocent sacrifices himself to save the life of a traitor, 'the face of death will be turned away' and all will be forgiven. Aslan comes back to life on the morning of battle. I don't understand, though... who would have sent it?"

Harry just stood there, open-mouthed.

"Hermione... what if... what if Dumbledore sent you that? What if he's trying to tell us that he's not really dead?"

A/N: So ends the first chapter of my first fic. I admit, I am a little nervous about it. Please, read and review! I would like to know what you think.

For the curious, the title of the story is taken from a C.S. Lewis book. The chapter title is also from a work about Lewis, the description of which is straight from Wiki: Shadowlands is a play, TV drama and film written by William Nicholson. The story is a fictionalized version of the relationship between the writer C.S. Lewis and his fan Joy Gresham. The title comes from Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, in which the world as we know it and other worlds like it are referred to as the 'shadowlands' because they are only a shadow of what is to come.

Many thanks to my beta, Cassandra (Sevariger).

Inklings

Chapter 2 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Two // Inklings

"Harry, I don't understand. You saw him die. We watched them put him in the tomb!"

"I saw him fall, that's true. But *the laws of the Stone Table!* The face of death will be turned away! He could have come back! He was an innocent!"

"Oh, Harry... I don't know. You heard Snape cast the Avada Kedavra curse, right? No one survives it!"

"I did!"

"Well, that's different. You had protection."

"Maybe he did, too..."

"Did Fred and George put Firewhiskey in the eggnog? What's gotten into you, Harry? Snape killed him. Dead people don't come back unless they've done something terrible like make a Horcrux; Dumbledore wouldn't do that."

"But, Hermione, the laws of the Stone Table! The message says--"

Hermione cut him off abruptly. "I know what the bloody book said! I'm telling you, though, that the dead do not come back to life! This is a work of fiction, Harry. We don't even know who sent it! Don't read too much into it."

"I think you're making a mistake. Dumbledore always said that he trusted Snape, didn't he? I may not like the great greasy bat, but it's starting to make sense! The note said that it wasn't Edmund's fault. What if it was a code? A traitor and a lion Snape and Dumbledore! I admit, it's a little far-fetched, but that book was sent to you for a reason. What if Snape didn't do it out of hate?"

"For all I know, Snape sent it himself to trick us! Besides, are you forgetting that this is the man who is responsible for the death of your parents? Have you forgotten how horrible he was to Sirius? The man made fun of my teeth! Besides, Snape isn't the only traitor we know. I don't see you jumping to the defense of Draco Malfoy, for example."

"Yeah, but you didn't hear Dumbledore say that he trusted Malfoy, either. I'll admit that Snape made a huge mistake giving Voldemort the prophecy. He isn't to blame, though. Peter Pettigrew is. I don't like that he was horrible to Sirius, but then Sirius tried to kill him! I didn't expect them to be bosom buddies. And... umm..." Harry blushed and looked at his trainers. "Your teeth were pretty huge before you shrunk them."

Hermione clenched her fists at her sides, trying to breathe deeply. Finally, she forced out, "I just don't understand how you can forgive him so easily."

"Hermione, I didn't say I forgave him. If he needs forgiveness, he'll ask for it. All I'm saying is that this message opens up different avenues that are definitely worth investigating. If I'm going to do that, I'll need your help." His voice softened, and he looked at her with pleading in his eyes. "Please?"

She gave a deep sigh, relaxing her fists. "Harry, I think you're positively mental. I think that you are clinging to this as a false hope that the closest thing you had to a father hasn't left you." She closed her eyes. "Fine. I'll help you. I even promise not to say 'I told you so.'"

"I think I'd better be the one promising that. Come on; let's go see what Mrs. Weasley is doing to Ron in there."

"Oh. She's stopped yelling, hasn't she? It's awfully quiet. I wonder if that's a bad sign..."

When they entered the kitchen, they were surprised to see that Mrs. Weasley looked very calm and collected, and Ron was looking a little green but still alive. He looked strangely rigid, and Hermione thought she detected a note of panic behind his eyes.

"Oh, good. You're here. I've decided that the most effective punishment for Ronnie is to get a taste of his own medicine," Mrs. Weasley said with a beatific smile. "He's about to discover exactly what is so unpleasant about being forced to answer questions. I administered the serum... oh, about 10 minutes ago. It should be kicking in soon."

Hermione gave a gasp. "Mrs. Weasley, did you just give him Veritaserum?"

"Indeed I did!"

"Mrs. Weasley, where did you get Veritaserum? Isn't it a controlled substance? Ron had to steal it out of the Potions classroom when Professor Henry wasn't looking."

"I have my ways, dear girl. Now, does anyone have anything they'd like to ask Ron?"

The next afternoon, Hermione was on fire.

Unfortunately, she was not aflame with academic fervor or a brilliant idea. She was literally *on fire*.

She'd slept until way past noon, and when she'd woken up, the house was empty. There was a note in the kitchen from Harry, saying that they'd all gone after-Christmas shopping and would be home later to change before leaving for Hogwarts. (It should be noted that the Wizarding Day After Christmas is not the barbaric Muggle practice of getting up at 6 am and heading to the store to do battle with the elbows of your fellow shoppers. It was simply the best day to spend all those lovely Christmas Galleons burning a hole in one's pocket. It also helped that all the stores in Diagon Alley had been spelled with an Anti-Elbowing Jinx.)

The note also said that breakfast was in the kitchen, but she'd have to cook the eggs herself as Molly said that Warming charms made them taste funny.

Why is it that everyone assumes that being good at potions means you're a good cook? Potions are made to be accurate, not to please the palate. Hermione groaned as she stared at the Wizarding kitchen. There didn't appear to be anything that could pass for a stove...

Twenty minutes later, Hermione was rolling on the kitchen floor trying to suffocate the flames that had taken up residence in her hair.

"Fire! Fire! Activating fire protection charms immediately!" shouted a disembodied voice.

All the pots and pans began filling with water and dumping themselves over the flames. Moments later, Mrs. Weasley Apparated into the kitchen.

"Hermione, dear, are you all right? I felt the fire ward go off!"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. I accidentally burned the eggs. I'm sorry for the mess; I'll clean it up."

"Goodness, Hermione, you didn't just burn the eggs! Hmm, maybe the cooking charm has worn off..." and she picked up the skillet, prodding it with her wand.

"No, Mrs. Weasley... I've just never used a wizard's kitchen, and I... I don't know how to cook, anyway."

"Goodness, child! I'll just have to show you how, then. For now, though, off to the bath with you! You smell terrible."

Just then, a series of pops filled the kitchen. The rest of the Weasleys had arrived.

"Mom, is everything okay? You left in a--ugh, what's that smell?" Fred and George wrinkled their noses in unison.

"It smells like burned hair and rotten flobberworms," said Ron. "Oh, wait. I know! It smells like a Mudblood! See, there's Hermione."

Immediately, the remaining Weasleys and Harry all reached for their wands in unison, murder in their eyes. Ron just stood there, a blank look on his face.

"Stop! Hermione gets first dibs on the hexes. Might I recommend the Ball Breaker curse?" said Ginny, eyes glittering.

"No, that's okay. I have a better one. *Macula Pygmy Puff!*"

There was no visible reaction from Ron. Mrs. Weasley eyed him skeptically. "Hermione, I think that one might have been a dud."

"Oh, no, it wasn't. Ronald, dear, why don't you look at your chest?"

Ron, still not speaking, looked down at his shirt in confusion.

"Underneath your shirt, imbecile."

Ron peered down the collar of his shirt, paled, made a strange squeaky noise like a mouse being trodden on, and gulped.

"That's not permanent, is it? I don't know why I said that. It felt like it wasn't me, you know? I think someone might have hit me with an Imperio--"

"--Ronald, please stop making excuses for your despicable behavior. And yes, it is permanent. You'd have to get back into my good graces before I would remove it, and that's about as possible Hagrid modeling for Twilfitt and Tattings."

"What did you do to him?" said Ginny.

"Show them, Ronald."

He hesitated and then began unbuttoning his shirt at his mother's dangerous look.

There, tattooed on Ron's chest in magnificent splendor, was a pink and purple Pygmy Puff.

A/N: The line about the mouse being trodden on is from SS. That line always cracks me up!

The chapter title, Inklings, is taken from a literary discussion group by the same name that existed between the 1930s and 1960s. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were both members of the Inklings.

Thanks to all of you who reviewed! You all are very kind, and reviews apparently feed the muse monkey.

Additionally, I'd like to thank betas extraordinaire Sevariger and WickedlyWanton! Without your help, I would still be trying to beat this chapter into submission. You are amazing and I will be mailing you your own personal Snape-bot as soon as I can find a box big enough.

Pilgrim's Regress

Chapter 3 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

"Memory, once waked, will play the tyrant..."

Chapter Three // Pilgrim's Regress

Hermione put her quill down and cradled her head in her hands. She and Harry had been in the Hogwarts library for hours, scratching out endless theories and Arithmancy equations.

Students weren't typically allowed to come back to the castle during the holidays if they hadn't signed up to do so. They hadn't, but she supposed being with The Boy Who Lived had its benefits. Professor McGonagall had been unusually accommodating, and Hermione could have sworn she saw the corner of the steely Transfiguration teacher's mouth twitch when she pulled out the book and explained why she needed the library.

All her equations kept coming back to one number – four. She knew that there were four children in the book, but couldn't see what that had to do with the Stone Table or Dumbledore. It couldn't be talking about the so-called Golden Trio. She didn't know of any magical quintuplets, though she'd checked the directories for all the major wizarding schools.

Harry was deeply absorbed in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. She'd never seen him read anything with that much interest, with the exception of the Half-Blood Prince's... well, Snape's Potions book. She rolled her eyes. This was just like Harry. He got a new piece of information and took off running with it without even stopping to think. She was reminded of their fifth year when he'd gone to the Ministry of Magic based on a strange dream and words from a snarky house-elf. Hermione was all for house-elf rights, but to trust anyone who acted like Kreacher without a second thought was folly.

Couldn't Harry see how illogical his current train of thought was? No, probably not, she mused. He was so desperate to believe that Dumbledore wasn't gone that he'd pushed aside the evidence he'd seen with his own eyes.

She sighed and set her quill to paper again. The sooner she proved that Dumbledore was dead, the sooner Harry could move on. More importantly, they could concentrate on finding the remaining Horcruxes.

Her quill was once again flying over the paper. What did it mean, if it meant anything at all? Slowly, the equations moved and the symbolism started to become clear.

Lucy. The feminine Lucius, meaning 'one who walks in the light.' The youngest. Harry, also the youngest, the one who walks in light, the ruler. Even though Harry was neither Lucius nor a girl, the value of 'Harry' was accepted and that part of the equation stabilized. A line of the purest gold curled around his name, waiting to join the rest as they unfolded.

Susan, from Susanna. Derived from the Hebrew word for 'lily' or 'rose.' The falsely accused. Accused, accused... could it be Snape? The equation closed down – no, that wasn't right. Lily... could it be Harry's mother? Again, the equation stopped. Roses... roses are red... Ronald! Sure enough, Ronald was accepted into the equation, a rose-red line. It did not join with Harry's, though. Instead, it connected to another line which ran off the page. It was putrid green and gave Hermione a distinct feeling of nausea. She'd come back to that. She didn't want to think about Ron right now.

Peter, meaning 'stone.' The meaning here became clear almost instantly. Hermione, derived from Hermes, the god of wisdom whose name also meant 'stone'. A silver line ran from her name, connecting with Harry's. Ron's line reached out for hers, but her line shied away, running for the last name on the list.

Edmund. The protector.

For hours, Hermione tried plugging in different variables. Still, the equation would not move. The protector refused to make his presence known. She slammed a fist on the table in frustration.

Ten points from Gryffindor for conduct unbecoming of the Head Girl.

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Hermione jumped up in confusion, looking around the library. There stood Minerva McGonagall in a tartan bathrobe and fuzzy cat slippers, holding a covered plate that was emitting an enticing aroma.

"I'm sorry, Professor. It won't happen again."

"What won't happen again? You forgetting to eat? Well, I should hope so! You've been in here for nine hours, child. Didn't you even notice when Harry left?"

"No, I didn't! Sorry about the house points, Professor. I wasn't thinking."

"What points?"

"You... just took ten points from Gryffindor for 'conduct unbecoming of the Head Girl.'"

"You must be tired! I just got in here, and I most certainly didn't take points! It's Christmas, Hermione. Even I'm not as strict as that. Severus is the only one who would have done something like that. Now, eat up and then it's back to the Burrow and to bed with you! We've found Albus's will; we'll be reading it tomorrow. You'll need the sleep."

With that, the professor set the plate down, winked, and was gone.

Whose voice was that?

"...Severus is the only one..."

Could it be?

A yawn threatened to split her face in two, and her stomach felt like it had wrapped itself around her spine and was attempting to devour it. Nonsense. She was tired and hungry and obviously hearing things. She picked up a sandwich and began packing her book bag. They could start again tomorrow.

Hermione stumbled through the Floo at the Burrow, barely able to keep her eyes open. Taking a look around the empty kitchen, she realized just how late it was. She trundled upstairs, eager to collapse into bed.

Upstairs, Molly Weasley stirred in her sleep. Her infamous clock, which she had started carrying everywhere when Voldemort returned, ticked ominously.

The golden hand labeled 'Ron' had just moved from 'Traveling' to 'Mortal Peril'.

A/N: The beginning quote is taken from 'Til We Have Faces by C.S. Lewis. The chapter title is another work by Lewis.

Most of the name meanings are correct, though I did take some liberties with the meaning of Harry.

In the Old Testament, Susanna was falsely accused of adultery. She was cleared by the prophet David. Check out Susanna and the Elders by Artemisia Gentileschi for a graphic representation.

I know that the hands on Molly's clock are all supposed to be pointing to 'Mortal Peril' all the time now that Voldemort's back, but I'm taking liberties again. All for the sake of the plot, I assure you.

Thanks to my wonderful beta, WickedlyWanton, for being so much better with punctuation than I. Today, you get an A plus!

Ron Weasley and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Chapter 4 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Four: Ron Weasley and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Ron pounded his fist on the wall in frustration, ignoring the sharp pain he felt lancing through his fingers. What in the hell was happening to him?

It had all started earlier that year in Professor Henry's Advanced Potions class. He'd found himself sneaking back to the storage cabinet while the young professor's back was turned, pocketing a tiny vial of clear liquid. It had been an odd feeling he'd done it; he'd *wanted* to do it but it didn't feel like *him*.

He'd gone upstairs to Gryffindor Tower, dumped the little vial in Hermione's tea, waited for her to drink it... and before he knew it, his arm had lifted and he was saying '*Petrificus Partialis!*' Words had begun pouring from his mouth, and he was helpless to stop it.

He'd thought he was going mad, but then he remembered Professor Moody's lesson on the Unforgivable Curses, especially the Imperius Curse. That same feeling of wanting to do something, but not knowing why... not caring that it wasn't his voice telling him to do these things.

He'd wanted to talk to Harry and Hermione about it, but neither of them were speaking to him. He began to research on his own who had cast it? He'd always been hopeless at resisting the curse, so he'd have to find out who had cast it if he hoped to stop them. Telling a professor wouldn't do any good there was a reason no one could prove whether the Death Eaters after the first war who said they'd been under the curse actually had been. If a victim of the Imperius Curse were given Veritaserum, they would confess to performing all those acts themselves, even that they had *wanted* to do these things. Unless you knew the name of the person who had put you under the curse, it was hopeless.

Then there had been the incident yesterday. He'd come in the door and found himself calling Hermione...*that*. He'd tried again to tell her about the curse, but she wouldn't listen.

Suddenly, it didn't seem so important. He felt an overwhelming urge to leave. He crept downstairs, knowing that he would need to Apparate as soon as he got outside. He didn't know where, but again, it didn't seem to matter.

Once the stomach-wrenching feeling of Apparition passed, he found himself in a narrow alleyway. There, at the end of the alley, was a man robed in black *Gee, could he think of a less stereotypical bad guy costume?* he thought, looking at the man. Ron could barely make out the gleam of blonde hair beneath the man's cloak's deep hood.

Good. You've come. I have work for you, Mr. Weasley.

He heard the voice in his head.

"Who are you?"

I am no one of consequence. You will tell no one of this meeting. You will go back to your home when we have finished here, and you will behave as normal. Do you understand me?

Ron felt a blissful blankness invade his mind. He tried to concentrate, to throw off what he now knew was the Imperius Curse, but to no avail. He wasn't strong enough; if only he could be like Harry...

Do you understand me?

He nodded, unable to fight anymore.

You will find him for me. Albus Dumbledore.

"Are you mad? He's dead!"

Do not be so sure. We believe there is a reason he chose the phoenix as his symbol. You will listen for news of him, and also for the plans of the Order of the Phoenix. You will report back here in two weeks' time... and believe me, the consequences will be... unpleasant if you have nothing to report.

A vision of his mother, of Hermione, of his brothers all dead flashed in front of his eyes.

"No!"

He poured all of his strength into breaking the connection. Slowly, jerkily, he moved his wand to point at the robed figure.

You think to fight me? Crucio!

The pain was like nothing he'd ever known. He gritted his teeth, determined to defend his family and friends.

"Protego!"

The Shield Charm was weak, but it held long enough for him to get his bearings. His attacker was faster, though, and sent a Slicing Hex straight for him. His Shield Charm absorbed the spell, and then shattered. He was wide open, a sitting duck.

He didn't hear the incantation for the next hex, but he did know that as soon as it hit, the world turned upside down. Up was down, left was right, black was white... he couldn't tell which way his attacker was, much less which way to move. Pain lanced across his left side, and he felt warm blood trickle down his leg. He crumpled to the ground, and in desperation as his world faded, he screamed.

"Hermione, Hermione, wake up!" a familiar voice hissed in her ear.

"Huhwhaa?"

"Wake up! Ron's been attacked and taken to St. Mungo's!"

That had the desired effect. Ginny started handing her clothes as she hurriedly put them on, not even noticing that her jumper was on backwards until Ginny pointed it out. The girls dashed down the stairs to find Molly scrawling a message on a piece of parchment.

"Who's that to?" asked Ginny, pulling on her trainers.

"It's to your father. The place he's staying at doesn't have a Floo connection."

Arthur Weasley was staying in the Muggle world for a week, on orders of the new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour. He was to 'feel out' what the Muggles thought of the situation the Dementors affected them, even if they couldn't see them. He was also to research various Muggle technologies that could be useful in the war against Voldemort. This was a clear violation of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Act, but as they say, all's fair in love and war. The Death Eaters certainly weren't going to use Muggle technology, and the side of the Light needed all the help it could get.

"How's Ron I mean, Ronald?"

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips at hearing Hermione call Ron 'Ronald' but continued, "He's unconscious. Prolonged exposure to the Cuciatus Curse, as well as a nasty

Slicing Hex that's resisting all attempts to heal. Mundungus Fletcher found him in Knockturn Alley, of all places."

Hermione got a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she remembered the putrid green line in her Arithmancy equations.

"You all go on... I have something I need to get. I'll be along in a second," she said, racing back up the stairs.

Once upstairs, she hurriedly began shoving books and parchment into her bag. She'd just shouldered it and was prepared to head back down to the fireplace when she heard a muffled explosion up in the attic.

She found the attic door heavily warded, but she thought she heard muffled cursing. She inhaled deeply, wondering if there was a fire and if Mrs. Weasley's fire wards extended into the attic.

"That's odd," she thought. The only thing that should have been in the attic was the house ghoul, but she distinctly smelled arugula, ginger, and angel hair flax all ingredients in a powerful healing potion. Curious, she tried to break the attic ward, but it was far beyond her skill level. Puzzled, she headed back downstairs. She'd have to tell Mrs. Weasley about this.

"Healing potions? My, the attic ghoul must be getting ambitious! That's the only thing up there, dear. It must have been your imagination," Mrs. Weasley said in a tone that brooked no nonsense and left no doubt in Hermione's mind that she'd not be getting any answers here. "Ron's awake. The Aurors are in there talking to him now, but we're allowed in once they're done."

As if on cue, a short woman with curly strawberry blonde hair stepped out of the room on the right. "Molly? We're done here. You can go in. The Healers just gave him a Sleeping Draught, so I'd say he won't be up long."

"Thanks, Miss Easley. Come on, kids. Let's go see him."

Ron's eyes were closing as they entered the room. "Hi, Mum."

"Hi, Ronnie. What happened to you?"

"I... tried to tell you yesterday... I got hit with an Imperius Curse... a few months ago... can't fight it..."

Guilt washed over Hermione. How could they not have noticed? She knew how hopeless Ron was at resisting the Imperius Curse. He'd even tried to tell them, but she'd been too angry to listen.

She didn't even hear the rest of the family's words to him. She simply stood in the back of the tiny room, wishing the floor would swallow her up. She didn't look up until Mrs. Weasley touched her arm as she walked past. "You should say something to him, Hermione."

She walked over to the bed where Ron lay still and pale. She bent over and kissed him on the forehead, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." His hand reached up and clumsily patted hers. "S'okay, 'Mione... It's not your fault. But I... wanna sleep now..."

She squeezed his hand and then left to rejoin the rest of the Weasleys and Harry in the hall.

They lunched quietly at the Leaky Cauldron. Tonks joined them, saying that the Aurors didn't have any clues on who would've cursed Ron.

"But you do know he was cursed, right? I thought they couldn't ever really tell that sort of thing," said Harry, poking at the remains of his lunch.

"Well, usually, we can't. This time, though, we had a Sothian."

Everyone, including Hermione, looked at Tonks with a confused expression.

"What's a Sothian?" asked Hermione, ashamed that she'd never even heard the term.

"I thought you were supposed to be a know-it-all! Sothians are a lot like Metamorphmagi in that they are really rare. It's impossible to lie in the presence of a Sothian; they're even better than Veritaserum. They can detect the Imperius Curse, too. Unfortunately, though, other than that, they're almost like Squibs. Most of them can hardly use magic. I don't believe Miss Easley even has a wand. She's the first one in over two hundred years."

They discussed Sothians for a bit longer, and then Mrs. Weasley reminded them that they were due at Hogwarts for the reading of Professor Dumbledore's will. They settled the tab with Tom and then Flooed to Headmistress McGonagall's office.

Minerva McGonagall was her usual acerbic self when they arrived. Without any ado other than tea and biscuits from one of her numerous tartan tins, she began to read the Headmaster's will.

Molly Weasley received two thick envelopes for her and Arthur, as well as a tidy sum of Galleons. Fred and George got some curious silver instruments as well as recipes for some of the Headmaster's favorite trick potions and sweets, with a note saying that laughter was a light in these dark times, and that their work was noble. Molly scoffed at that.

For Bill, there were several books on Dark curses, as well as some more silver instruments that would be 'essential' for anyone wanting to become a first class cursebreaker. For Charlie, there was a single egg, red with silver veins. Charlie said he'd never seen its like and eagerly began reading the enclosed instructions for hatching, care, and feeding.

Harry received a cottage in Hogsmeade, as well as a large crate of assorted items. He laughed when he pulled out a pair of thick woolen socks, though he wouldn't say why.

Headmistress McGonagall wouldn't discuss what she had received, nor would she tell them what the other professors had gotten. Finally, Hermione's turn came. McGonagall walked over to a large, sheet-covered object in the corner of the room.

"This, Miss Granger, was left for you," she said, pulling the sheet off.

There stood a handsome mahogany wardrobe, carved with lions and centaurs and a tiny lamppost that flickered and trees that really moved in a wind only they could feel. There was a note affixed to the front in a loopy handwriting she thought she'd seen before.

You have a Witch and a Wardrobe, Miss Granger. Now, I wonder, is there a Lion to go with it?

The chapter title is from Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst.

The term 'Sothian' is taken from the Old English root of 'soothsayer', and it means 'to confirm to be true'. At least, that's what it means according to dictionary.com.

As always, none of this would be possible without Cassandra and WickedlyWanton, who rock my socks with their beta skills.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

Chapter 5 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Five // The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

You have a Witch and a Wardrobe, Miss Granger. Now I wonder, is there a Lion to go with it?

Hermione reached out a hand and touched the wardrobe in wonder, ignoring the soft swoosh that signaled someone arriving by Floo.

"That handwriting looks familiar, doesn't it?" asked Harry, walking up behind her. Indeed, the writing on the note matched the writing inside the book she'd gotten.

She wanted to tell Harry it wasn't true, that this coincidence meant nothing, but she found that she couldn't. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, but nothing would come out.

"You can't tell me you don't at least think it's a possibility now."

"I " Again, the words seemed to stick in the back of her throat.

"Look who just came in," said Harry, grinning from ear to ear. "You do believe me! I know it!"

Miss Easley stood in front of the fireplace, an apprehensive look on her face. "Sorry, Minerva. I didn't know you had guests. I'll stop by later," she said, turning around and immediately going back through the Floo.

"What's her hurry?" asked Hermione, the wardrobe momentarily forgotten.

"Please, Miss Granger, use that remarkable brain of yours," said McGonagall rather testily. "While Miss Easley is very important to our cause, she is also very dangerous. None of us are able to lie in her presence, and in these times of war, much depends on our ability to do so. We are all keeping secrets, I'm afraid. It is also a matter of etiquette that she must know that everyone in the room is comfortable with her presence. However, I have some very important matters to discuss with her. I hate to rush you, but can you move this to another location?"

They all murmured their assent and began gathering their things. Hermione stared at the wardrobe, wondering how on earth she was going to get it back to The Burrow. To shrink something this large and complex would take a very powerful wizard indeed.

As if on cue, the wardrobe shrunk down to palm size and floated gently over to her. She stared at it for a moment, but then quickly plucked it out of the air when it started gently nudging then insistently rapping on the side of her head.

Hermione took the wardrobe out of its scarf wrapping and set it on her desk.

"Harry, where on earth are we going to put this thing?"

She should have expected what happened next. The wardrobe floated up off the desk and started up the stairs. It stopped on the landing in front of the attic and grew to its original size, shaking itself rather like a dog.

"Well, I guess it takes care of itself. Just what I'd expect from something belonging to Dumbledore. I wonder if we should go in it, like the kids in the book did?"

"Harry! Didn't Ginny's time in the Chamber of Secrets teach you anything? *Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain!* I'm willing to admit that it is a bit much to be a coincidence, but we still need to be careful! There's still the possibility of a trap!"

Harry placed his hand on the wardrobe. "It doesn't... feel evil. I'm going in. You can stay out here and cover me if you're scared."

Before she could protest, he opened the wardrobe door and went inside. She couldn't see anything but long fur coats. Suddenly, Harry burst out of the wardrobe as if he'd been shot out of a cannon.

"Hermione! I'm sorry I was gone so long, but there's something there! Woods, or something!"

"What do you mean, you were gone so long? You haven't even been in there a minute!"

"But... I was gone for ages! Maybe it's a time enchantment like in the book... No time to think about it, though, come on!" he grabbed her arm and pulled her into the wardrobe.

Despite herself, Hermione was excited at the prospect of seeing what lay inside the wardrobe. She pushed her way through the heavy coats...

... Only to encounter a solid wall.

"Umm, Harry... there's nothing here. Just the back of the wardrobe."

"You must not be doing it right, then. Let me see," said Harry, pushing his way in front of her.

In spite of all his poking and prodding and spell casting, the back wall of the wardrobe remained stubbornly solid.

Once again, the pair found themselves back at the Hogwarts library. Hermione had gotten in a little research on lions as symbols, but Harry interrupted her, insisting that they look for spells that could be used to alter time and dimensions.

There was no other explanation for it. The stress of Dumbledore's death, Voldemort's return, and everything else had finally gotten to Harry. Worse, she was getting caught up in his delusional fantasies. She steadied her resolve. Harry was awfully convincing, not to mention as conniving as any Slytherin. For a minute there, he'd almost made her believe what he was saying was possible! Thankfully, when he'd said that he had found a magical land in the wardrobe she had come back to her senses.

She was sure that the late Headmaster's message had meant something different. She needed to be looking for the answer, not following Harry on his wild goose chase. Hadn't Dumbledore told Harry that no spell could reawaken the dead after he saw his parents come out of Voldemort's wand at the end of the Triwizard tournament? She slammed *Back to the Future: A Magical Approach to Time* by Dr. Emmett Brown closed on the table.

"Harry, there's nothing here! There is not a spell in existence that could create that kind of environment. There was a lot of excitement today, Harry. Maybe you just imagined those woods. Come on, let's go home and leave this till tomorrow. I bet Ron's home by now they said they weren't going to keep him long."

"I know I'm not imagining things! And I'm not crazy, either, so you can stop thinking that! I know I'm not as smart as you, but my gut is telling me I'm right."

"Look, let's just leave it for now. It's been a long day, and we're both tired... Let's just go," she said, not wanting to deal with any more.

"Fine. Though you know, Hermione, I never would have expected you to be one to so readily abandon the library for sleep."

"It's important to get eight hours of sleep a night! A well-rested mind is sharper, Harry. That's why you have more trouble with your homework when you've had a long Quidditch practice."

"Trust you to keep track of when I have trouble with my homework in correlation with when I have practice. Sweet Jesus, 'Mione, is there anything you don't notice?"

"Don't call me 'Mione. Are you admitting I'm right about this whole wardrobe business, then?"

"I think you're just mad because the answers can't be found in a book. Something big is happening, I can feel it."

"This coming from the boy who got a P on his Divination OWL? I'm sorry, Harry, but you having a 'feeling' is not enough to convince me. I need to see evidence."

"What about the book? What about the wardrobe?"

"I don't deny that Dumbledore is trying to tell me something. Lions symbolize many things; that was the research you dragged me away from earlier. It could represent any number of places or things! Singa Pura, or Singapore, is the Lion City. Lviv County in the Ukraine has a lion on its flag. Native Americans use the lion on their totems; the constellation Leo, slayer of Taurus "

" And the bloody symbol of bloody Gryffindor house is a lion!"

"Goodness, Harry, no need for such language! All I'm trying to say is that maybe you should step back and look at other angles!"

"And all I'm saying is that you need to get that book out of your arse and look at it from my side, too! I don't feel like arguing this into the ground. I'm going to take your suggestion and go home, get some sleep, and maybe we'll all feel better in the morning," said Harry, flooing out before she could even open her mouth.

Blast. Maybe that was her problem. Opening her mouth always seemed to get her in such trouble.

Back at the Burrow, everyone was celebrating Ron's return. The twins were trying to improve their new Yeti Beans, which would turn the eater into a miniature Yeti. Mrs. Weasley was nowhere in sight probably a good thing, as George was shedding white fur all over the rug.

"Where's your mum?" Hermione asked Ginny, who was silently sitting off to the side.

"I think she's upstairs messing with the potions St. Mungo's sent home with Ron. I don't know why she's started doing all the potions upstairs. She usually makes them in the shed out back, since she's normally as bad as Neville about blowing up cauldrons."

Remembering the faint smell of healing herbs on the landing the day before, Hermione gave a small smile. That must have been why she'd acted so strange earlier when Hermione asked about the noise in the attic and the smell.

She headed upstairs, stopping in briefly to visit Ron. He was sleeping, so she didn't stay long. She continued her journey upstairs, mind set on sleeping herself.

She was almost to her room when she heard soft voices coming from the attic. She strained her ears, listening, but could only make out Mrs. Weasley's voice and one other a man's voice, deep and rich. Moving towards the landing, she cast a slight Amplification charm, hoping that she hadn't made it so loud the voices would carry downstairs.

"...not sure if he can handle the truth... I wait, I think someone's outside. Did you remember to cast a Silencing Charm when I came up? You didn't? Well for the love of Merlin, cast it "

The voices cut off abruptly. Sensing that someone was coming, she hid in the first place she came to the wardrobe. Of course, she left the door partially open, for she knew it was a very silly thing to shut oneself into a wardrobe.

Quietly, carefully, hardly daring to breathe, she moved towards the back of the wardrobe. She reached out a hand, attempting to keep herself from running into the back wall.

What she encountered, though, was most definitely *not* the back of the wardrobe.

'Never trust anything that thinks for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain' was shamelessly stolen from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

Back to the Future: A Magical Approach to Time by Dr. Emmett Brown refers to the Back to the Future movies, which I was watching while I was writing this chapter.

The line about shutting yourself up in a wardrobe is paraphrased from (what else?) The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis.

All my base are belong to Wickedly Wanton and Sevariger, for they are the ultimate betas. If you're not a video game nerd like me, allow me to translate: I owe everything to the magnificent skills of those two. Well, everything except the mistakes. I make them all by myself. ^_^

Surprised By Joy

Chapter 6 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Six // Surprised By Joy

What she encountered, though, was most definitely not the back of the wardrobe.

Cold and wet. The back of the wardrobe was not supposed to be *cold* and *wet*. She froze, almost afraid to turn around.

Don't be stupid, she thought. *How are you ever supposed to help Harry face Voldemort if you're afraid of a silly wardrobe?*

Steeling herself, she turned around.

The cold and wet had been snow. It looked like Harry might not have been hallucinating about the forest in the wardrobe.

She could see the flickering of a lamppost between the thick, snow-bowed trees. Taking one of the fur coats, she wrapped it around herself and ventured towards the light.

The lamppost itself was old-fashioned wrought iron with a tiny flame flickering in it. It was what was behind the lamppost that caught her attention, though.

A tiny cottage sat nestled cozily in the trees, lit up and looking very warm and inviting. She pulled out her wand, casting a few low-level detection charms she'd read about in the library. From what she could tell, this place was not an illusion. Strangely enough, she could detect no magic at all.

If it was a real place, then, where was it?

She looked back the way she came. She could barely make out the outline of a wardrobe exactly identical to the one she'd just entered. She desperately wanted to go back and tell the others, but a strong compulsion to go towards the cottage took over.

She walked around the perimeter, looking for anything suspicious. She found a small greenhouse containing lemon verbena and Flitterblooms, as well as numerous plants she didn't recognize. For all that she had found no magic in the area, whoever lived here was either a wizard or acquainted with one.

She hid behind a tree, waiting to see if anyone came in or out. Nothing happened. The gaily-colored curtains stayed shut.

When her toes began going numb, Hermione realized that she had to make a choice. She could go knock on the door, or she could leave.

She stared at the cottage for a long moment before turning back around and heading for the wardrobe door. Halfway there, she seemed to find her nerve, for she turned around and ran pell-mell for the cottage. At the door, she readjusted her grip on her wand and knocked.

The door opened, letting out a breath of warm, slightly lemon-scented air.

"Why, Miss Granger! I had started to wonder if you were ever going to knock."

Albus Dumbledore crinkled his twinkling eyes in delight, looking very much alive and well. The hand that had been blackened and wizened when she'd last seen him was strong and whole.

"If I... was going to knock... *You're supposed to be dead!*" She swallowed, trying to quell the pounding of her heart. She felt both excited and sick, like it was the first day of school.

"Well, I've never liked doing what I'm supposed to do. Lemon drop?"

"Why are you acting like everything is normal? I don't understand. How did you do it?"

"That's rather a long story, and it's bad manners of me to leave you standing outside in the cold. Come in, have a cup of tea, and we'll talk."

Hermione, who was still gaping like a dying fish, allowed the former Headmaster to lead her inside and seat her in a cushy chintz armchair in front of the fire. There were already two cups of tea poured; hers made just the way she liked it with a slice of lemon and two lumps of sugar.

"Ah, yes. As you can see, I've been expecting you though I did not expect Mr. Potter to enter before you. Had you been with him, I would have revealed myself. I take it you understood the clues I left you, then? No?"

She found her voice, and with it a multitude of questions. She found that she was nervously wringing her hands, a habit of her mother's that she loathed. She picked up the tea, trying to ignore the way it shook in her grasp.

"Professor "

"A professor I am no longer. My name, as I am sure you are aware, is Albus."

"Albus, then. Tell me, Albus, why didn't you tell us you were alive?"

"What would have been the fun in that? Besides, I can't go bandying about the fact that I'm not dead. I faked my death for a reason, you know."

"What reason is that?"

"You're a bright young lady. You'll figure it out. Perhaps you should go back to that Arithmancy equation you've been working on."

"How did you know?"

"Of course Minerva knows of the situation why do you think she let you into the library? She, and now you. There are two others, who I am sure you will find in time."

"The protector! Yes, I was looking for them, but I was interrupted. Can't you just tell me?"

"Those who would seek to take the mark of the phoenix must face their weakness. You must learn to look beyond what you see. This is all I shall say on the matter." The last was said in a tone that brooked no nonsense, and she knew not to press the matter. This sounded like a test, and if there was one thing Hermione Jane Granger was good at, it was tests.

She tried a different subject. "Where are we? What's going on with the matching wardrobes?"

"Ah, yes, the wardrobes. One of my better ideas, if I do say so myself. You are familiar, of course, with the concept of a Vanishing Cabinet?"

"Yes, it's what Malfoy used to sneak those Death Eaters into the school. It links one place to another oh!"

"I see that you have made the connection. I simply took the cabinets he used and Transfigured them to look like Lewis's wardrobe and reset their locations. However, the entry charm is weak you must get back before the gate closes. You will be able to come through again later today. Before you leave, though, I will have your wand-oath that you will not speak of this to anyone other than Messrs. Potter and Weasley."

She swore, and he bundled her up in the long heavy coat and sent her on her way.

It was still dark when she came back through, though the voices she had been concerned with earlier had ceased. She took a quick look towards the back of the wardrobe, finding it solid. She crept back down into her room, packed her bag, wrote a quick note to Molly, and Flooded into Hogwarts.

He was alive. She would be joining the Order.

It seemed like a dream. She briefly wondered if Professor Snape knew.

She also wondered why Albus hadn't spoken to Harry when she came through the wardrobe. Maybe that, too, was a part of his test. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she forgot to keep her elbows tucked in, and as a result, she nearly fell out into the wrong grate. *Way to go, Granger.*

The Auror who was charged with monitoring all outside Floo calls waved her with a minimum of fuss. Once in the library, she spread her books and papers out around her, putting her formidable mind to the problem of the protector.

Harry Potter woke up feeling as though he had wings.

Largely because he did. He opened his mouth to ask what in the name of Merlin was going on, but all that came out was a trill of birdsong.

He heard snickering, and then he saw Ron sitting next to his bed holding a tiny vial with a dropper. He returned to his normal form, shedding feathers and a tiny yellow beak.

"What on earth is that?"

"Canary Drops. Same base as what Fred and George put in the Canary Creams, only this works by just skin contact. The Ministry won't let them sell it, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy the fruits of their research."

"Don't ever wake me up like that again! What time is it, anyway?"

"About ten thirty."

"Jesus! Hermione was supposed to wake me up this morning! We're supposed to go back to the library"

Ron cut him off mid-sentence. "Yeah, she was supposed to tell me what's been going on. Haven't seen her all day, though. I don't think she's in her room. If she is, she's not answering."

"That's weird. You think we should worry?"

"I am worried, whether I *should* be or not," Ron said with no small amount of sarcasm. "It isn't like her to not tell anyone where she's going. I was hoping she was in here with you."

"All right, let me get dressed, and we'll look for her. How are you feeling today, by the way?" Harry asked, scrutinizing Ron as he looked for his trainers.

"Like I got run over by a Thestral. I've got to go take more of that foul-tasting potion and eat some breakfast before we do anything Mum will go ballistic if I don't. Maybe we can ask her if she's seen Hermione."

The boys got dressed and headed downstairs, Harry bringing Ron up to date on recent events. Strangely, Ron sided with Hermione.

"You know you're my best mate, Harry, but you do sound a bit mental. Even in the Wizarding world, you don't find forests in the back of wardrobes. Might've been some kind of illusion, though. We can ask Mum to check it out."

"Your mum? No offense, Ron, but I can't see your mum being very useful in this."

Ron rolled his eyes. "She is a member of the Order, prat. Besides, where do you think Bill got his love for curse-breaking? It wasn't from Dad. Mum knows some nasty curses, too. Y'know, maybe we should ask her if she can teach us anything."

Harry was still trying to sort out the fact that Mrs. Weasley was something other than Ron's slightly overbearing mother when the object of his thoughts directed him towards a chair and began piling kippers and sausages on the plate in front of him.

"You two eat up!"

"Mum, could you do us a favor and look at that wardrobe Hermione got from Dumbledore? Harry swears he found a forest in the back of the thing, but no one else has found it."

"No, dear. The wardrobe isn't for me to touch. Speaking of Hermione, though, she said to tell you that she's at the library again and that you should join her there after you've eaten."

"Okay, we will. Hey, Mrs. Weasley, Ron said you were really good at curse-breaking is that right?"

"Well, I'm a dab hand at it, though I'm no expert "

Her sentence ended in a girlish squeal as Mr. Weasley swept in to the kitchen and pinched her bum. Harry and Ron tried not to be sick.

"Dab hand? She's excellent Captain of the Dueling Club and had an offer from Gringotts to work as a cruse-breaker as soon as she graduated. She didn't want to, though. We started with you lot and haven't looked back."

"Morning, Dad," said Ron, recovering enough to begin shoveling food at an astonishing rate.

Harry remained silent until Ron elbowed him in the ribs. When he found his voice, he asked, "Mr. Weasley, forgive me for being rude, but why are you wearing a hat made out of tinfoil?" He was surprised that no one else seemed to find this odd.

"Oh, this? Well, you know the Ministry sent me to stay with the Muggles for a bit. This chap I stayed next door to was telling me the most fascinating things about these hats did you know that they would protect you from *alieums* that can read your mind? I figured if it works on them, it might work on You-Know-Who."

"Mr. Weasley, there's no such thing as aliens."

"But the chap said...!"

With a sigh, Harry spent the rest of the morning explaining to Mr. Weasley about conspiracy theorists, aliens, and the real purpose of tinfoil. Finally, though, Harry managed to extract them from the conversation and left to find out what Hermione was doing.

**

Surprised By Joy is a partial autobiography of C.S. Lewis. In the book, he documents his search for the phenomenon of pure joy. Ironically enough, several years later Lewis married a woman named Joy Gresham.

Thanks to WickedlyWanton and Sevariger for making this legible.

Also thanks to all of you who have left reviews! I really appreciate the feedback. It also has the added benefit of making me write faster.

Abolition of Man

Chapter 7 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

"Long did I hate you. Long did I fear you. I might "

- from 'Til We Have Faces, C.S. Lewis

Chapter 7 // Abolition of Man

Harry and Ron found Hermione in the library, frantically scribbling on bits of parchment and muttering to herself. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair looked like she'd been on the bad end of an Electrifying Hex.

"Hermione, weren't you telling me just yesterday that not sleeping was bad for you and that it made your mind dull or something?" teased Harry, tweaking one of the many quills that seemed to be holding her hair up.

She looked up, and Harry saw that though her eyes were red-rimmed and circled, they shone with hope and excitement. "It is bad for you, but I couldn't sleep, so I came here. Harry... You were right. *I saw him*."

Ron gasped. "You mean... He's really alive? The guy who attacked me in the alley I'm pretty sure he was a Death Eater said he was, but I thought he was just mental."

Hermione's eyes were as big as saucers. "You mean the *Death Eaters* know he's alive?"

"Well, I don't think they know for certain. He said something about Dumbledore choosing the Phoenix as his symbol for a reason, and that I was supposed to report back to him anything I heard. Good thing Mum helped me break that curse, eh? Enough with the suspense, though! Tell us what happened yesterday."

She relayed the story of finding Albus's cottage in the wardrobe-wood, detailing their "test" for induction into the Order.

"So, he's not going to tell us *anything*?" asked Ron petulantly.

"I think the point is that we find out on our own, Ron. He suggested that I go back to this Arithmancy equation, but I'm stuck."

"Well, we're in this together, so explain it to us. I doubt we'll be much help, but three heads are better than one. Just ask Fluffy," joked Harry, though the attempt fell flat. Hermione ignored him and plowed into explanations of star lines, tangents, runic variables, and dividing by zero which apparently was possible with magic. She noticed Harry's eyes glazing over, and Ron was leaning back in his chair, looking as awake as he did in Divination, which wasn't very awake at all. She tried a simpler approach.

"Well, *this*," she indicated the pure gold line, "is you, Harry. Represented by Lucy, the feminine Lucius, the light-bringer."

Ron snorted. "Dumbledore put you in as a *girl*."

"I wouldn't be too smug about that, Ron. This red line is you, represented by Susanna, the falsely accused. Susan is derived from Susanna much like Lucy is from Lucius. Biblically, Susanna was accused of adultery, though Daniel, who helped her trick them into telling the truth, later saved her. It actually makes a lot more sense now, knowing that you were under the Imperius Curse. You were falsely accused of betraying someone important to you, just like Susanna."

"What about you? Are you a bloke?" demanded Ron.

"Actually, yes. I think Dumbledore might have set it up that way intentionally. Here I am," she said, tapping the silver line with the end of her quill. "Represented by Peter, the stone. Hermione is derived from Hermes, whose name means 'cairn' or a pile of stones."

"Well, if that's us, then who's that?" Harry asked, pointing to an oily black line that seemed to sulk over in the corner of the paper, away from the lines representing the Golden Trio.

"I don't know. This is where I'm stuck. This would be Edmund, the protector. Whoever it is, they appear pretty reluctant to join us."

Harry looked at the colorful lines and runes that adorned the sheets of parchment spread before them. "What does it mean when the lines intersect?"

"I won't know until I have the last piece of the base equation. It's an interaction of some kind, but that's all I know."

"Who are all these people?" Ron asked, indicating several more lines that went off in different directions.

"Those are who I've tried to use in the role of the protector. This one," here she pointed to a warm pink line that jumped around between all the other lines, "is your mum. She's doing *something*, because she interacts with almost everyone. This yellow one is McGonagall, the blue one is Professor Vector, the rainbow-striped one is Tonks... and here's Hagrid, Remus, Professors Flitwick and Sprout... I've even got Madam Pince on here. None of these are the right one, though."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture..." Ron said grumpily. "Wait, who's *that* line?" He indicated a line that was so light it was almost transparent and gleamed with a pearlescent shimmer. This line did not connect with anything; instead, it ran straight off the end of the parchment.

"That's Miss Easley. I did some research after that, and I found out that Sothians cannot be used as variables in Arithmantic equations. They are an anomaly of human behavior, and they'll throw the whole thing off... *wait!* Dumbledore said that McGonagall and two others knew and you can't lie to a Sothian! She ~~has~~ to be the other one besides the protector who knows there's no way she couldn't!"

Harry, who had been reading her notes, nodded briefly and looked up with an apprehensive expression on his face. "What is it?" she asked, almost afraid of what he might say.

"Maybe you're going about it wrong. That's why you can't find the protector."

No wonder he'd looked so apprehensive it wasn't often that one told Hermione she was 'doing it wrong' and went un-hexed. "Well, Harry, perhaps with your vast experience with Arithmancy, you can enlighten me on what to do next," she said icily, her hands clenching around her quill so hard it snapped.

He tapped the paper thoughtfully. "We all share some similarities and very major differences with the characters, so maybe we need to look at Edmund's basic profile and go from there. For example, Hermione, neither you nor Peter believed that I / Lucy found something in the wardrobe. But Peter was the fighter; he got the sword and shield, remember? You're not like that, though. You stay in the library and prefer to fight with your mind rather than your fists. What the names mean is interesting and all, but I don't think Dumbledore meant us to focus on that - I think he meant us to focus on the character."

Hermione was baffled. When had Harry gotten so perceptive? If she'd taken her own advice and actually gotten some sleep last night, she would have picked up on that. She whisked a fresh sheet of parchment from the dwindling stack and started making a list.

"Let's see... we take what we know about variable Edmund. He was younger, a student... he betrayed both his family and the 'right' side to go to the side of the Witch. He realized what he'd done and regretted it, but he was sentenced to death. A rescue party sent by Aslan saved him, and Aslan gave his own life to save him from the Witch after that."

"What about Snape? He fits the profile he was a traitor, but he's certainly not a young student by any stretch of the imagination," mused Harry, almost to himself.

"He can't be the protector; it doesn't make sense," said Hermione in an exasperated tone, pulling more quills out of her hair and securing the frizzy locks with a charm. "The protector can't kill the one they're protecting."

"Who said that the protector was protecting Dumbledore? Besides, you remember what that note from Dumbledore said: 'Don't blame Edmund, it wasn't his fault.' I think it could be Snape, and I think you'd be daft not to at least try."

"I still don't think it makes sense..." she grumbled, but she bent her head back to her equation.

Her quill paused at the 'protector' variable as she brought to mind Snape. This was the hardest part of using people as Arithmantic variables. You had to see them in your mind, to somehow translate the words 'Severus Snape' into the myriad of complex impressions and emotions that made the man. She admittedly didn't know much about Snape, but when her knowledge stopped, the magic began. She felt pain, fear, revulsion, more pain... Impressions that she could only partially catch played through her skull, and the equation *clicked*.

The oily black line seemed to leap forth from the page with joy at being recognized, at being *known*... indeed, Severus Snape was the protector. And her silvery line was the second to encounter his: the first being the bright pink line of Molly Weasley.

Some murmuring and a dull *thwunk* sound registered at the edge of her hearing; apparently Harry had explained what she saw to Ron, who had promptly passed out on hearing that his mother might be in cahoots with the Great Greasy Git-Bat of the Dungeons. She wasn't paying attention to that, though. Now that they had the four base variables in place, pathways began to appear before her very eyes. She saw Molly's pink line seem to wrap around Snape, and she felt phantom limbs go around her and comfort her. Then, the black line disappeared within the pink, and Snape was gone from her equation entirely. Her own line came close to the place where Snape and Molly's lines merged, but her line could not pass through Molly's and get to the other side. Meanwhile, a tendril emerged from the opposite side of Molly's line from where she was trying to pass through. The pinky-gray line headed straight for the putrid green line that had connected with Ron, surrounding it. The green line dimmed slightly, and Hermione felt a distinct wave of fear move through it.

The equation stopped again. Her mouth felt dry, and her head reeled when she tried to rise.

"Hey... guys..." she said weakly, trying to bring herself to rights. Harry was fussing over Ron, though, and didn't seem to hear her. Unable to support herself, she slid sideways and crumpled beneath the desk.

A *nap... that sounds nice*, she thought.

She cracked open a bleary eye to find a bright green one the size of a tennis ball inches from hers. She screamed, bolting upright and throwing Dobby across the library. He crashed into a shelf of books on magical fungi, but it didn't seem to faze him.

"Harry Potter Harry Potter Harry Potter!" Dobby squeaked happily. "Miss Hat Lady is waking now!"

Harry, who had been speaking with Ron, rushed over to her. "How are you feeling? That was kind of scary."

She groaned and pressed a hand to her forehead. "Not so good... My head hurts. What happened?"

Harry opened his mouth, perhaps to tell her what had happened, but Dobby beat him to it. "Miss Hat Lady do too much too quick. Dobby has seen Professor Vector do this sometimes when the magic is strong. Miss Hat Lady will have headache all day and will be very hungry later."

He began pulling small bottles from one of the many pockets on his sweater. Squinting at it, Hermione asked, "Is that a Weasley sweater?"

Dobby jumped up and down excitedly. "Oh yes! Weezy Lady is making it for Dobby, since the one Dobby got from the Weezy was too big. Weezy Lady is making it with pockets!" Dobby was obviously very excited about having pockets; Hermione supposed that most things house-elves would wear didn't. She was about to ask why Dobby would need pockets, since house-elves could use magic to Summon most anything, but she found her mouth full of a vile-tasting liquid. She gagged and tried to spit it out, but Dobby would have none of it.

"Missy Hat Lady will take her medicine!" he squealed, and she found that she couldn't spit it out. Seeing no other option, she swallowed it with a grimace.

"Ugh, Dobby, that was terrible! What was it?"

"Professor Bat-man makes the other professor take it when she falls down after doing the scribbles. Dobby is going in his office and finding it."

"You got into Professor Snape's office? How? I thought the Ministry had sealed it up after..." Her voice trailed off, and she was unable to continue. If Snape ~~was~~, Professor Snape, she corrected herself was the protector, then why had he done it? Had Dumbledore *wanted him to do it*?

Dobby didn't notice, being more than happy to talk. "House-elf magic at Hogwarts overrides all other magic. Dobby can move through wards like they is not there. House-elves must be cleaning everywhere, so everywhere they must go. And if there is students or professors in danger behind their wards, house-elves can be going in to help!"

Harry and Ron's eyes appeared to glaze over, processing the fact that Dobby could *go anywhere*. You could practically *see* the mischief coming off of them in waves. Hermione, though, found that her brain seemed to be working just fine, despite the fact that she didn't think she could so much as Summon a quill at the moment.

"So, you can go into Professor Snape's old chambers? Can you get me in there?"

Dobby looked down his crooked little nose at her. "Is Miss Hat Lady making trouble? Dobby is a good elf, and he is not making trouble."

"No, no, Dobby! It's... a secret," she said in a low whisper, hoping to appeal to the elf's sense of adventure.

"Secrets is sounding like trouble... Dobby will think about it."

It seemed to be the best she was going to get for now. Perhaps she could bribe him with some new socks.

**

Harry and Ron dragged her out of the library despite her protests, though they agreed that they would try to get back through the wardrobe that evening after dinner.

Dinner itself was a quiet affair, since most of the Weasleys had left the lovable ramshackle house they called home. Bill was living with Fleur, though no one but Molly and Arthur really wanted to see him. Fleur was pregnant with their first child, and it seemed to be all Bill could discuss. The scars left by Fenrir Greyback had healed, though they still looked deep and angry as they bisected his face. He suffered no ill effects from his injuries; he simply had a liking for extremely rare meat and got twitchy when the full moon came through.

Fred and George were still living in their spacious flat above Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, raking in Galleons at an astonishing rate. Molly still disapproved, though she disapproved less now that they brought presents when they came home.

Charlie was back in Romania with the dragons, training some of them for the coming fight against the Dark. Dragon-riders were few and far between these days, but Charlie and his team had the talent to pull it off if anyone could. Hermione smiled at the thought of Lucius Malfoy getting eaten by a Hungarian Horntail.

Percy Weasley still chose to live his life estranged from those who had raised and loved him. All Christmas presents still came back unopened, though Molly sent packages like clockwork. "I want to remind him that we still love him," she had explained, doing a very poor job of hiding the tears that threatened to fall.

Lastly, there was Ginny. Poor, sweet Ginny. After Harry had left her, she retreated into a shell that no one could break. She was often seen up on the roof of the Burrow, staring off into space. She never cried, though. Lately she had started coming down to dinner, but conversation was still sparse. She'd lost weight, and her once lustrous hair hung limp and lank around her shoulders. Hermione felt rather guilty that she hadn't spoken to the younger girl much since it happened and made a mental note to do so later.

After what seemed like an age, the dinner dishes were cleared away, and Ginny had retreated upstairs, and Arthur and Molly were preoccupied with each other. It was time.

They quietly went upstairs and into the wardrobe. Ron made to shut the door behind him, but stopped when Hermione explained how foolish it was to completely shut oneself up in a wardrobe. She took a deep breath and began moving through the layers of coats.

There it was again. She hadn't been imagining things, or hallucinating, and she wasn't going crazy. Ron was chattering excitedly about seeing everything for the first time, but Hermione was considerably more cautious. Something didn't seem right. The woods were too quiet, and an odd smell hung upon the breeze.

Just past the lamp-post, she paused, motioning for Ron and Harry to be silent and wait. Harry must have sensed it too because he elbowed Ron and gripped his wand a little tighter.

The cottage was still there, but today no cheery lights shone in the windows. The door was slightly open, and there were big-booted footprints all over the snow around the house. Hermione cast a swift and (mostly) silent Disillusionment Charm, motioning for Ron and Harry to do the same. Ron had a little trouble with his, but after a moment got it sorted out. They crept towards the house, trying not to let so much as a whisper of snow across the frozen ground mark their passage.

The house was dark, cold, and empty, though she could still smell the faintest breath of lemon-scented air. The gaily-colored curtains had been ripped down, and papers and knickknacks were strewn throughout the house. Someone had been here, and they had been looking for something.

She walked back towards the small kitchen, noting that Dumbledore's blue and silver cloak still hung on the peg, and a pair of boots was neatly placed beneath it. Her eyes blurred momentarily with unshed tears. *What happened? Don't tell me that we got him back just to lose him again...*The kitchen seemed to have been left alone, the little canisters denoting *flour* and *sugar* still gleaming in the dim light coming through the window. She could just make out the greenhouse beyond the trees. That too, seemed intact.

She wandered back towards the living room, where Harry knelt with his fingertips pressed against a dark stain on the carpet. She watched as he raised red, sticky fingers to his nose and took a cautious sniff. The look on his face confirmed her fears. It was blood.

**

:ducks: I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

Abolition of Man is another work by C.S. Lewis.

As always, thanks to my wonderful betas (appearing in alphabetical order), Sevariger and WickedlyWantonExtra kudos to Septentrion, who caught my David/Daniel oopsie.

Please, read and review! I'd like to know what you think so far.

**EDIT: PP apparently had a spasm of some kind, so all your lovely reviews were lost. I do reply to reviews pretty quickly, so I think I thanked everyone that had reviewed before - but if I missed you, I'm sorry. Leave another review and I'll make it up to you!

Out of the Silent Planet

Chapter 8 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Eight // Out of the Silent Planet

The look on his face confirmed her fears. It was blood.

Harry, though, did not seem to be upset at the large quantity of blood that stained the floor and the walls. Instead, after a moment, he gave a short laugh, saying, "You can come out now, Professor."

A gentle *pop* sounded, though it was not the amicable white-haired professor that Harry expected who appeared. This man was tall and thin, with lank black hair that hung forward and obscured his face. His nose jutted out like the prow of a sinking ship, and he held a slender ebony wand at the ready in his thin, almost delicate, hands.

"Potter. Ever the arrogant one, aren't you?"

"Snape," said Harry tersely, inclining his head a fraction of an inch. "What's going on here?"

The man sneered, an expression which expression that was obviously at home on his thin face. "Far be it for me to question a Gryffindor's lack of observation, but it would appear that I have you at wand point. Drop your wands, all of you, or I cannot be responsible for what I do to Potter."

Harry looked as though he'd been punched in the stomach. "But... *I thought you were on our side!*"

A short laugh that held no humor or goodwill escaped the man's thin lips. "Side? I am on no side, for no one is on my side. I killed the Headmaster, have no doubt about that, little boy. Now, *drop your wands.*" His voice became low and dangerous. He reminded Hermione of a large black panther, ready to strike, all silk and steel and pure force.

"*Expelliarmis!*" Ron broke the silence, firing a disarming spell. Harry froze, staring at him in shock.

Snape dodged the spell almost lazily. "Really, Weasley, did you think such a pathetic attempt was going to work? It took all three of you to disarm me in the Shrieking Shack, or did you forget that? Rule number one: Know your enemy. *Incarcerous.*"

Ropes shot out of the end of his wand, binding Harry tightly. Snape made a *tut-tut* noise, "Quite pathetic. Rule number two: Never take your eyes from your enemy."

He should have taken his own advice, though, for Hermione had charmed one of Dumbledore's chintz armchairs to move behind him. Chintz fabric shot out of the arms, pulling Snape down into its squashy depths, attempting to bind him.

"Good, Miss Granger, though not quite good enough," and his voice was behind her suddenly, yanking her head back by her hair. "Rule three: if you wish to incapacitate your enemy, you would do well to disarm him." A wand pressed into her cheek, and a whispered *Accio* snatched her wand from nerveless fingers.

Harry struggled against the ropes that held him fast. "Let her go, you prick! Your problem is with me, not her!"

"On the contrary, Potter, Miss Granger has been a buck-toothed thorn in my arse since Day One. I have plenty of problems, though none with hurting our resident Know-It-All. *Sectumspetra.*"

Hermione heard fabric rip, and saw blood begin to flow down her arm. It hadn't hurt, *oddly must be shock*, she thought. *Have to do something.* Harry was still screaming and struggling with his bonds, and Ron was just standing there, looking at Professor Snape with an odd expression.

"Ron, *do something!*" Hermione screamed, fiercely struggling against her captor. She managed to plow her elbow into his diaphragm, and a soft groan alerted her to the fact that she'd hurt him. A few more well-placed elbows later, and she had gotten free of the traitorous Potions Master.

Ron burst out laughing a deep, echoing belly laugh that seemed to reverberate through the cottage and burst into the woods. Hermione whipped around to face Snape, hissing, "What did you do to him?"

Now Ron's breath was coming in harsh gasps punctuated by giggles, though he still tried to speak. "Oh, Merlin...I can't believe..." he gasped.

Hermione, though, was not paying attention to his words. She was looking at the fourteen inches of willow wood that hung limply in his fingers. She lunged for it, feeling the unfamiliar wand spark and buck in her fingers.

"*Animatus! Oppungo!*" she cried, directing the wand at an overturned bowl of lemon drops. The now-animated drops flew towards Snape, gnashing their little sugary teeth. Two of them struck, one in his thigh and one in his shoulder, and the wounds created began to bleed freely. Snape staggered slightly, and lifted his wand.

Before he could do anything, though, a bluish light streaked from a toppled armchair and created a barrier of light between the three students and their former professor. Hermione prodded it with Ron's wand to find that it was like steel, and she bet that no spells could be cast through it.

Snape, who did not seem to find this at all odd, sat heavily on the floor, and began rummaging in his cloak. Ron, who seemed to have recovered the ability to speak, solemnly held out his hand for his wand.

"That's enough, Hermione. He didn't hurt you."

"Yes, he did! Look at my arm, the blood... He used that cutting curse..."

Ron pulled back her sleeve to show her the unblemished skin beneath. "I'm ashamed, 'Mione. For once, I was listening and you weren't. He didn't say *Sectumsempra*, he said *Sectumspectra*. Looks like all it does is create the illusion of a wound."

"Ten points to Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley. It's a very useful spell in this line of work. May I ask what you found so funny earlier?" said Snape, pulling a small pot out from inside his robes.

Ron smiled, though Hermione could not fathom why. "One, because you were getting beaten up on by *agirl*. Two, because I'd just realized that we'd all been taken for fools. Again."

That being said, Snape released Harry from his bonds. The black-haired youth flexed his limbs slowly, and then addressed the armchair. "All right, Professor, I think I get it. Come out," and he poked the armchair with his wand.

Pop!

There sat Professor Dumbledore, still whole and unharmed.

"Delightful! Now that we're all here, I think a cup of tea is in order." With a wave of his wand, the little cottage was set to rights. Two swishes and a flick later, a fire was blazing and a teakettle was gently steaming on the low table in front of it. He sat down in the purple armchair closest to the fire, and motioned for the rest of them to sit down. Harry leapt to take the seat next to Dumbledore, and Ron followed behind Harry, leaving Hermione to sit next to Snape, who had taken the chair across from Albus. She stiffly sat down, wondering what in the world was going on.

"All in good time, Miss Granger, all in good time. And before you ask, it's written all over your face. We shall begin with Harry. How did you know it was me?"

Harry blushed and looked down at his trainers. "Umm, well... once I started thinking again, I remembered that I'd seen this before. When we went to see Slughorn before sixth year started, and he made us think he'd been kidnapped... I remembered the smell of dragon's blood."

"Very good. I'm sure Miss Granger has already told you that there are trials before entering the Order of the Phoenix, and this is one of yours. You must learn to think and not just blindly react. Now, Mr. Weasley I have already heard how you noticed the different incantations, but allow me to communicate the nature of your first trial. You must learn to listen and think for yourself. You rely too heavily on Hermione and Harry to lead you, but there is great potential in you. Have confidence in yourself, and you will go far."

It was Ron's turn to blush, and he stammered, "Th-thank you, Professor."

"Albus, please. I am not your professor any longer."

"Oh. Um, well, I'll try. And, um, you can call me Ron, not Mr. Weasley."

"That is all I ask. Thank you for permitting me use of your first name, Ron. Now, Hermione..." He paused, biting into a crumpet. "Tell me, child. How do you believe you are doing with your trial?"

Hermione pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. "Not too well. I didn't look past what I saw... but... will you tell me how you did it, now? Why is Snape here?"

"These are questions that you already know the answers to. Severus betrayed our cause in a moment of stupidity in his youth. While that is his story to tell, the act marked him as a traitor. Such marks are not easily erased. When it came down to losing Severus, Draco, or me, I chose myself. Love is a funny thing. I love Severus, and when in that love I chose to die so he might live, the magic stepped in. The magic saw that I had sacrificed myself out of love for one who was marked as a traitor, and I was restored. Severus now has access to more information within the Death Eaters, and in that way, he is saving us all."

She looked at Professor Snape out of the corner of her eye. "So he was the Protector after all... What does Mrs. Weasley have to do with him? I saw it in that Arithmancy equation, but I wasn't sure what happened."

She was surprised when Snape spoke. "She... helped me. I do not wish to speak of it, but I will say that I have been staying in the Burrow since," and here he gave a small cough, "it happened."

Ron was incredulous. "You mean you were staying in my house and I didn't even know? Where were you?"

It was Hermione who answered. "The attic. I smelled healing herbs up there one day you made all of Ron's potions for him when he got attacked, didn't you?"

"Some of them. There was a curse placed on the leg wound that the St. Mungo's healers overlooked. Unsurprising, really, given that Lucius Malfoy developed it. It was a blood-based curse that would have given him an alarming degree of control over you."

Ron stood and walked over to Professor Snape. He bowed, and said solemnly, "Thank you, sir. I owe you."

"No, I owe your mother. She has done... much for me. I only regret that he was acting alone, and that I did not know of your plight until it was too late."

"I regret that I didn't notice something was off before, Ron. I feel horrible," said Hermione with a small snuffle.

A handkerchief floated into her field of vision, and she accepted it gratefully.

"I think Ron already knows that, m'dear. Now, do you see the importance of considering possibilities other than the ones shown to you?" asked Albus kindly.

"I do. It's just so hard..."

"It is not as hard as you think. Let us try a little exercise, shall we? Please, tell me what you think about Argus Filch."

"He's cruel... he seems to resent students and takes great pleasure in punishing them."

"Is that so? Severus, perhaps you could enlighten Miss Granger on Mr. Filch's story? I think you both may learn something interesting from it. I need to speak with Ron and Mr. Potter for just a moment..."

She heard Harry say, "Really, sir, you can call me Harry..." but all of her attention was now focused on the man in front of her.

**

"...for no one is on my side" is from J.R.R. Tolkien's esteemed LotR.

Out of the Silent Planet is the first novel in C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy.

Thank you to WickedlyWanton, as usual. You are awesome!

Thanks to you all for reading, as well. I love hearing from you, so leave a review!

Perelandra

Chapter 9 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Nine // Perelandra

"Have you ever wondered why Argus doesn't carry a wand? Magic would go a long way towards helping him with his job, wouldn't it?" the former professor asked, stirring a ghastly quantity of sugar into his Earl Grey.

"I suppose it would... But he's a Squib, isn't he?" Hermione asked, her teeth hurting from simply *looking* at all that sugar.

"He is indeed. Have you ever wondered why Albus would employ a caretaker, especially a *Squib* caretaker, when the house-elves are more than capable of taking care of Hogwarts?"

"Well... no... I suppose I'd never thought of that."

"Obviously," he said disparagingly. "There is a reason Albus set to you the trial he did. The world is a strange place, Miss Granger, and things are rarely as they seem. I am sure you know that Hogwarts has a 'magical standard' Squibs and others of little magical abilities are not permitted to study there. It was not always that way, though. Formerly, any child of Wizarding parentage was admitted, as well as those Muggle-borns who showed significant magical ability. However, over the years problems with inbreeding among purebred lines led to Squibs. It was only a matter of time before one was admitted to Hogwarts. I can't remember when it was a number of years before I started Hogwarts but a Squib was admitted to the school. He was sorted into Hufflepuff and began his classes like the other first years. However, in his first Transfiguration lesson, his wand rejected him. Do you know what happens when the wand rejects the wizard, Miss Granger?"

"No, I didn't even know such a thing was possible! Mr. Ollivander told me that the wand chooses the wizard."

"And so it does now. Your experience with purchasing a wand was very different from this young Hufflepuff's. At that time, your wand was chosen for you based on the signs at your birth the position of the sun, the stars, and a number of other things. The wand itself was not thought to have any part in the choosing. This boy was given a very powerful wand, alder and dragon heartstring. Due to restrictions on underage magic, his first time using his wand was at Hogwarts. The wand, however, recognized that the boy could not handle its power, and it rejected him. In your time in Muggle school, perhaps, you heard of Newton's Third Law?"

"Yes, Newton's Third Law of Motion states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. I don't understand what that has to do with wands and Squibs, though."

Snape took the lid off of the small jar he'd removed from his robes earlier and began massaging the green cream inside into the wounds he'd received from her animated lemon drops. As he worked, he continued speaking. "When a wizard casts a spell, a certain amount of magical backlash occurs backlash equal to the power required to cast the spell. The wizard's magic absorbs and negates this backlash most of the time. However, when a wizard attempts to cast a spell beyond his abilities, his magic cannot control the entire backlash. It causes pain and discomfort, and takes some time to recover. This is why you start off with such small spells in class," he said, replacing the jar lid and hiding it once more in his robes.

"When a Squib attempts to cast a spell, they receive the full brunt of the backlash. They cannot handle it, and the magic harms them greatly. That is what happened to this Hufflepuff boy. He tried to turn a match into a needle; a spell which is thankfully not too taxing. He spoke gibberish for a few minutes and then lost consciousness. When he came to, he was told that he was not really a wizard and that he would have to leave the school. The boy's family, a well-to-do pureblood family, rejected their son. Having nowhere else to go, he went to Hogsmeade, wanting to stay as close to the magic he was denied as possible."

He paused to take a sip of his tea and then continued. "In Hogsmeade, he found that as a Squib he was a social outcast, and that coupled with the loss of his family nearly broke him. However, the Transfiguration professor, one Albus Dumbledore, never forgot the boy. When he became Headmaster, he implemented the current magical restrictions at Hogwarts. Feeling somewhat responsible for the boy, he brought him here and made him the caretaker. The boy changed his name to Argus Filch and has been at Hogwarts ever since."

Hermione was silent as she thought about the man she'd always considered to be mean-spirited and cruel. *He must resent us so much... To be told that you aren't a wizard after you've hungered for magic your whole life...*

"No wonder Neville was worried he wasn't magic enough..."

She hadn't realized that she'd spoken aloud until Professor Snape asked her to repeat herself.

"Oh! Well, in our first year, Neville said that he was afraid he wasn't magical enough to come. He told us about his uncle hanging him out a window and then throwing him off a pier to try and get his magic to come out."

"They *what*? Of all of the irresponsible, fool-minded... I doubt Dumbledore knows this." At her confused look, he explained *forcing* magic to come out that way is very dangerous. No wonder Longbottom is so hopeless. His magic must not be stable."

The Gryffindor in her rose to defend her friend. "He is NOT hopeless. He's the best student in Herbology in our year! If you'd helped him or encouraged him sometimes, he might not have been so bad! He gets so nervous that he's going to fail that he can't function... Professor McGonagall's almost as bad as you are; he's been terrified of her ever since third year... Professor Sprout is nice to him though, and he does just fine in there."

"It is not my job to be 'nice.'"

"And if it was, Severus, I am sure you would have been fired long ago," chuckled Albus, entering the room with Ron and Harry in tow.

"No, instead I was fired for killing the most beloved wizard since Merlin," Snape said dryly.

"Yes, but I got better, so all shall be forgiven. You can be reinstated as soon as this war is done."

"Albus, assuming that I survive this war, there are not enough Galleons in Gringotts to make me teach dunderheads. I loathe teaching, as you well know."

"I think anyone who's ever been in one of your classes knows that," mumbled Ron.

"Mr. Weasley, do not think that by virtue of not being one of my students that you can forget the proper respect due an older wizard."

"Yeah, but by virtue of not being your student anymore, I can choose to ignore you."

"Given that I know approximately 487 ways to poison you, 327 of them being incredibly painful, added to the fact that I could defeat you in a duel with my eyes closed... I would say that would be incredibly stupid, even for you," he said with a grim smile, cracking the knuckles of a long-fingered hand.

"Now, now, Severus, play nicely," the elderly wizard smiled and twinkled, taking his seat in front of the fire. "You have given me a wonderful idea! As you so appropriately pointed out, you could defeat any of them in a duel," here he gesticulated towards the trio, "with your eyes closed."

"I doubt that," snorted Ron inelegantly.

"Care to test that theory, Mr. Weasley?"

**

Thirty minutes later they were in a large clearing in the snow-shrouded wood. Dumbledore drew a circle in the snow with his wand around the two.

"Now, you know the rules. No Unforgivables, no permanent damage. Everything else is fair game. Severus, are you prepared?"

The dark man gave a quick glance around the circle, his expressionless face betraying nothing.

"Yes, Albus."

"Very well. *Caecus!*" Albus cast a Blinding Hex on him and quickly stepped out of the circle.

"Severus is now totally blind. Ron, are you prepared?"

Ron, who looked supremely confident about fighting a blind man, nodded.

"Begin!"

Ron began shouting curses and hexes, but none of them hit the blinded man. Snape was fluid like quicksilver given form and purpose. A Tickling Hex nearly struck him, but he threw up a shield without a word. After several minutes of this, he smirked.

"Really, Weasley, is this the best you can do? I was hoping you'd get in a hex or two at some point, but this is pathetic."

Hermione was thinking that Ron was doing a pretty terrible job, not being able to hex a blind man, when the *louçop!* of Apparition sounded through the clearing.

Ron opened his mouth, perhaps to say something, but he fell gracelessly to the ground. His opponent stood behind him, fist still closed from the blow that had been delivered to the back of Ron's head.

"Severus! I said no permanent damage!" Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and he lost his customary twinkle.

"The damage was to his head, which is probably the least-used part of his body. In any case, Albus, you know that I can judge a blow like that. He'll wake up in a moment with a bloody awful headache, but otherwise fine."

As if on cue, Ron groaned and attempted to stand up.

"Ron, stay sitting down! You might have a concussion! Let me look at your head," cried Hermione, rushing to his side. She tried to remember everything she'd ever read about treating blows to the head, clucking over him like a mother hen all the while.

"Miss Granger, this is really unnecessary. As I previously stated, Weasley has a thick skull. Take this."

He pulled another bottle out of his robes and handed it to the redheaded boy on the ground.

"Thanks, Snape." Ron accepted the potion with a grateful smile. He uncorked it, but paused just as it reached his lips. "What is this?"

"I was wondering if you would ask. That is a considerably weakened version of the Baneberry Potion, and it is mildly toxic. Never take anything without asking what it is, do you understand?"

"Y-y-you just tried to poison me, you bastard!"

"It wouldn't have killed you at that strength; you simply would have been sick for a few hours. If nothing else, you have learned a valuable lesson today, have you not? This poison used fairly often among Death Eaters; you would do well to note its color and smell. They will not be as...", he gave Albus and Hermione a pointed glare, "...nice as I, and typically administer larger doses."

Ron looked at him oddly, but then broke into a broad grin. "Yeah, you're probably right. I won't forget it, but I still think your teaching method could use some work."

"My teaching methods are effective, which is all that matters. Here," he said, handing Ron another bottle out of his robes. Ron looked at it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"A standard potion used for treating minor head injuries. I am surprised you did not recognize it; Madam Pomfrey uses it quite often after Quidditch accidents."

"I thought I recognized it, but given what just happened I figured I would ask." Ron looked around the clearing for a moment. "Hey, where's Harry?"

Hermione stood up abruptly, her eyes joining the others as they visually swept the area. The Boy Who Lived was nowhere to be seen. "There," said Snape, pointing in the

opposite direction of the cottage. "Footprints. Just one set, though. He must have wandered off, idiot boy."

Hermione was aghast at Snape's unconcerned tone. "Don't you care? Something could have happened to him!" She started to head in the direction Harry had gone, but a thin hand wrapped around her arm and held her back. She turned to look into Snape's endless black eyes.

"There is nothing in this wood that could harm him, nor can he stray beyond the boundaries we have set," he glanced at the sun, which was ending its trek across the heavens. "Albus, we had better send these two back through the gate before it closes."

She wrenched free of his surprisingly strong grasp. "No! I'm not leaving without him!"

"Miss Granger, he is perfectly capable of caring for himself. If he is not, then it would be better for us to know now instead of in the middle of a battle with Voldemort. You will leave without him."

Albus gently touched her shoulder. "Hermione... May I call you Hermione?"

She nodded mutely.

"This wood is a strange place. It is said to hold the last remnants of the Old Magick, the magic that first begat wizardkind. Over the centuries it faded from the world, until this was the only known place left. No harm can come to him here, and it is entirely possible, given who he is and what he must do, that the magic has called him. He will be fine, but Ron needs rest. Take him to Molly."

"Does she know about you?"

"No, she does not. However, in my will, I left her instructions to care for Severus despite what he had done. She has taken to that task admirably, and she will know soon enough. I ask that you continue to keep this silent."

Ron and Hermione both nodded their agreement.

"Good. Severus, will you escort them back through the gate? Meet me at the cottage this time tomorrow for tomorrow, your lessons begin."

**

The Baneberry Potion is shamelessly lifted from the HP Lexicon.

'Caecus' was the result of typing 'Blind' into the English-to-Latin translator I found online. I am not a Latin scholar though if there are any out there, you're more than welcome to correct me!

Perelandra (a.k.a. Voyage to Venus) is the second book in C.S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy.

"...I got better" is a nod to Monty Python and the Holy Grail, one of my favorite movies.

Thank you to WickedlyWanton for betaing this for me! You rock!

It was my birthday yesterday, so you should leave me a review! Thank you all for reading!

Present Concerns

Chapter 10 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter 10 // Present Concerns

"Oh, *Ronnie*, what's happened to you?" Molly Weasley was nothing if not observant, and the way Ron gingerly kept touching the back of his head and the way Hermione was watching him like a hawk alerted her to the fact that Something Was Wrong.

Ron gave a quick look around. "I had a run-in with Snape, and I came off on the bad end," he said, gesturing towards the back of his skull.

Mrs. Weasley stopped and paled, her eyes narrowing dangerously. *"What did he do?"* Hermione had never thought of the older woman as someone to be frightened of, but the look that came over her face would have chilled even Albus Dumbledore.

"Relax, Ma. We know you've been taking care of him. He's going to be teaching us about dueling and stuff. The bump to the head was worth all the wicked cool stuff we learned!"

She pursed her lips. "Well, he didn't have to hit you in the head. Come on now, you're late for your next dose of your potions," she said, and with a wave of her wand, varicolored bottles came zooming out of the pantry. "I'm not going to ask you how you know... Where's Harry?"

It was lucky Hermione was a quick thinker, or the Kneazle would have been out of the bag. "He went to Grimmauld Place for the night. Something about he wanted to sort through some of Sirius's stuff..."

Tears formed in Mrs. Weasley's bright blue eyes. "That poor boy... well, I suppose we should let him be. It's high time he started on that; putting it off never makes it any easier. We'll leave him alone for now, but I am going to call a few members of the Advance Guard and have them stand guard outside."

When she went to the fireplace, presumably to Floo-call one of Harry's 'guards', Hermione pulled her book bag from the hall closet and once more spread her Arithmancy equations on the table.

"You still workin' on that?" Ron asked with his mouth full of one of his mother's fantastic homemade cookies.

"Ron-*ald*, don't talk with your mouth full! You got crumbs all over my equations!" She hurriedly began to brush the crumbs and chocolate flakes off the parchments.

"What equations are you working on, Hermione? I thought you'd already finished your homework for the break," asked Mrs. Weasley as she came back into the kitchen.

Hermione hurriedly tried to hide the parchments, but the mother of Fred and George was too quick for her. "Is that... oh. I see how you knew." She picked up the parchment, having already seen the warm pink line neatly labeled "M. Weasley". She traced it with her finger, eyes darkening as she reached the place where her pink line met Snape's black line, continuing where the muddy pink line emerged and surrounded the putrid green one.

"Mrs. Weasley... what does that mean?" Hermione was sure the older woman knew something. After some research, she had found that when two lines blur together like Mrs. Weasley's and Professor Snape's, it meant that there was a bond between the two: be it a life-debt, a Wizard's Oath, or any other kind of magical bond excepting marriage.

"I..." she sighed heavily. "I suppose you'd find out sooner or later, so you might as well hear it from me." She ran her finger over the green line, though she did not make contact with the paper. It was almost as if she didn't want to touch it. "As you already know, I am bound by my acceptance of Albus's last wishes to care for Severus. He told me that there was one better suited to the task, but until Severus can learn to accept help from this person the Oath will stand." She looked almost insulted by the fact that Albus had thought someone else to be a better caregiver than she.

"This," she said, her hand still hovering over the green line, "is whoever attacked Ron in the alley. I don't know who it was... but Severus helped me track them down. I think he may have a suspicion, but he wouldn't share it. We cornered him and almost had him... but then he Disappeared. I know we hurt him, though."

Her eyes got a lost, faraway sort of look, and after a moment she shook her head as if to clear it. "Oh, goodness, it's getting late... Ron, your father will be home soon. I have to get dinner on!"

As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, she shooed them out of the kitchen and into the living room.

**

Hermione stared at the parchment in front of her. She'd lost her concentration when Ron had started whining about his Pygmy Puff tattoo; she'd had to remove it just to shut him up.

She decided to try a new path. Here, a little lower, her own silver line ran beside the black one, then intersected it, joined by Harry's gold line, Ron's red line, and a bright blue line that seemed to twinkle when you looked at it. *Dumbledore*. The lines split again, the trio's line rejoining Molly Weasley. Snape's oily black line joined the attacker's line (now identified neatly as L. Malfoy), and a new line appeared. This one was the color of old blood, and Hermione felt afraid just seeing it. *Voldemort*.

That was a good place to start. She put in variables representing a battle between Harry and Voldemort this should be easy, all she had to do was pinpoint *when* or *where*...

She woke up three hours later in a warm, sterile-smelling bed. *The Hogwarts Infirmary. How did I get here?*

"Miss Granger, are you awake?"

She struggled to open her eyes, and the dark complexion and snapping gray eyes of Professor Vector came into view.

"Yes, Professor. What are you doing here? More importantly, how did I get here?" Her head pounded, and her mouth felt like it was full of cotton wool. She reached gratefully for the glass of water beside her bed, ignoring for the moment that she hated drinking water, and gulped it thirstily down.

"You'll be hungry as well. Here." The Professor conjured up a plate of hot, spicy-smelling sandwiches. "Miss Granger, I am shocked. I thought we had covered the dangers of working with Arithmantic equations beyond your skill? You nearly killed yourself what were you thinking, trying to predict the outcome of a battle with You-Know-Who? It's madness!"

Hermione hung her head in shame, her sandwich held loosely in one hand. "I thought... I didn't know it would be so hard it's a standard equation, isn't it? Two variables, an event..." She trailed off, her throat constricting painfully. She began picking the crust of the sandwich, having lost all interest in eating.

"Were it that easy, do you really think that one of the Masters would not have done so by now? You-Know-Who is *amadman*, in case you hadn't noticed. Trying to predict what he will do is a task that even a Master is reluctant to touch. Arithmancy is not Divination; we cannot process things with so many possibilities. What we can do is divine the likelihood of smaller events, see connections hidden from us, and use that knowledge to get an idea of the larger picture."

The dark-haired professor pulled a piece of parchment out of her robes. "This is good work; you're just trying to do too much too quickly. I have taken the liberty of taking one of your equations through to the end so you can see an example of how to go about the more complicated equations. You normally wouldn't be allowed to attempt something this large unless you'd taken an Apprenticeship in Arithmancy, but I'd rather you do it with minor supervision and get a headache than with no supervision and end up dead."

Oh, no! thought Hermione. *She must have seen all the names... and Snape...*

Her fears must have been evident because the professor gave a short laugh. "Really, Miss Granger, do you think that I would have been allowed to see this if I wasn't a member of the Order? Now, eat up. I conjured those sandwiches especially for you, and I'll be very disappointed if you don't finish them."

Hermione turned her attention back to the sandwiches. They seemed to be made on some kind of sweet bread, with warm spicy turkey and melted cheese. They were delicious, and she'd bolted down one and half of her second when she remembered her manners. "These are wonderful! What are they?"

"Fried turkey and cheese. My mother used to make them for me... Now, I'll leave you to finish eating and rest. Send me an owl if you have any questions about that equation."

Hermione called her thanks as the tall professor left. Unrolling the parchment, she gasped when she saw the complexity of equations the older woman had done. *haven't even dreamed of anything this complicated! I thought I was pretty advanced in Arithmancy, and now I realize that I haven't even touched all the possibilities!*

Professor Vector had picked up her silver line where it stopped at the Burrow, with the notation *'You need to refine your parameters so that you won't waste your time tracking everyday things'*, along with some suggestions for runes to use.

The line had jumped, marking *Time: Unknown* in Vector's wide scrawl. Her line, entwined with Ron's, was surrounded at this point, by several lines that gave off highly unpleasant energies. The line jumped again, and she saw the muddy pink line from her earlier equation come between her and the other lines. The other lines faded and disappeared, which Hermione remembered symbolized a death of some kind. Deaths were tricky things, for it did not always mean a death of flesh and soul. It could mean a death of a way of life, a death of a mindset any kind of emotional change that resulted in 'death' of the self.

That wasn't the concern, though. The muddy pink line had separated. Snape's black line held fast, and her line reached over and stopped just next to his. If it was possible for an Arithmantic line to be nervous, this line would have been quaking in its boots.

Mrs. Weasley's pink line rushed for a faded blue line that had previously been simply hovering in a corner, waiting to be discovered. This line reminded her of her favorite pair of blue jeans; frayed and patched, but well-loved and comfortable. The two lines blurred again, becoming a single purple line. Hermione felt a great sadness, and both lines faded.

She was trying to understand what this could mean when a sharp *Crack!* dragged her from her thoughts. Dobby was standing on her bed, wearing a new sweater. This one was black, an unusual color for Dobby, and it seemed to fit him slightly better than the one Mrs. Weasley had knitted for him (whilst still having just as many pockets). Due to the fit of his new sweater, Hermione fervently wished that *someone* had thought to give him some trousers.

The elf's expression, however, was one of the utmost seriousness, and so she fixed her eyes firmly on his face.

"Miss Hat Lady, I is coming to take you to Professor Bat-man's room. Dobby has decided that you is not making trouble..."

With no warning other than the snap of his fingers, she found herself on a very different bed than the one she'd been on before. It was hardly bigger than a single bed, and very hard. She tried to peer into the darkness of the room, but could see nothing other than shadowy shapes. A clap of Dobby's little hands lit up the room, and she took in her new surroundings.

If she'd thought the bed was small, it was nothing compared to the closet it was in. It wasn't big enough to be called a bedroom. There was a battered wardrobe crammed into one corner but that was the only other furniture in the room.

"Dobby... are you sure we're in Professor Snape's rooms?"

"Oh yes. This is it! Dobby will watch for people coming," he said, just before he disappeared again.

Oh, dear. This tiny, utilitarian bedroom with its rock-hard bed was *Professor Snape's*. She wished she'd gotten a chance to tell Dobby that she didn't really need to get in these rooms after all...

She gave a tentative bounce on the bed, and it creaked beneath her. Since she was here, she might as well go exploring. There were two doors in this room, both of them closed. She tried the door on the left, first.

She tried to get the idea out of her head that she was now standing in Professor Snape's bathroom. It was also very tiny, hardly room for a toilet, sink, and counter, all done in the standard Hogwarts style. She'd somehow expected him to have a bigger bathroom, but no matter. A cursory glance around told her that there wasn't anything worth pursuing in here. She left very quickly, hurrying towards the door on the right.

The next room more than made up for the inadequacies of the last two. This was a man who obviously loved books, for his library was more wonderful than anything Hermione could have imagined. She was surprised all of his books hadn't been confiscated. The room itself had to be at least the equivalent of one-and-a-half stories (she laughed at her own little literary pun), shelves reaching up towards... *How did he get a skylight in the dungeons? Must be some kind of charm...*

There were no paperbacks to be seen here; all of his books were leather-bound and in pristine condition. She idly wondered if he wore white gloves when reading *No, probably black ones.*

A massive scrubbed pine desk sat in the center of the room, looking very out of place in Hermione's perception of the tetchy professor. It was covered in a mountain of papers, and she would later tell herself that it was her Gryffindor curiosity that made her go and sit at his desk with the idea of rifling through his things.

**

Present Concerns is a collection of 19 essays that C.S. Lewis submitted to various newspapers and journals. The essays are rather eclectic, ranging from "On Living in an Atomic Age" to "The Necessity of Chivalry". My personal favorite is one titled "On Sex in Literature", in which he calls for the end of "moral censorship of literature" even if "realms of filth" are the result. Interesting stuff.

Thanks to my ever-supportive beta, WickedlyWanton!

Experiment In Criticism

Chapter 11 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Eleven // Experiment in Criticism

Hermione set down the last sheaf of papers with a sigh. Putting a hand to her eyes and rubbing vigorously, she eased up out of the chair. Nothing. The only thing of note she'd found was her last Potions essay, a black 'E' scrawled in the corner. Bastard. She remembered that essay, the one on powdered Bicorn horn. It hadn't deserved anything below an 'O'.

"Dobby?" she called softly.

The elf appeared before her with a flourish. "Yes, Miss Hat Lady?"

"Thank you, Dobby. I'm done here there wasn't much to find."

Dobby rolled his eyes, and Hermione briefly missed the creepy servility of the other House Elves. "Dobby could have been telling you that, Miss Stone Head. Professor Bat-man is not keeping things to find here."

"Why didn't you tell me, then?" She was agitated. She'd just wasted several hours looking through first through seventh year Potions essays in hopes of finding something helpful.

"You is not asking. He is taking things other places, so they cannot be found. Dobby knows not where."

A resounding crack later, and she was back in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey came and fussed at her for being out of bed, and in all the chatter Dobby slipped away.

After much fussing and a near temper tantrum from Madam Pomfrey, Hermione was allowed to leave. She'd had to promise not to undertake any strenuous activities which to the Mediwitch was defined as 'anything other than total bed rest'. She had no intention of doing this, but she'd lied just so she would be allowed to leave. She felt a bit guilty, but the gate should be opening soon and they needed to find Harry.

Back at the Burrow, Hermione scowled at her closet, picking out a pair of ratty jeans, trainers, and a t-shirt that proclaimed "If you're not a part of the solution, you're part of the precipitate." Over this she put on a slightly oversized hooded jacket that had once been her mother's, shrinking it down a little for easier movement. She wasn't sure how long they would need to look for Harry, and she would kiss Professor Snape before she wore her nice clothes to go mucking about in the woods looking for the Boy Who Got Lost. She shuddered inwardly at the thought of kissing the Potions master. She was sure he must smell bad, given the state of his hair and teeth.

**

She found Ron in his bedroom, laughing over the latest edition of Martin Miggs, The Mad Muggle. Honestly, the boy could somehow manage to push everything out of his mind and enjoy a comic book like nothing was wrong. Hermione envied him.

"Hermione! You're home!"

"Yeah, I'm fine now, just a little tired. The gate will probably be opening again soon. I meant to ask you, though... What did Albus talk about with you and Harry yesterday?"

"He said a lot of useful stuff, actually. He said that he was considering asking Snape if he would help with Horcux-hunting and wanted to know if we could 'put aside our differences' and work with the git."

"I wonder why Snape doesn't know about the Horcuxes... that's odd, isn't it?"

"Well, he said that Voldemort was incredibly sensitive to information about them, and while Snape is a really good Occlumens, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep something like that from Voldemort."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Why don't we just tell Snape that we're looking for magical artifacts that Voldemort might have hidden and see what he can tell us? He'll probably give us too much information, but since we kind of know what we're looking for, we'll be able to narrow it down. I bet he could hide that information pretty easily, and he wouldn't have the word 'Horcux' floating around in his head."

Ron bolted upright and wrapped his arms around her in a giant bear hug. "Hermione! You're brilliant! Let's go and tell Dumble... Albus!"

**

Harry Potter was tired. He'd been walking for what seemed like an eternity. He wasn't sure why he'd left the clearing, but his feet had started moving of their own volition. Now he was lost in Merlin-knows-where and he was getting hungry, too.

An impossibly tall holly tree caught his eye, and he remembered something he'd heard on the telly ages ago: "If you're lost in the woods, hug a tree!" It seemed like silly advice, the sort of thing Hermione might say, but he stopped anyway, faced with a sudden desire to rest for a moment. He sat down, leaning his back against the tree's broad trunk. The skin on the back of his neck tingled slightly when it made contact with the wood, which felt unusually warm. He reached out a grubby hand to touch the bark.

Hello, boy.

The soft voice filled his head, coming from everywhere and nowhere. He jerked his hand back from the trunk as if it had burned him. Had that tree just... No, impossible. Trees didn't talk. And broomsticks don't fly said a sarcastic little voice in the back of his head. It was true he'd seen too much of magic to believe that trees were incapable of speech. He tentatively reached out a hand towards the bark again.

I did not mean to frighten you. Would you speak with an old tree, for just a moment?

He nodded, unsure of how to speak to it.

You speak to me as you would speak to anyone else! Just because I inhabit this form does not mean I have forgotten the ways of human speech.

"Oh," he said, feeling a bit stupid. "Ummm.... Hello," he stammered lamely.

Hello, Harry Potter. I had wondered when you would come.

He frowned and ran a hand through his hair, noting with some distaste the amount of mud and plant parts stuck in it. "How do you know me? More importantly, who are you and what do you want?"

I see that patience is not a virtue you possess.

The tree laughed, and Harry felt the branches shake and tremble.

I have always known you, just as I know all who pass through this place. You are safe here, do not fear. As for what to call me... given from whence you came, I think you should call me Tumnus. Yes, Tumnus will do quite nicely.

"Like Mr. Tumnus? But that's from the book... Do you know Albus Dumbledore?" Harry was excited; maybe this... thing, whatever it was, could point him back towards the cottage.

Ah, yes, Albus and I had many delightful conversations when he was a younger man. Now, though, he has no need of me... It is you who needs me now, for without my help you will surely fail.

"How can a bloody tree help me? I doubt you even know what is going on out there! This is bloody stupid; I'm going."

He made to rise, but a blinding white light filled his vision.

You think to disrespect me?

The voice had changed. No longer gentle and soothing, it was terrible and filled with such power that Harry could no longer stand. He was forced to his knees, his breath coming in short gasps, unable to act.

It may have escaped your notice, but I am not a 'bloody tree'. As I said, this is the form that I choose to inhabit. However, since your intent seems to be to leave and in turn to fail at your task... Allow me to show you my true power!

The voice spoke a word that Harry could not understand and dark symbols surrounded the tree. Suddenly, a loud crack sounded and he was thrown backwards. The light intensified, and when it died, he found himself staring at...

Himself.

Right down to the scar on his forehead, the baggy jeans he wore, and his untidy black hair. The eyes, though, blazed a bright blue and in them Harry saw eternity stretching out before him. The sheer power the figure gave off was still nerve-wracking, but Harry somehow found the will to stand.

"I... What are you?"

The being spoke, and though it was his voice, Harry thought that he could never sound this confident, this commanding.

"I am that which you lack. Now, are you prepared to listen?" At Harry's nod, the being smiled and held out his hand. "Come. I will take you to my home, where you may rest. We will talk, and then I will point you on the correct path."

**

Hermione struggled against the man who was restraining her.

"Let me go, you bastard! I'm going after him!"

Severus Snape smiled, showing far too many of his crooked teeth for Hermione's comfort. He reminded her of a shark a greasy, snarky shark. "Now now, Miss Granger, such language from our Head Girl! I will tell you again: you are not going after him, and you are not leaving this room until I have your oath that you will behave like a civilized person."

"Look, just because you can't understand friendship "

"That is *enough*, Miss Granger! I grow tired of your chatter, and I grow even more tired of babysitting a hormonal Gryffindor when I have more important things to attend to. *Incarcerous!*" Ropes flew from the end of his wand, binding her tightly. He Summoned a spindly, horribly uncomfortable-looking chair for her, and shoved her down in it. She opened her mouth, perhaps to scream, but the spy hadn't been kidding when he said he grew tired of her chatter. He turned his back to her and she heard a ripping sound, followed swiftly by the application of something sticky to her mouth.

"Ah, that is much better. You have no idea how long I have wanted to do that."

She made a few noises behind her freshly duct-taped mouth, then settled for internal fuming. That bastard, taping her mouth shut like that...

She and Ron had arrived just as the sun was beginning its downward trek. Upon entering the cottage, Albus advised them that Harry had not yet returned. Stupid Harry; this was all his fault somehow. Hermione wanted to go look for him, but both Albus and Snape had refused to allow it. She'd gotten up with the intent of just going to look for him alone when Snape had bodily picked her up and thrown her into this tiny pantry next to the kitchen.

Her fuming was interrupted when she heard the front door open and Albus happily welcoming Harry back to the cottage.

"Mmm! Ummpph!" She tried to get Snape's attention, but he was already walking out the door.

"MMMMMPH!" He turned around, giving her another sharky smile.

"What's that, Miss Granger? I'm afraid I can't understand you..." he said as he exited. For the umpteenth time that evening, the word Bastard was mentally flung in his direction as she got up and bunny-hopped into the sitting room.

Harry and Ron looked from her to Snape, then back again, before bursting out in gales of laughter. Thankfully, Albus was not as amused and quickly set her free.

"Severus! What in the name of all that is lemony and sweet were you doing to that poor child!" exclaimed Albus, setting out the tea things while pointedly ignoring that Hermione had found her wand and was busy casting silent hexes.

"You asked me to restrain her. You were unspecific as to how. I, for one Dear Merlin, girl! What are you doing?!?"

Having left both Harry and Ron clutching their testicles in pain, Hermione had moved on to the man who thought he could duct tape her mouth shut and get away with it. She had quickly ruled out pain, since Snape could probably handle that pretty well. This would be her most perfect revenge.

After the escapade with her teeth in second year, Hermione had made it a point to learn all kinds of dental spells, ensuring that she would never have to endure her parents near her teeth again. Those were the spells she began putting to work now.

She was only halfway done when Snape started screaming. She didn't argue, however, when Albus took her wand. He'd taken Snape's, too. The latter was still raging like Fluffy on bath day, which made Hermione smile a slow, satisfied smile. She'd gotten him *good*.

His teeth were now straight and sparkling white, and she'd managed to hit him with an Exfoliating Charm before she was disarmed. He still had suds in his eyebrows. She'd wanted to turn him into a poster-boy for Playwitch, shiny hair and all. She was sure he would have hated that, given how much he was whining about his teeth.

She re-tuned into the conversation to hear, "Severus, I can't reverse it! Besides, why would you want me to? They really do look much better "

"They looked fine before! She's gone and made me into some nancy-boy, and I won't have it! What do you have to say for yourself?" he turned to her, spittle flying from his mouth.

She was feeling awfully dangerous today, which is probably what made her retort, "I see no difference," echoing his words to her in her fourth year.

He froze, looking at her like she was a particularly ripe pile of Manticore dung. Albus, his internal Trouble Detector shrieking, stepped between the two. "Enough! Both of you, sit! We don't have time for this nonsense!"

It did not escape Ron or Harry's notice that the scowl on Hermione's face was eerily similar to that of Snape's. Ron leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "Brilliant, but scary. Both of 'em." Harry began to reply, but snapped his mouth shut at the Headmaster's look.

"Now, Harry, let's try to pick up where we were before we were interrupted..."

"I don't know what it was, exactly. He was me, only he seemed to be so much more than that. He took me to this cave, and we had tea and sardines... He told me..." Harry's voice cracked and died. Albus put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Ah, I see you have met the Harper."

"The Harper? No, he told me to call him Tumnus..."

"He changes forms quite often... everyone who meets him knows him as something different. His true name cannot be spoken by mortal man."

"He said he knew you once, but you didn't need him anymore. What did he mean?"

"I... what is it the Muggles say? Ah, yes I found myself."

"Found yourself?"

"I am sure that is not the last time you will see the Harper, or Tumnus as he calls himself for you. As you mature, you will notice him... fade. Then one day, you will look for him and he will be gone. He is you as you are intended to be."

"How do I find him again?"

"You won't. He'll come to you when you are ready to receive him. I think it would be best if we discussed it no more for the moment, Harry. Now, are you three ready to begin your lessons?"

**

An Experiment in Criticism *is (you guessed it) another work by C.S. Lewis. He proposes a theory that says the quality of books should not be judged on how they are written, but how they are read.*

"Creepy servility" is taken from OotP.

Severiger and WickedlyWanton (appearing in alphabetical order) are seriously awesome ladies. Without them, I would still be sitting here too scared to post anything!

Reviews are chocolate for the ego!

Allegory of Love

Chapter 12 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Twelve // Allegory of Love

"Ouch, you bastard!"

"I seem to be hearing that epithet a lot lately. Still, Mr. Weasley, it will not make me throw these any slower."

"Do you have to call me Mr. Weasley? I feel like I'm in trouble."

Snape swallowed, an expression of distaste stealing over his sharp features. "Very well... Ronald."

"Thanks, Severus."

A golf ball and a pink china teapot came whirring through the air towards the redheaded boy. He dodged the ball, but the teapot hit him on the elbow.

"Do not take liberties with my name! I did not give you leave to use my first name, and you will refer to me as Professor Snape, or Mr. Snape if you prefer."

"Oh, Severus, stop being such a stick in the mud! We are colleagues now, soldiers fighting together for the good of tomorrow! Let us drop the formalities!" said Albus, who was pouring himself a cup of tea.

"You crazy old codger, I do not wish for them to be so familiar with me! Stuff all the sentimental claptrap about being colleagues-in-arms. They must *earn* the right to call me a colleague."

"Fine, fine. Keep on, then. Haven't got all day." Albus once more propped his feet up on his chartreuse paisley print ottoman, which clashed horrifically with the pink and orange chintz armchair he sat on. He sipped his tea and sat back to watch the show.

Severus had a brilliant strategy when it came to learning how to dodge a hex. Albus was sure it was a brilliant strategy, anyway. Surely Severus wouldn't take enjoyment out of throwing things at the children... At least, that's what Albus hoped.

He'd taken Albus's Endless Box of Banishment (affectionately referred to as BoB by the older man) for this lesson. Albus's Box of Banishment was much like the Muggle idea of a 'junk drawer'. The problem for wizards was that after over one hundred years of living, a junk *drawer* was more than slightly inadequate. The Box was full of... well, anything and everything the wizard hadn't wanted to throw away over the past several decades, as well as items confiscated from students. Severus had simply lined the children up and began throwing things at them. His reasoning was that they would learn how to dodge very quickly. Dodging was more of an involuntary reflex than anything else, and practice was the only thing that would give the reaction time needed.

After all, if you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a hex.

Half an hour and some *very* strange items later, Hermione flopped to the ground.

"I don't care what you hit me with, I can't move anymore!" she wheezed.

A stuffed poodle and a rolled up piece of parchment smacked her in the forehead. She picked up both items, perhaps to throw them back at the surly professor, but a jolt of magical energy hit her.

"Albus, what is this? It feels... strange." Hermione struggled to her feet and shuffled over to Dumbledore. Gods, all that dipping, ducking, diving, and dodging had really worn her out. Professor Snape put down the toy train he was holding and joined her beside Albus, the boys not far behind.

Handing the rather thick parchment to Albus, he ran his hands lightly over it. He handed it back to her, his finger tapping a blue wax seal holding it closed.

"Do not worry; I don't believe it will harm us until it is unsealed. I believe this is one of the items we seek." A further glance at the parchment brought into relief the eagle stamped into the wax.

"Is this...?" she asked with bated breath. A slight nod confirmed her suspicions. A Horcrux.

"Albus, I have a feeling that you are not telling me something. I do not like being left in the dark when they seem to know what is going on." Snape's expression got surlier, if that was possible.

"And you are right to feel so, my dear boy. Allow me to fill you in; I think it is time. I trust you will protect this information with your very life, as you have everything else I have confided in you."

In that moment, the Golden Trio lost something. The way Albus had addressed Snape... as if he were loved, as if he were honored... Ron, and especially Harry, felt a grudging respect take hold. The greatest wizard of the modern age placed his trust in the spy; who were they to disrespect this man? Though they had been told time and time again that Albus trusted him, some things just don't fully sink in until you see them for yourself.

Hermione, though, saw something a little different. Snape's face had lost its guarded look when Albus called him 'dear boy', and she saw a glimpse of the man he might have been had life been kinder to him. His respect and affection for the man he'd killed heartened her, for surely no one who felt that deeply was truly evil. His face was softer, and...

"So you see, Severus, that is the situation. Two of the Horcruxes have already been nullified, and I believe that we hold a third here."

Hermione was yanked back to the present with those words, and she felt the question bubble up in her. "What is this? It looks like just a tattered bit of parchment..."

The old wizard beamed at her. "Why, Miss Granger, you have never heard that Rowena Ravenclaw created the moving floor plan for Hogwarts?"

She furrowed her brow in puzzlement. "I thought that was only a rumor..."

"It is no rumor. You hold in your hands the original floor plans of Hogwarts, complete with moving staircases and missing steps."

"How would Voldemort have gotten it?" asked Hermione, slightly confused.

"My concern is what it was doing in your junk box, Albus. What in the bloody hell else have you got squirreled away in there, Excalibur?" asked Snape dryly.

"I'm afraid I don't know the answer to either question. It was said that the originals had been destroyed, but Tom must have found a way to obtain it. I do not, however, believe he fully researched the protection spells on the plans. They are Charmed to return to Hogwarts if they are removed after all, every entrance into this school is mapped on here. He must have thought he'd found a way to break it, but it feels like it was only weakened. As for what it is doing with BoB, I have no idea. Charm must've gone bad when he tinkered with it."

"Could he have found out how to break into the school with that?" asked Hermione worriedly.

"He knows the entrances. He was a student there, after all. He does not, however, know of the many protections imbued in the walls of Hogwarts. The school obeys the will of the current Head and will become an impenetrable fortress if activated. Unfortunately, during the last attack, I was incapacitated, and Minerva had not yet gone through the Rites of the Head. She was not attuned to the school's protections. I was not expecting the Vanishing Cabinet, and had it not been for Harry's quick thinking with the DA, more would have been lost."

Ron looked puzzled. "What're the Rites of the Head?"

Albus smiled and simply said, "It is just as its name implies. It is the ceremony used to instate a new Head of Hogwarts, and it is forbidden for me to speak more on it. You children look exhausted; why don't you go freshen up, and we'll have some tea and talk."

**

Hermione stuck her head under the cold water tap in the cottage's pink and green bathroom. Muscles she'd long forgotten about ached being a bookworm was not exactly conducive to a muscular physique. She was thankful, at least, that Harry and Ron were having as much trouble as she was. She would have thought that they would be used to this sort of thing from Quidditch, but as Harry pointed out, dodging on a broom in midair is not even close to dodging things under the power of your own body. Hearing Harry and Ron begin whining about girls taking forever in the bathroom, she finished up quickly.

Feeling slightly refreshed, she went back in the sitting room to wait for the others. Albus was already there, putting out tea and fairy cakes. Seeing that he was the only one in the room, she pulled the Arithmancy equation given to her by Professor Vector out of her pocket to get his opinion.

"Sir... I did some more work on the equation, and I drained myself... But Professor Vector did this part, and I... I think I understand what it means, but I wanted a second opinion. Can you look at this?"

He took the parchment from her hand and unrolled it. As he read, Hermione watched emotions play over the old man's face. His shoulders suddenly looked as though he was supporting the weight of the world, and his blue eyes looked misty.

She swallowed, hard. For the first time in her life she had fervently wished to be wrong, but it did not appear to be so. If his expression was any indication, her thoughts had been spot-on.

"Sometimes knowing the future is a hard thing to bear. As with Divination, I do not know that what I see here will come to pass... but it is likely. Do not trouble yourself with this further. The Order has Arithmancers, as you know from speaking with Professor Vector. It is their job to calculate the coming days, and I believe you have already learned enough from these calculations." With that, he re-rolled the parchment and put it in his robe pocket. She wanted to ask him more, but at that moment Harry and Ron entered the room. His warning glance told her not to say anymore on the subject.

"Professor... Albus," said Ron, still having difficulty calling the former headmaster by his given name. "He's been called."

There was no need to ask who 'he' was. "I expected as much. Very well, we shall continue your lessons without Severus for the moment."

Ron and Hermione groaned in unison, both thinking that they would surely need to bathe in Bruise-Healing Paste at this rate. Harry asked, "What was the point in cleaning up, then? We're just going to get all dirty again."

Albus laughed heartily. "Lessons of the body are not the only lessons we shall have. It is important to also exercise the mind, for without stimulation the mind cannot grow. First: You have heard me before, yet you hear me again. Then I die, 'til you call me again. What am I?"

Hermione was puzzled. "You're asking us riddles?"

"Ah, yes. You won't beat Riddle without riddles!" Albus laughed at his own little (terrible) joke. "In all seriousness, riddles are quite useful for making one think. Just as you hone your dodging reflex by exercising it, you will also hone your mind by using it."

"You could ask us harder ones, then. My dad and I used to play riddle games when I was small. The answer is an echo."

"Severus said that wasn't a very good one... perhaps I should try one of his," said Albus, shuffling through a stack of parchment.

"He wrote some too?" Hermione was excited. She'd solved one of Snape's riddles in her first year even if they weren't difficult, they showed some originality.

"Of course! Severus is quite gifted with words though don't get cocky because you figured his out so easily first year. I gave him the concept of the potions, poisons, and wine, and his job was simply to write the riddle. These are ones of his own devising, which have no such limits."

The next two hours were spent with some of the hardest riddles Hermione had ever heard. The tea-table was covered in parchment, and she was pretty sure she had ink on her nose. She could see why Albus had called this exercise her brain bloody *hurt!*

When night began to creep through the tree branches, Snape had not yet returned. Albus was looking for his cloak when a silvery giant panda headed soared through the door. He closed his eyes and held out his hand to the Patronus, who nudged him gently. Albus's eyes shone silver for a moment, and then he said gravely, "You must go. Lord Voldemort is at the Burrow, and I fear that Severus's cover has been blown."

**

I promise, I'll explain why I chose the panda as Snape's Patronus before the end though a little research a la Hermione would probably tell you why.

Yes, that was Dodgeball I'm shamelessly ripping off in this chapter. I couldn't help it. My muse wouldn't let it go!

Sorry for the wait on this chapter I've been rethinking some things about the direction of this story, and I am in the process of tweaking some of the earlier chapters. I will post any changes like that (nothing major, I swear) in the Author's Notes at the end of the chapter. I also have honestly not felt like writing lately due to some personal issues.

It's probably a given at this point, but the chapter title is yet another work of C.S. Lewis.

Thanks, as always, to the wonderful ladies, WickedlyWanton and Sevariger! Double thanks for listening to me whine.

That Hideous Strength

Chapter 13 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book – can Hermione find it in time?

"You must go. Lord Voldemort is at the Burrow, and I fear that Severus's cover has been blown."

**

Chapter Thirteen // That Hideous Strength

The three students ran through the woods towards the lamp-post, remembering Albus's final words to them.

Lord Voldemort will not attack you now. He will wait until he has all of his Death Eaters with him to witness the event, and I am sure he will attempt to fight you for the last time at Godric's Hollow he would like the symbolism behind that. However, this does not mean you should toy with him. Send a message with your Patronus to the remaining members of the Order. Try to stay hidden until the Order arrives. Your mother is the only one there, and Severus has blown his cover to protect her...

The first thing they heard on exiting the wardrobe was a cold, cruel laugh.

"Really, Severus, did you think I did not know of your deception? Why do you think I brought you here I knew you would not let her die without a fight. Stand up and fight me, you coward!"

"Don't call me a coward!" they heard Snape say vehemently.

Creeping down the stairs a little farther, Hermione saw him. He stood straight and tall despite the obvious pain he was in, shielding Molly Weasley with his body. She stood behind him, wand at the ready, though she did not move.

For a moment, all was still. The three on the stairs were trying to be as quiet as possible. Severus was concentrating on holding off the Dark Lord until the Order arrived. Mrs. Weasley was terrified, yet oddly thankful that none of her loved ones were home to see this.

It was a terrible thing, then, what happened next. Lord Voldemort plucked the thought from her mind like a ripe berry, and at that moment Arthur Weasley came in, calling, "Molly! Where are you, dear?"

The next few moments were a blur of motion. Voldemort was inhumanly fast, whipping around and crying, *Amoresta Morte!* A blood-red jet of light hit Mr. Weasley in the chest, and a thin thread shot back out and wrapped itself around his wife before fading. Mrs. Weasley and Ron screamed, "Dad!" and "Arthur!" in unison, both rushing towards the fallen man. Harry tried to follow, but Hermione hissed, "You idiot! If you're seen now all will be for nothing!" Shoving him back, she ran down the stairs and planted herself behind Professor Snape, furiously whispering the few healing spells she knew as she went. She was, she supposed, pretty handy with a wand, but Severus Snape was far more experienced than she. Her best hope, then, was to support the man who had a chance of holding him off until the Order arrived.

Before she got to him, though, an unseen force pushed both her back to where Ron sat, cradling his father's head in his lap. "Please, Daddy, wake up..." he chanted like a mantra, tears streaming down his face. She looked for the source of the disturbance and saw Molly Weasley still holding her wand at the ready and looking incredibly dangerous.

"Get them out of here. Now." She growled, her eyes never leaving a pair of slitted red ones that looked at her with no small amount of amusement.

"Is the mother cub going to protect her babes? How... touching," Voldemort said in a tone that clearly indicated that he was anything but touched.

"You came into my home. You attacked not only me, but the man I love. For that, you will pay!" On the last word, a bright light white seemed to explode from Mrs. Weasley's chest, surrounding her like a bright aura.

Hermione had no idea the dumpy redhead was hiding that much power. Neither did Lord Voldemort, apparently, for his slitted eyes narrowed even further. "Lucius. Antonin. Take down the traitor Snape, but leave the blood-traitors alive. They will be examples of what happens to those who betray their heritage."

Severus felt relief wash over him as Lord Voldemort disappeared, activating the Portkey he kept with him at all times. The Dark Lord was not ready to fight. Though he could have easily dispatched them by calling his other Death Eaters to him, he instead left probably fearing an injury that could weaken him. To Voldemort, absolute victory was the only victory and weakness was death. This had simply been a ploy to get him to betray himself. He may have been stupid for blowing his cover like this, but despite appearances, Severus Snape was not a heartless man, nor was he a man that forgot what was owed. Molly Weasley had saved him when he had not believed his life was worth saving; she had brought him back from the brink of destruction. He could not let her be killed while he still had breath in his body.

"Severus, Severus, Severus..." Lucius drawled, hissing his name like some foul blond snake. "To think that all this time, you were working against us. At one time I called you friend. I saw you, you know, when you and the blood-traitor came to kill me. You injured me quite badly; I think I shall return the favor. Perhaps when you "

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

Lucius fell over dead in mid-sentence, a pompous sneer still twisting his features. Antonin Dolohov may have been a Death Eater, but he wasn't entirely stupid. Grabbing Lucius's corpse by the wrist, he Disapparated.

Hermione looked up from where she was conjuring a stretcher, her eyes immediately going to Severus Snape as the source of the Killing Curse. However, his wand was now held loosely at his side, and he was staring in horrified amazement at Molly Weasley. The white light which had surrounded her pulsed and faded, and her eyes lost the look that had frightened even Lord Voldemort. She returned Snape's look, saying "No one who hurts my family will live to tell the tale. No one."

She seemed to snap back into the present then. "Oh, Arthur!" she cried, sobs already wracking her stout frame as she rushed to his side. Mr. Weasley looked terrible. His face, always pale, was as white as Albus's beard, each freckle standing out in terrifying relief. His eyes were slightly unfocused, and he wheezed with each breath that he took. The pain was evident on his face, and so Mrs. Weasley asked Hermione to go fetch a pain potion while she prepared to move him to St. Mungo's.

"No."

A single word stopped the Gryffindor as she began to rise. She glanced at Snape and was shocked to see that he looked as though his heart would break. A moment later, though, she was sure she had imagined it his features were as cold and controlled as ever.

"We must take him to Albus, secrecy be damned. St. Mungo's can do nothing for him, nor can a simple pain potion."

She looked at him in confusion *How is Albus supposed to heal him?*

"Get up, you silly girl! We don't have time to waste with you gaping at me like a dead Puffeskein!" he snapped, grabbing her roughly by the arm and pulling her upwards. He let her go quite abruptly when he found a wand pressed to his genitals, a wand belonging to one Molly Weasley.

"Don't touch her like that," she said in a deadly calm voice. "What do you mean, take him to Albus?"

"Come on, Molly. I will explain on the way; I will carry Arthur for you."

"No, you won't. I will carry him," she said, tears rolling down her face. She cast a spell, one that Hermione recognized as a weight reduction charm. She tenderly picked up her husband, leaving the conjured stretcher on the floor and nodding at Snape to lead the way.

**

Albus exited the guest bedroom, his face grave. He somehow seemed to have aged greatly since Hermione saw him thirty minutes before. Snape exited behind him, his face still a hard mask. Albus closed the door and turned to face the three students.

"Albus, what's going on?" asked Ron. He was still upset that he'd not been allowed in the room, but as Albus had told him, notifying his family and the Order came first.

"Severus, will you please explain this? I think we all need a cup of tea..." he said, turning towards the kitchen as he spoke.

Snape settled himself in one of the armchairs by the fire and began to speak. *Amoresta Morte* is one of the Dark Lord's cruelest curses. It is not an Unforgivable, though I suspect that this is because the Ministry of Magic denies its existence. Basically, it turns love into pain and, eventually, death. The love your mother has for your father will cause him intense pain, and the more she loves, the worse it is. He believes that this will demoralize us."

Ron's voice cracked as he asked, "Isn't there anything we can do to stop it?"

"There is one option. There is a potion, that when taken, will sever the connection of love that holds them together."

The three wore identical horrified expressions. "You mean," Harry asked, "that unless she takes this potion and... stops loving him... he'll die?"

"I am afraid so. There is nothing else to stop the pain which will eventually consume him. They are discussing their options now."

Hermione now understood why Severus Snape had actually looked upset, even if he had only let it show for a moment. To know that your love would kill your beloved and that the only way to stop their pain was to stop loving... She could not imagine such a fate.

Another silvery Patronus came sailing through the door, this time stopping in front of Ron. His eyes took on the silver glow that meant he was listening to the message and then faded with the Patronus.

"That was Bill, and he said the Order is there now. What should I do?" Hermione was impressed with the way Ron was handling himself. At her questioning gaze he said, "Won't do me any good to break down now. It won't help anything."

"Very wise... Ronald. You are more mature than I had given you credit for, and I... will endeavor not to underestimate you in the future," Snape said stiffly.

It wasn't an apology, but it was the closest thing to one any of them had ever heard out of the mouth of the former dungeon bat. Snape shifted slightly at the awestruck gazes of the three.

"I am not entirely the man that I portrayed at Hogwarts. He is a character in a play, nothing more. Though I feel compelled to remind you that I am still not friendly, nor am I ever likely to be. As we will be spending an inordinate amount of time together in the future, I suggest you forget what you can of Professor Snape, and begin the process of getting... acquainted with Severus Snape. I shall... try to do the same for you."

"Why, Severus, that was almost pleasant! I am very proud of you," said Albus, balancing what looked to be tea for twenty on the tip of his wand.

"I wasn't trying to be pleasant. I simply tire of them looking at me like I've grown another head or three every time I do something outside of Professor Snape's persona."

Albus twinkled at him, saying, "Of course... Now, Ron, I believe I heard you say that Bill had arrived?" At Ron's nod, he continued, "Will you go and fetch him, please? The time for secrecy, at least among members of the Order, has passed."

As Ron got up to find his boots, Hermione approached the Headmaster. Maybe there was something that had been overlooked, something that could save them... She needed the library. Everyone has their way of coping, and getting lost in research was hers.

"If it would be all right... that is, it's not that I don't want to stay here... I just..." she stuttered. Thankfully, having been a Headmaster of a boarding school that admitted nervous eleven-year-olds for many years, Albus Dumbledore was proficient in Stutter and saved her the trouble of asking.

"Run along to the library, dear. In fact," he said, putting down the tea and picking up a quill, quickly scribbling something on the parchment, "here."

He handed her the parchment, and she read the words *The private library of the Phoenix can be found behind the tapestry of Duranda the Demented on the third floor of Hogwarts Castle.*

"Albus, do you really think it's a good idea to let her have access to that? The know-it-all won't be able to resist opening some of the Dark tomes..." said Snape, who had come up behind the Headmaster.

"Too true, too true. She is too much like you, Severus... The call of knowledge is strong, isn't it? Very well, thank you for escorting her. I'm sure you won't let her get into any trouble."

"Albus, this is a terrible idea and a task that I most certainly do not wish to undertake. In case you haven't forgotten, I am still a wanted man!"

"I know very well that you can disguise yourself when needed. In any case, she'll need someone who knows how to get past the ward. Go on!" Snape glared at him, but Albus just twinkled.

**

That Hideous Strength is the final book in C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy. Random Fact: In this book we are introduced to Numenor, which is an intentional reference to his friend J.R.R. Tolkien's Númenor. Lewis, however, had only heard the word in readings of the rough drafts of the LotR trilogy, which would not be published for several years hence the misspelling.

Thanks, as always, to my awesome betas, Sevariger and WickedlyWanton.

The Problem of Pain

Chapter 14 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

Author's Note: First of all, I just noticed that I don't have a disclaimer on any of these chapters. Whoops. So, let me say that JKR is much cooler than I because she owns all things Potter.

Also, I've gone back into previous chapters and made some changes. Nothing major, just tweaking some dialogue, correcting some mistakes I made, and changing around a couple of things I didn't like. Thank you all for your reviews, which I think have really helped me improve this story. Now, on with the chapter!

Chapter Fourteen // The Problem of Pain

Hermione quickly shoved rolls of parchment, ink, and quills into her bag. There had to be something they could do for the Weasleys... something that had perhaps been overlooked.

Making her way to the end of the hall as instructed, she saw that Snape was already waiting for her, scowling at the retreating back of Albus Dumbledore. Albus twinkled at Hermione as she walked by, though he didn't say anything.

Glancing back at Snape, she tried not to laugh. He was wearing what appeared to be a Weasley sweater (which was a lovely shade of maroon), a pair of shoddily transfigured denim trousers, and trainers. He looked highly uncomfortable, and had it been anyone other than he, she was sure they would be tugging at the clothes. His hair had been Charmed a light brown, and though the face was still the same, he didn't look like Professor Snape at all.

"Professor Snape?" she asked timidly.

He gritted his teeth and said, "Albus has directed that I allow you to call me Severus..."

"All right then, Severus... umm..." Deciding it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission, she waved her wand and re-Transfigured his trousers. He looked down, then at her, and *Did he just blush?*

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Transfiguration was never my best subject."

"Look, if I have to get accustomed to calling you Severus, you really ought to call me Hermione."

He nodded his acquiescence and turned to the wall. Keeping his silence, he flipped what appeared to be a Muggle light switch. The wall opened, revealing a small entryway. She followed him inside to find a dimly lit chute just beyond the door.

"Has Albus explained how to use this passage?" She shook her head, and he quirked up a corner of his mouth in something that was half forced smile, half grimace.

"Doubtless he thought it was amusing. It's a slide, Miss... Hermione. It will take us to a secure room in the Hogwarts infirmary. I will go first; count to twenty and then follow me. Understand?"

**

The slide was more amazing than any Muggle one she'd ever experienced. She would have screamed with joy, but she stopped herself, thinking that Professor... Severus would probably object. She came to the end all too soon, landing on something soft in the dark with a muffled thump.

Loud cursing met her ears, and she realized the *something soft* she had landed on was Severus Snape. There were a few awkward moments of sorting out limbs. He hastily stood up, eliciting a loud yelp from his former student. Her hair, it seemed, had gotten tangled around the button at the throat of his sweater. While he untangled her, she sniffed him cautiously. She wasn't sure why, but she was overcome with the urge to learn his scent. He smelled surprisingly good, like wood smoke and spices.

Lighting the ends of their wands, he motioned her to go ahead. Thankfully, the third floor tapestry wasn't far, and they didn't meet anyone on their way. Stopping in front of a tapestry that depicted a woman attempting to converse with a Mandrake, she stopped at his whispered command. This was Duranda the Demented, the woman who had attempted to translate the wailing cries of the ugly plants. The cry of the Mandrake is, of course, fatal to anyone who hears it firsthand, so Duranda had devised a way to record and play back the cries. While not fatal if heard secondhand, the played-back cries tended to addle the listener's brain hence the name Duranda the Demented.

Recalling the procedure she'd used to get into Grimmauld Place for the first time, she thought about what she'd read on the slip of paper. The tapestry glowed gold for a moment, and she had to stifle a shriek when Duranda's hand left the tapestry and extended out towards her.

"Stand back. It's just the ward. Something else I'm sure Albus found to be amusing..."

He began moving his hand in a complicated pattern, and this time it was a giggle she stifled as she realized this ward was the Wizarding equivalent of a secret handshake.

He stopped and glared at her, then redirected his glare to the ward. "The last part, Severus! You know you have to do it!" Duranda cackled gleefully.

"If you so much as titter, we will leave immediately," he told Hermione gruffly. She nodded and placed a Silencing Charm on herself just to be sure. She wasn't going to miss this opportunity to get inside the private library of the Order. Muttering to himself about sadistic, twinkling old wizards, he struck a pose that was strongly reminiscent of John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever. Apparently that was the last key in opening the door, for the tapestry took on a rubbery sheen and Severus stepped through. She quickly followed, not wanting to be subjected to the handshake herself.

She entered the library and was amazed by the luxuriousness of it. The carpet was a thick cherry red, accented by walls paneled in golden oak. Pictures of phoenixes adorned the walls, and a fire was already crackling merrily in a huge stone fireplace. There was a long, low sofa in front of the fireplace, and tea and biscuits had already been laid on the table beside it.

Perhaps the strangest thing about this library, though, was that it contained no books.

"Prof... umm... Severus..." she began, but then she noticed that the dark man was nowhere in her line of sight. There was a large Hogwarts banner along the back wall, and she noticed it moving faintly as though there were a slight breeze. Behind it, she found the man she was looking for on a small balcony overlooking the Hogwarts library. She assumed it must be shielded, for she had never noticed it when she was in the library below. Following his gaze, she saw him looking at the table she had occupied on her first visit to the library after Christmas.

"You!"

"Why, yes, it is me. Given that we arrived together, this should not surprise you."

"No! You were here on Christmas! You said, 'Ten points from Gryffindor for conduct unbecoming of the Head Girl.'"

"I didn't know you'd heard that. This room is supposed to be completely shielded. Perhaps I should have Albus "

What he was going to have Albus do, she didn't hear. She heard a voice that sounded a lot like Molly Weasley, though she couldn't make out the whispered, echoing words. Looking at Severus, she saw a black line floating around him like so much oily smoke, centering on his heart. A warm pink line detached from him, hovering in midair for a moment before disappearing. A silver line originated at her own heart, and their two lines reached for each other, their curling movements reminding Hermione suddenly of the smoke from the incense that Professor Trelawney liked to burn. The lines twined around each other and turned a shade of shining charcoal grey before fading away.

"Look at the Charms on the room... Hermione?" Severus looked at her to find that she wasn't paying attention to him at all. Instead, she was staring at the space between them, transfixed.

Was that what Mrs. Weasley meant about being released from the Oath when someone better comes along to care for him? I'm supposed to care for him? How am I supposed to do that? He doesn't even like me! For the moment, she elected to stay silent. She would talk to Albus; perhaps he could help her.

"Miss Granger!" he barked in his best Professor Snape Is Pissed voice.

That brought her out of it, for she jerked her gaze back to his. "Did you see... Never mind. I was just woolgathering. Sorry."

Ushering her back through the banner, he said, "Fine. Do you know how to use this library, or did Albus leave everything to me?"

"He didn't say anything about it. Where are all the books?"

"Go stand in front of the mirror in the corner. You'll see," he said, and with a flick of his wand he pulled the dust cover off of a large object she hadn't noticed before. Standing in front of it, she read the inscription across the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.*

She thought she'd heard that before... yes! The Mirror of Erised!

"I'm sure you've heard about this mirror from Potter... it is the Mirror of Erised, the Mirror that will show you your heart's desire. It is the best way to protect these tomes from anyone who manages to get through the Fidelius. It will find for you the book you desire, provided your intentions are pure hence the reason for my presence. Desire to read would be pure in your case, since you only desire to help. However, some of the Darker books would consume you before you had even touched the bindings."

Gazing into the Mirror, she saw only herself reflected. The room, though, had changed. All she could see behind Mirror-Hermione were rows upon rows of books. Mirror-Hermione held out her hand and a slim red volume came zooming into her outstretched fingers. A dull thwack sounded behind her, and she turned to see the same red book she'd seen in the mirror laying on the large desk in the center of the room. Glancing back at the mirror, she saw her reflection smile sadly before the dust cover rose up from the ground and covered the mirror once more. She looked over to find Snape lowering his wand.

"The Mirror is as dangerous as it is useful, and it is unwise to gaze into it too long. Seeing their heart's desire manifested before them has driven many a person insane, for you cannot always have what you see." His eyes darkened momentarily, and Hermione wondered what it was that he saw in the mirror.

He walked over to the desk and picked up the book. "Ah, yes. *The Problem of Pain* by S. Acelli Sveltewisp. You do know this isn't going to work, correct? There is nothing that will reverse that curse."

Glaring at him, she held out her hand for the book. "You only say that because no one's ever done it."

"What makes you think you can? You are intelligent, I will give you that but men far more intelligent than you have researched this, and I know it cannot be done." He

handed the book to her and walked over to sit on the couch, where a stack of Potions journals had appeared.

"By 'men far more intelligent than you,' do you mean yourself?"

He ignored her, disappearing behind the voluminous pages of the first journal.

Fine. He wanted to ignore her, did he? She'd show him *impossible*. She sent a jet of bluebell flame towards the fireplace and started for the desk. She stopped when she noticed Severus looking back and forth between the newly-lit fireplace and her with an odd expression on his face.

"What?" she asked testily.

"Magical fire like that tends to have a color specific to the caster. I have seen a flame like this once before... Please tell me it wasn't you who set my robes on fire at a certain Quidditch match several years ago."

It was her turn to blush, but she held his gaze as she answered. "It was me, but we thought you were hexing Harry's broom. I didn't realize until later that I had knocked Professor Quirrell over to get to you."

"I still bear scars from that fire," he said, glaring at her and disappearing once more behind his journal. She was seated at the desk when she heard him add, "Ten points to Gryffindor for managing to do that without me noticing."

**

Three hours, four quills, two rolls of parchment, two cups of tea, and a Ginger Newt later, she gave a tiny triumphant squeal. She'd found a footnote in a relatively new book entitled *Potions: The Revenge of the Nerd* by Toshiro Takashi: The carnivorous plant *Dionaea muscipula* may be able to consume some Dark curses. The enzymes that the plant uses to digest insects have a strange ability to break down these curses, though it should be noted that this is only conjecture and should only be attempted with a live, healthy plant.

Her quill began flying over the paper. If a way could be found to pull the curse from the Weasleys and direct it towards the plant, perhaps it could simply be eliminated.

A cough behind her broke her concentration. Severus was reading over her shoulder, an amused smirk on his face.

"Well, that is certainly interesting, but you should know that the only way to pull a curse from someone is to pull their soul out with it. And once the soul has been removed, the cord that connects it to the body, the *inga no kusari*, breaks and the soul is doomed to wander forever."

"But if a way were found to bind the soul to the body... I will do this, Severus. If all you have is discouragement, please leave me be."

"On the contrary, Miss... Hermione. I think it could be done, though it would take months if not years of research. The Weasleys do not have that long. I will speak to Minerva, though. Perhaps a way can be found to research this further when you are back in school. Even if we cannot save Arthur and Molly, perhaps we can prevent others from sharing that fate."

**

The Problem of Pain is, of course, a book by C. S. Lewis. (S. Acelli Sveltewisp is an anagram of Clive Staples Lewis.)

Toshiro Takashi is one of the characters from the very awesome movie, *Revenge of the Nerds*. *Dionaea muscipula* is more commonly known as the Venus Flytrap.

Inga no kusari is stolen from my favorite anime, *Bleach*. It means Chain of Fate.

Thanks to my lovely betas, Sevariger and WickedlyWanton.

The Weight of Glory

Chapter 15 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know. Lao Tzu

Chapter Fifteen // The Weight of Glory

Hermione yawned and stretched, grumbling about morning people. As Head Girl, she had been given a private room the downside of which was that it was located just off the Common Room and had an entrance into the hallway outside of Gryffindor Tower as well. The idea was that the Head Girl should be easily accessible to all students, not just those in her own House. While Hermione agreed with that idea, she wished there were some stronger noise-dampening charms on the room so that she wouldn't get woken up by the early risers who were in the Great Hall before breakfast even started.

The day before yesterday she'd been hustled back to Albus's cottage, where she'd had a meeting of sorts with Severus, Albus, and Professor McGonagall. She saddened at the memory of what she'd learned, though she was eager to get started.

**

"Albus, Minerva. Miss Granger has had an idea of sorts that may help us in removing this curse. How long does Arthur have?" asked Severus, his expression grave.

"He has perhaps a month. Molly has... made it possible for him to stay with us longer," Albus stated, and she wondered why he sounded so sad. Holding on longer was a good thing, wasn't it?

Severus, though, seemed to understand, for he said, "She didn't...?"

"She did. She's opened an unrestricted channel."

Her confusion must have been evident, for Albus directed his attention to her. "Are you familiar with the Anam Cara, Hermione?"

"Anam Cara... that means 'soul friend', right? Your Anam Cara is one who loves you for who you truly are they look past the worldly you and see the soul inside."

"Right you are. Sometimes it is referred to as a 'soul mate', though that term is used very loosely in this day and age. The true love that exists between Anam Caras is capable of many things one of which is the opening of an unrestricted channel between two souls. She is sharing everything she has with him, and vice versa. Their magic, their pain... she is easing his burden, but by doing so she has bound herself to his fate."

"But why? Why would she do such a thing? What about Ron, and Ginny, and everyone else? Why is she leaving them?"

It was not Albus, but Severus, who answered her. "Bill and Charlie are old enough now to take their father's place as head of the household. They will grieve for their parents, but they will understand what this means to their mother. When if Arthur is taken beyond the veil, he will not be alone."

She remembered the faded blue line Mrs. Weasley's line had joined with in the Arithmancy equation, and the resulting purple line that had disappeared. She squared her shoulders with newfound determination. She had to do this.

**

Scrambling out of bed, Hermione dressed and readied herself to head down to breakfast. Starting today, she would no longer be in Professor Henry's Advanced Potions class. Professor McGonagall had been more than happy to accommodate her desire to help. She'd sent Professor Henry a note stating that Hermione would be undertaking independent research instead of attending his class. The young professor hadn't had a problem with that, saying that he'd noticed that Hermione was bored in his class. She'd still take her N.E.W.T.s with everyone else, but for now she would be able to continue her work.

She'd been a little worried about how she would get into the Order's library unseen, but Albus had assured her that since the location was Secret-Kept, no one else would notice the Head Girl disappearing into a wall once a day. He had instructed, though, that she not read any new books without Severus there to warn her away from the dangerous tomes.

**

After lunch, she headed up to the third floor. Ron and Harry hadn't even asked what sort of independent research she'd been working on. For once, Potions was a class they looked forward to. Professor Henry ruled his classroom with an iron fist that would have earned the respect of even Severus Snape, but he still managed to be kind and patient. He'd even taken Neville, who hadn't scored high enough on his O.W.L.s to take Advanced Potions, under his wing. Though he wouldn't be able to retake the test, he made sure that Neville could brew anything useful from the lower curriculum without a problem.

She'd been happy that the boys didn't ask what she was working on. Ron was having a difficult enough time dealing with the situation; she didn't want to give him hope in case she didn't succeed in time.

Severus merely grunted at her when she came in. He was scribbling away on a piece of parchment, nose nearly touching the paper. Rolling it up and sealing it closed with his wand, he handed it to her.

"I would appreciate it if you took this to the Owlery for me today. It is a letter to an acquaintance of mine who deals in unusual plants. He should be able to get the plants we need."

"Thank you!" she squealed, having not expected much help from the sour-looking man.

"Please, calm yourself. We still do not know if this theory of yours is even feasible remember, we still have to find a way to get the curse out of the body without ripping out the soul and find a way to get the plant to consume the curse if it even will."

"I thought about that last night. You said this curse feeds on love, right?" When he nodded, she continued. "I remembered an experiment we did in primary school with a piece of celery and blue dye. We stood the celery stalk up in some blue-tinted water, and as the days progressed we watched the dye travel through the plant, and eventually the whole piece of celery turned blue. Do you think we could water the Venus Flytrap with a love potion and make the curse go for it instead? If we could modify Amortentia with a few drops of their blood..."

Severus had grabbed another piece of parchment and picked up his quill again, murmuring something Hermione couldn't understand. "What?" she asked, afraid she'd missed something.

For the second time in her life, she saw Severus Snape's cheeks take on a pale pink tinge. "It's a Charm..." he said. "One that automatically corrects your spelling."

"Why don't you just buy one of the Self-Correcting Quills at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes? Oh, well, never mind... I suppose you can't go in there. You could ask them to bring you one!"

"Why would I do that? I am the one who showed them that Charm in the first place." At her surprised stare, he explained. "For the wonderful prank they played on Dolores Umbridge, I taught them a few things. The Edible Dark Marks were also my idea."

At her incredulous expression, he continued, "Do close your mouth. I was young once, and I am still not so old that I cannot enjoy a well-played prank. I told you I ~~am~~ the Professor Snape who was your teacher. Please learn to dissociate."

Now it was her turn to blush. "Sorry, it's just a little difficult. I'd heard them talk about you, though they didn't mention your name. I helped them a bit, too, the summer before fifth year. The Extendable Ears." Clearing her throat, she continued. "So what do you think about the modified Amortentia idea?"

"It has merit. I assume that your reason for adding Arthur and Molly's blood to the Amortentia is to modify the potion to resemble their feelings for each other? I would suggest adding powdered dickelroot to increase the potency. Why?"

"Well, dickelroot is mainly used to heighten emotion... and I am assuming this is some sort of a leech-spell that feeds off of love... so if we could tempt the leech with something stronger to feed on, it would be easier to separate it from his soul. Dickelroot in an Amortentia potion meant to be ingested would cause severe psychosis, making the person who took it "

"That's *enough*, Hermione. I do not need an analysis of what it would do when ingested. First, I am a Master of Potions, and I do believe I know what effects dickelroot has on Amortentia. Secondly, as this potion will not be ingested, it is irrelevant. You are not lacking in intelligence, but you are lacking in *focus*. This is why I always marked down your essays in class; you put in too much information that had nothing to do with the assignment." With a smirk, he added, "Just like I did on that powdered bicorn horn essay you found in my office."

"How did you know about that?"

"Never trust a house-elf who is not bound to you. All house-elves at Hogwarts are required to report any unusual goings-on to the appropriate person. Wanting to break into

the room of a former professor and known murderer definitely qualifies as unusual."

"But Dobby is a free elf! He isn't bound to anyone!"

"That was true, for a little while. He then chose to bind himself to Albus Dumbledore. You do not seem to understand that this is what they want. A house-elf lives to care for people, for things... Before, they would bind themselves to whatever struck their fancy a person, a shrine, a garden and there were many, both Muggle and Magical, who were killed by an overprotective elf. For example, say that an elf had bound himself to care for the greenhouses. A student wanders in, perhaps to pick some herbs, and does not consult the elf. The elf would become enraged at what they see as an interference with their duty and would lose control. The student would be injured, perhaps even killed. This was the way of things until an elf called Kitsunebi came to the wizards for help. She saw that her people were dying, killed out of fear by those who considered them demons. The elves bound themselves to wizards, and from then on were called house-elves. They are happy to have an entire race to care for, and we are happy for the assistance. They remember what they once were, and they see what you do as the gravest of insults. Dobby has tried to convince them that you mean no harm, but has had little success."

"Why wasn't this in any of the books I read?"

"There is not a written history of the house-elves. However, had you simply asked either a professor or a house-elf, they would have told you all this and probably more."

Hermione twisted a strand of hair through her fingers, feeling sick. Standing up, she said, "I'm going to go take this to the Owlery." She hurriedly gathered up her belongings and left the room, not seeing the look of concern that passed over Severus's face.

**

After tying the letter to the leg of a nondescript barn owl, Hermione trudged back to the castle. The wind was fierce today, whipping her already bushy brown hair into a tangled mess. She shivered, increasing her pace to a slow jog. She had business to attend to, and perhaps she could get a nice cup of hot cocoa when she was done.

Once inside, she headed down to the kitchens. The house-elves, as was usual for them, ignored her. Only one came hurtling out of the crowd, and Hermione laughed as she saw Dobby's black-clad torso collide with her ankles.

"Miss Hat Lady! What can Dobby do for you?"

Kneeling so that she was on eye-level with the tiny creature, she said, "I want to apologize to the other house-elves. I didn't know..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked at Dobby with pleading in her eyes.

A toothy smile threatened to split his face in two, and he hopped up on the counters and began to speak in a loud, carrying voice.

"Peoples of Kitsunebi! We is seeing before us Miss Hat Lady, the Troll of Gryffindor, Hater of House-Elves." Hermione blushed and hung her head in shame upon hearing the names that Dobby called her.

"She is coming here to be giving her apologies, for she was not knowing the history of us. I says forgive her, for she knew not what she was doing!"

A moment of silence followed, and for a moment Hermione wondered if they would ever forgive her. Then a loud thwack broke the stillness, and Hermione recognized Winky as she hit Dobby about the ankles with a large wooden spoon.

"Dobby! You is getting down from there! We is having work to do!" The house-elves seemed to take this as a sign, for they all went back to their work. One, however, came up to her and asked, "Is there anything Miss is needing?"

Somehow, she knew that this was a test. "Yes, please! I would like some hot chocolate, with those little marshmallows in it, and a big piece of cherry pie!"

In an instant, she had what she'd asked for. She found herself surrounded by a multitude of house-elves, all clamoring to get her anything she needed.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Dobby whispered in her ear, "They was testing you. A house-elf knows what it is you need, and they knows when you is lying about it."

She gave him a one-armed hug, being careful not to spill her mug of hot liquid. "Thanks, Dobby. I owe you one."

"Then let Dobby collect this one now! You is hiding in the Phoenix Room with Professor Bat-man sometimes. Dobby needs you to be feeding him."

"Feeding him? Professor Snape?"

"Yes." The little house-elf shook his head sadly. "We is bringing him all kinds of foods he likes, and he is not eating nothing. He is not listening to us when we is telling him he needs to eat, but you is one he would listen to!"

She remembered how thin Severus had looked in his Muggle clothes, though these days he remained hidden, wrapped up inside those too-big teaching robes he favored. He did look like he needed to wrap himself around a good meal...

**

The Weight of Glory is a sermon by C.S. Lewis, originally given in Oxford in 1942.

Dickelroot... well, I was looking around my kitchen for something to use as an herb, when my eyes alighted on a mostly-empty bottle of George Dickel whisky.

Kitsunebi is an intentional misspelling of Kitsune-bi, which I believe is Japanese for fox fire. It's from another anime.

I haven't felt like writing in awhile, and I am hoping that will change.

I'm not going to spoil it in case anyone still hasn't finished it... buDeathly Hallows... oh goodness. I cried like a baby. Like a hungry, angry baby. (House points if anyone can name that movie! ^_^)

The Screwtape Letters

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book – can Hermione find it in time?

Chapter Sixteen The Screwtape Letters

After Hermione had determined that it was possible to help the Weasleys, Albus had decided that Severus must accompany her to the library on a daily basis. The slide from Albus's cottage and the subsequent sneak to the third floor tapestry had been removed for his sake, and instead a Portkey had been installed in a portrait of Fawkes.

Remembering her vow to Dobby, she formed a plan to make Severus eat. She started by sending an owl to her mother for advice. Samantha Granger had years of experience in bending stubborn men to her will, having dealt with her husband's tenacity for nigh on a quarter century.

Her mother's return owl was swift and contained a single piece of advice. That day, Hermione started taking her lunch to the Order's library, telling Ron and Harry that she needed the time to work on her "independent project." Ron had believed her immediately, but Harry had given her a piercing look that led her to believe he knew more than he let on.

She'd also informed the Headmistress of her plans, knowing that her daily absence from the Great Hall would not go unnoticed. Professor McGonagall had been reading from a long list and muttering to herself and simply nodded in agreement when Hermione told her of her plans.

**

Severus scowled at the plate of roast beef sandwiches. "What *is that*?"

"Lunch," Hermione said, working her way through a stack of books with a sandwich in one hand. Following her mother's advice, she didn't even look up when he came in the room.

"And where, you idiot woman, did you get the idea that I needed *lunch*?"

"I didn't. I brought my lunch up here, and the house-elves packed too much food. There are extras if you want any," she said absently, putting down the sandwich and picking up a large tome on *Advanced Divination*. *That's odd*, she thought. *Wonder why the Mirror gave me that useless piece of garbage?*

"I think not," Severus replied haughtily.

A few moments later, movement in her peripheral vision alerted her to the fact that Severus had taken a sandwich and settled down with a book on blood magic. She smiled to herself, happy that her mother's plan had worked so well. She decided to look through the book on *Advanced Divination*, figuring if the *Mirror* had put it out there may be something useful in it.

**

"I've been thinking," she said.

"Stop the presses, summon the Wizengamot! Hermione Granger is thinking!" Severus said, though she thought she heard a bit of good humor behind the jibe.

"I'm serious! I have an idea. This book "

"Is that *Fortunes Fair and Foul*? I thought you'd dropped *Divination*."

"I did, but if you would *listen*, I'd tell you I found something," she said exasperatedly. He waved at her to continue, so she did. "Muggles and wizards alike have experimented with a concept called astral projection. It allows "

"I know what astral projection is. Out-of-body experiences have been documented in the past, and it's all considered to be absolute rubbish. If you're interested in wasting your time with that nonsense, though, there's only one person you can ask."

She knew the answer before he even said it.

Professor Trelawney.

**

A whiff of cooking sherry alerted Hermione that the dreaded professor was approaching. Professor Trelawney always went to meals late when she came at all and Hermione had waited at lunchtime hidden in an alcove below the North Tower to catch the professor on her way down to the Great Hall. It was the only time of day she wasn't surrounded by a gaggle of giggling sycophants and Hermione showing up in Professor Trelawney's office asking questions about the Divine would have caused some undue attention.

Passing by the alcove where Hermione hid, the professor called out, "Miss Granger! The Eye told me to expect you on this day. I See that you are more receptive to the pathways of the Art. Perhaps you have come to resume your learning?" she asked, waving her arms in what she clearly thought was a mystical manner as Hermione stepped out of her hiding spot.

"Actually, Professor, I did have a question," she said, checking to make sure they were alone. "Have you ever heard of something called astral projection?"

"Of course, my dear child! Those of us with the Sight often travel within the world of ether." She flung her arms wide, crying dramatically, "Come! This is not the place to speak of such things, for who knows what evil lurks in the darkness."

Suppressing an inner groan, Hermione turned, expecting to follow Professor Trelawney to her office with its ever present, eye-smarting cloud of incense. Instead, the professor continued on the way she had been traveling. Thinking that the cooking sherry was finally turning her brain, she asked, "Professor? Isn't your office upstairs?"

The withering look the batty professor shot in her direction would have killed a *Venomous Tentacula*. She wisely decided to hold her tongue as they traveled down to the library and continued into the Restricted Section with not so much as a glance upward from Madam Pince.

Hermione closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, enjoying the musty smell of old parchment. The cooking sherry, however, ruined the experience, and she opened her eyes to find Professor Trelawney looking at her searchingly. When she spoke, her voice had lost its normal airy-fairy tones and was much more businesslike.

"Many come to me asking for the secrets of the ether. I send them on their way with the usual rubbish that has been written on the subject, and that is that. You, however, would not come to me unless your need was dire?"

"Yes. I can't tell you why "

She was cut off by the older woman, who said, "I know why you ask. I have Seen, and that is why I have brought you here. To travel in the ether is a dangerous thing, and

you must bring the man I have Seen, the man of fading fire, up to the task. For reasons I cannot See, he cannot be brought here, so it is you who must show him the way."

Reaching up on one of the shelves, she pulled out a pale blue book that had no title.

"I will give you permission to take this book only if you give your wand-oath to never let it out of your sight and to only give it up if death itself takes you. This is the only known copy of the Book of Aether, and to let it fall into the wrong hands would be disastrous. I am the only professor with permission to lend this book, and it is because you have the soul of a scholar that I lend it."

"I swear," Hermione said, waving her wand in a circular path. Her hand tingled for a moment, and Professor Trelawney handed her the book.

"I'm sure I needn't add that this conversation never happened," the professor said, pulling a small bottle of cooking sherry out of her robes and splashing it on as if it were perfume.

"Of course, Professor. But since this conversation never happened, may I ask... why all this?" she asked, gesturing towards the bangles and the bottle of cooking sherry.

The professor, however, was on her way out of the Restricted Section and didn't reply.

**

"Sybil's not as batty as she comes off," Severus said when she asked him. "Kook is the Trelawney family byword, though, and she's got it down to an art. She puts out the perception that she drinks and is a bit mad because she doesn't want people to bother her. Imagine a smart, capable, *sane* Seer. People would be flocking to them all the time for advice, fortunes, and what-have-you. Only people who are truly interested in Divination for the art's sake will put up with Sybil for long, True Seer or not. What did she give you?"

When she showed him the book, Severus looked impressed, but did not comment on it. Instead, he asked her if she would be willing to forgo their daily research. It seemed that the shipment of Venus Fly Trap plants had arrived, and he was ready to begin treating them with the modified Amortentia. She agreed, eager to begin reading the Book of Aether. Together they activated the Portkey to Albus's cottage.

**

Hermione closed the book with a sigh. This was going to be much harder than she had thought. The problem was not getting Arthur out of his body. The problem was getting him to return to it. He had to be bound to this plane of existence, and his body had to be protected from outside influences. Evil spirits could inhabit the still-living body while its occupant was in the ethereal plane.

To bind him to this world, they needed every member of his immediate family to willingly participate including Percy. She hadn't seen Percy since last year. He hadn't even come to visit when the rest of the family had been notified of the attack.

She rose from the comfortable armchair she had ensconced herself in, stretching to work the kinks out of stiff muscles. Her tea was cold and the house was silent. Padding through the house and down a small flight of stairs, she entered Albus's basement-turned-laboratory to find Professor Snape hovering over a steaming cauldron, the table behind him covered with pots full of the spiny Venus Fly Traps.

**

An update! I'm so proud of me. Sorry for not updating sooner; things have been busy!

The Screwtape Letters is one of my favorite C.S. Lewis works. It is a series of letters from an older demon to his nephew on how to best damn his human charge.

Thanks to my betas, WickedlyWanton and Sevariger.

Voyage of the Dawn Treader

Chapter 17 of 17

The lion lies dead beneath cold stone. The traitor lives freely. The darkness stirs, readying itself for the final blow. Things, however, are not always as they appear. The truth lies in a Muggle children's book- can Hermione find it in time?

She rose from the comfortable armchair she had ensconced herself in, stretching to work the kinks out of stiff muscles. Her tea was cold and the house was silent. Padding through the house and down a small flight of stairs, she entered Albus's basement-turned-laboratory to find Professor Snape hovering over a steaming cauldron, the table behind him covered with pots full of the spiny Venus Fly Trap.

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"How are the trials with the plants going?" she asked, stepping into the room. Upon entering, she noticed that he had rolled the sleeves of his robes up while brewing, exposing skinny white forearms. She couldn't remember ever seeing more than his face and hands exposed before now.

"Passable. I've had to dilute the solution a bit to keep from killing the plants. Did you find anything of use in that book?"

"I think. It seems that the hard part won't be removing the soul from the body, but keeping Mr. Weasley from leaving it. The reason that *thenga no kusari* breaks is that once the soul is outside the body, the person is naturally pulled to leave their body behind and 'pass on.' We have to bind his soul to this plane of existence and keep lost souls from entering his living body. We'll need all the children to do the binding, though, which could present a problem. Do you know if anyone has heard from Percy?"

An emotion she could not name passed over Severus's face. "I have seen him. I do not know that he could be brought here, however. You should speak with Albus. I know of a protective ward that we could use to keep Arthur's physical form from harm. The Planar Ward is powerful enough to keep even the worst of the umbral creatures away."

"The Planar Ward? Isn't that considered Dark magic?" she asked, settling onto a tall stool near the lab table.

"There are only three Dark spells in all of Wizardkind, Hermione. In its rawest form, magic is neither dark nor light it simply is. It is the intent of the caster that makes it Dark

or Light magic. This is why those are the only three Unforgivables you have to truly want to cause the most excruciating pain imaginable, to bend someone completely to your will, to take a life." He turned to the cabinet behind him and pulled out a large green-speckled horn. It did not harm his bare hands, but where it brushed the material of his rolled-up sleeves the fabric smoked.

"But what about other spells, like the Slicing Hex and the Hurling Hex? Those both intend to cause pain and can kill someone... though, I suppose the intent isn't quite the same, is it?" She watched him take a scraper and shave off a little of the horn, her eyes widening slightly as the removed portion turned a vivid purple.

"Well reasoned. The intent required when casting a Slicing Hex *I wish to cut this thing* doesn't have to be deadly, or even malicious. Most hexes and jinxes started out as something fairly innocent. The Leg-Locker and Full-Body Bind Curses were used in medicine before modern pain-numbing potions were invented. They prevented the patient from thrashing about and harming themselves further. Even early curses designed to do harm would not cross certain boundaries. The Order's library has some books on the history and etymology of spells; I believe you would find it interesting."

"I will have to look into those. It's fascinating to think of where all these spells came from," she said, watching him methodically shred dickle root and gently stir it into the potion.

They sat there in silence for a few moments, him stirring, her watching. After those few moments, Severus's voice broke the silence.

"Why aren't you trying to look at it?" he asked, a look of irritation on his face.

"I thought it would bother you. Naturally, I'm very curious about the modifications you've made to it, especially with that Coranthis Horn you put in "

"Not the *potion*! The Dark Mark! Any one of your little friends would have been looking for it the instant they saw my exposed arm."

Hermione carefully considered her next words and then replied, "I didn't think about it; I wouldn't have thought of it at all if you hadn't brought it up. Obviously I know it's *there*, but it doesn't bother me."

He didn't say anything more after that, just kept his head bent to his brewing. Wondering at the reason behind his outburst, she headed upstairs to look for Albus.

She found him in the greenhouse, clipping sprigs off of a tall stalk of lemon basil. He greeted her warmly, and she picked up a pair of clippers to help. Snipping away at a large rosemary bush, she told him of the binding ritual and asked him about Percy Weasley.

"Is there no other way?" he asked, not meeting her eyes.

"The binding ritual calls for all of them to be present. I don't see a way around that. It may be possible to conduct the ritual without him, but it will lack the strength needed to hold Mr. Weasley to this plane."

"You must understand my predicament, Hermione. Percy Weasley is yet another spy within the Death Eaters my only contact on their side within the Ministry. Severus was quite helpful, but as a professor, Voldemort rarely involved him in the bureaucratic end of things. Percy has had to renounce all ties with his family given his heritage; Voldemort has him watched very closely, and it is hard enough getting information to me without his knowledge. If he is brought to his family, Voldemort will surely know."

"But without him, Arthur could die!" she cried, not believing her ears.

"I must consider the price of his life. Is the life of one man worth more than the numerous lives Percy Weasley could save?"

She couldn't listen to anymore. She threw her clippers and the bits of rosemary to the ground and ran outside, through the woods to the lonely swing that stood just out of sight of the house. She curled up on a corner of the swing, arms around her knees, and sobbed.

How could such a choice be made? How could Albus be so indifferent about the life of Arthur Weasley? She wept for all that was lost, and for all there was yet to lose.

"He does not mean to be cold. He only thinks as a General would," the uncharacteristically soft voice of Severus Snape came from behind her. She looked up to see him standing several feet away from her, arms crossed over his chest and staring out into the snow.

"How did Percy even get involved in that?" she asked, hiccupping and rummaging in her pockets for a handkerchief.

"He asked to be. The Dark Lord is a physical manifestation of disorder and chaos two things that Percy Weasley cannot abide. He asked what he could do to help, and Albus was more than happy to find him a place. I took him before the Dark Lord, and a tracking device was placed upon him that monitors him when he is in proximity to those of his own blood. It can only be removed by the Dark Lord."

"Albus said he had to decide the price of his life. I wish it didn't have to be that way. I wish we could save them all," she said sadly. "It's cold. I'm going back in for a cup of tea." Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, "Would you like some?"

For a moment she thought he was going to accept, but then he said, "I don't have time for tea. I have something I must do."

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The next day after classes, Hermione was cornered by a very angry-looking Harry. "What are you up to?" he demanded, leading her into an empty classroom.

"I'm working on something that might help Ron's father," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything, but you two are always together, and I don't want to get Ron's hopes up in case it doesn't work."

"Oh," he said, deflating a bit. "We never see you anymore. How come you don't come to our training sessions?"

"Training sessions?" she asked, confused. "What are *you* up to?"

"Albus has been teaching us, training Ron and I. We're trying to figure out a way to destroy Voldemort without using the Killing Curse. Albus seems to be set on using the power of love, but I think it's a load of rubbish. There's got to be another way." He ran his hands through his unkempt hair, his frustration evident.

"I'll start looking for spells that might help. The Order's library is fascinating; I wonder if Albus has even managed to read everything in it yet," she said.

"Right now, I think I'd rather you just try to help Mr. Weasley. How's that coming, by the way?"

"Fairly well. We've hit a snag, though nothing I can talk about, Harry, so don't ask," she said at his questioning look.

He looked a bit offended. "I understand that we've all got things we can't talk about, Hermione, but I miss you. You're never at lunch anymore, and you're hardly ever in the common room. Come on, you're spending the rest of the afternoon with us! You need a break."

Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her up to the House Commons, a general common room for students of every house. Professor McGonagall had implemented it at the beginning of this year in hopes that a general meeting area would foster more inter-house friendships. Since then, Luna Lovegood and Susan Bones had been added to their group as well as... Was that *Millicent Bulstrode*? The bigger girl had a black eye, a half-healed cut above her lip, and Hermione thought her knuckles looked bruised. When he noticed the direction of her glance, he whispered, "She's apparently had a crush on Seamus Finnegan for years. She decided to tell him about it, and some of the other Slytherins heard. Five of them tried to teach her a lesson after dinner last week." He smirked at a huddled group of Slytherins, all of whom looked much worse than

Millicent.

As they approached the group, Hermione met Millicent's eyes. Though Millicent (in true Slytherin fashion) let no hint of her feelings show, Hermione knew Millicent was waiting to see Hermione's reaction. She pulled a small bottle out of her book bag and handed it to the other girl. "Murtlap essence. It'll help with your knuckles." Millicent gave her a small smile, and a tentative friendship was formed.

She spent the rest of the evening with her friends, talking, laughing, and enjoying the break from the war. Her thoughts drifted momentarily to a thin man with dark hair, bent over a cauldron. She wondered if he ever took a break, took time just for *him*. She would find out after all, she was supposed to be looking after his well-being, wasn't she?

She was so distracted that she ate the pasty Ginny handed her without even looking at it, and regretted it when she sprouted a large sunflower on top of her head. She couldn't be mad about it though, so happy was she to see Ginny out and smiling again.

Soon after that Professor Sprout came in and shoosed them all to their common rooms. She went reluctantly, having enjoyed the evening, but slept better that night than she had in a month. She had a very strange dream involving Venus Flytraps, lemons, and a dark-haired man wreathed in flames, but remembered none of it the next morning.

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No, not that kind of lemons. Not yet.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader *is the third book written in the Chronicles of Narnia series and is generally accepted as the fifth book in the storyline.*

Sorry for the sporadic updates. DH kind of killed my desire to read and write fan fiction for awhile, but I'm coming back again. Chapter 18 is in progress.