

Sage

by lady_rhian

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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A/N: My sincerest thanks go out to my beta Rhiannon and alpha reader Snapeophile for working with me on this. Your help has been invaluable! My thanks also to talesofsnape for the wonderful story banner.



Funerals are like an ablution, she thought numbly as she licked the last envelope and placed it in the basket. *People have paid their respects; they feel absolved of their grief... like they now have permission to move on.*

Rose stared at the envelope, addressed to the last of the well-wishers, and rested her chin on her hands. She was done. Three hundred forty-seven envelopes later, she was done. The bleak repetitious activity of thanking mourners had dulled the pain. But she hadn't forgotten.

She sighed. Her mother had finished her portion of the thank-you notes days ago, and she'd taken the bulk of them over six hundred cards and items of condolence to thank people for. Rose sighed. Her mother was a remarkable witch, and a notoriously fair one, and had refused to consider *not* replying to any of the cards that came their

way. Hugo had tried to convince her otherwise. *He was asking for it*, Rose thought.

Her brother had had a point, though. Rose had never seen so many owls in one place, not even at Hogwarts. Ronald Weasley was one of the first War Heroes to die, and Wizarding Britain had grieved. That his death had been a tragic accident made the pain all the more acute; he'd been in a car accident in Muggle London on his way back from shopping.

Rose smiled. Her father had become frighteningly like her grandfather: very enamored with all sorts of Muggle things that Hermione had brought into the house when they'd married. He loved going to the elder Grangers' residence, as each visit brought with it the element of surprise and fascination. She and her brother had shared in their father's excitement, and their mum had always laughed, a bemused smile on her face. She was fond of saying she had three children. Rose knew plenty of women who said the same thing about their husbands, but her mother actually had a point. Take her father anywhere in Muggle London and he was a like a child in Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

The accident had been well, an accident. As Muggle accidents tended to be, it was simply a matter of two cars in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the wrong thing.

That had not stopped Rita Skeeter from writing an inflammatory article in the *Daily Prophet* on the "dangers" of embracing Muggle culture. The *Prophet* had gotten so many angry letters in response, Skeeter had apparently almost been sacked. 'Almost' was the operative word in Rose's opinion; the woman was a vulture, feasting on the pain of others, and had been from the time her mum was at Hogwarts. She angered a lot of people but sold a lot of papers. Lee Jordan now a senior editor at the *Prophet* had come straight from work to see Hermione and had told the family of the article in advance. He'd fought tooth and nail to prevent its publication, but he was a sports editor, not an op-ed one, and thus had little power to stop it.

In spite of the hints, gentle prodding, and outright demands of their friends and family, her mother had not written a response to Rita Skeeter's article. Rather, she had arrived at the funeral only minutes before it started in a red Muggle convertible.

After the funeral, she had sent the car as a gift to the *Prophet's* editor-in-chief. He had reportedly been seen flying the car to work.

Everyone agreed that Hermione's point had been made.

"Rosie?" a voice called from the doorway.

Rose's head snapped up, out of her reverie, and she turned around in the chair.

Hugo leaned against the doorway, completely unkempt, his brown hair long, shaggy, and unwashed. Rather like their Uncle Bill's in an old photograph they'd seen.

"I didn't think you'd be in Dad's office," he said softly, looking around. His eyes suddenly glazed over.

His eyes lingered on the wall full of their family photographs there were dozens and dozens of Wizarding pictures of their nuclear family, extended family, friends of the family. It was a wall that usually brought them all much happiness, but not as much this past week. And Rose knew what picture her brother was looking at without following his gaze the most recent addition to the wall, a photo taken just over two months ago of Ron, Hermione, and Rose standing proudly around Hugo in front of the gates at Oxford College.

Rose shifted her gaze to the other side of the room and snorted. This wall, conversely, was full of Quidditch banners and memorabilia. Hermione had often complained that her pictures had to look at the Chudley Canons' colors all day.

"Finished up with the cards?" Hugo asked suddenly, gesturing to the basket.

"Oh... yes," she replied. "A bit ago."

"And you've just been staring at them?" he asked, a smile on his face.

"I've just been... thinking," she said, leaning on the arm of the chair. She looked up at her brother's face. He looked too handsome for eighteen. He looked far too old for his age, and in Rose's opinion, this wasn't a good thing.

"Are you heading back to uni?" she asked.

He nodded. "Within the hour. My professors were good about keeping this week's workload light for me, but it's Oxford, and I can't well afford to fall behind."

Rose nodded as her brother walked towards her.

"Come here, you," he said, pulling her up into a hug. "You holding up alright?"

Rose returned the hug fiercely; he was so strong, her brother. She could barely keep from crying through the entirety of their father's funeral; Hugo had been able to smile and greet guests warmly, exuding thanks and comfort to those who sought to give it to him. He'd got the gene she had missed.

Hugo gave her a last squeeze before letting go.

"I miss Dad," she said quietly, tears forming in her eyes. "I just miss him so much."

"Me too," Hugo murmured. He reached for her hand. "I feel awful, that I haven't been more of a help to you and Mum with the cards and everything."

Rose sighed. "It's been a busy week, and you still had schoolwork to do. I have no idea how you did it, Hugh, with everything we've had going on, and all the people and the funeral... Besides, you've been brilliant with everyone. You've known exactly what to say to them. Thank God we stood together in the receiving line. I could barely nod and some people..." She shook her head. "Some people I can't believe had the gall to show up." Her eyes darkened with anger. "And I can't get over that some people had the gall not to."

Hugo cast his gaze downward, knowing the question that would come.

"Where was James?"

"Rose..."

"Why wasn't he there?" Her voice became angrier. "Albus was there and Lily was there and Teddy and Victoire and the twins were there and even Draco bloody Malfoy managed to drag his sorry arse over to pay his respects, but James *didn't come*." *The bastard*, she added silently in her head.

"He'll come see us when he's ready," Hugo said after a moment. "James has been gone for a long time..."

"Six months," Rose snorted.

"Well, it's not just about Dad or us. He hasn't spoken with his parents or siblings either. We're all worried, and I know Harry was... extremely upset that James wasn't here."

That was an understatement. Hugo, Rose knew, was the master of understatement. Harry had taken her aside and spoken with her for a good twenty minutes, during which he'd alternately apologized for and raged over James' conspicuous absence.

"I know," she said, the tears now gone from her face.

"James never had much... taste... for family function, Rose, you know that. He and Dad and Mum were never close..."

"Well, he and I are!" she said defensively, crossing her arms. "James is my best friend, and he has been since the day Albus and I arrived at Hogwarts." She gave a dramatic sigh. "He's the big brother I never got."

Hugo gave her a cheeky grin. "Well, I'm the little brother you *did* get, so can you show some love, please? I'm not feeling very appreciated."

She gave her brother an obliging but half-hearted punch on the arm and leaned against the heavy oak desk she'd been sitting at for the past four hours. "Nothing at Hogwarts went right for me, that first week. Albus and I sat together on the train, but we've never been close, not like you and he are close. Albus and I are... cousins." She shrugged. "No other way to put it. We talked about what we thought school would be like, not much else. Then we got to Hogwarts, and I was scared. Like Mum says she was scared and in a really similar way. It's not like I didn't know people, because I did, but everyone was in one place. I had five cousins in Hogwarts at that time, all in Gryffindor, and Teddy had been Gryffindor even though he'd graduated, and Albus was about to be put in Gryffindor, and Luna and Dean's kids were in Gryffindor, and aside from Uncle Neville, I wasn't friends with anyone outside the sphere of Gryffindor tower, and he doesn't really count since he's their Head of House. It was bloody fucking *terrifying*."

Hugo went to sit next to her on the desk and put his arm around her. "And then you were put in Ravenclaw."

"The first Weasley to break Gryffindor tradition." Rose smiled in spite of herself. "Red hair and everything." She unconsciously ran her fingers through some of her long, loose, red curls.

"It took me a while to make friends, like Mum. I'm not nearly as outgoing as you lot," she said, gesturing helplessly towards a photograph of Hugo with the rambunctious male Weasley cousins and uncles, "and I'm marked a Weasley for life, and people have all sorts of ideas about what our family is like. And Mum and Dad are right famous, which made things a bit harder."

"So James..." Hugo prompted.

She shrugged. "Not much to tell. James had some friends in Ravenclaw he had some friends ~~everywhere~~, actually and he made a point to hang out with them more during that first term, and he always included me in the activities. They were only second-years, but once I was comfortable with them, it was easier to get to know... other people, too. First-years and such."

"Like Delilah Finnigan," Hugo said, nodding appreciatively, to which Rose smacked him much harder than she had before.

"Delilah is one of my best friends, Hugo Weasley, and she'll Bat-Bogey you faster than Aunt Ginny if you take your advances too far."

"Well, you can't watch me at Oxford while I'm there, can you? And *she's* at Oxford." Hugo gave a wide grin. "And she feels a wonderfully *endearing* need to watch out for her best friend's little brother." He attempted to give Rose an innocent smile. Rose rolled her eyes, and they both dissolved into laughter, which quickly turned to tears when they realized it was the first time either of them had laughed since the funeral.

"Speaking of Oxford," he said softly, getting off the desk. "I'd better get back. Must go say goodbye to Mum."

Rose nodded. Hugo tapped her chin. "Chin up, sweets," he said. "You're not supposed to be depressed all the time. Dad wouldn't want it. It's okay to laugh." He smiled at her.

"Who told you that?" Rose asked, wiping a wayward tear from her face.

His smile sobered. "Delilah," he said. He gave Rose another hug before leaving the room.

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Rose sat on the desk a while after Hugo had gone, wondering when her little brother had left and when he'd come back a man. Was it before Dad's funeral? Was it his breaking the news to his parents, during his last term at Hogwarts, that he'd been accepted to Oxford? Was it when he decided he wanted an advanced Muggle education? Or was it earlier even, when at barely fifteen, she'd found him sitting on the patio, an Arithmancy textbook on the table and an advanced calculus book in his lap, listening to him explain that he was combining the two practices for an extra-credit project for Professor Vector?

She sighed. Who knew when all that mattered was that Hugo was a maverick academic, one who was hell bent on changing the educational curriculum of Wizarding schools for the better. He was passionate about three things in life: education, knowledge, and social equality. How he'd been put in Gryffindor and not Ravenclaw was beyond her.

Because he's brave enough to change the system and doesn't give a shite as to what people think of him, unlike yourself, old girl! The thought came to her mind like lightning.

Leave me alone, she said angrily to the inner voice in her head.

Rose was in the second year of her apprenticeship at St. Mungo's. She was barely twenty years old, but she'd always known what she wanted to do with her life. She liked to help people, and medicine seemed to be the way to go. Besides, it's what Mum had done at first, anyway. And she was like her mum. Perhaps it's why she had such a hard time talking to her.

She sighed, pulled out her wand, and pointed it at the basket. The three-hundred-plus letters disappeared with *apoof*, all gone, Rose knew, to the fireplaces of their recipients.

A cool November breeze swept suddenly through the room, and she quickly shut the window. It was far too chilly for being so early in the month; the temperatures were already December-level, but not much could be helped. She wanted to go someplace warm... someplace...

Mum's bedroom.

*

Rose walked quietly to the other side of the house. Later in life, Ron and Hermione had kept separate bedrooms, not that Rose could blame them. Her father had a horrendously loud snore, one that worsened with age, and Hermione had often said she'd be deaf by the time she was sixty if they stayed in the same room at night, *Sonorus* charms be damned. Her father's study was directly across from his bedroom on one side of the second floor; her mother's room was on the other side of the house. It was practically another wing; the house was easily three or four times the size of the Burrow. Her father had built it far too large, Rose thought, probably expecting to have more children than he'd ended up with. What it meant was that family holidays were held here at the Granger-Weasley's. Her grandmum Molly had died before she was born, and Rose had surmised that that had diminished the hold her father's childhood home had on him. Besides, the Weasley clan was far too large for the Burrow to hold. Ron and Hermione had automatically volunteered their home as a permanent holiday residence.

Every Christmas, Rose knew, there would be plenty of Weasley relatives filling the halls, and many friends, as well. Granddad, Bill and Fleur and their kids, Charlie and his flavor of the month, Percy and Penelope and their girls, George and Angelina and their children Fred and Roxanne, Harry and Ginny and Albus and Lily (maybe James, she

thought angrily), Neville Longbottom, Minerva McGonagall, Teddy and Victoire Lupin and the twins Gabi and 'Dromeda, and of course, various house-elves to help with the cooking, including Winky and Kreacher. Rose shuddered. Kreacher was positively creepy, she thought, but he was devoted to her Uncle Harry, and Harry, in turn, was quite devoted to Kreacher. She gave an involuntary shudder. She was so glad her family didn't have house-elves. *No, that's not fair. Winky is wonderful.* Alright, she was glad they didn't have Kreacher.

She finally arrived at her Mum's room, situated in a corner of the house that was almost like the final destination of a maze there was a mass of corridors to go through before arriving. She had figured out long ago that her parents used her dad's room for things and she understood why. She also figured that her mum had designed this part of the house with the ulterior goal of having it as her bedroom in mind. That was a thought Rose did not like to contemplate.

The door was open, which was unusual her mum usually kept her room locked. "Mum?" Rose called. She drew her sweater tight around her at the sudden chill the doors to the balcony were open. *Mum's room is never chilly.* She walked across the room and shut them hastily. Her mum wasn't on the balcony well, where was she?

The room featured soft colors, pale blues and creams that Rose had always found calming. Maybe because they were like her house colors, so it was familiar, but it was just something that was distinctly *Mum*. She sat down on the high, sleigh bed, sinking into the mattress, her feet off the ground. She smiled. She liked that she couldn't touch the floor; she was tall, and little things like this gave her an inexplicable sense of childish glee.

She continued to look around the room, noting if anything had changed since her dad's death. She hadn't been in this room for a solid two weeks, at least. Hermione had slept in Rose's room the night they'd found out, had held her daughter as she sobbed herself to sleep. When Rose awoke the next morning, she saw that Hugo had arrived and had fallen asleep in the chair by Rose's bed, holding his mother's hand.

She slowly catalogued the items in the room and saw that little had changed. The beautiful porcelain vanity still stood as it had, the little vials of perfume and books stacked on top of it. The bookshelves that lined the room were full they were always full but they'd been dusted recently. The photographs were all still on the wall, as well pictures of Rose and Hugo hung prominently among the others. The closet was open, and the door to the large master bath (or 'mistress bath,' as Rose called it) was open as well.

Rose's eyes swept around the room again, and they latched onto something she hadn't caught before. There was a small blue box sitting on the vanity, and the lid rested on it, only half-way on.

What's this?, she asked herself as she walked to the vanity. Her mother was an intensely private person, and it was not like her to leave things lying about she would not want others to see. And Rose had never seen this box.

Her fingers hovered over the lid for a second. She was curious, but she'd be violating her mother's privacy. Her fingers clenched in indecision *Make a decision and go for it.* James' voice came unbidden to her head.

"I'm blaming this on you, James," she muttered as her fingers went for the lid.

She was distracted, however, by what looked to be a folded letter sitting under the box. She lifted the box up, keeping the lid as it was, and pulled the sheet of paper out from under it. She squinted her eyes to read the faded writing.

3 June 2000

Hermione,

I appreciate the letter telling me where you are, but for Merlin's sake, why have you left? 'Finding yourself' is not a reason when you're about to start your dream job at St. Mungo's and may I remind you when you are mere MONTHS away from your dream wedding? We are all worried sick! I have never seen Ron so angry, so frustrated so hurt. He is so hurt you did not leave word with him... please, please come back. You've been gone a week, and the entire place is still in an uproar. I've tried to tell everyone you've gone on an impulsive holiday, but people aren't buying it at least, Ron, Harry, and Luna aren't buying it.

And I'm not buying the reason you gave me. I'd be a shite friend if I couldn't call you on the carpet for a lie, and I know you're not giving us the real reason you've gone, even if I can't see your face. What's wrong, Hermione? Please tell me. Please tell me so we can make it better and get you back here!

Love and hugs always

Ginny

She re-read the letter.

What the...

She did the math in her head. 2000. Her mum would have just finished... well, the letter said she just finished her apprenticeship. So she was about to start her job... had been *supposed* to start her job... and was engaged? Her parents hadn't been engaged until 2005! She knew that because their wedding had been approximately three months later, in August, and she had been born nine months to the day of the wedding...

2000. 2005. Five years... *did Mum and Dad ever talk about their life before they were married or engaged? Aside from Hogwarts. Some things about Dad and Uncle Harry's Auror training, a bit about Aunt Ginny's work with the Wizengamot...* but nothing, really, about her mum. *And St. Mungo's?* she thought. *Mum's dream job? Hardly!* Rose knew her mother had interned at St. Mungo's, but she thought she'd changed her mind after finishing and had gone to work for the Ministry... *Mum never had a 'dream job' there! But it says she left before starting it...*

Rose's heartbeat quickened. There were too many holes here... She couldn't think of *anything* specific in those years that involved her mother... Where had she gone? And had she come back?

Well, she clearly came back. But five years was a long time to be gone...

The wind suddenly howled outside, and the doors to the balcony rattled. Rose quickly shoved the letter back under the box and put everything as she thought it had been. She raced over to the balcony doors and was about to draw the curtains when she saw her mother.

Her mum had always looked dignified, she thought, but she was struck at how beautiful she looked here in her element. Rose bent her head and leaned it against the glass door, staring. Her mum was nearly 50 not old for witches, she knew, but still and she was just as striking as she'd always been. Menopause had tamed the frizz, so Hermione's hair, while still extremely thick, hung in loose curls like Rose's rather than the big bundle she usually left it in. Her figure was as it had always been rather slim, not overly curvy, but just enough to keep her young co-workers in awe of her. Rose snorted. She'd heard too many of her mother's male colleagues *admire* her as she walked past. She knew her mum was amused by it, but it was her *mum*, for goodness' sake! Rose felt inexplicably protective of her.

But the sight of her mother, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, giving orders, supervising cases, and running off to consult on the latest security research was not the sight that had Rose so spellbound now. Her mother stood on the hill closest to their house the second highest hill in Devonshire. The house sat on the highest hill; you could see the Burrow and Old Man Lovegood's home from it; it had the best vantage point in the county. Her parents always said they'd bought the land so they could have the beautiful view, but Rose was fairly certain it was because the effects of the second War lingered on with them. They wanted to be able to see everything, from all sides. No surprises. Preparedness. Constant vigilance.

The wind, now softened, seemed centered around her mother; Hermione's long skirt whipped about her legs, emphasizing her figure, and the fringe of the white shawl wrapped around her torso blew wildly in the same direction as her hair. Rose hadn't seen her mother's hair so... *out of control*... in years. And it seemed Hermione wasn't surveying the land, as she so often did... She was looking for something. Actively looking for something or someone she expected to come.

Rose inhaled sharply as she saw a mass of silver come out of the sky and dip down towards her mother.

"Mum!" she yelled directly into the glass as the figure descended, settling into a familiar shape...

It was a shape she'd seen before. Rose didn't know how, but she'd seen this Patronus *how could I be so stupid to not recognize a Patronus?* She'd seen it somewhere... she gaped as she realized she'd seen it here. Standing here, looking out the window, watching her mother on that hill... How old had she been? Five, six? And it'd happened multiple times in her childhood... multiple times... The scene before her, Rose realized, was an especially intimate one. *Who would send a Patronus rather than come themselves? Especially now.*

The Patronus relayed its message. Rose was frustrated that she was too far away to hear the voice. Not that she was guaranteed to recognize it.

She put her head against the glass as the Patronus dissipated. Her mother stood there, entirely still. Rose could have sworn she saw her mother put her hands to her face, as if she were crying.

She knew her mother was crying when she saw her kneel to the ground and openly weep.

She numbly stepped away from the window and hurried out of the room, one question on her mind.

Who has a doe Patronus?

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Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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*

The next Monday

Rose yawned and put her head on her desk. It was a Monday. Rose *hated* Mondays.

Mondays were paperwork days for the interns: they had to file reports, file invoices, file memos, help monitor critical patients' charts in the colloquially named "Chart Room," approve visitor requests for various patients all in all, it was an excuse to give the secretaries a day off and let the interns take the workload. Save the chart monitoring which they were only allowed to do because Healer Brown said her nursing team could use a break the work was entirely mundane. Rose knew that she was quieter than most and that, as a Ravenclaw, she was thought to have a deep love for academics, research, and homework. Thus, people seemed to think she would be perfectly suited to administrative work.

Rose loved to read medical journals, yes. She liked to stay updated on the latest in medical research, both Wizard and Muggle, and found the academic text to be fascinating. Routine, monotonous details of everyday administration, however, she found to be tedious and trite. It was grunt work, it was unproductive (would Muggles make surgical interns file visitor requests?), and in Rose's mind, it was the "I had to do it so you will too!" irrationality that governed such traditional inductions. *Ridiculous.*

She sighed. Her cubicle was small; it had a desk, notebooks, pads of paper, pens, a bin for receiving mail, and a small lamp. And a chair, naturally, though her dad and Uncle Harry had frequently joked that the Ministry wasn't too keen on providing chairs in their days.

She was fairly certain they were joking, anyway. The Ministry's revitalization had only come at the hands of her father's generation and, she smiled at the thought, due to a lot of her own family's work.

Some of her superiors at St. Mungo's sometimes seemed irrationally hard on her; she supposed that they thought *someone* had to make life difficult for Rose Weasley, daughter of Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Like she'd had some kind of superior upbringing. She snorted. Healer Brown, a school chum of her dad's (and an ex as well, she suspected), was one of the few heads of department at St. Mungo's who seemed to think that Rose should be treated just as fairly as the others. *Probably because she knew Mum and Dad enough to know they wouldn't spoil their children*, Rose thought, very appreciative of Healer Brown's kindness. It was a shame she was training to be a mediwitch, as Healer Brown would have been a wonderful boss.

But no. The department head who was in charge of all interns, though thankfully not in charge of Rose's eventual career department, was a very old, very traditional very arrogant cousin of the now-deceased Dolores Umbridge. Rose cringed. The woman was nearly as terrifying as her cousin, if her parents' stories were to be believed; and that woman certainly knew of the trouble Ron and Hermione had caused Dolores "back in the old days."

One more year. Just one more year. Life wasn't that bad with the internship; her go was just a bit harder than most, given Madame Rookwood's inherent desire to make her life a living hell.

Rose sighed and pushed her hair out of her face.

Couldn't Mum find some reason to bust St. Mungo's for discrimination against employees? Doesn't that merit law enforcement? Or maybe Uncle Harry could just arrest Madame Rookwood on principal... He's wanted to do it for ages...

Harry. She hadn't seen Harry since the funeral, and she had a few questions for him... questions she wanted to ask him before asking her mum! *I'm scared to ask her... scared of what the answers might be, how she'll react.* She paused. *And I'm not guaranteed an answer, anyway. I never am.* Her mother excelled at giving vague answers, and parenthood had intimately acquainted her with the power of saying "no." And her father had always adored her mother far too much to contradict her judgment. *Rather like Granddad*, she thought briefly.

Hugo had been upset with her frequently throughout their adolescence; he'd get upset with her when she'd refuse to push a point with her parents or, furthermore, not even ask or talk to them about questions she had, which were frequently about Voldemort and the War. Hugo thought she was capitulating to their desire for privacy when, in reality, she just went to her Uncle Harry.

Harry had always told her things, had always been forthright; he'd never questioned a child's right to hear the truth, provided they were old enough to handle it. Harry had told her plenty of stuff about the War before she was "of age," when older relatives said she could know. Harry's refusal to abide by old traditions had been perceived a sign of arrogance by some, but Rose knew it was a matter of principal to him, and she suspected he'd often been told he wasn't fit to hear things because he wasn't "of age."

When Hermione would speak to Rose about the past, she was honest. Rose didn't doubt her mother's honesty or integrity, but these questions were decidedly ~~not~~ things she wanted to confront her mother about especially if her assumptions were wrong.

She glanced at the clock. 11:07 AM. She was overdue for her lunch break. Rose flicked her wand and quickly filed the papers before standing up to grab her purse. She walked out of the bull pen and headed out in the hall to the nearest fireplace. Grabbing a handful of green powder, she threw it in the fire and with a "Head Auror's Office!" was gone.

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She stepped out into Harry's "receiving room," as it was widely called. It was a standard office space with traditional décor, though the colors were warmer than the harsh black and white that dictated many a department head's office. Rather, soft browns, creams, and faint hints of orange greeted those who stepped out of the fireplace and into the small lobby.

"Rose! How are you, dear?" Mrs. Figg, the secretary, asked cheerfully a bit too cheerfully if you asked Rose.

"I'm well," she replied, giving a slight smile.

Mrs. Figg got up from behind her desk, quite a bit slower than she used to, and went to hug Rose. "Oh my dear, I'm just so sorry," she said quietly.

Rose returned the hug half-heartedly. Mrs. Figg was wonderful, but it was strange to be here in the Head Auror Office and know that only one of the two back offices was filled. Her dad's office had been left as it was... and it was plain depressing to be here without her father coming out to hug her. She was sure it was even sadder for Harry to be here without his lifelong best mate, having to see his office every day, remembering the decades they'd had working together.

Harry walked out of his office quickly, his white shirt rumpled, hair mussed, and glasses askew. Rose chuckled at the sight of him.

"What?" her uncle asked cheerfully, gesturing to his clothes. "Do I look like I left them lying on the floor last night?"

"You know you do, Uncle Harry," Rose said, a grin on her face as she went to give him a big hug. Mrs. Figg gave a knowing look and returned to her desk.

Harry gave her a kiss on the cheek before letting her go. "Is it business or family?" he asked, slipping his hands into his pockets.

"Family, of course," Rose said, crossing her arms over her blue robes. "What business could a St. Mungo's intern have with the head of the Auror Office?" she asked cheekily.

"Plenty, if Madame Rookwood is casting Unforgivables," Harry said, only half-joking as he led Rose into his office.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" he asked, leaning against his desk as Rose took a seat in one of the chairs. "Or did you want to go to lunch?"

Rose nodded. "I'd love to go to lunch, but... I've got a few questions for you, and you're one of the only people I trust to answer them."

She watched her uncle visibly gulp. "About your dad?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Mum."

His lowered his eyes to the floor, but not before Rose saw them darken. She saw him reach in his pocket; she knew he had grabbed his wand when the door closed behind her.

"What do you want to know?" he asked. "Though I reserve the right to not answer, as your mum is alive and able to answer your questions."

"I went to mum's room last night and I... found something," Rose started, too nervous for her own liking. *Get some courage, girl.*

"You went snooping in your mother's room?" Harry asked half-accusingly.

Rose glared at him.

"The door was open," she said strongly, "and it's *never* open, and I was looking for her, so I wondered."

She held her uncle's gaze for a second before he nodded. "Go on."

"I found... well, there were some things that were out that I'd never seen before. I found a letter Aunt Ginny had written her a long time ago. Twenty-five years ago, to be exact."

She could see a shift in her uncle's demeanor; his typically unflappable looks, the quiet self-assurance with which he held himself, all of a sudden seemed... nervous. He looked nervous. He never looked nervous.

"The letter said that Mum had... gone. She'd just finished her apprenticeship with St. Mungo's and was about to start a job there, but I know she never actually went to work for St. Mungo's. I thought she started with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement instead, after a... change of heart, or something." Rose looked beseechingly at her uncle. "And it also said she was engaged to Dad, but she and Dad weren't engaged until after James was born, which was five years *after* the letter was written, and then they got married quickly and had me right off. I know this, I've got a good memory, so there's no use saying my time table is wrong," she said, compelled to add that last bit.

There was silence for a moment.

"Did Mum take off?" she repeated.

Harry sighed. "Yes, she did."

Dumb question, Rose. The letter says she did. New approach.

Rose took in a deep breath. "How long was she gone?"

"Rose..."

"How long?"

"You should ask your..."

"How long was she gone, Harry?" she asked fiercely.

Harry met her gaze, now unflinching. "Five years," he said. "She was gone for five years," he repeated softly.

Rose sat back in her chair, her sense of triumph at her guesswork now turning in her stomach, turning into something sick...

"Were she and Dad engaged that entire time?" she asked quietly, not looking at her uncle.

"Yes," was the slow answer.

She breathed a sigh of relief and looked up at Harry, who looked sick to his stomach. Rose felt a flutter in her stomach again.

"What was she doing for that time? Where was she?" Rose asked, changing her tactics. She didn't want to cause her uncle pain. She didn't want to cause ~~her~~ *herself* pain.

Harry looked a bit more settled now, like he was on safer ground. "She was in France," he offered. "She ended up doing a bit of work with Arithmancers and the like... that's what got her into law enforcement, anyhow. A bit of a switch from medicine," he said, smiling at Rose.

"Well, they both help people," Rose said.

Harry nodded. "Yes, they do." He paused. "I've got a bit of work to do, Rose, and it's almost 11:30; you should probably get some lunch in before your break is up."

"Right," Rose said, getting up from the chair. She gave him a hug and walked over to the door, ignoring her gut's uneasy feeling.

"Uncle Harry?" she asked impulsively as she put her hand on the doorknob. "Do you know anyone who has a doe Patronus?"

There was silence for a moment. She threw a glance over her shoulder, questioning, "Do you?"

Harry was sitting at his desk and didn't look up at her.

"Yes," he said. "My mother did."

"Oh," Rose said, a bit disappointed. The first Lily Potter had been dead for nearly fifty years. "All right then. Have a good rest of your day, Uncle Harry."

"You too, Rose."

She turned the knob and walked out the door, a sinking feeling in her gut telling her that, for the first time in her life, she'd been spoon-fed the "children's version" by her Uncle Harry. She breathed deeply as she left the Head Auror Office through the doorway, determined to vent her frustration by walking to Diagon Alley. She'd catch some lunch and prepare herself for the inevitable: she was going to have to ask her mum.

*

That Evening

Harry walked into the Burrow slowly, tired out from his day at work. It was exhausting doing the work of two men... He could hire someone else, had been ordered to by Kingsley, but it... was too soon.

He dropped his briefcase on the kitchen floor with a heavy *thud* and tugged at his necktie. It had been a stressful day, and he was home late. That didn't happen very often.

"Harry?" he heard his wife call.

"In the kitchen," he responded loudly, grabbing a glass from a cupboard and filling it with water.

He heard Ginny's light footsteps going down the stairs, through the hallway, and into the kitchen where he at last felt her wrap her arms about his waist. He closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of her warmth, of her body against his. She was practically an anchor.

"Why the late hour?" she asked softly. Only Ginny, he was sure, could ask such a loaded question without assuming an accusing tone.

"Too much work," he replied simply, turning to face her.

"I'm sure they'd let Harry Potter out of the office by eight o'clock, even if you still had work to do," she said, her gaze resting gently on him.

"I had to work," he said, distracted.

She raised an eyebrow quizzically. "Something on your mind?" She paused. "Ron?"

He sighed. "It's all to do with Ron and nothing to do with Ron at the same time, darling." He put his hands on her shoulders, steadying himself. "The work... the office it's too much without him."

"I'd imagine that's all to do with Ron, wouldn't you think?" she asked, giving a slight smile. Harry would have chuckled had he not felt so weighed down.

"Rose came in today," he said, crossing his arms, looking at the floor.

"So?" Ginny asked. "She's practically your favorite niece...*Oh*." Her eyes dawned in recognition. "It was her first visit since..."

He shook his head. "No," he said definitively. "That honestly didn't even cross my mind, Gin. She came in today loaded with questions," he said, walking to take a seat at the kitchen table. "Questions about her mother." He reached for Ginny and pulled her onto his lap, holding her waist tightly.

"Why would that be so bad?" Ginny asked. "She's always gone to you if Ron and Hermione wouldn't tell her..."

"She found a letter you wrote her," he interrupted. "A letter from the week she... left."

She bolted upright, her eyes wide. "Rose found it? How could she have found it? Hermione's kept those under lock and key for years..."

Harry's eyes darkened. "She told me it was all destroyed."

He watched Ginny visibly gulp. "I'm sorry, darling," she said quietly. "A woman... well, it's easier said than done for us to get rid of things reminding us of places our heart has been."

"So she has all the letters," he said after a moment.

"Yes," Ginny said slowly. "Hermione is one of your best friends, but she's one of mine, too, in a... very different way."

"I should imagine."

She chuckled before a wave of sadness swept over her. "I know that it hurt you, that she took off to look for him. I know it hurt you even more when she stayed, but she didn't settle in Paris *because* of him."

"That he showed up was an accident, then?" Harry challenged.

Ginny glared. "Yes," she emphasized. "And you can write to Cosette if it'll change your mind."

Harry shook his head. "I don't need to write to her to know the truth."

"Snape loved her, Harry," Ginny said gently.

"He didn't love her enough to treat her as she deserved," Harry said harshly.

She gave a frustrated sigh. "You'll be angry either way," she said. "You're angry that Hermione left us, you're angry she fell in love with him, you're angry that she hurt Ron, and you're angry that Snape loved her, but at the same time you'll vilify him for not giving her what she wanted. If he'd capitulated to her desires, Harry, she'd have been in France with him for the rest of her life. You just can't be happy with that man, can you?" Ginny asked, exasperated.

"What I saw in... his memories..." Harry started. He shut his eyes, acknowledging defeat. "It's why Albus' middle name is what it is, Ginny. He is the bravest man I've ever known, and I saw him in an entirely new light after seeing the memories, and then what he did to Hermione... I felt let down, like I'd bought into something that was nice in theory but not nice in practice. The old hatred came back in full force."

"Severus Snape is *not* nice in practice, Harry dear, that's the point," she said cheekily, smiling. "He's a sarcastic bastard, and she loved him anyway."

They sat in silence for a bit. "I'm glad she came back," Harry said simply.

"Well, so am I, but now..." Ginny started, then cut herself off.

"What?" Harry's head snapped to look at her, interrogating.

"Well, now Ron's gone. Don't you wonder what she'll do?" Ginny asked him softly.

Harry ignored the question and forged on with his main point. "Rose came in today asking me where Hermione had gone and when she'd gone and for how long and..." He halted his speech.

"And?" Ginny asked. "If you can latch onto my interrupted thoughts, I can latch onto yours."

"She asked if I knew anyone who had a doe Patronus. She saw Hermione speaking to one on Friday night."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Did you tell her?" she asked after a moment.

"I told her my mum had a doe Patronus. It's not a lie," Harry said, defending himself against his wife's accusing look. "And hardly anyone has seen him alive."

"He still publishes in the potions journals; people *know* he's alive, Harry. His disappearance is not quite as ambiguous as it was in those first years after the War."

He shrugged. "I know quite a few people who think it's someone who knew him and who has been continuing his work that was left incomplete at his death."

Ginny snorted. "For almost thirty years?"

"People can blind themselves to the obvious for longer than that. And, like I said, hardly anyone in Britain has seen him alive. ~~We~~ We haven't, for instance."

They sat there in silence for a while, Harry holding Ginny to his chest as their eyes dipped down lower and lower towards sleep.

"He's already been in touch with her," Ginny whispered to herself, feeling her husband fall into a deep sleep. She sighed. "It's just a matter of time, isn't it?"

*

A Mile Away

Hermione sat out on the oak patio, leaning back in her chair, her feet propped up on the table, hand wrapped around a glass of Chardonnay. She breathed in and out, slowly and surely. She'd taken two weeks off of work. Surely that was an acceptable amount of time? She sighed and put her hands to her face. She felt guilty oh, so guilty at her desire to get back to work. Widows weren't *supposed* to return to life as normal... They were supposed to sit in the houses they'd shared with their husbands, walk around crying, constantly reminiscing...

Didn't people realize how that made the pain that much more acute?

Her work was her passion, her fuel, her fire, and getting back to it was the only way she could imagine returning to life as normal... no, not as normal. Throwing herself into work was the only way she was going to bring herself out of the misery she'd walked in for the last two weeks.

Gods above, I miss him.

An image came to her of Ron's smiling face the day the accident had happened. They had gone to lunch before he went into Muggle London. She was so grateful she'd agreed to go. Usually Hermione preferred to work straight through the lunch hour and take her break when Diagon Alley was a bit calmer, but she'd agreed to meet Ron for lunch well, not quite lunch. They'd gone to Fortescue's for ice cream. She smiled. Ron had ordered cookie-dough-with-chocolate-chip, she'd had coffee. Their favorite ice cream flavors, the only two ice creams that were guaranteed to be in the house at any given time (a fact which their children had always complained bitterly about, as Rose loved vanilla and Hugo favored berry).

Hermione was also grateful they hadn't spent much time talking about work. It had been a slow week for the Aurors and Law Enforcement departments, so they'd talked of Rose's internship, of Hugo's life at Oxford, of their worry for James, of Luna and Dean's anniversary party the previous week... and they'd reminisced a bit, too, which had surprised them both greatly. They didn't typically talk too much about Hogwarts days, now that those were nearly thirty years removed in the past. However, that day they'd talked of some moments in their relationship, of how she'd sent canaries flying at Ron (so maybe that wasn't a good example)... of their first kiss. She chuckled and took a sip of her wine. She and Ron had shared many passionate moments these past twenty-one years of marriage, though they had grown to be fewer and farther between as the years went on. These moments tended to happen when one surprised the other typically Ron surprising Hermione with an unexpected comment on a subject the other spouse was passionate about. However, Ron could only express so many positive sentiments about house-elves' freedom before that fire went out.

She lightly ran her forefinger over the light silver chain that hung around her neck. It held her wedding band; she'd put the ring on the chain only last night. The band was fairly simple platinum with diamonds encrusted in it. She had insisted it needed to be practical, to Ron's dismay. He'd been pointing out stones that rose a good quarter inch off their setting how did he think she'd be able to wear it, going to work, let alone chasing after the children that would come!

Now, however, her finger did not run around the diamonds but around the smooth inner band. She could barely feel the etching inside, faded as it was by wear and tear over the years. *To my Dearest Friend RW/HG 08/21/05.*

She had burst into tears when she saw that Ron had put that in the band; she had no idea how he'd stumbled upon such a renowned Muggle phrase, but it meant so much to her that he had appropriated it for their own use.

And that was what hurt the most, really she hadn't just lost her partner, husband, father of her children she'd lost her dearest friend.

She breathed in deeply. She had to go back to work. She had to *staysane*. Grieving Ron's loss in a near-empty house would do her no good. She had to be proactive and productive even if it killed her, even if it fueled the gossip corner of the *Prophet*. Rita Skeeter could write about it on the front page for all she cared. She needed to go back to work. There was some interesting research being done in France, and her hand had been in the cookie jar first. She didn't want to lose her place just because she'd taken an extended leave of absence... and Ron would understand. He would want her to; he had been the one who had encouraged her instincts with this project in the first place.

Her body stilled. Ron hadn't known why she was hesitant to pilot the research with her department. It had been fascinating, hadn't it? Finding ways to protect the security of Wizarding governments and financial systems with serums, as opposed to brute force as determined by Arithmantic probability? And a Veritaserum variant for the skin, Veritaserum as a paint to coat over certain spaces, doorways, objects, designed to protect them by being so personalized that they would recognize the touch of those allowed access? Veritaserum so powerful it could create a force-field to trap a perpetrator? Fingerprint identification, as appropriated from the Muggles, could be thwarted. Veritaserum could not. Additionally, this variant spared individuals the nasty byproduct of spilling their innermost secrets for a good hour after coming into skin-to-serum contact with it. The serum merely recognized an individual's touch and let them pass no soul-searching necessary. Who *wouldn't* want to pilot this project, Ron had demanded? Had she bloody lost her mind again?

Hermione hadn't realized how tightly she'd been winding her fingers in her curls until a few strands came out of her head. She sighed in frustration and flicked the strands from her fingertips. She hadn't lost her mind. She was just terrified to go to France to meet with the independent researchers who had engineered the potion. Three individuals from the British Ministry of Magic had been invited to meet with the intensely private group: the Minister, a much-older Kingsley Shacklebolt, the head of the Department of Mysteries, whose identity she didn't know, and, inexplicably, Hermione herself, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. It made sense for her department to be involved, she supposed, but wasn't another department head better suited to come along? Kingsley had denied her request that she send another in her stead; her presence had been particularly demanded by the group, he said, smiling.

She knew why, and she was fairly certain that, on a superficial level, Kingsley did, too.

She had no confirmation that *he* was in the group, but he had to be involved. Veritaserum had always held a mystical sway over his academic interest; he had been fascinated by it and its properties, by the variants that could be produced. There were few other Masters in the world who would be capable of producing this particular variant and even fewer who were capable of coming up with the idea in the first place.

And the pending visit was made that much more complicated by the fact that Ron was gone. She'd had a lifetime with Ron to cling to before, to cling to in the possible case that he would try to sway her... in case that part of her heart that he had claimed long ago would betray her. There was a part of her that he'd never left... he still could, as he'd said, bewitch her mind and ensnare her senses even all these years later.

She shuddered and gulped the rest of her wine down in one swallow. She was *not* looking forward to seeing Severus Snape again, though her heart may tell her differently. That period in her life was gone, twenty years in the past, but still...

She gave a deep sigh. Nothing could happen. Save Harry, Ginny, and Luna, no one knew what had *really* transpired in her life, those five years she'd gone away. And it needed to stay that way. So what was the harm in going to France with Kingsley and whoever was heading the Department of Mysteries these days?

What's the harm? was the thought in her mind as she walked into the house, up the stairs, to her room... as she touched the blue box that sat by her bed. *What's the harm?*

*

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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A/N: Again, my sincerest thanks go out to Snapeophile and sshg316 for their work on this chapter. Thank you for keeping me grounded and watching my commas. :-)

*

A Month Later

...she awoke to the smell of basil and garlic assaulting her nostrils. Her senses went on high alert; she was not in her bed, as evidenced by the ridiculously firm padding she felt beneath her. She peeked an eye open. The sofa she was sprawled out on was sage colored, and it felt like a rock cloaked in satin.

She didn't have a sofa that felt like a rock or like satin, for that matter.

She sat up abruptly, blood going to her head in a dizzying rush. She clasped the sofa's edge to steady herself.

Foolish girl, *she thought*. Where the hell am I?

She gently reached into her pocket to make sure her wand was there. She breathed an audible sigh of relief when she felt its familiar shape.

"Ah, you're awake. Will you kindly come in to eat supper before passing out on the sofa again?" an all-too familiar voice sounded from the doorway.

She looked over sharply, only to see the object of her obsession leaning against the threshold, looking far different than she remembered. He was... relaxed. Confident. At ease. And in a white shirt.

"What...?" she started.

"You fainted in the alleyway when I finally caught up to you. I could hardly leave a young woman passed out on a street in Amsterdam," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

She nodded imperceptibly, trying to get a hold of her surroundings. Oak floor, sage sofa, smells of dinner cooking in the kitchen. Bookshelves lined the wall; stacks of books were splayed across the floor. There were paintings on the wall. The fireplace was lit. Dark browns, sage greens, and rich blues were the dominating colors. And there was a faint smell of musk in the air.

"So... this is your flat?" she asked slowly.

"Yes. In Paris," he offered. "You're back in France. Now," he started. "Would you care for some supper? Grilled shrimp over linguini with garlic bread and a nice Chianti to accompany." He held a hand out towards her. "Can you get up from the sofa yourself or do you need me to assist you?"

"Hermione?"

She shook her head. "I can get up."

"Hermione..."

She attempted to rise to her feet, but fell back on the couch quickly. He raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Are you sure?"

"Hermione!"

Hermione's eyes snapped open, and she bolted up off her desk, her back hitting her chair with such vehemence that she nearly toppled over backwards.

"What?" she asked to no one in particular, looking around her office until her eyes rested on the figure standing in the doorway.

"Hermione, are you alright?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked gently, his large figure as authoritative and imposing as it had ever been.

"Yes, I'm..." she said quickly, rubbing her eyes and face. "I'm fine," she finished lamely, slowing her breathing *Oh, my God, I fell asleep at work. Dear Merlin.* Just dozed off a bit."

Kingsley's eyebrows scrunched together in concern. "Are you sure?" he asked as he crossed his arms. "I know you've been back for a month, but are you sure you don't need more... time? I'm more than willing to give it to you," he offered.

"Yes," she said, rubbing her nose. *I am such an idiot.* "I want to be here, I really do, and I'm almost done for the day." She gave a slight yawn. "I'm just a bit tired is all."

"Yes, well," Kingsley said in a chiding tone, clearly not believing her at all, "if this happens again, I am sending you on leave for a month, do you hear?"

Hermione nodded, feeling justly chastened. "Yes, Minister," she said with a bit of cheek. "I will do my best to stay awake at work."

"Do," he said, turning to leave. He paused in the doorway. "And if you call me Minister again, it'll be two months instead of one."

She chuckled. "Have a good rest of your day, Kingsley."

"You too," he said, giving a relaxed smile. "It's almost six o'clock; you should get out of here."

"Yes, well, no children in the house anymore." *No husband, either.*

Kingsley chuckled, amused. "I haven't had the pleasure."

"You've been too busy saving the country these past thirty years. I think the younger staff feels like they're all your children," Hermione said warmly. "I know I do sometimes. Especially when you catch me sleeping at my desk like a first-year."

He laughed heartily. "You're lucky I'm the one catching you then, and not Severus Snape. Say," he said, his face darkening a bit, "you are accompanying us to France to speak with his partners on acquiring their research?"

Hermione stilled in her desk at this confirmation. *So he is in the group.* "You know, I haven't given it much thought." *Liar.* "What with Ron and the funeral and all." *I'm going to hell for this.*

Kingsley nodded. "Of course. I'm sorry for rushing, but we are planning on meeting with them soon. We need to schedule a definite date, so I'd appreciate your answer within a few days." He paused. "I know there were hard feelings between the three of you and Severus when he was a professor, but I should imagine thirty years is enough to iron out the wrinkles, wouldn't you?"

You have no idea.

Beneath Kingsley's gaze, her hands bunched the fabric of her pant legs in nervous fits. *First-year, indeed.*

"My reticence to give you an answer has nothing to do with our feelings towards Severus. I agree with you; thirty years should be more than enough time to iron out any wrinkles." *But what about twenty?*

He nodded. "Right, then. I'll leave you to your work. Ahh." His eyes lit up as he gazed out the door and down the hallway. "You have a visitor."

A moment later, a black and white spotted owl flew in through the doorway. "Artemis," Hermione said softly, reaching out to her daughter's owl.

"Your children may not be at home, but you're still a full-time mother, Hermione," Kingsley said matter-of-factly. "I'll leave you to your work."

Hermione barely noticed him walk out of her door as Artemis shoved the letter into her hand. She examined the envelope before opening it. Rose's handwriting had always had a deliberate quality to it, but these letters were firmer than her normal shapes, as though she'd spent a great deal of time on them. Curious, she opened the letter.

Mum,

I haven't seen you these past few days, and there are a few things I'd like to discuss with you, if you've got the time. Can I come over for a late supper tonight?

Love,

Rose

That's a surprise. Hermione automatically reached for a quill and penned a response on the same note.

Rose,

Of course, you can come over. The house feels empty without you and your brother; I'm afraid I got quite used to having you both around for the past few weeks. Does 8:00 sound alright to you? I'll fix us something nice for supper.

Love,

Mum

She re-folded the letter and sealed it shut, gently putting it in Artemis' mouth before the owl took off. She sighed. What to have for dinner? She hadn't cooked a full meal in a while; her friends had kept the Granger-Weasley residence supplied with delicacies and treats for the last month and a half or so. And she only had herself to cook for now, too. What to eat, what to eat...

What about... grilled shrimp over linguini with garlic bread? And a nice Chianti wine to accompany. She gave a deep sigh. Well, her subconscious was good for something. Perhaps it was developing some Divination-like qualities, what with predicting what would come from what had been.

Severus. His name came to her mind like a searing fire. She leaned back in her chair. He'd sent her his condolences and just his condolences a month ago. That was the first time he'd sent his Patronus to her in years. She breathed deeply. The thought of seeing him in the flesh was enough to entirely unsettle her. *You'd think I was twenty-four again, not forty-six... I can't see him. It's too soon.*

Or am I just... terrified out of my bloody mind?

She willed the thought out of her mind and set about finishing the memos she'd been writing before she fell asleep. *Stay awake*, she chided herself. *You'll see Rose tonight.*

Her hands stilled.

And don't think about him, she ordered her subconscious. *Don't you dare.*

*

7:59 PM

Rose arrived on the lawn of her parents' house with a huge sense of relief. *I didn't splinch myself. Thank Merlin.*

She put her hand on her stomach and took a few deep, calming breaths. She was entirely nervous and, to be honest with herself, was scared shitless.

No need for honesty. I know what I feel.

This was the dinner she'd been working herself up to for the past month. Rather funny it had taken her so long, as she'd spent countless hours dwelling over the letter, her conversation with her Uncle Harry, and the presumed contents of that mysterious box. She pulled her jacket tight around her body and shivered, partly from cold but mostly from nerves.

2000. 2005. Five years were missing in the timeline of her mother's life. Five years she'd been gone in Paris working with Arithmancers, Harry had told her five years she'd been engaged to Ron that Rose hadn't known about.

Rose hadn't asked anyone else about her mother, but had rather put her money where her mouth was and done the legwork herself. That day in Harry's office had been more than enough to tell her she wasn't going to get any help from her parents' friends. Hell, if the letter was to be believed the only ones who had known something was immediately amiss were her father, Uncle Harry, Ginny, and Auntie Luna.

Well, Uncle Harry had been no help (*alright, a little help*, she acknowledged), and her father was gone (she gulped), Ginny (who detested being called 'aunt' by her adult nieces and nephews) was far too busy with Wizengamot work to be bothered with such questions, and Auntie Luna... well, getting a straight answer out of her was like finding a flock of Nargles in Devonshire. Bloody. Fucking. Impossible.

She smiled slightly. That was what she and James always said when they heard their Auntie Luna going off on some theory or another. She wasn't quite as loopy as her father, Old Man Lovegood, but she was still capable of saying things that even Merlin would have a difficult time deciphering. One time when they'd been visiting Dean and Auntie Luna, Luna had gone off on a lecture on the characteristics of one of her favorite species' of Nargles, a lecture that had ended with a fourteen-year-old Hugo getting into a debate with Luna over whether they really existed. Rose hadn't seen her parents laugh so hard in ages; usually her mum was quick to defend Luna's eccentricities, but the Nargles had been a source of humor among the Granger-Weasley and Potter clans for years. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had practically been rolling on the floor in laughter as Hugo and Luna's debate got louder and louder, and Dean had pulled out his wand just in case his wife made something explode (as she had been known to do), and James had whispered to Rose whether she thought Luna would capitulate or, better yet, pull a cage of Nargles out of thin air. "Bloody fucking impossible" had seemed the logical answer to both questions, but James hadn't been expecting that, and had burst out laughing along with the rest of the family, albeit for a very different reason. Rose flushed a little. She wasn't a potty-mouth, so James had been absolutely shocked that she knew, let alone could say, the F word. Naturally, it had become one of their favorite things to say for absolutely no reason at all.

She sighed again. James. It had been seven months now, and no one had heard a word. Rose had been hurt by Albus and Lily's insinuations that it was just one of many elaborate tricks he'd pulled in order to get attention; that he was just off on holiday having a good time shagging Italian beauties, or something of that ilk.

She swallowed hard. James had pulled many tricks on his family in the past, to be certain, but this one was different, and it hurt her deeply that he felt he couldn't confide in her the reason for his absence. She was his best friend. He was her best friend. And best friends told each other everything... or most everything. Besides, they were closer than that. Like siblings.

Well, cousins. She snorted. Close enough.

Hugo didn't especially care about James' absence, Rose knew, but he put on a concerned face for his big sister. She smiled. Hugo was a dear; she was very grateful for the brother she *did* have. And her parents... her parents had been unusually quiet on the subject. Her father hadn't said anything when James first went missing, and her mother...

Rose inhaled sharply. Her mother had said that he would come back when he was ready; that no one was to take it personally if he had things to do that he couldn't confide in them. She had said James was on a personal journey and that he would be an improved version of himself upon return. She'd said it with such confidence that Rose had stared at her, utterly gobsmacked, until her father had told her to pull her chin up and not say another word about it.

Come to think of it, her mother had a rather uncanny understanding of the subject of extended absence.

Absence. Her mother's absence. Rose massaged her throat, thinking of the few details she'd been able to come across. Her mother hadn't started working for the English Ministry until the spring of 2005 the date was unclear, though she was certain it was after Molly Weasley's death. She'd found a backissue of the *Prophet* with her parents' engagement announcement that June, and their wedding pictures had been in the paper that August. Harry said her parents had been engaged for the duration of her mother's absence, but why then hadn't it been announced until... *until she got back?* Rose thought. *Maybe they weren't... officially engaged.*

She'd attempted to find a list of Arithmancers working in Paris twenty years ago but had been unsuccessful; the French were a private lot, and the work her mother had been doing if it had dealt with Arithmantic probability and law enforcement, as Harry implied was probably not on public record. And the French were loath to talk to the English, anyway. Load of sodding idiots. The clerk she had contacted at the French Ministry had been absolutely no help at all; said she should just ask her precious mummy for details if she wanted them so bad. Rose had stalked out of the building without looking back.

As a last resort, she'd asked Lee Jordan to let her in to the *Prophet's* Archives. The *Prophet*, for its occasional crap reporting (*Rita Skeeter, bloody woman*), had become a peon in journalistic integrity... for the most part. At the very least, it had kept up with the lives of the War Heroes and the lives of the Golden Trio in particular. It had faithfully documented every relationship, engagement, marriage, birth, death, career move, and promotion of every family member Rose had. She'd searched painstakingly through the two hundred plus copies of the *Prophet* published during those five years using every charm she knew, every possible word she could think of Hermione Granger, Golden Trio, Mrs. Weasley, Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter, Ministry of Magic, War Hero, Department of Magical Law Enforcement... and she'd turned up nothing. *Nothing.* There'd been no mention of her mother for five years... no mention until she was listed among the guests who had attended Molly Weasley's funeral in March of 2005.

Rose had also learned another interesting fact. Her mother hadn't been in Harry and Ginny's wedding party as she'd assumed for so long. She hadn't even been listed among 'notable guests' in the article the *Prophet* ran. And this was an instance where the *Prophet* would have been dead accurate in its reporting...

Mum wasn't at Uncle Harry's wedding.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, bringing herself back to the task at hand *Buck up and get your arse in that house. Mum's cooking, and there'll probably be wine.*

Rose gathered her courage up to herself and walked up the steps and through the front door.

There had better be wine.

*

"In here!" she heard her mother's voice call from the kitchen. Rose shrugged her sweater off as she walked into the surprisingly warm kitchen. Come to think of it, she'd been warm all the way through since she walked in the house. That was an uncommon occurrence. She sighed in sad realization. Her dad had been like a furnace, and as such liked to have windows open and fans going even in the dead of winter. Her mum, on the other hand, could be counted on to keep the fireplaces lit.

She walked into the bright kitchen and smiled at the fact that little had changed. Her mother, ever productive, had set about renovating and re-decorating the house these past two months; the kitchen, however, remained as it had always been. It had been modeled after the Burrow's kitchen, and she figured that her mother probably couldn't bring herself to change it.

Her mother, the subject at hand, was at the stove cooking in Muggle fashion. There were some meals that her mother inexplicably insisted on cooking the Muggle way. This *let's see linguini, shrimp, ah, excellent, we'll be having the Chianti wine* was one of them.

"Mum?" she asked, amused.

Hermione whipped around from the stove, her face beaming. "Rose, darling!" She walked over to her daughter and wrapped her up in a big hug. "It is so good to see you. Your owl brightened my day, let me tell you."

"You were still at work when you got it?" Rose asked, eyes accusing.

Hermione looked at her with a saucy grin. "How did you know?"

"You're still in your pantsuit."

"I rarely change out of my work clothes."

"I also told Artemis to go to the Ministry first. It would have taken her an extra half hour to return if she would have needed to fly here to find you."

Hermione chuckled, capitulating. "Ever the clever one, Rose."

"I just don't want you to get too busy," Rose said, walking over to lean against the counter next to the stove. "You've had so much work to do since Dad..."

"Coping mechanism, or so your Auntie Luna tells me," her mother said matter-of-factly, staring at the stove. One hand deftly turned the shrimp over, checking their darkness, and the other was placed firmly on her hip.

"Well, Auntie Luna is right, for once."

Rose was not surprised by the glare she got in return. "Luna, though she still believes a few of her father's hair-brained theories, has a remarkable ability to read people and situations accurately. I have never known her to misjudge a person or to give faulty advice. She's even better at it than your Uncle Harry," Hermione said, smiling as she started to pull the shrimp off the pan.

Rose nodded and fell silent.

"Ahh, the pasta's ready," her mother said after a moment. "Be a love and grab me a strainer, will you?"

Rose rolled her eyes and pulled out her wand. "Accio strainer!" A drawer opened and a strainer flew into her hands. "Simple," she said, grinning as Hermione took the strainer from her, not so much annoyed as amused.

"There are some meals I prefer to cook..."

"Without magic, I know. One of your more endearing qualities," Rose said, teasing.

"Funny, your father always called it one of my more annoying eccentricities," Hermione muttered as she walked to the sink and strained the water from the linguini.

Rose snorted. "Well, Dad never lived with Muggles."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Not one of your deepest observations, dear, but it'll do under the circumstances."

Both women chuckled in amusement as Hermione fixed the linguini up in a bowl and carefully poured the steaming Alfredo sauce over it.

"Would you open a bottle of Chianti while I grab the garlic bread, please?"

Rose automatically went for the wine bottles held in the vine-like iron carrier. "There are two Chiantis here, mum. What year would you prefer, the..."

"1985, please. It's the best Chianti vintage; the 80s were when Chianti quality improved dramatically, and the 1985 is positively magnificent."

Rose shrugged and grabbed the particular bottle. "I've no idea how you got to know so much about wine, living with Dad. The Weasleys have absolutely no taste in liquor," Rose noted, flicking her wand to take the cork out.

"One can acquire a taste as time passes, I suppose," Hermione said a bit stiffly.

Rose practically felt her stomach drop. *What an opening.*

"I guess I'd pick a few tips up if I lived in France for... oh, say five years," she said in what she hoped was a casual tone.

Her mother slowly put the bowl of pasta and shrimp on the table and turned to face her daughter at an even slower pace. Her face held no expression.

"Who told you?" she asked flatly.

Rose gulped. "I saw Ginny's letter," she said softly.

Her mother's eyes blazed. "Did you break into my room, Rose?"

"No." She shook her head and crossed her arms. "It was over a week after the funeral. The night Hugo went back to school," she offered. "I went to your room because I needed to talk to you and you... weren't there," she said lamely. "The door was open," she added.

Hermione paused and looked down at the floor. Rose was certain her mother would start tapping her heels at any moment.

"Is that why you wanted to have dinner tonight?" she heard her mother say in a soft, slightly broken tone. "You... didn't want to see me?"

Rose gaped at her mother. "Of course I wanted to see you. Dad's gone, and I missed you!" she said loudly. "We're both a bit more private and can go a while without seeing the other, but I don't have to have a reason to want to see you, Mum!"

"Well, you clearly had one." Hermione crossed her arms, glaring.

"Sweet Merlin, Mum! Why are you so defensive?" she exclaimed. "Yes, I have a reason! I have questions! I have tried to find anything *anything* proving you were in England during that time, and I haven't found one whit of evidence to suggest you were here between June 2000 and March 2005." She paused, breathing heavily.

"You knew I was in France," her mother said after a moment. "There are... precious few people who knew where I was."

Rose slumped against the counter. "I went to Uncle Harry."

Hermione's nostrils flared. "Rather than coming to me?"

"I rarely get a straight answer from you, Mum! And I was scared, okay? Scared out of my godforsaken mind that I was wrong and that you'd be insulted that I accused you of going missing when you hadn't, and I was just as scared to have my suspicions confirmed!"

Silence descended on the room.

Hermione opened her mouth as if to speak and closed it again just as quickly, collecting her thoughts. "I'm grateful you went to Harry first, I suppose," she said slowly, arms crossed, staring at the floor. "The two of you have always been close, which pleases me greatly," she added. "But you had no business being in my room without my presence, regardless of whether the door was open, and you certainly shouldn't have gone through any items I had laid out. What else did you see?" she asked, her eyes piercing her daughter's.

Rose capitulated. "A blue box. I didn't see what was in it."

She saw visible relief on her mother's face, and her curiosity was peaked ten fold. "I don't see what the problem is, Mum. You were gone for a few years, I'm your daughter, I'm curious about your past, I want to know where you were and what you were doing and why you left. Why you weren't at Harry and Ginny's wedding, for one thing," Rose continued, refusing to back down. *I've come too far to lose my footing now.*

"Ah, the *Prophet*," Hermione said. She stared in Rose's direction but Rose was certain her mother was looking through her.

"It's honestly none of your business to know where I was or what I was doing," Hermione said simply. "There are many things parents don't tell their children about their pasts, and this is something that I have held very private. Like I said, precious few people knew where I was and what I was doing during that time. I can count them on one hand." She held up a hand and started ticking her fingers off. "Harry you've talked to him already. It's not in him to deny you information, but from the sound of it, he didn't give much to go on. Ginny," she continued, ticking off another finger as she gave a wicked smile, "who would defend me to the death she wouldn't give anyone information even if you put her under the *Cruciatus*. Luna would be kinder about it but would insist you come to me. And your father is gone," she finished in a matter-of-fact tone that sent chills down Rose's spine. "And now you know that I was gone for nearly five years, that I was in France, and that I did some work with Arithmancers that led me to my eventual career in law enforcement. That is all, yes?"

Rose nodded dumbly. The two women stood in a silent battle of wills for several moments.

"I just want to know, Mum," Rose said finally, in a quiet voice. "I want to get to know you as an adult, as a friend, if you will. I'd like to think I'm grown up enough to want to do that," she said defensively. "And Dad's gone, so I won't get the chance to sit down and have this conversation with him. Though his past probably isn't nearly as enigmatic," she said, moving to sit down at the kitchen table, pouring herself a glass of Chianti.

Hermione snorted as she followed suit. "There are a lot of things you wouldn't like, Rose a lot of things you'd be insulted by."

"I think I'm adult enough to handle them."

There was more silence as Hermione heaped servings of the cooling shrimp and linguini onto their plates. She waved her wand, and the food warmed up again.

Rose sat there, not eating, for several moments. *What if...*

"Is it that you don't want me to know, Mum, or is it that you don't want to remember?"

Hermione's hand stilled on her wine glass. She looked into her daughter's eyes.

"Astute," she said at last. "Very astute." She sipped some of her wine, her face softening as she savored the taste.

Rose followed suit and sipped some more Chianti.

"Please tell me, Mum. Don't you want to talk about it to someone?" she asked softly in a last ditch attempt, suspecting that her mother hadn't spoken of this subject in many years.

Her mother's face hardened and remained so as they began to eat their pasta. Rose, mired in dejection, was nearly half-finished with her plate when Hermione spoke.

"It's not so much a want as a need, for reasons which will... soon become apparent to you," Hermione said slowly.

"Thank you," Rose replied, her countenance automatically lifting.

Her mother merely raised an eyebrow. "Just remember, you're the one who's getting yourself into this mess. Don't blame me when it's your bloody curiosity that's at fault here."

Rose guffawed. "Why would I blame anyone for anything?"

Hermione's eyes darkened. "You'll see." She paused. "I presume you want to know why I left first."

"It'd be a good place to start."

Hermione lifted an eyebrow. "Are you absolutely sure you want to know?"

Rose nodded.

Hermione sighed. "Very well. It's not an especially dark secret, at least it doesn't start out as one, and there's no particular moral to the story; there's not a real rhyme or reason for me to tell you, save your insatiable curiosity. Well, perhaps..." Hermione whispered the last bit so softly Rose could hardly hear her. She met her daughter's eyes. "And I'd appreciate it if you don't burst out in indignation on your father's behalf."

Rose lifted an eyebrow quizzically. "Why would I do that? You were engaged the whole time, were you not?"

Hermione sighed. "Harry told you that?"

Rose nodded.

"Were we engaged?" Hermione murmured, resting her chin in a cupped palm. "In theory, yes. In practice, no."

Rose gaped but quickly recovered. "Is this why I can't be indignant?"

Hermione nodded. "I suspect you'll have great reason to be."

She drew her wand and lit the sage candle centerpiece that lay between them.

Rose looked at her mother, questioning.

"To ward away bad spirits... bad karma... bad anything, really" Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Sage is frequently used in ceremony as a purifier, and it's known to have healing properties. Besides, the smell relaxes me. Now," she said. "As to why I left England..."

And so the story began.

*

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

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1 June 2000

It was always difficult, this time of year. It had been for the past three years, and Hermione didn't imagine that this anniversary would be any different. The anniversary of Voldemort's defeat would never cease to make her sob unceasingly.

Oh, there were grand celebrations. The Ministry had put on a lavish ball that first anniversary, and since then, notable Wizarding families and companies had followed suit. The week before the anniversary was enough to fill even Lavender Brown's social schedule: there were various private parties, public galas, parades, and speeches to attend. The *Prophet* always ran a multitude of pieces, including a 'historical' section in which they reprinted the few pieces from that time that had actually predicted a few things right. They also ran a memorial issue, which was the one currently laid on Hermione Granger's lap.

She sat cross-legged on the floor in the small sitting room of her Diagon Alley flat, her hair streaming wildly around her face, still dressed in her pajamas. She always got up early on June 1. It'd become a twisted ritual of hers, to get up early in order to read the memorial issue. *Gets the tears out of the way first thing.*

She ran her hand across the front page of the special booklet-style the *Prophet* used for this particular issue. The front page always had the same photograph: a long shot of Hogwarts, smoke billowing from the grounds, the Dark Mark slowly disappearing from the sky. She gulped and opened the page, knowing the myriad of photos that would greet her, the waving hands of individuals listed from front to back in chronological order of death.

Bertha Jorkins. Bartemius Crouch, Sr. Cedric Diggory.

Amelia Bones. Emmeline Vance. Sirius Black.

Igor Karkaroff. Albus Dumbledore.

Charity Burbage. Mad-Eye Moody. Ted Tonks.

The small insert on the third page with a photograph of Harry with Dobby always brought a fresh flush of tears.

She turned to the fourth page, knowing what would come.

Fred Weasley. Remus Lupin. Nymphadora Tonks. Colin Creevey... a multitude of others.

And on the final page, a dark photograph of Severus Snape, with the title "LOYAL TO THE END" listed above, "*Missing in Action, Presumed Dead*" listed beneath the photo.

Not dead, she thought, staring at the photograph. *Not dead.*

"Where are you?" she asked aloud, surprising herself. She laid the open booklet on the floor and rested her elbows on her knees, her hands running through her hair, watching the dark, surprisingly still photograph of her enigmatic ex-professor.

I watched you die, she thought fiercely. *I watched you die, and I went back for your body, and you weren't there. You have to be alive. Somewhere. Somewhere, you're alive, breathing and working, at this moment...*

I will find you.

She rested her chin on her hands, breathing deeply. That was her other unspoken ritual: the one she kept from all who knew her. The *Prophet* could print all the tripe they wanted on how Snape was "presumed dead," and certainly, Harry's confirmation that he had indeed been bit by Nagini and bled to death in front of him didn't help much. But his body *hadn't been there*. She'd seen it with her own eyes: she and Minerva had gone back to the Shrieking Shack to retrieve Snape's body... a body that wasn't there. The theories for where it had gone were outrageous at best and, in Hermione's opinion, not worth listening to. Ron's suggestion that maybe the body had just "disappeared" had even prompted Harry out of the glassy reverie he had adopted whenever Severus Snape was mentioned by name.

"That's complete crap, Ron. Even I don't think it disappeared," Harry had said rather harshly, surprising his friends.

"Hermione?" Ron had turned to her, pleading. "Don't you think maybe he could have..."

"Bewitched his body to disappear when his heart gave out?" Hermione had raised an eyebrow incredulously. "Shite, Ronald, utter shite. I know you can do better than that."

Both boys had turned a deaf ear to her insistence that he was alive. Admittedly, the evidence to the contrary was impressive. She'd been with Harry in the Shack when Nagini had bitten Snape, after all; she'd watched Snape bequeath his memories to Harry (a dying act if ever there was one), had listened to Snape's always-controlled voice crack as he asked Harry to look him in the eye. Hermione, entirely confused at the time, now understood. He'd wanted to die looking into eyes identical to those of Lily Evans... also an action that could be construed as a dying wish.

But were all those actions part of an elaborate Slytherin smokescreen for his faked death? Hermione shook her head in consternation. She could never get past that nagging doubt...

She knew Harry believed him to be dead: Snape was an intensely private man, and the sharing of his memories almost certainly confirmed that he had indeed been dying. It had convinced Harry, at the very least, if not her.

"Does it matter where his body's gone, Hermione? Really? The man gave me his memories, for Christ's sake! He hated me, loathed me, but gave me his most... treasured... memories. I stumbled upon one memory of his during fifth year, and you remember the rage it sent him into! You think he would've given me that load of memories in the Shack if there was even the slightest chance he could live?" Harry had demanded the summer after that fateful June. "His body's gone, and there is no proof he's alive. If he is, he hasn't stepped foot in wizarding Britain."

"Would you?" she'd challenged immediately. "Even though he's been exonerated beyond what he could possibly imagine, even though he's been pardoned... well, would you want to go back to the life you'd left behind? Constant struggle, a double-agent existence, not being able to trust anyone but a man who is now dead, who you had to kill... knowing the people you loved and trusted most in this world are gone! Some life to come back to, Harry!"

"It was the life he chose, Hermione!" Harry had bellowed. "He's dead! Deal with it!"

If Harry and Ron knew she'd been actively searching for their ex-professor these past three years, they would almost certainly have a screaming match the likes of which Diagon Alley had never seen. It'd throw the street into paralytic shock... especially if it came from its revered Golden Trio.

She sighed and got to her knees to stand up. She picked up the booklet and laid it reverently on the coffee table by the fireplace. Ginny would be by later today; she didn't like to be with her family on this anniversary, and Hermione honestly couldn't blame her. She'd lost a brother, one who was still greatly mourned. Hermione had listened to enough talk to know what today would entail for the Weasley clan. The entire family would gather at the Burrow. Arthur's hands would be full dealing with his inconsolable wife, and Bill, George, Fleur, Angelina, Ron, and Harry would go out flying: everyone gave George the most attention on the anniversary, even more than they gave Molly. When they got back, they'd be met by Charlie, happily playing Uncle to Victoire and Percy and Penelope's baby boy. Percy and Penelope would have a wonderful late lunch prepared and all ready to eat in the kitchen.

And Ginny would be at Hermione's flat, going over the memorial booklet, eating chocolate, and drinking loads of butterbeer. By the time four o'clock rolled around, Harry would arrive, ready to cart Ginny back to the Burrow for dinner. He'd invite Hermione, as he always did, and she would decline. Later that night, Ron would come over, and they'd drink wine and eat a late supper and shag each other senseless, driven by grief a desire to forget. It would be absolutely amazing. It always was.

But for some reason, she never looked forward to it.

Rather than contemplate those tempestuous thoughts, she walked into her kitchen and pulled out a bag of Italian Roast from her refrigerator. She needed to wake up and jolt her heart out of its semi-catatonic state, and dark roast coffee always did the trick.

You haven't failed me yet, she thought as she poured the grounds into the paper liner. *So don't even think about letting me down now.*

*

"This is probably the best coffee I've ever had in my life, and I don't even like coffee," Ginny said, smacking her lips together as she sipped from the crimson mug. Hermione looked at her friend and glowed.

"I knew I'd eventually convert you," she said, a wide smile on her face as she inwardly rejoiced. It was a seemingly small thing, but Hermione had been offering her friend coffee for years. To be taken up on the offer and get a positive response was more than she could possibly have hoped for.

Especially when Ginny had showed up late and in a foul mood to boot. Someone in the Weasley clan always managed to get Ginny in a snit before she 'abandoned' her family, as Molly had so kindly put it that first year.

The two women sat cross-legged on Hermione's sitting-room floor, both looking like they'd just gotten out of bed, even though it was almost three in the afternoon. Their hair was unkempt, their clothes slightly wrinkled, and there were the faintest hints of tear streaks on both their cheeks. The memorial issue had long since been placed in the bin with its predecessors, the tears had been shed, memories shared, and the girls had moved into their traditional fourth phase of the late afternoon chocolate and coffee. Hermione had brewed another batch of Italian Roast after finishing the first pot off herself, and Ginny, surprisingly, had asked to try some.

"It's rather unusual for a non-coffee drinker to like dark roast," Hermione remarked, sipping from her cup.

"Because it's so dark?" Ginny asked with a cheeky grin.

"Well, yes," Hermione chuckled. "It's not particularly light or sweet in the traditional sense."

"This is somewhat sweet. Very rich, very smooth," Ginny remarked.

"Well, it's Italian Roast. It's the darkest of the dark roasts, and the most intense, but it does have a subtle sweetness to it that the other darks lack."

"What other roasts do you like?" Ginny asked.

"I prefer a coffee that is... rich, sophisticated, intense but with a subtle sweetness that can... creep in around the edges," Hermione started, her mouth quirking upwards in a smile. "The Viennese Roast is dark but quite mild, really, and very rich. It's quite good. French Roast is the most popular dark roast, but I don't like it; it's too spicy for me, though the smooth texture is nice. And Porto-Fino is another Italian that is a blend of South and Central American coffees; it's quite intense, as far as dark roasts are concerned, but it has a remarkably lighter flavor to it." Hermione shrugged. "That was probably more than you want to know, but the gist of it is that I like Italian Roasts."

Ginny smiled. "You and your coffee. You areso not English, you know that, right?"

"I like tea," Hermione insisted, feigning insult. "I just prefer coffee. Tea doesn't have enough of a kick, and I find it to be quite thin, not at all interesting."

"Yes, you like your drinks sophisticated, rich, smooth..."

"You make it sound like I'm looking at the singles advertisements in the Muggle papers, Gin!" she laughed.

"Don't you?"

"Absolutely not."

Ginny shrugged but had a rather indecent look on her face. "You can look, you just can't touch. That description certainly doesn't fit my brother he's not rich, and he's certainly not anywhere near sophisticated or smooth."

Hermione lifted her eyebrows. "He's never been any of those things, not that I expected anything different." *But do I want...*

Ginny remained silent for a moment. "Are you sure about it?"

Hermione inhaled sharply. Ginny's tone was casual, but her eyes were sharp, piercing like a Legilimens interrogating his or her witness. Hermione knew her mind hadn't been breached and she was certain that Ginny didn't (yet) have the skill to do so but her senses were on high alert. *What is she playing at?*

"Am I sure about what?" she asked flatly, trying to keep her tone level.

"The engagement," Ginny said automatically, eyes still locked on Hermione's. "Are you sure it's not too soon?"

Bugger.

She and Ron had been engaged for several months, and Hermione had had the distinct feeling that several of her friends did not approve. Namely, Ginny and Luna. Luna had approached her that first week and asked her various questions, questions she was sure Ginny was about to launch into. *It's too soon, you need time apart, do your futures line up...*

Complete tripe.

Hermione had no idea why Ginny didn't approve, as it was her brother Hermione was engaged to, but she knew she was certain to find out.

What had Ginny asked? Is it too soon?

Right. She knew the answer to this question.

She breathed in slowly and collected her thoughts. "How exactly is it 'too soon'? We've been friends for a decade, and your mum claims that we've been 'destined' for each other since the beginning. It's also been three years since we graduated, and those are three years we've been in a very serious, very exclusive relationship. He's twenty, I'm twenty-one, we've got our careers established and coming along nicely so I confess, Gin, I fail to see how it's possibly 'too soon,'" she said, trying to keep the bite out of her voice.

"Your infallible logic aside, Hermione, have you listened to your heart lately?" Ginny asked, leaning back on her hands.

Leave it to Gin to cut through the bullshit and get to the bottom of the issue.

Hermione gave an uneasy smile, trying to mask the uneasy churning in her stomach.

"Have I said anything lately to lead you to believe that I don't love your brother, Ginny? Because there could be nothing further from the truth."

"No," Ginny immediately agreed. "You love Ron. Ron loves you. But I don't see evidence that you're *in* love with each other... yet."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Ginny beat her to it.

"And shagging does not mean you're in love."

Hermione closed her mouth. Ginny gave her saucy 'I know I'm right' grin.

"Well, well," she said, trying to catch her breath. "I never thought I'd see the day that Ginevra Weasley would try to talk me out of marrying her own brother."

"I'm not trying to talk you out of it. I'm trying to talk you into waiting. There's a difference."

Hermione sighed. "If we know we'll marry each other, why wait?"

"Because there's so much to go through first! And not just getting your careers under you," Ginny said, leaning back against a chair, her hands wrapped around her mug of steaming coffee. "There are fights to have, issues to work through... We know you're compatible as friends, and maybe you're even compatible in bed, I really don't want to know, but do either of those things mean you can build a life together?"

"Yes," Hermione said automatically. "We want the same things out of life..."

"Which are?" Ginny challenged. "Ron wants a family."

"So do I!"

"He wants one right away. Are you willing to start having children within a year of getting married?"

"Well no..." Hermione stammered.

"And you want to travel first, yes? You've always talked about living on the Continent for a while. Do you think Ron will take kindly to that idea?"

"He'd wait," Hermione said frankly, looking Ginny right in the eye, giving her best 'I know I'm right' look.

"Yes, he would," Ginny said softly after a moment. "He'd wait for you; he's convinced there's no one else for him."

And what goes unsaid is that I know Ron isn't the only person out there for me.

Hermione sighed. "I love Ron," she said. *But am I in love with him?* She shook the thought from her head but not before the thoughts flew across her face. She stared at the floor stubbornly.

"No one's questioning your love and devotion to each other, Hermione. You're best friends, everyone knows it."

"And doesn't everyone want to marry their best friend?" Hermione asked quickly.

"I'd rather not marry you, darling; I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be compatible in bed," Ginny deadpanned, sipping her coffee.

Hermione burst out laughing. "Okay, who doesn't want to marry their best friend of the *opposite sex*?" she emphasized.

Ginny shrugged. "That's probably Neville, and we'd be right awful for each other, let me tell you."

"Ron and I *work*, Gin, and we've worked well well, mostly well as a team for over a decade. Not everyone finds that," Hermione insisted, trying to quell the doubts that were rising in her that had been rising in her since Ron proposed. The nagging voice that said '*More time! I need more time!*' was getting louder by the second.... Damn it all, why did Ginny have to voice her concern?

"What you have is a beautiful thing, that's true," Ginny acknowledged, snapping Hermione out of her mental flurry. "But to find a compatibility beyond friendship... a compatibility that transcends the familiar into the unknown and to desire it anyway... to find that depth of understanding on a spiritual level, to be so drawn to someone you couldn't stand the thought of being separated, to be in a room with them and have a near-magnetic attachment... *that* is something else entirely. And *that* is something I don't think you and Ron have," she finished quietly, looking her friend straight in the eye.

Hermione broke the gaze and stared into her coffee. "That sounds like obsession."

"Or being in love."

"Not all of us can be you and Harry. We all want different things out of love, Gin."

"You *think* you want a friendship-based love. You *think* you want Ron. And maybe you do." Ginny shrugged. "But I think you *need* something else entirely."

"What we want and what we need are two very different things, Ginevra," Hermione said quietly.

"Yes, and typically that phrase is used to indicate that a person should pursue a need before a want... so why are you so hell-bent on putting this want of yours above everything else? Do you think you're not built for a Grand Passion-type love, dear?" Ginny asked kindly.

No, I don't.

Hermione sighed. "I'm the brains, darling. I'm the bookworm. I'm the academic, I'm studious..." She trailed off, chuckling. "Not typical descriptors for a person built for a Grand Passion thing, if you know what I'm saying." She sighed. "And why are we having this conversation anyway? Ron and I are getting married within the year."

"Are you? You haven't set a date yet. And when I say you, I mean *you*, Hermione. Ron would elope tomorrow if you asked him."

She inhaled sharply. Yes, Ron was more than willing to drop everything and get married now. And, like Ginny said, that would mean a baby within the year. Fuck it all, she didn't want to be a mother yet.

"You said you were trying to convince me to wait, Gin, but the more you talk it sounds like you think Ron and I should just break it off."

Ginny shrugged. "I'm just trying to talk some sense into you before you go off and make a mistake."

"Marrying Ron would be a mistake?"

"Marrying Ron *right now* would certainly be a mistake. Maybe later it would work." She sighed. "Or not. It depends. But I do think you've got a lot of self-searching to do before you go off and hitch yourself to my brother and bring a child into this world. You'll make a good wife and mother, Hermione, just... maybe put it off a bit."

They sat in silence for several minutes, digesting what was being said.

What if she's right? I've hardly even thought about Ron today... and Grand Passion is not the thing we have... Am I in love with him? ... Oh, sod it.

Enough, Hermione. Enough.

"Are you trying to spare Ron or spare me?" she asked Ginny, her voice steady.

"I'm trying to spare both of you, but he would never listen to any of this, mainly because most of my concerns deal specifically with you and how *you* need to wait."

"So Ron's ready for marriage?" Hermione asked.

Ginny laughed. "Ron was *born* ready for marriage. He's lost if you put him out to pasture by himself."

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle. "Too true."

Ginny leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. "Just think about it, please? I'd love it if you got married, but I don't want you to get married because you feel like that's the only place this relationship can go."

Hermione nodded slowly. *Think about it. I can think about it.* "... appreciate your thoughts, Gin. Remarkably objective, considering Ron's your big brother."

Ginny shrugged. "I love him, and that means I want what's best for him. I love you, and I want what's best for you. Fact is, I don't think it's in either of your best interest to get married right now. But I'll drop the subject, let you think on it for a while. And it's not like you're not a member of the Weasley clan already. And you and Harry are practically brother and sister, so we'll be in-laws anyway."

Hermione grinned. "Has he proposed yet?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "He'd better do it soon."

"He will if he knows what's good for him."

"If he doesn't want to be impotent until our wedding night," Ginny said, dead serious. "I think he's waiting for me to finish my internship at the Ministry, but that won't be done for another year and a half, and if I have to wait much longer it's" she slid her finger across her throat "for our sex life. And I don't think he'd like that too much, so it might be just the impetus I need to get him off his arse and to the jewelry store."

"The Bat-Bogey won't work?" Hermione asked.

Ginny shook her head. "He's gotten very good at deflecting it."

Hermione did not want to know *why* Harry had gotten good at deflecting it. For that matter, she didn't want to know about Harry and Ginny's sex life. Or impending lack thereof.

As she opened her mouth to change the topic, she heard Ginny beat her to it, only what came out of her mouth wasn't quite what Hermione expected.

"Is that Viktor's owl?" Ginny asked incredulously, pointing to the window.

Hermione's jaw practically dropped as she saw the mahogany-colored owl swoop in and drop a letter in her lap. "Thank you..." Hermione started, but the owl flew out the window, not waiting for a reply.

"Is it Viktor's owl?" Ginny repeated, looking slightly excited, anxious, and entirely too saucy for her own good.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I haven't heard from him in months; I wonder what the occasion is."

"Right, well, you read the letter; I need to go use the loo," Ginny said, scrambling off the floor and straightening her clothes as she walked into the hallway.

Hermione tore open the envelope and pulled a short note out. Then again, this was Viktor. His notes were always short.

Hermione,

I hope this owl finds you well on the anniversary of your victory. I hope you have not cried many tears; remember that your friends' sacrifices were not in vain. I am sure you have cried today, just as sure as I am that you are currently drinking coffee (Italian Roast? Or is it the Viennese?), and I want you to know that you are in my thoughts.

You've been in my thoughts a lot lately I've seen someone this week that reminded me of you. We've been in Paris playing the Parisian Pistoles in the semi-final round of the World Cup, and the team stopped for drinks in a small village on our way home from the arena. The village (Capois, it's called) is an hour or so outside of Paris and is very secluded; it's classic Old Wizarding World material. Anyhow, you will never guess who I saw at the town's café! Severus Snape! Apparently, he had some potion or other to give to our coach (Igor's cousin, and Igor and Snape were friends, you know). I was so happy to see him alive, Hermione, so happy. I have heard many theories that he is alive, that he is dead, that he is in Purgatory... so many ideas, so many questions, and then to see him in the café, completely comfortable and in public! And so near to Paris (he divides himself between Paris and Capois, he said). Who would have thought? I chatted with him for a bit he was a good friend of Igor's and he was most polite to me. I was shocked to see him, but was very glad to. He's working in Paris, he didn't say doing what, but then I didn't expect him to share anything.

I know you have hoped that he is still alive, and I thought I would let you know. See? It is a day for celebration!

I will be coming through London soon and hope to see you.

Yours,

Viktor

She clasped her hands to her mouth, her eyes wide with shock and joy.

You're alive. Oh, thank Merlin in Heaven, you're alive!

She didn't expect the tears to come pouring down her cheeks, but they did. A sense of vindication swept over her... vindication that her hunch was correct... joy that he was indeed alive and seemingly all right... and an inexplicable sense of relief, like somehow the world was right again, that the pain of what had been unmade with the War had

been lessened, that the edge had been taken off, that there was some kind of... hope.

Hermione's heart clenched so tightly she put her hands to her chest. Paris. He was in Paris. He was close so very close...

The tears kept pouring and her breath came quickly; her heart felt like it was going a mile a minute.

I'm going to Paris.

*

I hope you are all enjoying it thus far! :-)

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: My thanks to snapeophile and sshg316 for their work on this story - the two of you are invaluable!

Chapter Disclaimer: I am aware that everyone is very eager for Severus to emerge, and I greatly appreciate the enthusiasm. However, I must state that he is not slated to show up in these flashbacks for a little while yet. The flashback chapters are exclusively from Hermione's point-of-view, as she is telling these stories to Rose. Therefore, Severus will only come into the story when Hermione meets him. Thank you for understanding, and with that, I hope you enjoy the chapter!

*

Present

"So you left for Paris when Ginny was using the loo?" Rose asked incredulously, dumbstruck by her mother's story. She grabbed her glass of wine and gulped it down, smacking her lips.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at her daughter's 'mature' coping skills. "No, of course I didn't."

Rose tapped her foot silently but impatiently under the table, trying to digest all of what she'd just heard. She didn't know what to be more surprised by: Ginny's opposition to the marriage, her mother's doubts, her mother's obsession with her ex-professor's disappearance, or the fact that her mother had been ready to take off at a moment's notice when she had heard of his whereabouts.

Or the confirmation that it had indeed been another man who had inspired her mother to leave the country for five years. Finding herself, indeed.

"I told you that you may be offended, Rose," Hermione said quietly, watching the flurry of emotions pass over her daughter's face.

"I know," Rose responded, folding her hands together in her lap. She looked at her mother straight on. "So, what did you do, if you didn't leave right away?" she asked, re-filling her wine glass.

"I took a Puking Pastille."

Rose nearly dropped the Chianti bottle she was holding. She stared at her mother to see if she was joking, and when Hermione met her gaze head-on, she erupted into laughter.

"You... took... a *Puking Pastille*?" she asked, barely able to breathe through her giggles and snorting.

Hermione joined her laughter. "Yes," she said, smiling, as she rested her elbows on the table. "I didn't want to worry anyone right away, so I took a Puking Pastille when Ginny was in the loo. She came out, and I rushed right in and promptly became sick as a dog for a good fifteen minutes."

"And why did you have Puking Pastilles at your apartment?" Rose asked incredulously.

"Your father liked to keep some handy, just in case."

Rose shook her head in pseudo-disbelief. "I can't believe you." She paused. "But how did Ginny not know you'd taken one of Uncle George's products?"

Hermione smirked. "Do I look like the sort of person who would knowingly use a Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes product?"

Rose snorted. "Point taken."

"Exactly. Well, Ginny was a right wreck she thought our conversation was what had gotten me so worked up and upset. So, she stayed with me while I wretched my guts out, and then she put me to bed early. I insisted that she leave once I fell asleep, and once she was convinced I was sleeping soundly, she went to the Burrow and told Ron that he was not to visit me."

Rose sobered at this reminder of her father.

Hermione noticed the shadow that descended on her daughter and quickly took her hand.

"And did Dad... stay away?" Rose asked quietly.

"No," Hermione murmured. "No, he didn't."

"He caught you leaving?"

Hermione sighed. "I set to packing immediately after Ginny left. I had no idea how long I'd be gone, so I took all my clothes, my toiletries, quite a few of my books for both research and pleasure and, of course, Viktor's letter." She sighed. "Your father apparently came by late that night. He was the one who found I was gone."

"You didn't leave a note?"

Hermione shook her head. "I wrote one to Ginny the next morning, as I knew she'd blame herself for my sudden disappearance. I said that I was off to 'find myself' and that I didn't know when I'd be back."

Rose gaped. "And you thought they'd receive that kindly?"

"Ginny blamed herself," her mother said curtly. "And she probably would have thought that the lecture she had given me had prompted me to go... I don't know, off myself, or backpack through the Continent in the presence of strange wizards or something. So I just told her that I was safe and in France and didn't know when I'd return."

"And you didn't write Dad or Harry?" Rose whispered, a bit crestfallen.

Hermione put her hand over her heart as if feeling Rose's pain herself. "I regret not writing them that first week. Because I didn't write them right away, I... well, I decided not to correspond with them at all during my absence."

"But Dad found you were missing," Rose said, quietly insistent.

"He was worried sick," Hermione admitted. "Something I later begged him to forgive me for... I took his love for granted in those early years."

"You loved someone else."

"No, I didn't."

"You were cold and... unfeeling... towards Dad, and one hint that this bloke is in Paris, and you *you*, Mother, Hermione Granger, model student, rule-following, socially conscious *you* left without a word to anyone at the drop of a hat because you heard where *hemight* be! You were falling in love with him before you even got there!" Rose exclaimed, her emotions quickly rising.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I wasn't," she said patiently. She paused. "You've heard your father talk about S.P.E.W.?" she asked, changing tactics.

"Yes," Rose said, not seeing what house-elves had to do with Severus Snape.

"Well, knowing he was alive... he became my S.P.E.W, so to speak. I was a bit obsessed with finding him, publicly vindicating him... He was a lost cause, Rose, and I was determined to find him for myself."

"But you said that the papers *had* vindicated him," Rose said with a distinct edge to her voice.

Hermione nodded, clearly choosing to ignore Rose's tone. "Well, it was three years after the War. Plenty of evidence in his favor had been revealed, not the least of which was the testimony found in Dumbledore's Pensieve and portrait, and Harry had spoken publicly on his last encounter with Severus..." Hermione's mouth clamped shut as though she had sworn.

"Severus?" Rose asked, quirked an eyebrow. She sighed and slumped in her chair. "I take it you found him, then."

Hermione nodded. "I did, though I stumbled upon him... quite by accident. It was a few months before we encountered each other."

"So... what did you do in those few months?" Rose asked, her heart racing. She couldn't keep herself from asking questions, even though she already knew what the answers were. Her Uncle Harry's voice came to her head... "*She ended up doing a bit of work with Arithmancers and the like... That's what got her into law enforcement, anyhow...*"

"You already know the answer, my dear. You said Harry told you."

Rose nodded slowly. "You worked with Arithmancers..."

Hermione's lips turned upward in a lazy smile. "Yes. Yes, I did."

*

17 June 2000

Hermione Granger was frustrated. She scratched lines through what she'd just written in her small, black notebook and tore out the last few pages, incinerating them with a non-verbal *Incendio*.

He wasn't here. Damn it, he was supposed to be here! All of her calculations had said that he would be shopping on L'Rue Sauge in downtown wizarding Paris on the seventeenth of June around ten o'clock in the morning.

He wasn't here.

And she'd been looking. She sat at a small table for two outside a charming café on a heavily trafficked street in downtown wizarding Paris had been sitting there for over an hour, in fact, watching the crowd move to and fro, searching.... She had been surreptitiously casting all sorts of spells and charms ones to track or locate a person, and one even to Summon them. She supposed he was good at deflecting such charms, but he didn't know she was there, in France, actively looking for him.

She hoped he didn't.

She'd made discreet inquiries with two of her French-born colleagues from St. Mungo's, Philippe and Margot. They were people she trusted to be quiet on the subject of her disappearance and where she was Margot had been a good friend, a fellow intern, and Philippe was a visiting specialist who loathed all of his colleagues and most of his subordinates, save Hermione, for some reason known only to Merlin himself. She smiled at the thought of her weekly tea with the highly irascible and flamboyantly French Philippe Demers. The man was "far too well-dressed for his age and damned impossible to deal with!" to quote Lavender Brown, but then, Lavender Brown couldn't speak fluent French and talk about the medical theories of Leonardo de Vinci. Hermione felt a bit smug about that and silently preened herself before regrouping her train of thought...

She had asked Philippe and Margot where she would go to locate someone wishing to hide, where she could find a registry of French citizens.... Neither of her friends had proved overly helpful in the long run. Margot had spoken of 'family connections,' but Hermione had yet to meet any Caron in Paris.

Hell, Hermione had yet to find anything remotely related to Severus Snape in Paris.

Viktor had given her precious little to go on, after all. She thought of Viktor's last letter, the one she had long since memorized...*and then to see him in the café, completely comfortable and in public! And so near to Paris (he divides himself between Paris and Capois, he said)...*

When she had left for France, she'd hardly given thought to how difficult and expensive it might be to actually find her former professor. Paris was huge, Capois was apparently small logic dictated that she start in Capois.

The problem was, no one seemed to know where Capois was. Rather, no one was willing to tell her where it was. And no amount of spells or charms could reveal its location.

Dejected, she had set to looking in wizarding Paris, which was just about as productive as looking for someone in the entirety of Muggle London. Britain had a relatively small wizarding population, and places like Diagon Alley typically only attracted individuals claiming heritage in Great Britain. Wizarding Paris, on the other hand, was enormous, and as such it was the meeting place of wizards and witches on the Continent. It was the wizarding city with the most history, it had the largest wizarding underground Hermione had ever seen, and on top of all that, there were about four different conferences meeting this weekend alone, which made her search for Severus Snape all the more difficult. She was still learning how to route herself through Paris, and the French were a damned private lot, so she wasn't getting any help from their Ministry on locating a private citizen.

Severus Snape had certainly picked the perfect city in which to hide in plain sight.

Which was what he was doing, Hermione was certain. Snape wouldn't sit in a basement and only come out after dark: he would go about his everyday life, conducting business, being seen in public, and he'd execute his plan with uncommon levels of stealth and skill. It was what he had done for over twenty years as a double agent, and she could hardly see him changing his ways now.

She sipped her coffee and dejectedly put the pen she'd been tapping down on the table. She picked up the calculations sheet one last time to check for details... for anything she might have missed... *there has to be something....*

"Pardon me, Mademoiselle, but may I see the sheet of paper you are holding?" a voice sounded behind her.

Hermione spun around in her chair, only to lose hold of her coffee. She watched as the paper cup fell to the ground and splattered the remaining few drops down on the cobblestone.

"Oh, *excusez-moi, Monsieur.*" Hermione reached for her wand to *Evanescio* the mess, but the gentleman standing behind her beat her to it.

"*Merci,*" she murmured, turning again to look at the gentleman, who was shrinking his wand back down to size.

He was a tall man in a black Muggle suit, very stylish. Armani, if Hermione had to guess, but then Hermione didn't know designers very well. He looked to be in his fifties and had a kind, if worn, look to his face. He still had a full head of hair and a beard to match, both streaked with silver. And his eyes she recognized those eyes. They looked very familiar....

Hermione opened her mouth, about to speak in French, when it dawned on her that he'd addressed her in English. "Do I know you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

The man smiled. "Pierre Caron, at your service. The name should be familiar," he said, a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

Hermione grinned in comprehension. "I worked with a Margot Caron at St. Mungo's " she started.

"Then you are Hermione Granger." Pierre smiled. "I thought I recognized you. The papers, you see. You are quite the celebrity in Great Britain, Mademoiselle."

Hermione flushed. "You must keep up with the *Prophet*. I've read very little news of Britain here in the French papers. You're actually the first person who has recognized me since I've been here." *Thank Merlin*, she added in her head. She paused. "How are you related to Margot?"

"I'm her father's brother," he informed her. "May I sit? The calculations you look to be doing are quite exquisite."

Hermione gestured towards the chair opposite hers. "You're an Arithmancer?" she asked, curious.

He waved his hands, deflecting her admiring tone. "Oh, not quite an Arithmancer, though I use the practice frequently in my work. My academic training centered in the field, and from what I could vaguely see of your paper, your abilities far surpass mine when I was your age."

Hermione stiffened at his mention of the paper. *What exactly did he see? Calculations are impersonal, but still....* "It's a bit rude to stare at others' papers in cafés, would you not agree, Monsieur Caron?" she found herself saying.

He graciously bowed his head, conscious of the gaffe. "I apologize; it was quite rude of me. Curiosity can indeed be a sin, Mademoiselle. But I thought I recognized you," he said, leaning back in the chair and crossing his legs, "from both the papers and the last letter Margot sent the family. There was a picture of the two of you in it from a New Year's party, and my memory is infallible, I assure you."

Hermione sincerely hoped it wasn't a copy of the same New Years picture Margot had given *her*.

And did he say *infallible* memory?

"Do you have an eidetic memory, sir?" she asked, her curiosity overcoming both her offense and nervousness.

He nodded and smiled.

I've never met anyone with an eidetic memory... I wonder if I could ask a few questions... No, Hermione, stop! Vigilance. Constant. Vigilance.

She went on guard again and was fairly certain that Pierre saw her do so, judging by the amused smile on his lips. "So, I'm a friend of your niece," Hermione said, leaning on the table and meeting his stare head-on. It was a bit disconcerting to look into Margot's eyes on a fifty-something-year-old man. "And my calculations are... advanced. Yet I ask, why approach me in a café when I have no way of knowing who you are?"

"Because Margot asked me," he said simply.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Margot did not know I'd be at this café today."

"No," he said, shrugging. "This meeting is sheer dumb luck."

That phrase sounded much more intelligent when accompanied by a French accent, Hermione decided. She shook herself back to what Pierre was saying.

"...or fate, whichever you'd prefer. But she said that you were here searching for something and that you'd had no luck inquiring with our vaunted Ministry of Magic," he finished, raising his eyebrows at the word 'vaunted.' Hermione snorted. "And so," he continued, "she asked if I'd be able to assist you."

"And your business could profit my search?" Hermione asked, conscious that Margot had apparently told her uncle she was looking for something and not someone.

Thank you, dear, she voiced silently in her head.

"I'm in law enforcement and investigation, Mademoiselle," Pierre said. "A private firm that uses advanced techniques in Arithmancy, Divination, and various other enterprises in order to predict the whereabouts of individuals, the likelihood of crime in certain areas, and other... private projects."

Hermione's mind reeled at the potential possibilities.

"So, I was going to give you a social call and offer my services in your search. You are a friend of Margot's, and Margot is my favorite niece," he said simply, with a tone of finality.

"Margot is an only child; she's probably your *only* niece," Hermione said, grinning.

Pierre laughed. "Well, she is a dear girl forgive me, a dear *woman* and I am certain that even if I had other nieces she would be my favorite."

Hermione smiled, comfortable for the first time since Pierre had sat down. "So, you want to help me?"

He nodded. "And offer you a job."

If she had been drinking coffee, she surely would have spat it out. As she had no coffee, she made do with gaping at the man across from her.

"Excuse me?" she asked, shaking her head in slight disbelief.

"I had planned on merely introducing myself and offering you my firm's services, but when I saw the calculations you were doing...." He clucked his tongue. "Impressive, Mademoiselle Granger. *Very* impressive, especially for a woman who has spent the last three years of her life in the medical field; a field which decidedly does not offer higher training in the field of Arithmancy. And I know for a fact that Hogwarts' curriculum in Arithmancy is not the most rigorous of the European academies, so I must conclude that much of your knowledge is self-taught and that, more importantly, you have a natural affinity for the practice."

"A job?" she asked, nearly whispering.

She had quite an allowance to go on from her parents, but their generosity wouldn't last forever, and she'd long since lost the job at St. Mungo's....

Pierre stroked his beard for a moment. "Yes," he said. "How about this. Come to the firm tomorrow morning I can take you myself and you can talk with my partners and some employees and get a feel for how it would suit you."

"Is it a top-secret sort of business?" Hermione asked, images of private investigation firms from Muggle films coming to her mind.

Pierre shrugged. "Eh," he said. "It's a private consulting firm. We're not the government, Mademoiselle. Just people hired for a cause."

"And your causes are?" she asked, caution rising in her. *Guns for hire? Thank you, no.*

Pierre burst into laughter. "Margot said you were politically spirited. And ethical," he added. "I assure you, Mademoiselle, that we are... how would you put it? The good guys," he said. "Or the ambiguous ones, in a worst case scenario. We do not work for dark wizards and witches, nor are we sponsored by the government. We are discriminating in who we choose to take on as our clientele."

"Your services are in demand, then?"

He gave a definite nod. "Quite."

And with that Hermione understood that the subject was closed.

Pierre stood. "Margot took the liberty of giving me the address of your flat. Is three o'clock tomorrow convenient for you?"

Hermione nodded dumbly, the last few minutes flying by her. "Yes," she said, finding her voice. "Yes, it is."

Pierre nodded as she stood to shake his hand goodbye. "I realize I have thrown a lot of information at you in these past few minutes, Mademoiselle Granger. I would apologize, but with talents like yours, you were bound to be snatched up sooner or later, and I think you would very much enjoy working with my firm."

"Margot gave me a glowing recommendation, then?" Hermione asked, a smile on her face.

Pierre smiled. "She did." He hesitated, as if he wanted to say more.

"Yes?" Hermione asked, tilting her head quizzically. "Did you have another question for me?"

"Margot said you were here on private business. She said you did not want to be found by individuals who may come looking for you," he said quietly.

Hermione stilled. "That is true," she said quietly.

"Are you running from the law, Mademoiselle? I am compelled to ask," he said, waving a hand.

"No," Hermione said, swallowing. "I'm not. I'm just... getting a new start is all." *There, that's a respectable answer.*

"You invested a lot of time in St. Mungo's training only to fly away without a moment's notice. Would you do the same here?"

"I haven't even seen the business, Monsieur Caron. Are you interviewing me already?" she asked, her tone a bit harsher than she'd intended.

He sighed. "You seem a woman who keeps your commitments. I wonder what happened in England, that you so suddenly abandoned all you'd been working for at St. Mungo's."

Professor Snape happened, that's what. He surfaced.

But she wasn't about to tell anyone that that was why she was here. Not Ginny, not Luna, not Harry, not Ron, and she certainly hadn't told Margot or Philippe when inquiring about vehicles of search within the French Ministry.

She hadn't even dealt with *whyshe* was here, damn it! He had long since been exonerated by the Ministry... It was her own fascination, her own obsession....

Goodness.

"Life happened, Monsieur Caron. It can turn on us suddenly, can it not?" she said after a long moment.

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with her answer. "That it can, that it can. Life is unpredictable, no?"

She smiled. "I didn't think to leave Le Café with a job offer, Monsieur. But I did *Oui*, unpredictable."

Pierre smiled at Hermione as she held out her hand in parting. "Three o'clock tomorrow?" she asked.

"I will come by," he assured her.

"*Merci*," she said, grinning widely as she released his hand and watched the older man walk out into the street and Apparate away.

*

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

A/N: I've no idea how to begin this; it's been months since *Sage* was updated. I sincerely apologize to everyone for the wait; I had an exceedingly difficult semester at uni, and studies must come first. Hopefully this next semester will offer me a bit more time; I cannot promise regular updates, but one of my New Years resolutions is to write every day, so *Sage* will certainly be seeing more attention.

That said, I'd like to offer a huge barrel of hugs to the much beloved Shug, who is beta, cheerleader, and fangirl wrapped up into one beautifully delightful, irreplaceable package.

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Three Weeks Later: Thursday

"Shit!" she screeched, as her coffee cup fell to the floor with a sickening crack. She groaned, reached for her wand, and neatly stitched the scattered pottery back together in two seconds flat. The cup quickly flew back into her hand, and she reached for the coffee pot just as it reached the two-cup mark. She smiled widely. Perfect timing, all things considered. Save the minor spill, it was shaping up to be a very good day.

*

Twenty minutes later, Hermione was walking out of her flat and across *L'Rue Sauge*. There was an extra bounce to her walk, coffee cup in hand, hair suitably coiffed, she felt better than she had all week. She'd presented her first major project in front of Pierre and the entire board of directors for the organization she'd worked with on Monday morning, and she'd been nauseous the whole time. In fact, the entire weekend had only been a gradual climb in tiredness and nausea, with several headaches to boot. Monday's presentation had only gone well with the assistance of an overpriced potion which was a combination of Nausea Suppressant, Energy Draught, Flu-Be-Gone, and Headache Reliever. Hermione could have brewed it herself had she been feeling better. The potion, however, had reacted badly with her breakfast that day, thus the nausea during the presentation, and after the meeting she had practically thrown up her stomach in the first floor bathroom. Pierre had followed her in and demanded that she rest.

The fact that he was the one who had her working sixty hours a week was not her fault, though she had admittedly chosen to put that many hours in her projects. And her body had still been in distress from the emotional exhaustion of the trip to Paris in the first place.

Speaking of which, she had not thought of Severus Snape in a full week. She shook her head dazedly as she turned off onto another street. She had to remember to keep trying to track him, but with all the work she was doing, that had already fallen by the wayside.

If you're not here for Snape, then why are you here? she asked herself. She shook the thought away angrily, an action expressed physically through the sudden sharp, hard clicks of her low heels against the cobblestone street. The truth was, she enjoyed her work. She enjoyed her co-workers... some of them, at least. She had yet to find a good friend, and she mostly worked with men. That wasn't necessarily a problem, but she would almost feel too much like she was trying to... replace... Harry and Ron.

Harry and Ron...

She walked faster, breathing a bit heavier, and exhaled sharply with relief upon seeing the tall building looming ahead of her.

Bureau d'Enquêtes et de Recherches Privée

Pierre Caron, Esq.

The black and silver print beckoned her, and she quickly walked inside.

*

Hermione was just settling in her office when Pierre stepped in the open doorway. He had a broad smile on his face. "I see you're doing much better," he said, hands in his pockets as he leaned against the frame. "That is good. The Poulin family was very happy with your presentation, Hermione," he added, his tone still fatherly but a bit more formal. "I was impressed as well, all things considered." The corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

She suppressed a chuckle and leaned forward on her desk, resting her elbows on the desktop with her hands tightly clasped. "I am glad," she said, a genuine smile on her face. "It was a fascinating proposal."

"Yes, well, next time, try not to suppress illness for so long, *oui*?" Pierre asked, eyebrows arched.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said, suppressing a smirk. *What the bloody hell else am I supposed to do on the day of a massive presentation?*

Pierre paused. "And try not to send your thoughts so clearly across the room, as well. Have you ever considered Occlumency?"

Hermione gripped her pen harder. "Yes, sir," she thought.*Severus*. She shut that thought out of her head quickly, and shook her head. "I should get to work."

"Ah, yes. Many new projects today, and it profits me little if I distract my employees," Pierre chuckled. "It is good to know you are better." And with that, he nodded politely and exited her doorway.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. "Severus," she whispered.*Damn it, Hermione*, she told herself,*get to work*.

*

A few hours later

"So if the property of six hundred is... and then... hmm, that can't be right," she muttered to herself. Hermione was hunched over her desk, elbows resting on the table, while her fingers rubbed her temples vigorously. She was fairly certain that she was going to stare a hole through the paper and her desk, but she didn't care. She leaned back in her chair and swirled around, her thumb and forefinger swinging her pencil around in an agitation that easily belied the kinetic energy coursing through her system. She hadn't felt this alive in weeks... ever since she'd left for Paris.

"Okay, focus," she muttered, leaning over her desk again, looking at her calculations, reviewing the assignment in her head. "If the riot happens, which points will be the most vulnerable for attack..."

"Hermione?"

Her head shot up and looked at the man standing in the doorway. He looked entirely too large to be in her office; everything was small, and he was blatantly conspicuous: tall, hulking, with a head like a bullet.

Not her type. How many times did she have to turn him down for him *to get the point*?

Louis. Dear Lord. She took a deep breath in and composed her countenance.

"It's past eleven o'clock, Hermione," he repeated with a wide smile and grinning, lascivious-looking eyes. "Do you want to come to lunch with me?"

"I'd rather you spoke French, Louis," she said edgily, trying desperately to be polite. "I need to practice French more than you need to show off your English."

Louis guffawed and fixed her again with his stubborn gaze. "You really need to come to lunch. You don't want to overwork yourself, do you?"

You don't know the Bat-Bogey Hex. You don't know the Bat-Bogey Hex she repeated to herself as her fingers clenched around the pen, which, come to think of it, was looking relatively pointed...

Louis had seen fit to situate himself in her doorway and attempt to intimidate her with that predatory gaze every Thursday since she'd been here, which meant that this was the third Thursday he'd propositioned her for lunch. The first week she'd been late to meet Pierre for her first assignment, so she'd been able to quickly escape. Last week she had feigned illness *well, it wasn't too feigned* and asked for a rain check.

Which had clearly been a big mistake *a massive* mistake, actually since here he was, back for his rain check, looking more imposing than ever. How she going to get rid of him without getting fired in the process was beyond her...

"Hermione?" he asked expectantly, tilting his head, looking slightly amused and very annoyed. "Come with me." He stuck out a hand stubbornly.

She could have sworn she literally growled.*Calm, calm, count to ten, count to ten...*

"Louis..." Hermione began firmly but was abruptly cut off when she saw a flying purse come out of nowhere and hit Louis in the head. Hard.

"*Merde!*" he yelled, doubling over, clutching his head.

"*Trou du cul* Can't leave the women alone, can you, filthy *chien*? You are on probation for harassment and you still prey on the new girl?" a voice said loudly. Hermione finally saw the attacker when long, sinewy arms and flying ebony hair came into view and pushed Louis down to the ground just outside of Hermione's doorway.

Hermione gaped in shock the woman was all of five feet, maybe a little more, but she looked long, thin, and absolutely terrifying. She was angry, clearly powerful, and was clad in a black sheath and three-inch stilettos.

"Bitch," Louis ground out, but the woman drew her wand and with one swipe had him flying down the hallway. Hermione heard the great glass doors at the entrance slam shut, presumably behind him.

The woman shook her long mane of hair out behind her back and turned in the doorway to face Hermione.

"Not a friend of yours, I hope?" she asked, leaning against the wood, quirking an eyebrow.

Hermione managed to pull her jaw up and took in the sight before her. The woman was fair-skinned, with fine bone structure and piercing, vibrant violet eyes that shot to the core of a person. The energy radiating off her was electrifying.

"Decidedly not," Hermione said, laughter giving way to the shock. "That was absolutely incredible. Will you get fired for it?" Sudden concern welled up in her.

The woman laughed. "Of course not. Louis has a reputation in this company. I'll tell Pierre, and that will be the straw that gets his, as you English say, bloody arse fired."

"He wasn't that bad yet," Hermione said, guilt washing over her.

"Trust me, he would have been. Doesn't know when to stop, doesn't know the word 'no' you know the type. Pierre has a three-strike system for sexual harassment, and this was the third one."

"I wouldn't call it..." Hermione said.

"Has he done this before?" the woman asked, standing straight in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

"Yes." Hermione slumped her shoulders.

She paused. "I see. You're Hermione Granger, correct?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Pierre just hired me."

"That man has been singing your praises." She gave a wide smile, her eyes sparkling. "I'm Cosette, by the way. Cosette Bedard," she said, walking across Hermione's

office and extended her hand.

Hermione shook it gratefully. "And how did you know Louis would be here?"

Cosette smoothed the front of her sheath and Summoned a chair from the wall, positioning it next to Hermione.

"Things get around," she said, sitting. "We're a quiet company, not too much interpersonal work, you know, everything's confidential so you're working solo or in a small group, but the chap next door to you is a friend of mine and mentioned that Louis had been by a few times."

"And he's tried this with other women?"

"Two others, and me," Cosette said.

"But you said three-strike," Hermione started, trying to keep up with the woman's abounding energy. Her hair was still flying, it was so charged from its earlier burst of energy.

"Pierre didn't count his encounter with me." Cosette grinned.

"Why?"

"Because I shoved him up against a wall, slapped him upside the head, and told him that if he ever tried that again he'd have little left identifying him as a man."

"What happened?" Hermione asked, laughing, entirely curious.

"Louis laughed, so I smacked him harder and told him that unless he avoided me, I'd sic my boyfriend on him."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What does your boyfriend do?"

"He's a boring Ministry bureaucrat by day who does contract chemical work for the Muggle government by night," Cosette said, smiling. "I'm very proud of him."

"That is fantastic," Hermione said, chuckling. "He's Muggle-born, then?"

"Yes," Cosette said with a slight bristle. Hermione gave an amused smile; the woman had no need to fear Muggle intolerance from her. Not that Cosette knew that.

"I'm Muggle-born as well; no need for theatrics," she said grinning, spinning her chair from side to side. "I just love the idea of combining Muggle academic theory with wizard practice."

Cosette grinned widely. "You should meet him," she said, pensive. "And I do believe you're late to lunch, as Louis so eloquently pointed out, so I'll take you. My treat." She stood, sent the chair flying back against Hermione's wall with a thud.

I need to take lessons from this woman. "How have I not met you before?" Hermione asked. "I've been here for three weeks, and I haven't met many people, but where on earth have they been keeping you?" she asked incredulously.

"I've been in Cancun, Mexico with Henri. I had some work to do there, he had to present at a conference, and we turned the last week of it into a ~~aa~~*excellent* vacation," Cosette said with a wicked grin. "The Mexicans know their liquor, let me tell you. Outstanding. I'm thinking of doing a girl's Margarita night during one of the company lunch hours next week."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "A Margarita night during the lunch hour?"

"Oh, a theme lunch, you know. Theme decorations, lots of ice, lots of lime; get this place loosened up,*ou*? It'll be fabulous, darling. Of course, no one would work for the rest of the day, but that's forgivable. Maybe next Friday. I'll talk to Pierre," Cosette said as she and Hermione walked out of the office.

"And what do you do here?" Hermione asked, clipping her flyaway hair back.

"Oh, I'm the Sales Director, which is a boring way of saying I do the recruiting, the schmoozing, and the boozing," Cosette said as they arrived at the front doors of Caron Investigations, pushing the doors out into the wide open sun of the Parisian streets.

Hermione laughed, as she had no idea what else to do. Cosette lightly touched her arm.

"Are you alright with Side-Along? There's this fabulous little place in Capois; you'll love it." Cosette shot a lightning-brilliant smile to Hermione.

Hermione's mind was reeling. *Capois*...

"Are you alright, Hermione?" Cosette asked, now concerned.

"Yes," Hermione said quickly, brushing a curl from her face. "Yes, I'm alright with Side-Along. Sounds great."

"Well hold on," Cosette said with a wicked smile, and grasped Hermione's arm. "Capois, here we come."

Pop!

*

Rough translations: *merde* is shit, *trou du cul* is asshole, and *chien* is dog. Filthy language, I know. Is it too cliché to say pardon my French? ;-)

This was a short chapter, but longer ones are to come. :-)

Chapter Seven

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: I keep forgetting this. It's clearly not mine. Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Who thought an update would come so quickly? :-) Many thanks to Shug for her lightning-fast beta'ing and to Septentrion for her assistance with French translations. Any errors are mine.

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When Hermione was a young girl, her Nana read her fairy tales from an old, leather bound storybook. It was soft to the touch, creased and worn, that had been handwritten and illustrated by her Nana's Nana, passed down through the years, mothers to daughters. Hermione's mother, Jane, had been a rough-and-tumble tomboy, more interested in playing with her brothers than in listening to fairy stories; therefore, Nana had passed the stories down to Hermione. The book only contained three tales, those of Cinderella, Beauty & the Beast, and Bluebeard.

Hermione's favorite was Beauty & the Beast, the story of a young maiden who takes her father's punishment in light of his foolishness and her sisters' selfishness, a strong, gentle spirit in the face of the Beast's tyranny. It was different from the Disney film she had seen with her cousins during the hols, as it was closer to the traditional tale, but there were some parallels between the book and film. Nana had made Beauty a daydreamer, a great reader (her own addition to the tale, Hermione thought), but capable of putting the Beast in his place through kind yet clearly truthful remarks. And the illustrations were beautiful, the careful pencil outlines barely visible through the iridescent watercolors. The moat around the Beast's castle almost appeared as though it was glistening in the sunlight, but it was the village that her ancestress had drawn that never failed to capture Hermione's attention. The drawing depicted the main street to the village just under the grand archway, displaying the town's name in etched stone. On either side of the street were shops, small, quaint stone and stucco buildings with the clear, delineated edges and fine trim particular to the French Provincial style. Painted wooden signs hung from the shop doors with names like *La Gourmandine* and *l'Apothicaire* written in calligraphy. A small café was drawn at the end of the street with white wire chairs and tables outside, the distant sun illuminating the entire street.

This was the image at the forefront of Hermione's mind as she and Cosette walked under the stone archway with 'Capois' etched in limestone. Hermione stopped dead in her tracks at the similarity of the image. Her breath caught. "It's so beautiful," she whispered.

"Hermione?" Cosette asked, raising a quizzical brow.

Hermione shook her head, clearing her thoughts from the reminiscent fog they'd nestled into. "There was a storybook my Nana used to read to me... the village looked just like this, I swear. It's so beautiful. I never thought to see anything like it," she said, a smile spreading across her face. "It's almost like a dream."

Cosette gave a warm smile. "I take it for granted," she said, taking time to look down the street herself. She led Hermione out of the cobblestone street and onto a gardenized median. They sat down on a black wire bench, watching the hustle and bustle of witches and wizards walking, going in and out of shops, Apparating and Disapparating, the random bursts of energy being emitted from a group of small children, presumably out on a class trip. "I was raised here," she said. "This is a protected village, actually. You can't find it on a map; it's private." She shrugged. "There are quite a few wizarding estates in the area, and the village sprung up as the center of country life. At first, it was only the elite families who could access the area, protected as it is, but now all French wizards and witches can access it."

"Access it?" Hermione asked.

"There's an incantation you have to say when Apparating here."

"I didn't hear you say anything."

"Nonverbal."

"Ah," Hermione said, shielding her eyes from the sun. "It seems a bit... exclusive, don't you think, to only allow French citizens?"

"Well, others can come, but they have to be with a French witch or wizard, as you are now," Cosette said, playfully patting her arm. "And, honestly, not all French citizens know about it, or where it's at, and you have to know where it's at to Apparate here. And know the incantation," she added as an afterthought. "It's long since become a hideaway for the famous and for those seeking anonymity."

Severus. Hermione shook the thought from her mind, ignoring her suddenly-racing heart, and attempted an easy laugh. "An interesting contradiction."

Cosette grinned. "*C'est la vie.* People come here to get away. It's a beautiful place to live it's quiet, you're away from everything, from Paris, from the gossip, from the politics... it's just country life here." Her face was soft, Hermione noticed she was watching the people, but it was almost as if she were looking at ghosts, memories long forgotten floating in front of her eyes.

"Was your family from here originally?" Hermione asked, brushing a curl from her face.

Cosette shifted uncomfortably in her seat and wrung her hands together. "My mother was a singer of some renown, in her day. We kept a house here."

"And you'd rather not talk about it," Hermione said quietly.

Cosette shrugged and slouched against the park bench. "My mother died several years ago. I haven't frequented the village since."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. She was too young." Cosette paused. "It was a drug overdose," she offered suddenly, awkwardly. "Muggle ones. Are you familiar with heroin?"

Hermione nodded dumbly.

"Well," Cosette said, fluffing her hair, "she got involved with a Muggle-born wizard in her band. Lowlife," she said, her voice dripping with derision. "He was into mixing Muggle drugs together with magical ones." She breathed in deep, calming herself. "I don't know why *Maman* got involved with him. Stupid woman."

"Drugs make people do stupid things," Hermione said quietly.

"Do you have experience with Muggle drugs?" Cosette asked.

Hermione shook her head. Cosette snorted. "Of course you don't."

"Honestly, I've cut most of my ties with the Muggle community," Hermione said. "I see my parents from time to time, but not much. I'm comfortable in Muggle London and Paris I love being in the city but I've lost contact with most of my relatives and all my friends from primary school days. My life has not... leant itself to keeping those ties."

"The Dark Lord and such?" her companion asked.

"Dark Lord?" Hermione asked, automatically on guard.

"I always thought it sounded more glamorous than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Cosette said, gesturing quotation marks, a goofy grin on her face. "That title inspires so much fear, don't you think?"

Hermione nodded. "Fear of a name increases the fear of a thing itself," she quoted.

"And who said that?"

Hermione sighed. "A very great, powerful, confused man." *Who did bad things to good people. Severus. Harry. Oh, gods, Harry. Severus. Stop it, Hermione.*

"Dumbledore," she heard Cosette say. Hermione didn't reply.

"Would you like to go to lunch? It's too beautiful today to dwell on such things," Cosette said, standing up and smoothing the front of her sheath.

The clock tower began to ring, and Hermione's head jerked at the realization. "And we have to get back soon!"

Cosette guffawed. "We're taking a late lunch and are both work-a-holics. No one will miss us. Come on, we'll go to my aunt's café. Great service." She winked playfully and took Hermione's arm in hers, escorting her as she would an intimate friend. Which, Hermione supposed, was what they were quickly becoming.

*

Lunch was short, peppered with light, animated conversation of their schooldays. Cosette regaled her with stories of her time at Beauxbatons, and Hermione spoke of Harry and Ron. It was, she reflected, the first opportunity she'd had to speak of them, but it had been soothing to reflect, to remember, to reassure her of why it was best for her to be here. Of Severus Snape, she did not speak, but merely said she had come to Paris for *un changement de décor*. There would be time for such truths later. Much later.

Cosette's Aunt Amelie was a lovely older woman with frosty silver hair, pink at the tips slim, energetic, very much like Cosette. "I'm much more like her than my maman. Everyone's always said so," Cosette had said with a conspiratorial grin, to which Hermione had chuckled. Such a statement could hardly be contradicted; one had only to see them together to see the resemblance.

"Did you stay much with her?" Hermione asked as they got up to leave, stealing a last nibble of croissant.

Cosette reached for her clutch. "I ran away from home the summer I turned fourteen."

"To Amelie's?"

Cosette nodded. "Everyone knew where I had gone, including *Maman*, but to her credit, she let me stay there."

"And you lived there...?"

"Whenever I was home from school. I would visit *Maman*, but we didn't live well together. It was best that I stay with Amelie." Cosette paused. "Did you ever run away?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but I stayed most of my summers with the Weasleys. Ron's family," she added. "It would have been too dangerous to go home."

Cosette nodded. "*Oui*. A wise decision. But you preferred the Weasleys to your own house?"

Hermione shrugged as Cosette took her arm and lead her out into the street. "My house was always quiet. Not cold, but not warm either. My parents were always at their practice. The Weasleys, however " she could not help but suppress a smile "were warm, loud, populous that's putting it mildly."

"Would you like to walk around briefly before we head back?" Cosette asked suddenly.

Hermione beamed and let out a delighted squeal. "Of course!"

*

The countryside was just as picturesque as the town, Hermione found. There were fields of green, meadows of wildflowers lining the country road that splayed out from the cobblestone streets of the town. Large hills bluffs, Hermione's father called them surrounded the town's perimeter. They were covered in trees in the dense bloom of summer, some of which looked just poised to reddened with the change of season. Hermione could see large estates in the distance, looming ancestral mansions that looked to be the size of small castles. One spot on the treeline, however, caught her eye, and she walked towards it, drawn in its direction as she started tramping through a field.

"Hermione?" Cosette called. "What the hell are you doing?" she asked, trekking through the field after her. The women quickly stopped walking, as stiletto heels did not lend themselves to walking in soft meadows. Hermione pointed to a small stone cottage sitting just along the tree line.

"What house is that?" she asked, squinting in the sunlight.

"That old thing?" Cosette asked, hands on her hips. "That's the Prince cottage. They're an old wizarding family British, actually all but died out. No one's lived there for years. It's quaint, though. Shame it's abandoned." She paused. "Are you coming?" she asked, starting to walk back towards the path.

Hermione's heart almost leapt out of her chest. "Would you give me a minute?" she asked. She pulled out her wand and pointed it at her sunglasses. "There, now, that's better," she murmured as she held up the newly transfigured binoculars to her eyes.

The stone cottage was nestled just beneath the tree line on the ridge, and just behind the wildly overgrown pastures that she was currently standing in. It was in the Provincial style, as was most of Capois, but there was something softer to its edges: not as clean cut and stylized. Simpler, less refined. It was larger than Hermione would have expected, but then Severus wouldn't have had much say in his ancestors' architectural preferences. But the stone exterior, the shuttered windows, the location... it was certainly private. Maybe he would like it.

Severus. Dear God, she'd been so distracted. He could be here. Could have been here...

"Hermione?" Cosette called.

"Hold on!" Hermione called back and trudged further through the grass, her heels sinking into the ground, toenails picking up dirt and muck as she walked.

"What are you doing?" Cosette called.

"I'm just having a look!" she replied as she waded through the last bit of tall grass. She lost her footing and landed on the recently cleared lawn.

A recently cleared lawn.

He had to be here. This was where he stayed when he was in Capois. *A family home tucked away, hidden in a hidden town... how much more perfect could this possibly get...*

Her heartbeat clunked with excitement; the promise of possibility thrummed through her veins. Her breathing came a bit heavier as she dusted off her pants and walked up to the front windows. They were thick glass, old glass, the type that distorted what you could see inside. *Charmed as well, probably*, she thought as she pressed her face to the glass. She could barely make out the walls and saw what she thought was a chimney.

"Hermione!" she heard Cosette call, loudly, more worried this time. "We need to be getting back!"

"Just a minute!" Hermione said, walking around the side of the house. There was a window looking into the cellar, and she got down on her knees and peered in. She could see the interior clearly. There was a work table, a work bench, and rows and rows of shelves along the wall, filled to the brim with jars of ingredients. *Potions ingredients. He's here.*

Suddenly, she saw a flash of black dart across the cellar and stifled a scream. She froze for a moment, heart beating wildly out of her chest. *What if...*

Something jumped right in front of her in the window, and now she did scream, falling off her kneeling perch. The piercing green eyes of a black cat stared at her from the window's interior ledge, and she scrambled to her feet, kicked off her shoes, picked them up, and proceeded to bolt through the meadow and back to the path, where Cosette stood impatiently waiting with an incredulous look on her face.

Hermione imagined she looked a frazzled sight, her frizzy hair streaming, clothes askew, shoes in hand, panting breath.

"Is your curiosity satisfied?" Cosette asked.

Hermione nodded.

"Well, put your shoes on," Cosette said, tugging Hermione's clothes aright. "And you'll tell me what that was all about later."

Hermione's heart, which was just now starting to calm, nodded quickly. "Let's go."

Cosette quirked an eyebrow but grabbed Hermione's arm and Apparated back to Paris.

*

An hour later

Hermione sat at her desk, staring numbly at the papers she held in her hand. These numbers should be making sense to her, but they weren't. They were jumbled lines thrown together; the symbols were meaningless, as symbols are when their significance is lost.

Trespassing. Spying. Stalking. Trespassing. Spying. Stalking. The words echoed through her mind like a mantra. The adrenaline that had coursed through her system in Capois had long been replaced by a sickening, sinking numbness—a leech, sucking her energy, sucking her sanity.

What am I doing?

Her mind gave no answer; her office provided no solace.

Fuck.

*

After work

Thud.

Hermione's purse landed unceremoniously on her kitchen counter, knocking over a plastic cup that proceeded to fall to the ground. She strode down the hallway angrily, chucking her coat in an open closet and kicking her shoes against the wall. She threw open the door to her bedroom and was briefly incensed by the mess she had left before realizing that it would give her the opportunity to exorcise her frustration with... well, herself. With great pomp, she peeled her sheets back from the bed and shook them out.

Cleaning always helped.

*

Hermione Granger's frustration had been purged through a vicious and thorough cleaning of her *bourdoir*; consequently, she was feeling much better. She hadn't brought any work home with her and was determined to distract herself. Thus, she sat in her overstuffed armchair with her legs tucked up underneath her, Edith Warton's *The Age of Innocence* in one hand and a glass of 1970 Château Montrose in the other, a housewarming gift from Pierre. Hermione didn't think that she very much liked the dark Bordeaux, but she was quite determined to finish the bottle, as it was one of the finest vintages of the late 20th century, according to Pierre, and it would be a shame to let such a fine wine go to waste.

She absently put the book down on the floor and sipped some more wine. The day's events had been... enlightening, to say the least, and the cause of much self-introspection.

Was she really doing the right thing, looking for him?

She rose from her perch and walked over to her desk, its surface softly illuminated by the lamp and the after-hours city light that streamed in from the window. Her journal was open already—she'd been re-reading it in anger—and the papers in it were shuffled askew. She picked up a pen and set her glass down.

Clues, clues, nothing but clues. He's between Paris and Capois, he has a cottage in Capois, I finally know why I couldn't find the village, I understand why he's going between cities, I do calculations, I see his house, but he is nowhere to be found.

And my obsession is scaring the living daylight out of me, to be honest. He's hard to find because he doesn't want to be found. I should just... respect that.

She dropped the pen on the desktop. It wasn't in her to give up. But this... she couldn't handle this. She sighed and put her head in her hands. He was alive and safe. She even knew his residence. What more did she want? Vindication? His name had already been cleared ten times over—*why hasn't he made a public statement? Never mind, dumb question*—so what was she waiting for? An awkward encounter consisting of, "Hello, Professor, I've been obsessing about you for years and left my family, friends, and job in Britain to come to Paris on a whim, because I heard you'd be here so—here I am! What now?"

No, thank you. How embarrassing. Decidedly *not* something she desired.

She just wanted to see him, to have that visual confirmation. *Is that so much?* she thought as she let her hair down from a loose bun and shook it out. *Would that be enough?* She stripped down to her knickers and climbed into bed. *God, it's hot.* She pulled up the thin white sheet to her chin and turned to one side, lying there, thinking, her body illuminated by a ray of moonlight that slipped in through the curtains. *If I'm not here for Severus, who am I here for?*

The thought dimly occurred to her as she fell into sleep that maybe, just maybe, she was here for herself.

*

Present day

The sage candle on the table flickered brightly as Hermione paused. Mother and daughter sat in companionable silence, sipping their wine, eyes downcast.

Hermione set her wine glass on the table and ran her hands over her pant leg to smooth the wrinkles. "So I stopped looking for him," she said, clasping her hands tightly together on her lap.

Rose rested her elbows on the table and looked straight at her mother. "You only looked for a month, Mum. That wasn't very long at all, and you can be patient."

Hermione chuckled. "The operative word there, Rose darling, is *can*." Her eyes glazed over. "Yes, I could have been more patient, but the ridiculousness of it all how it would look to others, to him it got to me. For the first time, it got to me," she said softly.

"You didn't care what Harry and dad and Ginny thought, but you cared what he would think, if he knew," Rose said.

"Yes," Hermione said simply.

Rose tilted her head and saw the sadness in her mother's eyes. Was it from the story she was telling or from the present reality? *Probably both.* But she looked so beautiful just now, her hair spiraling down her shoulders, the flickering candle catching on the flecks of gold in her hair, her hands resting on her lap, legs crossed, still in her work clothes. This was Hermione Granger... this was her mother, right here.

"Looking for something?" Hermione asked her daughter, a gentle amusement in her voice.

Rose cleared her throat. "You just look really beautiful tonight, Mum."

A smile crossed her mother's lips, and her eyes sparkled. "As do you, darling."

Rose smiled. "Well, I'm from good stock."

Her mother snorted.

"So you stopped looking for him, but you still stayed in France?" Rose asked after a moment.

Hermione chuckled. "You never desist, do you?"

Rose grinned. "I blame my genetics."

Both women laughed.

"But, yes," Hermione continued, "yes, I decided to stay in France, even though I stopped searching for Severus." She reached for the bottle of Chianti to pour herself more wine. "I liked my job, you see. The work was challenging far more challenging than anything I'd done in Britain and quite rewarding, as well. Pierre was just brilliant to work for, and the work environment was lovely, save the occasional arse like Louis. And Cosette and I got to be great, great friends," she said, putting the stopper in the bottle.

"And you know, I settled into the Parisian life quickly. It was *un changement de décor* a change in scenery. It was different from everything I knew, and I loved it. I didn't know how long I'd be in Paris, but I knew I didn't want to leave anytime soon. Besides, the money was good," she said with a quirk of a smile. "And it just... fit."

"Sounds like it could still fit you, Mum," Rose said softly and a bit sadly as she watched her mother's countenance light up at the talk of Paris.

Hermione nodded slowly. "It could. But I have a life here, now." She reached across the table to pat Rose's hand. "A house, a career, children, you know " Hermione grinned. "The small things in life."

Rose smiled. "But you were still in France for five years."

"And we bring the conversation back around," Hermione said, tapping the table.

"You did eventually meet him, didn't you?" Rose asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," Hermione said slowly. She drummed her fingers on the side of her wine glass. "What is the saying? You find the things you're looking for when and where you least expect them."

"So when did you see him?" Rose asked.

Hermione sipped her wine. "Well, I actually have Cosette to thank for that..."

Rose leaned in, and the women kept talking into the night, the sage candle flickering between them.

*

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008:

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Another apology for the wait, and another huge thank you to everyone for your kindness and patience. Many, many thanks to my beta Shug. Enjoy the chapter!

*

Past

Months passed, one and then another, some long, others short, all occupied with fascinating, riveting, entirely exhausting work long days, long nights. A similar experience, she thought, to that lived by all of mankind. *It's called work for a reason*, her father's voice called to her, its gruff exterior belying the kindness within. Her parents had been largely absent, particularly in light of the Hogwarts letter, very wrapped up in their work, in their marriage. And Hermione had honestly preferred it that way she had done her best to keep them out of the wizarding world, disconnected from its affairs, largely because of the fact that there was nothing they could do for it, save become the targets of Death Eaters. Locating her parents to Australia had been the best course of action, and they had seen fit to stay in the country after Hermione restored their memories. Frankly, it suited her just fine. It had made it much easier to slip away from Britain, not that her parents would have objected. They knew better than to interfere in their daughter's affairs when she had that determined look about her.

She smiled and laid their most recent letter on the kitchen counter. Her mum had insisted on scuba diving for her birthday, and her father had seen fit to take an underwater camera with them. Some friends who were experienced divers had accompanied them, and they'd subsequently been put on camera duty; the pictures Hermione held in her hand of her mum and dad were hysterical and very sweet. She reached for a magnet and pinned the pictures to her refrigerator, quirked a smile as she did so. There were times when she missed the feel of these photographs, thick, matte pieces, the ones she'd grown up pinning to scrapbooks with her grandmother, ones that did not move, just captured a moment in time still, soft, peaceful. Yes, she missed that.

She fluffed her hair and tugged her sweater close about her. The early November chill bit at her through the thin walls of her flat and seeped in through the window cracks; the fire was not quite enough to warm the entire place. Not that her apartment was large, but the charm of living in a historic building came at a bit of a price in winter. There were certainly more elaborate heating charms she could learn; she simply had never needed them. Not that a lack of necessity had ever been an excuse for her not to learn something in her education, but she thought heating charms were a bit... *boring*, to be honest.

A knock at the door brought her back to the present. "Come in," she called.

Cosette walked in and promptly kicked her shoes off. "Dear Merlin, it is cold outside!" She sniffed. "No coffee?"

"Coming right up," Hermione said, a smile on her face as she reached in the refrigerator for the bag of Columbia. "Would you like anything special in your coffee today, my dear?"

"Like cream or sugar? Heavens, no," Cosette said, laughing as she hung her coat up. "I thought I was going to die when Pierre asked if you kept any chocolate shavings or whipped cream handy. You're British, for God's sake. You're a sparse lot."

Hermione snorted as she poured water into the coffeemaker. "Except when it comes to tea. We put sugar and lemon and such in tea. My parents do, at least."

Cosette walked into the kitchen and stood next to Hermione as the coffee dripped. "Is that a new picture?"

Hermione nodded. "They went scuba diving in Australia."

"Oh *fuck*, scuba diving," Cosette groaned and leaned against the counter. "That implies that it's warm enough to scuba dive. That would ~~feel~~^{be} good right now."

"I know. I am, however, very, *very* pleased that we have a few days off before we leave for Florence," Hermione said as she opened a cupboard and reached for two mugs.

"I'm just happy that we get to go to Florence. Not that I wouldn't go; Henri's presenting, so I'm obligated."

"How awful!" Hermione exclaimed, placing her hand over her heart dramatically. "A weekend alone in Florence with a debonair, dashing, tall, dark, and handsome, brilliant 'what I do is borderline illegal' Ministry bureaucrat who will shag you senseless whenever he's not working." She paused. "You have my sympathies."

Cosette laughed. "I won't be able to *walk*, Hermione."

"*Cosette!*" Hermione shrieked. "That's vulgar, and you are looking at the girl who hasn't got any since May... or April, I can't recall, but don't you *dare* complain to me about having an excuse to be with the man you love in a beautiful country."

"You'll be in Florence, too."

Hermione nodded as she poured herself a cuppa. "With *Pierre*, Cosette. *Pierre*. Our boss."

"An authority figure. Dashing," Cosette said, grinning.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed again, handing Cosette the coffeepot. "You pour your own coffee. Pierre is *not* attractive."

Cosette snorted. "Yes, he is. Older man, distinguished, accomplished, brilliant, bachelor..."

"...womanizer, workaholic, probably an alcoholic, thank you, no," Hermione finished. She sipped her coffee and leaned against the counter in sheer bliss, all her cares forgotten. "There are many fish in the sea."

"And yet you aren't fishing. I know that Ron was a serious boyfriend, but leaving him didn't tear you up," Cosette said practically. "You're ready to get out there again."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not the sort of girl who goes 'out there' again. I'm not the... 'Grand Passion' sort of woman. And I can see where this conversation is going, and I had one with Ron's sister in the spring, so I'll thank you to stop telling me why I need to look for and be open to love."

Cosette sighed. "There is no getting through to you. Men look at you, Hermione, you just don't realize it."

Hermione snorted. "Like Louis? I'll pass," she said, chuckling at the memory.

"Well, do try to find a gorgeous, disposable lover while you're in Florence. Just for the weekend. Please? For me? It'll help me to know that your needs are being taken care of," Cosette said, turning to her friend in mock seriousness.

"I refuse to discuss those kinds of needs with a Frenchwoman," Hermione muttered into her coffee, sending Cosette into hysterics again.

"When do we leave again?" Cosette asked, eyes dancing.

"Two days," Hermione said, clutching her mug for warmth. "Heat is coming."

"It most certainly is." Cosette winked.

Hermione groaned.

*

A few days later, Florence, noon

"Circe, it's hot!" Hermione said, twirling her hair up into a knot at the nape of her neck. She murmured a charm to hold it in place.

"It's the Mediterranean, darling, what did you expect?" Cosette asked with a wink. Her hair was already piled up under a red cap they'd picked up from one of the street vendors. Hermione had eschewed Cosette's offer of a free cap, and she was increasingly regretting her decision. A cap would be fashionable, but, more than that, it'd keep her sweat-soaked, impossibly frizzy hair out of sight.

"I didn't expect it to be this hot in November!" she contested, a bit late on the uptake.

"Global warming, dear it's the latest rage." Cosette grinned.

Pierre chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "Ladies, please. Drink your *limoncello*. It's the finest I've had in several years. Enjoy it while you can." He sipped his drink. "And it is unexpectedly stifling for November. It's never been this hot. I wish I could apologize, but..." He held up his hands. "*C'est la vie*. Now drink," he ordered kindly.

Hermione and Cosette dutifully sipped their *limoncellos*, the white silk umbrella shading their table from the sun's hottest rays. The humidity made the air thick, and the smell of street vendors' wares lazed even to the balcony surprising, that the smells could move even when the heat threatened to stifle and suffocate all who breathed it.

The girls had been loath to sit outside, but Pierre had insisted. The view, he claimed, was one of the best in the city.

Unfortunately, he was right.

They were sitting on the balcony terrace of the bar at *La Galleria degli Uffizi* the Uffizi Gallery. They had arrived in the city only a few hours ago, and Hermione had compiled a list of sites to see in the case that extra time presented itself. The Uffizi, one of the world's premiere art museums, was at the top of her list. Pierre had taken her to the Louvre, so she only thought it fitting that she experience the Uffizi with him as well. Pierre had been to the museum multiple times and had been more than willing to give Hermione and Cosette the grand tour. The women had stood agog in front of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, captivated by its strong yet subtle strokes, by its sensual curves, its lush figures, all praising the form of Venus.

"Madonna or whore, Hermione?" Cosette asked playfully. "Which is she?"

Hermione cocked her head to a side and looked at Venus' eyes straight on. What mysteries of love had been birthed there? She looked knowing but sad, as if this was a duty thrust upon her, at the mercy of her masters or was it a false humility, a knowing of self, an acceptance of purpose?

"She is both," Hermione said slowly. "She is maid and lover, innocence and knowledge all together."

"The ultimate visual expression of what men desire," Cosette snorted. "Well, a man painted her; you can hardly expect anything else."

"She's just a woman, Cos. No more, no less," Hermione murmured.

"A woman who happens to be the goddess of love the female Eros, as it were." Cosette shook her head. "Come on, Pierre's already in the next room."

"Hermione?"

She shook her head. "Yes?"

Cosette cocked her head at her as if annoyed. "You were off in your own world again, is all."

"Cosette was just regaling me with stories of Henri's escapades with the Muggle government. I doubt I should be hearing this *Mademoiselle* Bedard," Pierre said.

Cosette laughed. "But of course you both want to hear!"

"When is Henri meeting us?" Hermione asked.

"We'll have *tapas* and wine around four, then head to the Symposium's opening festivities around seven. Henri is giving the opening lecture tonight," Cosette said.

"He doesn't work with security and contracts, though, does he?" Pierre asked.

"His work is somewhat related to the Symposium's general idea... It's more to stir up controversy than anything else, I think," Cosette said, maintaining a façade of sheer innocence the entire time.

Hermione laughed, turning away to peruse the lunch crowd walking out on the street, eating and drinking and laughing. Pierre and Cosette nattered on in the background, their voices gradually becoming dimmer and dimmer as she closed her eyes and basked in the sounds and even the smells of the Florentine market.

She was too lost in thought to notice the shock of black that slipped in and out of the crowds, moving towards her, or the gaze that fixed on her with a raw, animal-like intensity.

When she felt a shiver go down her spine, she attributed it to the drink.

*

The Symposium, evening

The opening ceremony had been short, sweet, and to the point, and Hermione was immensely appreciative. It was clear that the wine at the Symposium would be of the highest caliber, and if it was all the same to her, the night's festivities could get started right away, and the sooner, the better.

She was sitting in the Grand Ballroom of the *Rossi Hotel*, in a conveniently located aisle seat in the front row, listening to the young, handsome, and brilliant Henri Dubois speak on integrating Muggle chemistry with Potions and Charms work. He was a charismatic speaker, and a damn convincing one, seeing as how he had many of Europe's best and brightest too wrapped up in his genius to notice that his methodology was only slightly illegal in most countries. *So much for controversy*, she thought. But it was no matter; Hermione was sure the laws would be readily accommodated for such brilliance. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that prospect.

The look on Cosette's face, though, was more than enough to convince her to shut up on the subject. Her friend was dressed in a stunning green satin gown that clung to

her every curve in a way that rather reminded Hermione of cling-film. The backless dress had attracted the attention of most every man in the room, and Hermione could hardly say she minded. She rather preferred the attention to be on Cosette and not on her... She wasn't averse to being recognized, but was something she'd rather avoid.

She did not look too bad herself, really she had donned a white pinstripe suit and had her hair twisted up in an elegant chignon but she wasn't glamorous by anyone's standards. Moreover, she wore an intensely studious look on her face, unlike the radiant glow emanating from Cosette. Hermione had been tempted to ask Cosette if she was pregnant just as a joke but had decided against it.

Henri's lecture sounded as if it were about to wrap up. It had gone on a half hour, and that was relatively appropriate for an opening lecture, particularly one that would be followed by many, many hours of alcoholic consumption.

She rose to her feet and applauded along with the rest of the room a moment later. Henri quickly abandoned his post in front and came over to embrace Cosette. Hermione smiled, murmured her congratulations, and bent down to pick up her clutch.

She touched Cosette's arm. "I'm going back to the room; I'm quite tired. Your presentation was outstanding, Henri," she said, smiling up at him. He was inordinately tall, which both excused and explained Cosette's affinity for wearing obscenely high heels. Nothing could convince Hermione to wear shoes that high. Nothing. Ever.

"Thank you, Hermione. It was a pleasure meeting you. We will see you at breakfast tomorrow?" Henri asked, his smile wide and natural.

"Of course." Hermione smiled and gave Cosette a quick side hug. "I won't wait up," she whispered. Cosette guffawed and gave her a teasing push towards the aisle.

She made her way through the stream of academics, being jostled about to and fro. Just when she was to the lobby entrance, she tripped on the damn fringed rug and fell forward into a man standing in front of her.

Oh God, how mortifying, she thought as she stumbled to regain her balance, only to fall into him again. She was completely overcome by a light, pine-like smell... She turned into his torso to smell him before catching herself.

"Oh, sir, I'm so..." She looked up, and her eyes widened at the realization at whose arms were currently wrapped about her torso, whose eyes she was looking into; the man she'd just outright sniffed...

Who was looking at her as if he was completely unsurprised.

So this is what death looks like...

"Oh, God," she whimpered.

"Miss Granger, you've completely lost your senses," he declared in an annoyingly sensible tone. "Not that you had any before. This is an... unexpected surprise," he said, sneer now firmly in place. "Stopped by my cottage lately?"

And with that, she promptly passed out.

*

A/N: Limoncello is a common lemon liqueur in Italy; many families have their own recipe. It's relatively simple: add sugar, water, some sort of lemon juice/zest, alcohol, and time to mature. *nods* Quite good. Also, I know that Italy is famous for its nap-during-lunch-and-everything-closes tradition, but I bent the rules a bit. I hope you enjoyed the chapter and must confess that I am wondering what y'all are thinking, provided that after the long waits any of you are left. :-)

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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A/N: I had a Shining Writing Day yesterday, and this is the result. All my thanks to Shug for her ungodly-fast editing and to Septentrion for her assistance with French translations. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart!

*

The next morning

"Debout, marmotte!"

Hermione shifted in the bed and slowly opened her eyes, only to close them again at the shock of light coming through the shutters. She gave a slight groan and rolled over. A gentle hand on her shoulder rolled her back.

"Debout, marmotte," the voice said again gently. "Hermione, wake up."

She opened her eyes again only to see Pierre standing over her, looking down at her kindly, rather like a concerned uncle.

"Is it morning?" she asked.

"Oui. It's eight o'clock. You've been asleep for thirteen hours."

Her eyes opened wide. "I've never slept that much in my life!" she exclaimed. *Give or take being petrified*, she thought, sitting up against the headboard. She groaned a bit at the sudden head rush.

"I didn't want to wake you, but I'm leaving for the conference and wanted to make sure you ate something." Pierre lifted up a breakfast tray and set it down over her lap. "Dry toast, a scrambled egg, and a glass of orange juice," he said. "I didn't think you'd have much appetite."

"I don't," she said frankly.

"Well, you must eat something. Your body is clearly exhausted. I should have noticed earlier," Pierre said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You've been working ten, eleven hour days every day for the last few months, and on top of that, there's the switch of Parisian weather to this hot mess, and the shock of seeing a professor you've long thought dead," he said slowly, shaking his head. "It's a wonder you're not worse. You haven't been taking care of yourself."

Hermione bit into a piece of toast. "I'm sorry," she said weakly.

"Don't apologize. You scared us all, *ma chère*. You scared us quite a bit."

Hermione saw the worry lines on Pierre's forehead and noticed the dark circles under his eyes. "Was it bad?" she asked softly.

"Well, you fainted in Severus' arms. He picked you up and strode across the entire lobby to me, told me briefly what had happened, and we brought you back to the hotel. He knew a doctor at the conference, and we had him come with us to check your vitals and make sure you regained consciousness, even though you fell asleep the moment you did."

Hermione shook her head. *Oh God, Severus*. She shut her eyes and put her hands over her eyes. "Oh my God," she murmured. "He...*He knows*."

"He was of great assistance to me last night. He stayed with me for an hour to ensure your well being."

"You..." She shook her head, conscious, reasonable thought fleeing her, "*you know* him?"

Pierre nodded. "He's one of our potions suppliers."

Hermione let her head fall against the headboard with a heavy *thud*. "My God..."

"He survived the war and had resources and colleagues in France. Quite frankly, Hermione, his existence is the most open secret in the French wizarding community, at least amongst academics. He owns an exceedingly successful apothecary in Paris and does quite a bit of work for us from time to time not your department," Pierre said with a gentle smile. "Drink your orange juice. I know it's a shock."

"Pierre, I can't *think* right now," she said, barely mustering the strength to speak. "I... he's alive... he owns a shop, *he works* for us, for God's sake, and I didn't know!" She breathed heavily. "Why didn't you tell me he was alive? He was my professor! He's a hero! Why didn't I know, if it's an open secret?"

"We hardly publicize it, Hermione. We're discreet. You know this."

"Of course, you're right, I know you're right." She shook her head, trying to quiet her racing heart, trying to digest all of this new information apothecary, Capois, Paris, known existence *God*.

Pierre rose off the bed. "I don't want you going anywhere near the Symposium this morning, do you understand? You need to sleep."

"I couldn't go if I wanted to."

"And you're not going this afternoon if you're not better. Keep sleeping."

"Can I have coffee?" Hermione asked, turning to face her boss as he put on his suit coat.

"So coffee helps you sleep now?" Pierre grinned.

"Please, Pierre. I don't know what to do with all this information."

"Coffee may help you think, but it will not help you sleep. I've specifically ordered the front desk to withhold any caffeinated beverage you may order."

"*Pierre*," Hermione growled.

"Sleep, *marmotte*! Finish your egg." He smiled and walked towards the door. "I'll send Cosette to check up on you in a few hours."

Hermione sighed. It was a losing battle, fighting her boss. "*Merci*, Pierre. For everything."

He nodded. "Sleep," he said and walked out of the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

Hermione sat back against the headboard and mindlessly picked up the other piece of toast. She finished her breakfast and laid down to rest.

*

A few hours later

There was a knock at the door. She opened her eyes.

"Hermione?" Cosette's voice echoed.

Hermione reached for her wand to unlock the door. "Come in," she called, pulling the white cotton sheets tight around her.

Cosette came through the doorway with her typical burst of energy. She was dressed in a sleek crimson-colored pantsuit and had a coffee in one hand, her briefcase and a cloth tote in the other.

"I see you're walking this morning," Hermione said dryly, if a bit weakly. "No worse for the wear, eh?"

Cosette smirked. "I could say the same to you," she said, depositing the tote on the floor next to Hermione's bed. She sat down next to Hermione and took her hand. "Pierre says he's put you on bed rest."

"I don't need more bed rest," Hermione said flatly.

"Says the girl who passed out and proceeded to sleep for thirteen hours straight," Cosette said, raising an eyebrow. "I've brought you chocolate bars and a little souvenir book from the Uffizi to keep you occupied."

"*Merci*," Hermione said softly.

"You're quite welcome," Cosette whispered back, brushing a tendril from her friend's face. "You look exhausted."

You have no idea, Hermione thought, closing her eyes. "I'm just tired."

"Physically, mentally, emotionally?" Cosette asked.

"All three, I think."

"Mmm." Cosette nodded and pulled a chocolate bar from the tote. "Here," she said as she unwrapped the bar and put it to Hermione's mouth. "Eat."

Hermione took a very small bite. "I'm not hungry," she said, her mouth full of chocolate.

"Well, you'll need to eat if you want to get to the conference this afternoon. If you're still like this, Pierre will put you under house arrest until we're ready to leave."

Hermione put her hands over her eyes. *Severus*. His name rang through her mind like an incessant bell.

"Oh, *ma chère*. What's wrong?" Cosette rubbed Hermione's back.

Hermione breathed deeply. "Seeing him alive. I didn't think..." she started. *I didn't think I would be so shocked*.

"I was surprised when I saw him for the first time, too," Cosette said mildly.

Hermione turned over quickly. "What?" she asked, sitting up far too quickly. She got a bit of a head rush and reached for her water glass. "You've seen him before? You knew he was alive?"

Cosette looked taken aback. "*Oui*, of course. I distribute his potions to different departments."

Hermione breathed heavily, a sudden fire overtaking her being.

"You..." she sputtered, "You *knew* he was alive and didn't tell me?" she questioned, volume increasing, "We went to Capois - walked by his ~~house~~ - you knew I'd gone to Hogwarts, knew that I knew him, knew both of our involvements with the Order. You *knew* and you didn't *say* anything? I can understand Pierre's discretion, but *you*, Cosette?"

"Hermione, calm down!" Cosette exclaimed, surprised. "I knew that you had been his student and that he desired no contact with anyone in Britain. I hardly know the man, but I do know that he is an intensely private individual who would not appreciate an impromptu reintroduction to a student he probably disliked," Cosette retorted quickly. "He speaks disparagingly of most of his students - how was I to know you'd had a special relationship with him?"

Hermione's breathing had slowed. Special relationship. She put her hands to her head and breathed in deep. 1, 2, 3. "I never had a special relationship with him, as you call it, and his dislike for me was intense. You were right," she said softly. "God, I'm sorry." She crossed her arms across her chest, chilled by the sudden breeze that swept through the room.

Cosette flicked her wand and slammed the shutters shut. "Don't apologize. You obviously care for his well-being and are happy to know he's well." She looked at her friend oddly. "Though you do care... quite a bit."

Hermione held her head in her hands. "He... *hedied* in front of me," she whispered. "I watched him *die*, Cosette. I watched him die, and I was one of the ones who went back for his body. I..." She stopped herself - she could not bring herself to admit her... obsession... that word hung like a dark cloud over her... and he *knew*....

"Yes?" Cosette prompted.

She gulped. "Seeing him was a... shock. A visceral, hard shock."

"And you didn't just see him - you fainted in his arms," Cosette said with an amused smile.

"Bloody hell," Hermione muttered, biting off a hunk of chocolate bar. "What time is it?" she asked after swallowing.

"Ten o'clock in the morning, why?"

"Is it too early for alcohol?" she asked. *I'm going to need some. God, he knows... he knows....*

Cosette laughed. "Of course not, you're in Italy. What would you like?" she asked, picking up the phone and dialing room service.

"A *limoncello* would be nice."

Cosette snorted. "Another convert. Pierre will be thrilled." She ordered the drink and hung up the phone. "I'll wait for your drink, but I do need to get going. Henri is having lunch with some of his colleagues and would like me to be there."

Hermione smiled. "It's fun to watch you two together."

Cosette laughed. "Hopefully we'll have a dinner soon, just the three of us. I would love to see you and Henri in a debate."

There was a knock on the door.

"That's fast for Italians," Hermione remarked as Cosette rose to get the door. She brought the small drink back to Hermione.

"The beauty of staying in a wizarding hotel. Here you are. Now, please rest. I will see you at two o'clock if you're feeling better." She planted a quick kiss on Hermione's forehead and grabbed her briefcase. "*Au revoir!*" she said and walked out the door.

Hermione sighed and sipped her *limoncello*. She downed it in two gulps and set the empty glass on her bedside table before putting her head on her pillow again. She didn't realize how exhausted she'd been. This wasn't just because of Professor Snape... *Severus*. She'd run herself ragged these last few months and hadn't looked back, and her professor had proved the catalyst that forced her into bed rest. She'd be up by two o'clock, though, she thought as she closed her eyes. Images of the Florentine marketplace and *The Birth of Venus* flew across her mind, and the memory of a whiff of pine came to her just as she tumbled over the brink into sleep.

*

Noon

Hermione awoke and felt around on the bedside table for her watch.

Noon. Time to get up.

She was feeling much better. She supposed that thirteen hours of sleep plus four hours of on-again-off-again sleep, and a light breakfast, and *limoncello* to boot, would be more than enough to get anyone on their feet.

She threw the covers off and stood to her feet slowly, mindful of the head rush she'd experienced earlier. She walked across the plush carpet, shedding her camisole and boxers....

Wait.

Just in front of the bathroom, she paused. She'd passed out in her pantsuit. Theoretically, she'd been put to bed in her pantsuit.

She'd woken up in a camisole and boxers.

Something was not right. She let out a breath, shook her head, and walked into the bath to turn on the shower. Her mysteriously changed clothing was one of many eccentricities she had experienced in the last twenty-four hours. She stepped out of her knickers and unhooked her bra *at least those stayed on!* and stepped under the steaming stream of water.

She was remarkably unperturbed about the clothes change, she thought. But then, there were other things to consider... such as that Severus Snape was more connected to her than she thought. He was one of Pierre's suppliers. *Circe....*

Pierre and Cosette clearly thought she was shocked merely at his being alive. She was admittedly shocked at seeing feeling him in the flesh. That had affected her more than she'd thought it could, but it was more that he knew she'd... snooped. Intruded. Known of his existence.

He knew she'd been to Capois. Well, that was partly by accident. Cosette would have taken her there anyway. And Viktor's letter the thing that had started it all was also coincidental.

He didn't know the most damning thing: that she'd come to France because of him. She had stayed for herself, though, she reflected, so even that....

She ran her fingers through her hair, untangling the knots, soothing her scalp, and attempting to soothe her spirit. It would be all right. It would all be alright *Things have a way of working themselves out.* That's what her mum always said. It was true. She breathed deeply, calming herself, letting the water run down her body. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the shower's cleansing pound.

*

Hermione took a long shower and then cast a few drying charms, making sure to take extra care with her hair today. It was a professional conference, and this was Italy. It was hot, sticky, and the frizz would kill her if she didn't go beyond her usual routine.

She went over to her closet and pulled out some undergarments, a pair of black slacks, and a white button-down. She dressed, put her hair up, put her pearls on, and decided that that was enough.

She reached for her briefcase and saw a white envelope sticking out of it. *Curious*, she thought, kneeling down on the ground to open it. She fell on her arse when she saw the handwriting on the front *Miss Granger* scrawled in the sharp, jagged lines that characterized his writing. The sight of it sent her heart rate through the roof. She tore through the envelope and pulled out a singular sheet of paper.

Miss Granger,

I did not intend to scare you into a fainting spell last night, though I realize that seeing a man thought to be dead could have induced some sort of paralytic shock. Pierre has informed me, however, that you've been running yourself ragged with work these last few months, so you are partially to blame, as well.

Much as I desire to discontinue your acquaintance, I am, unfortunately, well acquainted with your incessant need to know everything. As such, it is best to get this questioning out of your system as soon as humanly possible. If you would like, you may meet me for dinner at the Rossi Bistro at six thirty. It's on the first floor of the hotel. Pierre insists that their limoncello is excellent.

-SS

Hermione re-read the letter several times over before putting it down and said the only coherent thing she could think of.

"Holy shit."

*

Six thirty

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," she muttered to herself under her breath, staring into her reflection. "It'll be all right, it'll be fine."

"Keep telling yourself that, dear," the mirror responded.

Hermione grunted and leaned across the sink. "Mind your own business."

The mirror steamed over in reply. "The impertinence!" Hermione exclaimed and wiped her hand across it.

It was six thirty. She took in deep breath after deep breath. She had stalled thinking about this meeting *really* thinking about this meeting for the entire afternoon. The presentations had been just fascinating, had really drawn her in, and she wasn't about to miss out on any detail by thinking about Severus Snape.

In retrospect, perhaps she should have tried less to banish the thought of him then she might actually feel slightly prepared for this meeting.

Oh, she was a bit prepared. She had a yellow tablet with dozens of questions, most of which she knew would go unanswered, but she had them, nonetheless.

She was theoretically prepared to meet her former professor, the man who had brought her to France and given her a new lease on life.

In reality, she was absolutely unprepared and felt like retching. Again.

For the first time in her life, Hermione Granger was in danger of running in the other direction.

No, she thought, summoning all the strength she had in her. *You can do it girl. You need to!*

She turned the water on as cold and as high as it could go and bent down, splashing her face with biting cold water. The tendrils of curl around her face dampened, but she stayed that way, leaning over the running sink in the women's private toilet at the Rossi, nervous as she could ever remember being in her life.

She breathed deeply and cast a drying charm. She pinched her cheeks, swallowed, and reached down for her briefcase, yellow tablet inside.

She drew herself up and smoothed the front of her button-down. She hadn't changed since the presentation; she wasn't about to give him the impression she was dressing up for him.

And she was relatively sure she'd wiped all her makeup off by now.

Bugger.

Without further ado, she strode towards the door, pushed it open, and walked across the well-lit, bustling lobby to the Rossi Bistro.

The Bistro was dimly lit, compared to the lobby. Mood lighting, it was called. The floor was wood, the walls ornate. The place reeked of class, elegance, and what she sincerely hoped was seafood smoking on the grill.

She looked around at all the faces, all the bodies, trying to distinguish voices and languages there were at least five being bantered around and all the noise almost made her dizzy. She looked to a back corner and finally saw the object of her focus. She could barely make out his silhouette but she knew he was there.

She walked across the Bistro with her chin held high until she arrived at the back corner booth, the most dimly lit booth in the entire place. Sitting at the corner's juncture was Severus Snape, leaning into the booth, arms crossed, hair pulled back, chin just as high as Hermione's. And he was staring at her unnervingly.

"Miss Granger, won't you take a seat?" he asked after a long moment, gesturing to a side.

She nodded and slid in, some of her faculties returning to her.

"I took the liberty of ordering already."

The impertinent...

And with that, Hermione found her voice. "I'm surprised you picked a booth, Professor. I imagine a table would provide an easier escape from my what was it? Incessant questioning?" she asked, meeting his glare, ignoring the light pine scent emanating from his being, soaking itself into her senses.

He grunted. "I've no idea what else you would call it."

The waiter appeared. "What would you like to drink, miss?"

"We're having grilled shrimp over linguini with a pesto sauce and toasted garlic bread," the preposterous man interjected.

Hermione glared. "Don't interrupt me."

"It's best to know what you're eating before you order your wine."

"Or I could just have two glasses," Hermione said, slightly annoyed. She smiled up at the waiter. "I apologize. I'll have a glass of Chianti Rufina."

The waiter nodded and walked away.

"Still glad I'm alive?" her former professor asked, a feral grin on his face.

"Of course, Professor," she said, gathering her wits and manners again.

"Good to know. And don't call me Professor."

"Then what should I call you? Mr. Snape?"

"Good heavens, no. It's an awful name," he said, pausing. "You may call me Severus."

Oh, shit.

"Umm... you can call me Hermione," Hermione said, feeling entirely unnerved and completely out of her league.

"Right then." He sighed. "We may as well get this over with. You have questions, I presume."

"Why are you even granting me an audience?" she asked, looking at him straight on.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Because you and I both know that you will hunt me down and interrogate me. I thought I'd be proactive, for once."

She leaned against the booth. "Why are you here?"

"In Florence?"

She glared.

He smirked. "I presented this morning."

"With your potions work?"

"No, by flying around the Ballroom on a broom and exercising my Quidditch skills. Of course with my potions work."

"So you're still... active, then?"

He shrugged. "I own an apothecary in Paris and sell to various companies, such as the one you work for. I assume Pierre told you all this, so why waste our time asking questions we both know you already know the answer to."

"You might refuse one of my other questions."

"That is a very likely possibility, but you'll have asked it and got some sort of response, which is more than you'd have otherwise," he said, reaching for his wine glass.

She swallowed. "How did you survive?" she asked quietly. "I..."

He waved a hand, cutting her off. "Yes, I know you were there. It must have been...*awful* for you to witness," he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"Don't do that!" Hermione slammed a hand down on the table. "Don't you dare patronise me for being here and having questions! You were dead for nearly three years, and then suddenly you... weren't!" she exclaimed, gesturing towards his body with her hands. "Don't you *dare* criticize me for wondering or for caring. Maybe you saw too

many dead bodies when you were a Death Eater to remember the horror of the first one that's killed right in front of you!" she finished, breathing heavily.

He sat across from her, still, silent.

"Fair enough," he said slowly. "How did I survive, then, was the question?" he asked, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "I inoculated myself against Nagini's venom. A relatively simple antidote, considering that I already had a base to work off of."

"The attack on Arthur," she whispered, already falling under his voice's power.

He nodded. "I had an emergency Portkey to a safe house that Dumbledore had set up for me several years before. I waited for you and Potter to leave, and then I left."

"You... shared your memories...."

"A dying act if ever there was one, yes?" he said, smirking as he drank his wine.

"And you healed yourself at the safe house."

"Essentially." He drank more wine and set the glass down on the table, smacking his lips in satisfaction.

She shook her head and put her elbows on the table.

"What is it?" he asked, amused. "You're leading this conversation. Lead."

"I didn't expect you to be so..."

"So... what?"

"*Comfortable*, I suppose."

And at this he laughed, a great laugh that echoed in the booth and reverberated in the restaurant.

"I've been in active wizarding society for nearly three years, Hermione. It only shocks you because I haven't been in yours," he said, sending his glass flying to the bar for a re-fill. "I've been free of Voldemort's control for three years, free to live as I like and do as I please and have no master but myself. You have never seen nor heard me in this form, and it rightly shocks the hell out of you, if I may be so frank."

She nodded. "Er yes."

"It is disconcerting, admittedly, to speak with someone who knew me... then," he said as the glass came back to him. "But you're an adult now, and I am willing to talk, so you should be as well."

At that, the waiter brought over their plates.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "Oh, it looks wonderful."

She looked up to thank Severus only to find him looking at her he was smirking, but his eyes were intent.

"Thank you," she said softly, picking up her fork to bite into the pasta.

He nodded. "You're welcome."

*

They talked of her work with Pierre, and he was kind enough to ask intelligent questions and seemed genuinely interested in her work. She asked about his apothecary and how he knew Pierre they'd met at a wine bar, naturally and he regaled her with stories of his clientele and some of his stranger experiences living in France.

"Speaking of the apothecary. The incident in Capois," he said naturally, sipping his wine.

She dropped her fork to her plate.

"You snooped," he said, his tone accusing but his eyes amused.

"I didn't know it was your cottage. My co-worker said it was the Prince cottage, and I wondered," Hermione said, her heartbeat kicking up. She'd gotten comfortable here, talking with him, bantering with him, completely forgetting that she was Hermione Granger and he was Severus Snape perhaps because here in Florence, she wasn't *that* Hermione Granger and he wasn't *that* Severus Snape. "And how did you know I...*trespassed* there I said it, happy? anyway?" she asked.

"My familiar."

"Your cat?"

"That would be my familiar, yes." He sighed. "To spell it out for you, she called to me, and I arrived at the cottage just in time to see you scampering through the fields. Rather entertaining, if a bit surprising."

She stared at him. "You knew? You knew I was in Paris, working for Pierre, and you didn't do anything?"

"I did not want to see you, no. I prefer to avoid complicated entanglements."

"So this is a complicated entanglement?" Hermione asked, viciously stabbing the last bit of shrimp off her plate.

"You're a former student, you are aware of my past life, you watched me die, and you were permeating the realm of my new life. Yes, I call that a complicated entanglement."

"So this...." she said, gesturing helplessly at the booth.

He met her eyes and stared. "I did not think such entanglements could be so enjoyable. This has proved less... wretched than I imagined it."

She swallowed. "I'm still surprised you're talking to me."

"You haven't asked too many impertinent questions, have you?" he retorted. "And I made you pass out last night, and you were not well afterwards, so you could say that I owed you."

"Speaking of which, what happened to my clothes?" she asked suddenly and rather loudly.

He sputtered into his wine. "Excuse me?"

"My clothes," she said. "I went to bed in a pantsuit and woke up in boxers." She held her hands, questioning.

He chuckled. "A simple charm that can easily be performed to switch someone's set of clothes. Not to worry, ah, Pierre and I performed it with you under the sheets."

Oh, God. She felt the color rising in her, up to her cheeks, and soon she was blushing a furious red.

"Would you like tiramisu for dessert?" he asked.

"That would be lovely, thank you," she murmured and brushed a curl off her face, oblivious to the intensity of his eyes on her form.

Thankfully, the waiter brought the tiramisu almost immediately. Hermione bit into it and realized that she had not truly had a dessert until now. It was sumptuous, decadent, and her next bite was twice as big, having the unfortunate effect of filling her mouth too full and crumbling a bit at the sides, which amused her companion far more than she was sure he was willing to let on.

"Severus?" she asked after swallowing.

"Yes, Hermione."

"Why did you hate me so much?"

His eyes darkened. "So you wait until the end to pepper me with difficult questions."

"You hated me in school."

He cocked his head and looked at her. "I didn't hate you. Far from it. You were an exceptionally bright student who kept unfortunate company and as such made irrational decisions. You also were a cheeky little bint with an axe to grind and an ego to prove," he added. "Thus, the know-it-all hand waving. It's quite annoying, by the way."

"Severus..." she started.

"It's true." He shrugged.

"I thought you'd become nicer," she insisted.

This time, his entire countenance darkened. "And I thought you'd matured enough to know that I've been doing my best to be exceptionally polite and cordial to you tonight. And to have taken me off the white horse."

She huffed. "I never..."

"Hero worship is an unfortunate affliction that plagues young women in particular when they find out that a rake has been reformed or, perhaps, that the rake was always reformed but hid it in the interest of a nobler cause," he said, his tone disdainful. "I am not a nice man, Hermione. I never have been, and I never will be. I am doing my level-headed best to be polite to you and answer your questions and satisfy your damned curiosity, but do not think that this is how I always am. That would be a most erroneous assumption."

She swallowed. "You're..."

"My grandmother hammered manners into me, and lest you forget, I was a spy for twenty years. I know how to act in social situations."

"You just choose to be a surly, antisocial, rude, prat of a bastard in private, then?" she challenged, a wild glint in her eye.

He sat back, admiring. "See, that," he said, pointing to her. "That is the reason I'm still sitting across from you." It seemed as though a smile played at his lips, but it was quickly suppressed.

He slid to the edge of the booth to stand up. "I must take my leave, *Mademoiselle*. It's been a... surprising pleasure."

"But I still have questions!" Hermione exclaimed, suddenly remembering her list.

He snorted. "I am sure you do. However, I am not going to answer them at least not tonight." He bent, picked up her hand, and kissed it. *Au revoir.* I am sure we will meet again."

And with that, he grabbed his waistcoat and turned, putting it on as he walked away, striding through the Bistro with that irrepressible arrogance he had clearly developed these last three years.

Hermione leaned back in her booth and slumped. She pulled out her tablet:

1. *Why did you choose France?*

2. *Why haven't you returned to Britain?*

3. *Are you still in contact with anyone?*

And the list continued.

She groaned. He'd kept her talking and occupied enough on small, comfortable subjects that he'd managed to evade some of the larger ones.

She sat up at that realization.

He'd steered the entire conversation.

That bastard!

The waiter came by the table again and handed her a slip of paper.

She swore under her breath.

He'd also stuck her with the check.

Surly...

And as she pulled money out of her purse, she vehemently repeated every swear word she knew under her breath.

She paid and got up from the table. She didn't have a sense of closure she was intrigued. She felt as if Pandora's Box had been presented to her and she'd just peeked inside the lid. A few questions were answered, but there were so many more....

And he was absolutely fascinating.

And fun. She'd had *fun*.

As she walked out of the Bistro, she knew.

She had to see him again. Once wasn't enough.

As if he'd want to see me again, though, she thought as she walked out into the crisp night air.

Somewhere during her walk, in between the sanctity of the city and the bustle of the streets, the heavy cloud of night and the dim street lights, between the Rossi and her own hotel, his words came back to her

I am not going to answer them at least not tonight.

"At least not tonight," she said aloud, a grin spreading across her face.

He's going to see me again.

And she practically danced the rest of the block to the hotel's entrance, exuberant in the joy of finally seeing her former professor, talking with him, laughing with him, bantering with him, and knowing that this was perhaps the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

*

Please forgive the shameless *Casablanca* reference. :-)

I very much hope that you've all enjoyed this chapter.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR.

A/N: My thanks to Shug for her beta work and enthusiastic support.

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Present

"He stuck you with the bill?" Rose asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded with an amused smile.

Rose leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. "That's not very gentleman-like."

"There's your mistake, Rose you think that he should have been one."

"Well, shouldn't he?" Rose asked, indignant. "He's a bit too forward with you at the Symposium, makes you pass out, and then proceeds to invite you to dinner only to trick you out of asking questions and leave you with the bill!"

Hermione chuckled. "A succinct summary of events, yes."

"And you weren't upset at it or offended?" Rose scoffed. "You were falling for him already." She reached for her wine.

"Careful there, Rose," her mother warned, raising an amused eyebrow. "You may get ahead of yourself."

The two women sat in silence.

"Why did you add the bit with him seeing you at the Uffizi?" Rose asked, eyes downcast, holding her wine. "You said you didn't see him in the market. How did you know he was watching you?"

Hermione inhaled and set her chin on her clasped hands. "He told me later on."

"Later on?" Rose asked, sighing. "So you did see him again."

Hermione laughed. "Of course I did, though it was quite a while after Florence. So long so that I almost forgot him."

"You could never forget him," Rose murmured, not noticing her mother's eyes glaze over. "So when did you see him next? You left off... when?"

"Florence was in..." Hermione tapped her fingers against the table in consternation. "November of 2000. Almost two and a half years after Voldemort's downfall. I didn't see him again until after the three year anniversary."

"June or July of 2001," Rose said, mentally adding the timetable in her head.

"July of 2001, yes." Hermione sighed. "I found his apothecary in Paris and tried to visit on several occasions after Florence. Curiously, he was never there."

"He was avoiding you," Rose said, a smile creeping across her face. She did not want to like this man, but he was a fascinating character, she had to give him that.

"He wanted to see me on his own terms, the bastard," Hermione interjected.

Rose laughed. "Two can play that game, Mum."

Hermione grinned. "Indeed they can."

"So where did you end up reuniting?"

Hermione sipped her wine. "Amsterdam. We met again in Amsterdam."

*

Amsterdam, July 2001

"Cosette Bedard, if you are not dressed and ready in the next thirty seconds, I am leaving you here, the conference be damned!" Hermione exclaimed, shifting in her chair and crossing and uncrossing her legs. She was not comfortable the hotel room she and her friend were renting for a cheap price consequently came with cheap, brutally uncomfortable furniture. She smoothed her skirt and stretched out her legs, admiring her freshly painted toe nails. Cosette had taken her for her first pedicure, and while she was not likely to repeat the experience, it had proved most pleasurable.

She had asked her friend repeatedly why they were out shopping and getting pedicures when Henri was in town, to which Cosette had replied that Henri was in meetings with "busy and important" Ministry officials and that they were on a much-deserved, if rather short, vacation.

That was a lovely thing about their work, Hermione thought she and Cosette, quite frankly, worked their arses off for Pierre, and truth be told, brought in quite a bit of money. It also bore noting that they were his favorite lunch companions. As such, he was more than willing to give them a Friday off here and there to travel, shop, and as the occasion arose, go to conferences where Henri presented his remarkably groundbreaking, still semi-illegal research. Pierre enjoyed accompanying them to such conferences and had expressed his regret that he could not attend this one. He had particularly lamented that he could not visit Amsterdam and had spoke fondly of its "superb extra-curricular activities," confirming Hermione's suspicion that the man had gorged himself on drugs and whores in his younger days.

"Ah, you're still here," Cosette said, finally emerging from the bathroom in a dress that could only *just* past for appropriate attire at a professional conference.

Hermione looked at her friend reproachfully. "More cling-film?"

"Merlin, Hermione, I don't look like I belong on a street corner."

"Yet," Hermione muttered under her breath. "This *is* Amsterdam, Cosette," she said a bit louder. "I've never seen so many prostitutes and open drug addicts in my life."

Cosette snorted. "This is one of the few cities that actually lives up to its bad reputation."

"It's even in the wizarding part of the city," Hermione said, surprised.

"We can't all be British," Cosette snorted.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked indignantly.

"You have one of the smallest wizarding populations in the world, and you're one of the most insular, prudish societies, at least by reputation. I have never heard of a whorehouse in wizarding Britain."

"Knockturn Alley," Hermione said automatically. "I'm sure we have our fair share." *Not that I've ever seen one.*

Cosette shrugged. "You're prudes. No matter, though. The prostitutes are easy enough to avoid. Oh, I was going to tell you earlier, be careful where you walk. Illegal substances are brewed and smoked in public on occasion, some of which should not be inhaled."

Hermione nodded. "Right. Don't inhale the thick, all-encompassing smoke coming off every alleyway. I'll try."

Cosette nodded. "Do. And my dress is *not* inappropriate, for the record. Besides, I'm wearing a jacket over it."

"And you say you come here to support your significant other." Hermione shook her head. "He probably thinks you're sent by the Fates to tempt his powers of concentration."

The two women walked to the door, Cosette grinning the entire time.

"It amuses you, don't lie," she insisted as they walked out of the room and down the corridor.

Hermione inhaled theatrically. "I love you enough to put up with it," was the response that sent Cosette into gales of laughter.

"Come on, then," Cosette said, approaching the Apparition point. "Let's go. This should be fun."

"It's always fun to watch Henri convince people that he's not breaking the law," Hermione muttered, and the two women Apparated away.

*

Ballroom C, Vrije Universiteit

Hermione entered the relatively small but elegantly crafted ballroom behind Cosette, looking around as she did so. There were about fifty people mulling about in the room, fresh off the previous presentation. The room was, interestingly, divided between European Ministry bureaucrats, various academics, and a few members of the local wizarding press. She sat in the third row as her friend went off to talk to someone or other and checked her watch. Ten minutes to one.

At five minutes to one, the crowd began to dissipate and sit in their respective seats *About time*, Hermione thought. She came to conferences to learn and listen to fascinating research, not to socialize, which was, ironically, exactly the reason Cosette attended. That and, of course, the fact that her significant other was presenting, although at present Cosette was working the room.

"*Bonjour*," a voice said from behind Hermione. She turned, startled, to see Henri smiling down at her, his hand extended.

"Henri," she said, visibly relieved, and shook his hand. "You startled me a bit. How are you?"

"I am well. It is good to see you again so soon. I enjoyed breakfast this morning." He grinned wickedly.

Hermione laughed. They had got into a bit of a friendly row over the legality of some of his research. Both had enjoyed the debate, if only to watch Cosette's reactions.

"Well, we must do it again sometime," she said, only to be interrupted by the unexpected sight of Severus Snape walking down the aisle.

That man...

An urgent desire to throttle him rose in her, and she was sure that she was flushing a furious red by the time Severus extended his hand to Henri.

"Severus! It is good to see you," Henri said, clasping hands with the Potions Master.

What...

Hermione's stomach flip-flopped. He looked rather dashing, dressed as he was in black trousers and a black button-down. His hair was pulled back with a black ribbon.

Well, isn't he approachable? Screw it.

"Severus " she tried to interrupt.

"I'm looking forward to your presentation, which, if I'm not mistaken is about to start," Severus said, maintaining eye contact with Henri, completely ignoring the anxious girl sitting directly in front of him.

Henri chuckled. "I'd best get up there, shouldn't I?"

Severus nodded. "It would be advisable."

"Well," Henri said, walking out into the aisle to go up to the podium, "I look forward to debating legality issues over our next meeting. I had a debate of a similar nature this morning. You should talk to Hermione about it," he said, nodding in Hermione's direction before climbing the steps to the stage.

Hermione flushed, and she looked back at Severus, only to see him walking by her without a care for her existence. He proceeded to take a seat directly across the aisle from her.

"Friends and colleagues..." Henri lifted his hands and began speaking from the podium.

Hermione slumped back in her seat as she felt Cosette slip in beside her.

"Is that Severus Snape sitting there?" Cosette asked with a wink at her friend. "Talked to him yet?"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, her chin high.

Damn the man. Goddamn the man.

*

Henri had been speaking for ten minutes. She was trying to pay attention to his presentation, she really was, but she was finding it difficult to not pay attention to the fact that Severus Snape was sitting across the aisle from her, taking notes in a small notebook, earnestly listening to Henri's animated lecture, looking entirely too dashing and smelling too sexy for his own good.

Sexy?

Bugger. Bugger, bugger, bugger.

He smelled like pine, or at least that's what she thought he smelled like it wasn't quite pine but something herbal, she just wasn't sure what. It was too damn frustrating, and she was entirely unsettled by the fact that pine reminded her of freshly grown grass. She had no idea why, but it was unnerving all the same.

She'd gone to his apothecary immediately upon returning from Florence and had been quite impressed with its size and services. She'd encountered staff each time she went, and she'd surmised that Snape kept four or five part-time employees. At least two were university students, she'd learned, and all had been quite knowledgeable and personable. Helpfulness was clearly a quality he valued in his employees, if not in himself.

The apothecary was called *L'Purgatorium*. It was in a tucked away, off-the-beaten-path location, on a street darker than most but still busy enough to keep the shops in the black. The apothecary's large success was probably due to its reputation, Hermione was sure. She'd attempted to discreetly ask around about the shop and had always received favorable feedback that the variety of potions sold was impressive, that the potions themselves were of the highest quality and that the rates were reasonable. The shop was far more successful than its appearance bespoke. If the shop's outward façade was dark, the inside was little better it was almost militaristic in style, with rows of dark oak tables lining the entirety of the shop floor, and at least four or five shelves lining the walls, all filled to the brink with jars, tubs, and boxes chock full of potions and ingredients. Candles provided the only lighting, and Hermione was relatively certain that there was a storeroom and laboratory in the back.

On her third visit, she'd worked up the courage to ask an employee if the owner was available. The young man had been quite surprised clearly he didn't field such questions on a regular basis and had stuttered a bit of nonsense, all of which amounted to his stating that the owner was rarely in town, which was a load of bollocks, Hermione knew, as Severus had told Viktor that he divided his time between Paris and Capois. Theoretically, he'd only be in Paris three or four days a week, or every other week, but not 'rarely.'

After her fifth visit, she'd ceased trying and had retreated back into life as usual: long workdays, intriguing if entirely exhausting projects, and the occasional lunch or dinner with Pierre or Cosette, sometimes with both, and sometimes with Cosette and Henri. She still didn't have many friends in Paris, but she could hardly say she minded. She'd felt practically stifled in Britain, where she knew or recognized almost every witch and wizard in Diagon Alley, and the anonymity Paris provided was a heady relief. She sought solace and relaxation in her books, and she frequently scoured Potions and Arithmancy journals to keep up on her academic reading.

She inhaled another whiff of pine, and the heat that ripped through her belly brought her crashing back down to earth.

The man she'd been looking for again was now sitting across from her, and anger and frustration were, at present, overtaking joy and jubilee. She'd been excited in Florence when he had said they would see each other again; she was now frustrated at his ignoring her. Games, all games.

Men, she thought and leaned back in her chair, vainly attempting to listen to Henri.

She snuck a glance across the aisle, only to find Severus watching her, a smirk spreading across his face as he turned back to Henri.

The heat spread again.

Stop it!

She was definitely going to corner him after.

*

Henri's presentation ended soon enough, and Hermione got up instantly.

"Excuse me, I have a few fish to fry," she muttered under her breath to Cosette, who chortled.

"Your former professor, I presume?" she asked.

Hermione nodded and picked up her purse from under the seat.

"You'd better get a move on, he's already leaving," Cosette said, nodding in Severus' direction.

Hermione whipped around only to see his back as he moved quickly down the aisle. She jogged to catch up with him and tapped him, perhaps a bit too hard, on the shoulder.

"What?" he growled, turning around. "Oh," he said, his features only just softening. "You." He turned around and started to walk, leaving her a bit shell-shocked in the aisle. She quickly recovered.

"Severus Snape, you get over here this instant!" she hissed under her breath, ignoring the curious glances of on-lookers.

He looked back at her, amused, and kept walking. "Miss Granger. What a pleasant surprise."

"Call me Hermione. And walk slower, I can't keep up with you."

He increased his pace. "My apologies, Miss Granger."

She inhaled sharply. "You called me Hermione before."

"Oh, did I? When?"

"In Florence, you sanctimonious bastard! You also stuck me with the check. You owe me," she said as they walked out into the brilliantly lit lobby.

He finally stopped walking and looked down at her, feigning shock. "Why on earth do I owe you?"

She poked him in the chest. "You invited me out to dinner and then left me with the fucking bill, as you damn well know."

"Tut-tut. Language, Miss Granger," he said sardonically and resumed walking.

"I am not a silly schoolgirl who is yours to command! Get back here!" she demanded.

He pushed the entrance doors open and walked out into the sunlight.

"Severus!" she exclaimed, oblivious to the ruckus they were causing. She groaned loudly and walked out the door, looking both ways in a vain attempt to spot him, but he had already disappeared.

That was just like him. *Damn it!*

"Gah!" she exclaimed loudly. She picked a direction and started walking.

She strode down the street angrily, turning down various roads in an attempt to walk off her aggression and got herself quite lost in the process, as she found out three minutes later when she bothered to stop and actually examine her surroundings.

She had run into an industrial district, by the looks of things, and she couldn't tell whether it was Muggle or wizard. She shrunk her wand and held it in her hand, tucked against her palm and the back of her wrist. She turned around and quickly began to walk back the way she had come when blue smoke and sparks suddenly burst from the alley she was passing. She inhaled it sharply, through both her nostrils and her mouth, and was overcome by its burning sensation not a hot tingle but a searing fire that ripped through her body with a force that slowly dissipated. She swayed on her feet and zig-zagged across the pavement, reaching out a hand to steady herself against a brick building. Her vision was spotted, and her head felt completely light, unattached, and she thought for a moment she might be having an out-of-body experience.

She sagged against the wall, falling helplessly. She heard someone call her name before she slumped and lost all consciousness.

*

She awoke to the smell of basil and garlic assaulting her nostrils. Her senses went on high alert; she was not in her bed, as evidenced by the ridiculously firm padding she felt beneath her. She peeked an eye open. The sofa she was sprawled out on was sage colored, and it felt like a rock cloaked in satin.

She didn't have a sofa that felt like a rock or like satin, for that matter.

She sat up abruptly, blood going to her head in a dizzying rush. She clasped the sofa's edge to steady herself.

Foolish girl, she thought. *Where the hell am I?*

She gently reached into her pocket to make sure her wand was there. She breathed an audible sigh of relief when she felt its familiar shape.

"Ah, you're awake. Will you kindly come in to eat supper before passing out on the sofa again?" an all-too familiar voice sounded from the doorway.

She looked over sharply, only to see the object of her obsession leaning against the threshold, looking different than she remembered. He was at ease... and in a white shirt.

"You changed your shirt," she said weakly.

"You drooled."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "What happened?"

"You fainted in the alleyway when I finally caught up to you. I could hardly leave a young woman passed out on a street in Amsterdam," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

She nodded imperceptibly, trying to get a hold of her surroundings. Oak floor, sage sofa, smells of dinner cooking in the kitchen. Bookshelves lined the wall; stacks of books were splayed across the floor. There were paintings on the wall. The fireplace was lit. Dark browns, sage greens, and rich blues were the dominating colors. And there was a faint smell of pine musk in the air.

"So... this is your flat?" she asked slowly.

"Yes. In Paris," he offered. "You're back in France. Now," he started. "Would you care for some supper? Grilled shrimp over linguini with garlic bread and a nice Chianti to accompany." He held a hand out towards her. "Can you get up from the sofa yourself or do you need me to assist you?"

She shook her head. "I can get up."

She attempted to rise to her feet but fell back on the couch quickly. He raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said loudly and pushed herself up onto her feet, quickly moving across the room, passing him in the doorway into what she sincerely hoped was the kitchen.

Considering that she was met by the overwhelming smell and sight of a gorgeous Italian dinner, oak dining furnishings, and onyx-colored appliances, it was safe to say that this room was indeed the kitchen.

"Please, take a seat," he said, an amused look on his face as he pulled her chair out for her.

"Such chivalry," she said, snorting.

"Well, you keep fainting in my arms, Hermione, so tell me what I'm supposed to resort to," he said, ignoring the bite in her tone as he sat and reached for a piece of garlic bread. "The meal should be a familiar one."

She snorted, recognizing the Florentine meal, down to the bottle of Chianti Rufina. "A man of diverse tastes, I see."

He shrugged. "I work with what's best."

"You don't experiment?" she asked, spinning her fork in the linguini.

"Not when I have guests as prickly as you, no," he said firmly.

"Prickly, am I?" she asked, her mouth full of delicious pasta.

"Irritating would be a better word. Chew with your mouth closed."

She glared at him as she finished chewing.

"Screw you."

He laughed. "You've quite a mouth on you."

"I spent my adolescence surrounded by teenage boys, and my father was in the military before he went to dental school. I'm accustomed to it, is all," she said, explaining far more than she needed to, likely because she was nervous, uncomfortable, and extremely turned on. The white shirt was a bit small on him, leaving little of his musculature to the imagination. It was most unfortunate when one was trying to concentrate.

Silence descended on the table.

"You inhaled a slightly toxic, extremely powerful hallucinogen," he said abruptly. "A mix of Muggle and wizarding chemicals. Any more and there may have been damage to your nervous system." He didn't look at her as he cut his pasta into tiny bits on his plate.

Hermione halted her fork midway to her mouth and set it down on the plate. Her hands shook a little. "Thank you," she said quietly, bringing her hands to her face. Oh God. "Cosette warned me not to inhale anything. I'm so stupid," she said, mentally berating herself.

"You couldn't have helped but inhale the smoke. It happened too quickly," he said.

"You..." She shook her head. "You saw it happen?"

He finally set his fork and knife down and met her eyes for the first time. Hermione could have sworn she saw regret in them. "... followed you as you left Vrije. I thought to sport with you." He looked straight at her. "I am sorry."

Hermione nodded. "I assume you gave me drugs to stop..."

He nodded. "I've worked with similar antidotes before."

"Henri," she said, wagering a guess, and he nodded. "Well, at least his work is good for something."

"It's good for a great many things," Severus said in an amused tone.

Hermione tilted her head and grinned. "Are we going to debate this, Severus?"

He chuckled and picked up a second piece of garlic bread. "If you like."

"I would like that very much." She smiled up at him, really looking into his eyes for the first time. They stared at each other for a moment before he broke away.

"What arguments do you have for me, mademoiselle? I am willing to hear," he said, sipping his wine.

Hermione grinned and began the relentless volley of questions.

*

A few hours later

Severus and Hermione were seated in armchairs opposite each other in the front room the sitting room, Hermione supposed it was, though she was sure Severus did not have a proper name for it. The room hardly resembled a formal thing at all, covered as it was in books not that she minded. She rather enjoyed the compulsively arranged book stacks, as well as the method to the madness indeed, even the bookshelves were all sorted by genre and author.

They were now reading in a rather companionable silence; they had debated ad nauseum for several hours, the food on their plates growing cold as the subjects deepened and the tempers heightened. Severus had finally ended with a Jade's trick, insisting that he was quite finished with the nonsense, and Hermione had sat back and sighed, curiously content. Now, curled up in an armchair, she felt rather like a cat. A purr would certainly be in character, for she could not remember feeling so pleased, at ease, and genuinely at peace in another's company in quite a long while.

She'd put on a pot of coffee, and they were now drinking from their respective mugs as Severus perused the newspaper, his reading spectacles firmly situated on his nose, and Hermione was attempting to read a potions journal, though her progress was hindered by the glances she kept sneaking at the distinguished, magnetic man currently sitting a mere two feet away from her. She wondered...

She shook her head and glanced at the mantle clock above the fireplace.

"Oh no," she said, her body stilled.

"What is it?" he asked, a bit perturbed, looking up from his paper.

"It's almost seven-thirty!" she exclaimed, hastily climbing out of the chair. "Cosette doesn't know where I've been," she murmured in realization.

Severus looked a bit frozen in his chair as she scrambled to find her shoes. "I'm sorry," she said, looking back at him over her shoulder. "It's been such a lovely evening..."

"Yes, it has," he said slowly. He set his newspaper on the wing table and stood, stretching his arms above his head, his shirt lifting up above his hips. Hermione couldn't help but notice the black trail of hair contrasted against his pale skin anymore than she could the taut muscles, seemingly pulled across his skeletal frame. It was a strangely arousing sight. *Not so strange, really*, she thought.

She blushed when she noticed that he was shamelessly staring at her as she rather wantonly stared at him. She quickly averted her gaze. "I'm sorry, Severus, I didn't mean..."

"Oh, yes you did," he said, amusement clear in his voice.

Damn. Well, he would think it was funny, an ex-student ogling him and all.

"Try to guard your thoughts more, Hermione, particularly when you're around me," he said with a smirk.

"Right then," she said, quickly righting her clothes and picking up her clutch. "I'll be off."

He strode over to her quickly, standing a mere foot away from her. "When can I see you again?" he asked, his voice low, his black eyes boring into hers.

"Umm..." she squeaked. "Coffee next week?"

He let a rare hint of a smile touch his lips and leaned in to kiss her forehead. "I'll send word."

"Okay," she whispered, backing away. "I should go now..."

"Yes," he said, his demeanor stiffening a bit; almost as if he were trying to... regain control. "Yes, you should."

She barely managed a "goodbye" before walking out the door and Apparating back to the cheap hotel in Amsterdam, where she proceeded to squeal and jump around with great vigor and enthusiasm, hardly noticing an amused and very relieved Cosette and Henri standing in the doorway.

*

A/N: There are three lines I can't entirely take credit for. The "busy and important" line is shamelessly pulled from *Love Actually*, Hermione's thought "Damn the man, goddamn the man" is inspired by Thomas Jefferson's line in the musical *1776*, and the concept of a "Jade's trick" I pulled from William Shakespeare, specifically citing the incomparable "Much Ado About Nothing," which I recently saw for the umpteenth time.

I hope you all enjoyed it. I can't say how much time it'll take for another update - I have a few papers due over the next few weeks - but I'll do my best to get the next installment out in a timely fashion. *squeezes you all*

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: My thanks to Shug for her beta work and enthusiastic support. As a brief note, while re-working the timeline, I realized that I made a mistake in the last chapter that has since been corrected. Hermione's trip to Florence took place in the same year as her departure from Britain and was thus in 2000; Amsterdam and this chapter are in 2001. My apologies for the confusion!

*

July 14, 2001

Dear Ginny,

I'm so sorry I haven't written since Amsterdam. I saw Severus while at the conference oh my. Long story short, I passed out after inhaling some godforsaken smoke byproduct of an alleyway drugstore, and he caught me, took me to his flat in Paris, gave me the antidote, and proceeded to cook me dinner, argue with me, and ask me out I think.

I'm relatively certain it's a date. We're having coffee tomorrow at this chic little café near my building. Don't tell anyone.

I hope you are doing well! I love you very much and miss you quite terribly.

Take care,

Hermione

July 14, 2001

Hermione,

TELL ME EVERYTHING! Details, details, details! I can't believe you're going out with Snape! I mean, it's SNAPE, for goodness' sake, but I trust you, and no, I haven't said anything to anyone and I'm not about to.

I love you, too, and miss you more than words can say. The boys miss you, too. You know which ones I mean.

XO,

Ginny

*

It was a drowsy afternoon of the rainy sort: the kind where it just *feels* wet and blue, where it's best to sit by a fire reading an old book, no matter that it's the middle of July in a sweltering city.

The humidity was through the roof, and Hermione thought that she was going to die. She was relatively certain that if she didn't melt on the way to café, she'd certainly collapse after, though preferably not in Severus' arms. She'd made an awful habit of doing that and was quite determined to break the cycle.

This was, after all, their first official date. And a shitty date it was shaping up to be. Hermione had had a hellish week at work, was completely exhausted, and was in absolutely no mood to pretend to be even half-way up to par with the sort of conversation Severus was expecting the sort they'd had the last two times they met. She had no idea whether he would take her as he was; Severus Snape was not the sort of man you met with your defenses down. His instincts to cut were too well honed, too practiced even if he didn't mean to be abusive, Hermione had a feeling that he would go into automatic mode and strike upon the first perceived provocation.

She could be borrowing trouble. Then again, she could just be preparing for the inevitable.

Better the latter, she thought as she attempted for the third time to charm her hair into submission. It was becoming increasingly clear that the humidity would win this battle.

She settled for arranging it in what she hoped was a stylishly messy bun. She pinched her cheeks, grabbed her umbrella and her purse *mustn't forget that* and walked out the door, not realizing that she'd worn a white top until she was halfway down the street.

What had started out as a chic ensemble black strappy heels, black capris, and a lacy white top was becoming increasingly impossible.

Oh well.

The cobblestone streets sputtered rain up all over her shoes as she walked out the building door.

Shit. At least he'll see that I put in some sort of effort.

*

"That outfit is hardly practical for the weather, Hermione," Severus remarked as she sat down at their table in the café. She was a few minutes late due to the uncomfortable trial that walking in soaked heels presented.

She inhaled sharply. "Are you honestly criticizing *my* clothing, Severus?" she asked, a bit embittered.

He smirked. "No." He pushed a cup in front of her. "Dark Roast. It's French today," he said with a nod towards the counter, "Just how you like it."

"Thank you," she said, quite grateful. She looked up at him as she sipped and almost spilled her cup when she met his eyes. That intensity was just unsettling. Her hands shook a bit as she smelled pine. *I am a better woman than this*, she thought, deliberately not making eye contact with him. *I will not melt into a puddle at his feet.*

He met her eyes again and asked her a question she didn't quite hear. He repeated it, eyes still intense *damn him!* and his long fingers drummed against the cup of coffee.

... or I could melt, she thought and gave herself up to the delectable coffee and excellent conversation.

*

"Why France?" she asked during a lull in the conversation.

He paused and gave her a hard look.

She smiled and batted her lashes.

He sighed, conceding an easy defeat. "My grandmother."

"The cottage?" Hermione asked, venturing a guess.

He nodded. "My grandparents were English but they spent their summers in France. It's how they met."

"And the cottage was..."

"My grandfather's. I never knew him," Severus said, clearly uninterested. "But my grandmother took up the cottage full-time after his death, so that is where I spent my summers."

"And now it's yours."

"I am her only living descendent."

Hermione paused. "It's quite beautiful."

He nodded and drank his coffee.

"Are you in contact with anyone in Britain?" she asked rather suddenly.

He looked up at her sharply. "Why do you need to know?"

"I "

"You want to know. I am not a puzzle for you to piece together, Hermione," he said, his voice low and his eyes fierce.

She opened her mouth, and he reached across the table and covered it with his hand.

"Will you desist, woman?" he hissed. "If you continue to harangue me with questions meant to satiate your own damned curiosity, I will be forced to take my leave."

She leaned back, slightly stunned. "Severus, I..."

He held up a hand. "Spare me."

They sat in silence a few moments.

"I'm sorry," she said meekly.

He grunted.

"So why did you open an apothecary?" Hermione asked tentatively, loathe to give up the conversation entirely. She thought his work may be safe ground *and even that's a guess* and was immensely relieved when he leaned in towards her.

"It's a way to make a living," he said simply, his fingers lightly drumming against his cup of coffee. It was distracting.

"Was it a dream of yours?"

He laughed. "I don't have dreams."

"Well, that's depressing," Hermione intoned with a raise of her eyebrows.

He shrugged and still managed to look quite dignified in the process. That was a bit annoying.

"I live in the present," he offered after a moment. "And only the present."

Hermione nodded and was relatively certain that she understood what he meant.

*

The discussion that followed was more than enough to convince Hermione that being in control was seriously overrated. Letting him lead and ask the questions made him much more relaxed than when he was on the defensive. *Well, naturally*, a little voice in her head said, but she shut that out quickly.

Also, her lacy shirt was distracting him, which both amused and unnerved her. Here was a man so self-controlled...

Speaking of which...

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"I visited your apothecary several times," she started slowly. "You were never there. Were you avoiding me?" She gave what she hoped was a cheeky smile, trying a bit too hard to come off as being more playful than she felt.

He stared at her long and hard. "I was not avoiding but rather delaying the inevitable."

She sputtered into her coffee. "You were avoiding me."

He closed his eyes, clearly annoyed. "There is a difference. I wanted to see you *on my* terms, when *I* deemed it necessary."

"Oh, when you deemed it necessary?" she asked sarcastically. *Forget letting him lead!* "So what I say or want doesn't matter?"

He inhaled sharply. "No. I just was not ready to see you. You visited three times..."

"Five."

"I am only aware of three visits, all of which I was told of after the fact."

"Why?"

"The first time you asked for me, and after that visit, I informed my employees that I wished to be apprised of any subsequent visits."

Her lips tightened into a thin smile. "Avoidant."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Informed." He sighed. "This conversation will only be as difficult as you make it."

"Well, you don't want to compromise..." she started, but he waved a hand and cut her off.

"You trespassed on my land, visited my apothecary, and you belligerently followed me at the conference in Amsterdam all of these are invasions of my private space and property, and I am not accustomed or inclined to share them with others."

That shut her up rather quickly.

That sat there, both staring at their coffee for several minutes.

She sighed and started to pull her things together. "You're right," she muttered. "I have no right to invade your life and impose myself on you when it's clear..."

"When *what* is clear, Hermione?" he asked softly, his voice a heady smoke to her ear. He pressed his leg against hers under the table to prevent her from getting up, and the sensation nearly knocked her off her chair.

Shit, she thought.

"I'm confused as to what exactly you want," she said, although the look in his eyes seemed quite clear.

"I want to spend time with you," he said without missing a beat. She opened her mouth to respond but he quickly said, "Surprising, I know. For all that you're a bushy haired know-it-all and I'm your greasy git of a former professor, I enjoy your company. I do not like it, however, when you ask impertinent questions and try to assume you know me. You don't. When you aren't annoying me, you'll find that we get on quite tolerably, or has the last hour escaped your notice?"

She closed her mouth. *Fuck.*

"I thought so," he said, looking entirely too self-satisfied for his own good.

"Severus," she said.

"Mm?"

"Your leg is still pressed up against mine."

"I am aware of it," he said, not looking up as he glanced at the paper he'd been reading before she arrived.

She looked at him and tried to ignore her temperature. He slid his leg along hers, and she thought her eyes would roll back in her head at the sheer pleasure of it.

Gods, I should not be this easily turned on! Then again, it has been over a year since...

The thought of her last encounter with Ron detached and decidedly unsatisfying was enough to put her off her stomach and move her leg away from Severus'. She clamped her legs together tightly and glared at him.

He, the sanctimonious prick, had the audacity to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she snapped.

"You," he said shamelessly, pressing his leg against hers again, clearly amused by the interaction.

Suddenly indignant and embarrassed at having been so easily aroused by her former professor but oh, how subtle it was, his leg pressed against hers, his eyes on his coffee, completely steady the whole time well, she did the only natural thing she could do. She picked up her things, kicked his leg away, and walked out of the café.

So caught up was she in the moment and in ignoring the passive look on his face, she failed to realize that it was raining. Furthermore, she forgot to put up her umbrella before venturing out into the elements, resulting in the complete soaking of her all-too-thin lace top.

The rain was coming down harder now, the colors of dusk now blocked out by the buildings, and the resulting shadows soaked the streets in a creamy, dark color.

"Oh, Merlin," she said, exasperated, as she reached in her purse for her umbrella. She fished about for a moment and didn't look up, so she was rather shocked when she suddenly felt a dry heaviness about her shoulders. She looked up into Severus' eyes and felt his hands resting on her shoulders where he'd put his jacket over her.

She pulled the coat tight around her, watching his wet hair cling to his head. Where the rain was cold, his eyes were hot, and they had been locked on her ever since she looked up from her bag. His button-down was soaked against him and had seen fit to mold itself to his hard body.

She tried to swallow discreetly.

They stood nearly nose-to-nose for a moment, breathing softly, falling slowly, until he broke and pulled her in tight against him, wrapping his arm around her waist and pressing his lips to hers in a fervent kiss, the force of the rain pressing them even tighter against one another.

Her arms came up around him, and neither of them noticed as the coat fell from her shoulders.

"Severus," she said softly, breathing against him when he finally released her lips in an audible *pop*. She shifted against him and he groaned, burying his face in the crook of her neck, right where it met collarbone. He pressed his mouth against her dampened skin and then sucked with such force that she almost cried out.

Almost.

"Stop, stop," she said softly, the sight of a stunned passerby bringing her back down to earth.

"Why should I?" he whispered against her ear, and his voice sent tingles down her spine.

"Because we're in the middle of the street," was the answer that brought a smile to his face.

She stepped away from him, hating that he knew how easily he affected her but loving the sensations all the same. *Two can play that game*, she thought, so she leaned against him again, feeling her rain-soaked torso come into contact with his. He exhaled quietly, and she reveled in it.

"Why stop?" she asked against his ear, standing on tiptoe with her arm around his neck to balance her.

His hands rested on her hips and rose up to stroke her back.

She sighed. "Because it's too soon." She nipped at his ear and stepped away, reaching down to pick up his coat. "I'll see you soon," she said with a smile, and then she stepped back into a sliver of dusky light.

"Alright then," Severus said, visibly more relaxed as his breathing regulated itself. "I'll send word," he said, and the look in his eyes made her a bit weak at the knees.

It also alarmed her enough to turn on her heel and walk the other direction.

*

July 15, 2001

Dear Ginny,

He kissed me in the pouring rain at dusk in the middle of the street in Paris. It was so romantic. And let me tell you, that man knows how to kiss.

I can't quite recall ever being so happy or sexually frustrated.

Work is going well, but I'm really quite incapable of reporting on anything else at the moment.

We're still working out that line between respecting privacy and getting to know each other... more specifically, I am still working out that line. I'm coming to realize I can't know everything all at once. I doubt he'll ever voluntarily share private information with me... it's like pulling back molars, honestly. I have a feeling that that facet of him is going to frustrate me for a very long time, but at the moment I want his hands on me too badly to think of anything else.

Tell me when you want more of the chocolate I sent you before.

Love,

Hermione

P.S. When you ask for detailed updates, this is what you get.

*

Present

"He kissed you in the rain?" Rose asked, incredulous and really, really impressed. She whistled and leaned back in her chair. "Damn, Mum. That's romantic."

Hermione laughed and sipped her wine. She put her glass down, smacked her lips, and threw her hair back over her shoulder.

"Yes, it was."

"Hot?" Rose asked with a wink. The wine had loosened them both up a bit; they were almost through with the bottle.

Hermione laughed heartily. "Quite. I recommend kissing in the rain. It's wet but well, inexplicable." She waved her wand and another bottle of wine flew over.

"So what happened after that?" Rose asked.

"We were together wait." Hermione drew her shoulders back and gave a haughty look. "Miss Granger," she mimicked, dropping her voice and smirking, "I do believe we are involved." She held the pose for a second before she burst out laughing and rocked forward into the table.

"That's what he said?" Rose asked. Hermione laughed again, almost a cackle. Rose smiled, amused. "You might want to get a glass of water, Mum."

"Oh, tosh, I'm fine," Hermione said, recovering herself.

"So you were exclusively involved?" Rose asked, trying to get them back on track.

"Essentially but we *weren't* in a relationship, mind." Hermione rolled her eyes. "We weren't together, we weren't exclusive, even though, naturally, we were, I mean "

Hermione ran a hand through her hair, distracted "Merlin, the physical pull was just so *intense*. I'm sorry, Rose. I'm sure you'd rather not hear about your mother in that sense, but the physical was definitely a driving force of our relationship. We fought like crazy I was pushy, he was cutting but we just couldn't stay away from each other."

"Strong attraction," Rose remarked nonchalantly. Honestly, any illusions of the stork or images of her mother as an asexual being had vanished long ago. She had walked in on her parents more often than she could remember, all of which when she was home on breaks from Hogwarts she supposed her parents had become sloppy with silencing and disillusionment charms after their children were gone. Also, most traumatizing, she had once seen a rather racy note her father had written to her mum. She'd been home for the hols during sixth year, and that note had put her off her stomach in the worst way. Why Hugo thought that it would be funny to show her she had no idea.

"Yes, attraction," her mother was saying. "A very strong one, physically and intellectually, of course, and I daresay a stronger attraction than either of us had ever experienced." A shadow passed over Hermione's face but was quickly replaced with a smile. "But there was also the fact that we were cut off from Britain both of us had done so voluntarily, though his was more out of necessity, but we were both... desperate, I suppose, for that comfort. We were familiar to each other, and that I think had a good to deal to do with it as well, though I think we both suppressed that notion. Two people desperate to forget yet clinging to the only visible wreckage an entertaining contradiction," Hermione murmured.

"But you *were* together..."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, we were. We were together for a long time for a very long, trying, difficult, yet immensely pleasurable and satisfying time."

*

I hope you all are still enjoying the story.

As a brief note, *Sage* has been nominated for Best WIP at the Quill to Parchment Awards. My sincere thanks to whoever nominated the story! I am honored to be in such esteemed company. To vote, go to <http://awards.quilltoparchment.com/>

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Thank you to Shug for her beta work and to snapeophile for alpha reading. I don't know what I'd do without you!

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*

October 31, 2001, Paris

Hermione fingered the exquisite pearl necklace that curved around her neck. It was her birthday gift from Severus. He'd taken her out for a luxurious dinner last month and presented her with a gift that was beautiful, thoughtful, and expensive. A token if ever there was one, unless he was in the habit of buying expensive jewelry for every young woman he took out for coffee (and lunch and dinner and to Capois...). "A grown up gift for a grown up woman," he had said with a wink. It was her twenty-second birthday, and he said it was one to celebrate. She had no idea why. Perhaps he said that for every birthday. Only time would tell.

She grinned at her reflection in the mirror. She was in the work bathroom, as she was heading straight to the Capois cottage to spend the evening with Severus. They had been "together" for a few months now, but who was counting? They spent an ungodly amount of time together, or so Cosette said. They met once a day for a morning coffee before work, and occasionally met for other meals as well. They were having an All Hallows Eve dinner together this evening, as a matter of fact.

Her smile faded. He had been in a foul snit when they met for coffee that morning. He was occasionally unbearable first thing off, often due to a lack of sleep, but her light attitude was usually enough to bring his spirits up, or at least to transform a grimace into a smirk by the end of their morning ritual.

Not this morning.

It was Halloween, and she had wondered what it was about this holiday that put him in such a temper.

She had scribbled a note off to Ginny, now a regular correspondent, asking as much, and had received a short response:

October 31, 2001

Hermione,

Three words: Lily Potter's death.

I hope he isn't too awful today.

Love,

Ginny

P.S. As Harry still hasn't proposed, I am seriously contemplating instituting the no-sex policy we talked about last year. Do you think that's too manipulative? Don't answer that question. I've waited too long, and the ring he has hidden in his top desk drawer is really lovely, and it'd look even better on my finger.

I'll stop rambling now.

Ah, yes, Hermione had thought. How had she not remembered? The first downfall of the Dark Lord was marked by the survival of Harry Potter and by the death of his parents.

As if Severus would forget.

She gave herself one last once-over in the mirror and tried to relax. She needed to prepare her mind, soften her tongue, and be kinder than usual. She wasn't going to spar tonight or, as Cosette said, "give him shit."

Right. She could do that.

*

Two hours later

Her kind words and the excellent dinner at Aunt Amelie's café had done nothing to sweeten Severus' still-sour mood. He had been short and silent, and Hermione doubted that he was even enjoying her company, even though he'd invited her over for the night. She sighed. They'd come back to the cottage for dessert, which Severus was supposedly serving up in the kitchen.

How the hell could she lighten the load? Honestly. And he hadn't said a word about anything: about Dumbledore or the war or Voldemort or Harry or James or Lily... The few words he had uttered were all to do with work and the weather. Naturally.

She was the supportive... significant other, for lack of a better word, but couldn't he just say something?

She was sitting on the front steps watching the sun set. It was a lovely sunset, if an angry one. There was a bit of purple but virtually no pink or yellow, just orange and violent streaks of red across the sky.

It suited the occasion.

The sun slipped beneath the horizon, and Hermione pulled her sweater tightly about her. The chill would descend quickly now. So would darkness.

As if her evening could get any darker.

Severus called her name, and Hermione rose to join him in the kitchen.

*

"Kahlua and vodka?" she asked, surprised, as she saw the bottles on the kitchen counter.

He put a casual arm around her waist and drew her close, startling her. He had not been in an affectionate mood. "White Russians," he said simply. "An excellent after-dinner drink. Try some." He pushed a glass in front of her.

She picked it up and sipped. Almost a milkshake, she thought. It tasted rather like a latte. A latte with a good dose of vodka. It had a hard edge to it. She made a bit of a face and set it down.

"You don't like it?" he asked, gazing at her.

"I do," she said. "It'll just take some getting used to. I'm not good with hard liquor."

He nodded, and she watched as he tipped almost half a glass back.

O-kay...

"Merlin, Sev," she said, trying to be light.

He slammed his glass down on the counter and went rigid, withdrawing his arm from her waist. "Don't call me that," he said, looking at her fiercely.

She shrank back. "Okay, then," she said, taken aback. "I was just teasing..."

He picked up his glass in one hand, the Kahlua and vodka in the other, and stalked out of the kitchen into the sitting room.

She exhaled, frustrated. *Damn it.*

She was always tempted to say "Well, to hell with you!" when he got like this, but it was Halloween, and she knew she should be here, regardless of how foul he was, regardless of how much alcohol he drowned himself in she needed to be here. For him.

She swallowed her pride, picked up her glass, and followed him into the sitting room.

She stalled in the doorway. The Kahlua and vodka lay on the floor in front of her, discarded and untouched, and his glass was turned over on the table, dripping onto the hardwood floor.

She Banished it all and walked over to where he sat. She took a seat opposite him in a wing-back chair in front of the fire.

Judging by his body language, he didn't want to talk about it; that was clear. She sat silently, crossed her legs, drank her White Russian, and stared at him. He was sitting as far back in the chair as was possible, retreating into the shadows as the firelight flickered across his legs. His chin rested on a fisted hand, his lips were pursed, and he looked as tightly wound as she'd seen him. *In France*, she added. *As tightly wound as I've seen him in France.*

This was a far cry from the Severus she had known the last few months, and it shook her. This was not the snarky, caustic, obscenely arrogant, socially adept man she had come to know. This was Professor Snape. The old Professor Snape.

She kept her gaze on him, unflinching, knowing he would break at some point. She uncrossed and crossed her legs again, noticing his eyes flicker in her direction.

She suppressed a grin. When in doubt, use your body. He was always susceptible to her form, even though they hadn't...

He snorted. "Don't play games with me, Hermione," he said.

Thank God. "Talk to me?" she asked softly, meeting his eyes.

Minutes passed.

"If you are waiting for an exposition on my feelings," he said at long last, sneer intact, "you can go somewhere else. Surely Henri and Cosette are throwing some debauched party on this most eventful of nights."

"They are," she said quickly. "I'd rather be with you."

"You and your fucking curiosity," he muttered. "I don't know why I indulge you."

She uncrossed and crossed her legs and stared pointedly.

He snorted again. "There is that. I have clearly secluded myself too long if even you tempt me."

Her breath caught in her throat. Her mind went blank.

Completely thrown, she stood, ignoring the sudden head rush.

A moment passed, her standing in shellshock.

She recovered her voice. "You want to talk games, Severus?" she said loudly. "Have the last few months been *agame* to you?"

He slammed against the armrest and stood, meeting her eye to eye, as much as was possible given their height difference. "Can *you* not understand that I want peace and quiet? Especially on Halloween!" he roared.

"Then *you* shouldn't have asked me over!" she screeched. "If you want your fucking peace and quiet, fine! But don't ask me over and take your foul mood out on me and expect me not to ask what's wrong!" She breathed heavily. "And don't be angry at me when I try to joke."

"Don't call me that... name," he said, his voice deathly quiet.

"Tell me why and I won't," she said stubbornly. "Does it annoy you? I'll stop."

He inhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why does it have to be you?" he muttered. "There are easier women, less difficult women..."

"Prettier women, more compliant women..." She trailed off, feeling broken. "Answer my goddamn question. One question, Severus. And it's not about your wretched mood, which I deal with on a regular basis, or about this game... I care about you," she pleaded.

He looked at her savagely. "You *care*?" he mocked. "How quaint." He sat down in his chair and conjured a drink, Hermione couldn't tell what. He sipped and smacked his lips. "You want an *explanation*, Hermione? Lily called me Sev. *Lily*. And this is the twenty-year anniversary of her death. This is a day when I bask in memories of her and drink myself into oblivion because the one woman who ever said she loved me save my grandmother is *dead*. And you *care*? What a consolation." He sipped his drink. "Is that enough *exposition* for you?"

Hermione's eyes filled to the brim. *Don't cry, don't cry.*

"I'm a consolation prize, is that it?" she choked out, wiping a disobedient tear from her cheek. "I'm a consolation prize for you? Lily's ~~dead~~, Severus. She's gone, and there's nothing any of us could have done. And I am leaving " because I *refuse* to be your second best. I will *not* compete with a dead woman. You want memories and alcohol? I wish you joy in them."

She Disappeared with a crack.

*

She got as far as the meadows outside the cottage. Having forgotten her bare feet, she ran through them a long while and breathed hard against the brisk night air. She finally saw a stump off in the distance, and she ran to it, taking a seat on it a minute later as she cast a warming charm on herself. Her breath came fast, and her heart was racing, and tears were spilling.

She looked up at the sky. A red moon. She gulped and drew her sweater tightly around her. The stars were brightly lit against the dark canvas of sky, and she stared at it

for a long time, tracing constellations with her fingertips, wishing she could recall more of her Astronomy class.

Ginny. Ginny had loved Astronomy; she'd taken enough of it, Merlin knew. She didn't care for Divination, preferring to read the past and future out of nature rather than from omens and crystal balls. She could recall Ginny going out to dance naked under the full moon more than a few times, always with a Disillusionment charm, of course. Hermione chuckled at the memory. *Ginny*, she thought. She whipped out her wand and Conjured parchment and a pen. She Summoned some fireflies from off in the distance and put a stasis charm on them so that they floated in front of her, giving off light to write by.

October 31, 2001

Dear Ginny,

I'm watching the moon tonight. It's red it looks like a harvest moon, except harvest is finished. It's blood red, which is troubling. Sitting out here in a musty meadow, one that is slowly dying as autumn fades into winter, it is easy to imagine you looking out the window of your flat and wishing on that same moon. The wide-open countryside is soaked with moonlight, and it's beautiful, so beautiful. As my world is Paris and my co-workers and a certain former Professor it is small so it also includes everyone I left behind; everyone I cherish in the innermost corner of my heart.

I have been with Severus for several months now, and he usually makes me happy, Gin. He's sarcastic and arrogant but tender when you least expect it. He's like liquorices or sour candy I can't help but come back for it.

I have my doubts though, and on nights like tonight, when we fight and he says the most awful things and I look up and see the red moon, it is easy to imagine omens and trouble not far ahead. Nights like tonight, I miss the innocence of childhood, the Hogwarts feasts, the enchanted pumpkins, the joy, the laughter. Severus is not joyful on Halloween. As you know, it marks an anniversary I am sure he desperately wants to forget.

Lily. She haunts me, Gin. I know he loved her, and I usually don't think of it, but tonight... How do you live up to a dead woman, especially one of such beauty and principle? She may as well be the dead wife, for all the devotion he's shown her all these years! He's not still in love with her, but I know it's days like today when he pretends to care far less than he really does, when he affects absentminded melancholy when I know he's breaking inside. It hurts him, but it hurts me, too. This sounds awful, but if I'd known he would be like this, I probably would have made my excuses and not seen him.

Or not. I care too much. I care far too much.

It's times like tonight when I sit out here in the meadow in the Parisian countryside and I let myself remember, and I watch the blood red moon and the starry sky and I ask myself, is this it? Is this what my life has come to? Arithmancy and lots of wine and an irascible man who will never show me how much he cares, who will never tell me, who I don't even know will stay with me?

It breaks my heart.

It sounds ludicrous, but it's times like this where I dream of a love that even time will lie down and be still for.

And then I remember. I'm leading a new life now. I made my bed, and I'll be damned if I don't sleep in it.

I love you.

Always,

Hermione

She folded it up and pointed her wand at it. It disappeared, gone to Ginny's fireplace. She breathed in deep and looked back up at the sky.

*

She sat on the stump a long while and watched the stars dance and thought about the hard, embittered, broken man inside the cottage.

She stood up after what felt like an hour and trudged back across the meadow, her heart a bit lighter with attempted forgiveness, and pretended not to be affected as the cottage came closer and closer until she was at the steps. She was surprised to find the door ajar. Odd, that.

She walked in quietly, shut the door, and crossed the old rugs in the entryway as she made her way to the sitting room. The fire was roaring, but he wasn't in sight.

She peeked in the kitchen no one and, hesitant, walked over to his bedroom. She looked in the open door, but he wasn't there, either.

"Severus?" she called, worry rising in her.

She walked back through the sitting room, central as it was, and was startled when she saw him sitting in a chair in the corner, shadows fleeing about his drawn, tear-stained face. He met her eyes. His were filled with sorrow.

"Oh," she whispered. She walked over to him.

She stood next to him and was about to put her hand on his shoulder when he reached for her hand and held it.

"I'm sorry," he said, not looking at her. "So sorry," the words seemed choked out. "You are not a consolation prize." He kissed her wrist and released it.

"It hurt," she said.

"I know, and I apologize," he said quietly, looking up at her.

"I accept your apology," she said slowly.

Silence.

"Severus?" she asked. He looked up at her. "Please never say those things to me again."

"I won't," he sighed. An emotion passed over his face, she couldn't tell what, but he put his head in his hands and breathed deeply. "I... care about you as well," he murmured, so softly Hermione barely heard it.

But she did hear it.

She slowly raked a hand through his hair. He reached for her hand, stilling it, and with a gentle touch brought her hand down to his face. He hadn't shaved recently, and his stubble was alternately rough and ticklish to the touch, but when his lips kissed her palm insistently, she shut her eyes and blocked everything else out. She felt his tongue dart out and press against her palm in several quick stabs, and she let the heat roll. She swayed slightly, and he slowly kissed up her forearm. He gently tugged at

her arm and led her body around so that she faced him. He caught her hips with his hands and brought her to stand between his knees. He rested his forehead against her stomach as she stroked his hair.

At long last, he pulled her arms down to her sides and looked up at her, his eyes hot, and she pulled her top up and over her head because the heat was going to burn her up if she didn't. He brought his hands up to her waist and hooked his fingers in her skirt. He pulled it down slowly, his fingers and the silk alternately raking over her stomach, thighs, and then her shins, at long last pooling at her feet in a sea of blue. She stepped out of the skirt as he brought his hands up to touch her, and she lost herself in the sensations as his fingers disappeared in her.

*

After, he carried her over to the rug in front of the fire where he made love to her slowly, exquisitely, and her world shattered in a thousand brilliant stars, the firelight reflecting off her pearl necklace.

*

Present

Hermione's eyes glazed over after she told Rose that she'd gone back in the cottage and reconciled with Severus, and Rose knew she wasn't getting the whole story. At this point, though, she was not about to press for details.

She sipped her wine as her mum went into her own world. It seemed as if she was watching a memory play out on the kitchen floor, she stared at it long enough.

"Mum?" Rose asked after a moment.

Hermione snapped out of her reverie and flushed.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I just... never mind." Her cheeks reddened.

Rose shut her eyes. She wasn't stupid, after all. "I'm not going to ask."

*

As a note, I owe a severe debt to the film Practical Magic for Hermione's letter to Ginny. The letter Sally writes to her sister Gillian in the film is the direct inspiration, and it just struck me and seemed so fitting here. The only line that is directly lifted is the one about wanting a love that even time will lie down and be still for.

I hope you're all still enjoying!

hugs

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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A/N: My thanks to Shug for her thorough beta work amidst the chaotic demands of RL.

*

December 19

Christmas was coming, and that was a damned tense holiday if ever there was one. Namely, there was the one question that loomed in the distance and came closer and closer like a storm cloud: where to spend Christmas?

If one were single, the assumption was that the hols would be spent with one's parents, but Hermione had always spent at least part of the holiday with the Weasley family. Last Christmas, her first in France, had been spent with Pierre and the innumerable guests who crowded his country estate with raucous jokes and ungodly amounts of liquor. Her parents had chosen this year to beg her to come visit them in Australia admittedly she hadn't been there since before her seventh year at Hogwarts... or what should have been her seventh year, she supposed. Her mother had added a bit too cheerfully, in Hermione's opinion that she could bring any 'guests' she wanted. Tactful, her mum.

Hermione had no idea what Severus was doing for Christmas. She doubted he spent it with anyone; he certainly hadn't mentioned it, and she was hesitant to raise the subject.

They were spending the weekend together at Capois if the town was something to behold in the summer and even autumn, then it was truly a thing of glory in the winter. Hermione had read metaphors of snow blanketing the land and of it glistening so brightly it nearly blinded, but the snow actually looked like that here. It was beautiful.

Hermione returned her attention to her morning coffee and scone. She was sitting at the table, having just dressed for the day, and she had a stack of papers from work next to her. Just as she began to focus, she heard a noise.

She looked up to see Severus leaning against the doorway, half-naked and looking a bit worse for the wear, given last night. A hint of a smirk played at her lips as she noted a few scratches. *I did that!* She thought she might be a bit too pleased at having marked him. She had concealed a few love bites around her neck, after all.

"Good morning," she said brightly. "Coffee's on."

"That greeting is an oxymoron," he muttered, but there was no bite in his voice. He raked a hand through his hair. 'Will take a cup of coffee.'" He crossed the floor almost without a sound, and he looked far too elegant to be half naked and in silky pajama pants. Hermione sneaked a glance over her shoulder and admired his strong back and tapered waist.

She hurriedly looked at her papers when he took a seat next to her at the table and pulled the newspaper across the table, dusting Floo powder off the papers as he did so. In the winter, French papers were delivered to the countryside via fireplace.

In all honesty, she was scrutinizing the company's annual report that Pierre had distributed yesterday. She was now aware of the projects and figures she didn't know about during the year, and she was absolutely delighted to see so many of her successes printed, even if they were in vague detail without her name attached.

"And that cheeky grin is for..." Severus prompted.

She looked up at him. "Work is going exceedingly well."

He nodded. "Good. Your work has been productive?"

"Very."

"Congratulations."

Hermione graced him with a smile and laid a hand on his arm. "Thank you."

He grunted and turned the page.

Given the discretion required by her employer, Hermione had belatedly realized that she could never imbue her work stories with the details she often pestered Severus for in daily conversation. Most thankfully, the man sitting next to her more than understood the need for secrecy and was always respectful of it. He never pried.

Ron would have pried.

Hermione shook that thought from her head. In her last letter, Ginny had said that the boys were nearly finished with the final stage of Auror training, the six month practicum. She had also reported that Ron was still helping George with Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes and that he was currently seeing Lavender Brown, who, surprisingly, was now a Healer for St. Mungo's.

Hermione wished them all the happiness. Lavender had grown up, and so had Ron more or less.

"Something on your mind?"

"Why?" Hermione asked, caught a bit off guard.

"You haven't turned a page in almost five minutes."

She turned a page.

"I was merely inquiring," he said, a rather pleasant look on his face as he returned to his own paper.

Hermione looked at him for just a moment. Half naked in silky pajama trousers, drinking coffee, and reading a paper, completely at peace after a night of revelry

How on earth could she ever want someone else?

"Christmas," she said abruptly. "I was thinking about Christmas."

"What of it?" he asked, his shoulders stiffening.

"My parents have invited me to spend the hols with them in Australia. They... said I could bring a guest," she said.

He sipped his coffee. "I'm afraid I must decline your invitation."

She gaped. "Just like that?"

He nodded.

She was far more offended than she thought she'd be. She'd thought he'd at least...

"Won't you even *consider* coming?"

"No." He looked up at her. "Thank you for the offer."

"Why thank me for an offer that was so easy for you to turn down?" She violently rose from the table, her chair creaking against the floor, and walked over to the sink, slamming her dishes into the basin and turning the faucet on full blast.

"Hermione " she heard him say patiently.

She flung a wet hand in his direction, flinging water with it.

"Hermione," he said sharply, rising from his chair. "You asked, I declined. I cannot see why you are so attached to the idea."

"I am *involved* with you and would not mind sharing the holiday with you. I enjoy your company. I would love to have you in Australia.*I want you to meet my parents* was the thought she did not express.

"I would not object to spending the holidays with you," he said slowly, as if trying to control his temper, "but I *do not* care to spend it with your family."

She practically growled and turned back to the sink, but not before she saw him pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Hermione," he said, clearly annoyed, "we are well, *we are*, but we only *have been* for..."

"Oh, five, six months," she said, her sarcasm not nearly as subtle as his could be.

"And sparing the fact that I prefer to spend my time alone, do you bring men home to your parents after five, six months?"

She kept washing dishes.

"Do you?" he asked, and he must have walked right up behind her because she felt his breath on her neck. A shiver ran down her spine. She put her slippery hands on the

edge of the sink, bracing her body and willing herself to not press back against him.

"I want you to come," she said meekly.

"And don't think I don't appreciate the sentiment," he murmured against her neck, lifting her hair so he could brush his lips against her skin. "But do your parents know who your guest would be?"

She shook her head.

He sighed. "I thought as much. Don't you think that springing your greasy git of an ex-professor on them right before Christmas might be a bit... much for them to handle?"

She shook her head. "No, actually "

"Well, I do." He released her and went back to sit in his chair.

"Severus "

"Do not ask me again."

Tears sprung to her eyes. *Damn it!*

She knew he didn't mean it as an insult, but she couldn't help the hurt she felt.

She crossed the kitchen to head to the bathroom, where she could at least take a bath and cry in peace.

"I hate to even ask this, but to drive the point home," Severus muttered, and she halted in the doorway, "did you ever ask the boys home with you?"

More tears came to her eyes, and she resumed walking to the bath. She heard him say "I thought not" before slamming the door behind her.

*

The next day, 10 AM, Paris

Hermione traveled by Floo to the International Transportation Hall at the French Ministry of Magic, a surprisingly chic structure exclusively decorated in ebony and porcelain. *Naturally*, she thought as she looked around and saw Parisian witches and wizards bustling about, all with intense looks on their face, studiously avoiding those around them. *Damned French*, Hermione thought as she started walking. She felt for her shrunk suitcase, secured in her pocket, and clutched her tote extra tight. She walked silently through the masses already leaving for the holiday, relieved that she'd talked her parents out of buying her plane tickets. The airlines were hell at Christmas, and it would have been exceedingly difficult for her to change her flight plan this late in the month.

She made her way to the Sydney connection at the end of the corridor and waited in the relatively short queue before disappearing into the massive Floo.

*

6 PM, Sydney

Hermione arrived at the Australian Ministry of Magic not a moment later and stood in shock for a moment before making her way out of the fireplace. She situated herself out of the main flow of traffic and stared in awe. This Ministry could not be more different than the French Ministry if it had tried. It was made almost entirely of glass and was *sweet Merlin* underwater. *Am I in Sydney Harbour?* She thought she'd read that somewhere. She looked around, above, and below for a long while, watching the fish, the shimmering rays of sunlight that pierced the depths, and the smiling, *relaxed* Aussie witches and wizards, so different from those in Paris not a moment ago.

She checked her watch, which had automatically adjusted the time difference. 6 PM. Well, at least it was still the same day. She walked down the hall, uncertain of her direction but already feeling her internal clock slow she could take her time; it was perfectly alright, and in all honesty, she had no idea how to navigate her way out of this submerged... tank?

She finally came across an information desk and waited patiently for the clerk's attention. When she had it, she smiled and asked "I'm sorry, but how do I ?"

"Get out of the Bay?" the older woman asked kindly. She pointed towards a corridor jutting out just to the left. "Those Floos will take you to a street in the city or in any of the suburbs."

"Thank you," Hermione said gratefully. Her parents lived in the Northern Beaches, near Manly. She found the Floo she needed and embarking on her last Floo trip of the day, shut her eyes tight and said "Belgrave Street, Manly!"

*

She arrived, surprisingly, in the open air. She stepped out of the fireplace, attached to a building in an alleyway, and watched it disappear behind her. Given her bad luck with alleyways, she quickly made her way onto Belgrave, hailed a taxi, and after checking the address she had written in her date book, headed to her parents' home on the beachfront.

*

Hermione got out of the taxi in front of the cottage not four minutes later traffic had been relatively light, all things considered. She paid the driver and stood on the curb, looking at the house as she heard the cab drive away. The cottage was sun-bleached white and looked quite large from the outside. During what should have been her seventh year, she'd situated her parents in a flat in the city, but they'd since seen fit to move out to the suburbs on the shore. Not that she could blame them; it was positively idyllic.

She walked up the sidewalk to the door and after a quick look around the neighborhood, surreptitiously pulled her suitcase out of her pocket and cast a momentary Do Not Notice charm. She waved her hand, and it was full-size in the blink of an eye. She shrank her wand and secured it in her tote. She had no intention of using magic on this trip.

She knocked on the door hesitantly. She hadn't told her parents that she was coming early *stupid, stupid* and she supposed she could get in the house if they weren't home, but she would really rather not break and enter into her parents' home on the first day she'd seen them in almost two years. She'd been raised with better manners than that, after all, and to hell with what Harry and Ron thought was acceptable behavior.

Those thoughts fled as she heard footsteps come to the door. It opened, and there stood her mum, a look of utter shock on her face that was quickly replaced with

"HERMIONE!"

Hermione was shocked as her mother threw her arms around her and pulled her in for a tight hug.

They let go of each other after a moment and looked at each other. Her mum had always been a petite woman, but she *did not* look her fifty years.

"Your hair is long!" Hermione blurted out. Her mum had always kept her sleek brown hair closely cropped to her head.

"I'm retired. I can grow it out now," Jean Granger said, grinning. She touched her daughter's hair. "You've grown so much, my darling," she said tenderly, her eyes glistening.

Hermione smiled, a bit embarrassed. "I've not grown in a while, Mum."

"You look like an adult. You look like you're living," Jean said definitively. "Oh, come in!" she exclaimed suddenly. "What a mother I am, keeping my only child out on the porch!"

She reached for Hermione's suitcase and ushered her daughter into the house. Hermione stood and stared agog, once again finding herself in a place of awe. The main level was almost entirely open, complete with vaulted ceilings, skylights, hardwood floors, and a fireplace directly in the center of the room. Furniture sectioned off the dining and sitting rooms and the diagonally situated kitchen had an island with bar stools and a hanging wine bar that jutted out into the dining area. There was an open closet directly to Hermione's left and what she thought was probably a bathroom on the other side of the entryway. A wooden staircase was right next to the entryway.

"The bedrooms and other baths are upstairs," Jean said, watching her daughter's eyes wander. "And there is a large patio right off the kitchen." Hermione's eyes shot to that direction and noticed the somewhat-visible patio furniture through the ceiling-to-floor windows that ran all along the beachfront side of the house. The sun was settled half-way up the horizon, and the view was...

"My God, Mum," Hermione said at last. "This is stunning."

"Thank you," Jean beamed. "I'll take you to the guest room."

"Where's Dad?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, he just went over to the Emersons' our neighbors for the men's weekly neighborhood poker night. I'll call "

"No, no, that's alright. It's good for it to be just us," Hermione said, suddenly realizing that it was. She put her hand over her heart and rubbed her chest, suddenly a bit melancholy.

"What's wrong?" Jean asked, putting a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"I..."

"Would this perhaps be why you arrived so early?" she asked gently.

Hermione nodded.

"Right," Jean said. She took her daughter's hand and led her over to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out two pina coladas. "The sun will set soon, and it's absolutely beautiful. Let's go for a walk, and we'll talk about it," she said, her voice taking on that decisive tone Hermione remembered so well from her childhood.

She followed her mum out onto the patio, where both women took off their sandals and walked down the steps to the beach. The sand was hot under her feet and provided a stark contrast to the slippery smooth pina colada that went down her throat so coolly.

She looks so relaxed, Hermione thought as she followed Jean out onto the beach. The long hair, white capris, and surfing t-shirt were throwing her for a loop. Retirement clearly suited her previously wound-up parents well.

"So," Jean said once they were walking side by side, "who is he?"

Hermione sprayed her drink. "What?"

Jean patted her daughter on the back. "I cannot for the life of me think of any other problem that would have you running to us three days early. Besides, think of the last what is it, almost two years now? You moved to France suddenly, left all your friends behind, and we proceeded to hardly hear from you at all. It was all very uncharacteristic of you."

Hermione sighed. She knew she was going to have to explain some things to her mother, but this was all coming rather soon. It was bound to come at some point, though. *I may as well tell her.*

So she did.

*

They talked a short while about Hermione's dissatisfaction with St. Mungo's and frustration with Ron. Hermione had omitted Viktor's letter and the obsession some things were better left buried, and she doubted she would ever tell anyone what the driving force behind her relocation had been. Jean had been intrigued and skeptical of her daughter's decision to go to France as Hermione had sparingly described it but had thankfully refrained from commenting. Hermione then told her mother about the amazing job she had come to love admittedly in sparse detail and about Pierre and Henri and Cosette and trips to Florence and Amsterdam... omitting Severus' appearance, of course...

"And the man, Hermione," Jean interrupted a few minutes later. "Don't try to distract me from my initial question."

Hermione sighed and stuck her hands in her pockets. "The man is... older than I."

"How much?"

"Nineteen years."

Jean chortled and put an arm around her daughter's waist. "The same as your father and I. At least you're following some family tradition. Is he an authority figure?"

"He was my professor at Hogwarts."

Jean laughed again. "And I interned under your father during dentistry school. Were you afraid to tell me these things, dear? Why on earth would you be nervous? Those sorts of relationships are a bit unorthodox, of course..."

"Just a bit, Mum," Hermione said, relieved.

Jean snorted. "Your friends will come around, trust me. It's a hard road at first but a worthwhile one. Look at your father and I. Twenty-four years of marriage and still going strong. We outlived every betting pool that was placed at our wedding."

Hermione looked at her mother's face, utterly serene and joyful. *I want that.*

They walked in silence for a bit. "Which professor, Hermione?" Jean asked.

"Severus Snape."

Jean stopped walking. "I've heard that name before," she said. Hermione met her mother's eyes, which had gone from serene to furious in two seconds. "He killed your Headmaster. Dumbledore."

Hermione's stomach dropped. She had never regretted telling her parents the war details more. "On Dumbledore's orders, Mum," she stressed, feeling like she was repeating the conversation she'd had with her parents the summer after Voldemort's defeat. "He took a magical Vow. It's called an Unbreakable Vow because you die if you don't do it," she said matter-of-factly. Her mother winced. "Dumbledore was already dying and he..."

"The fact that he was *capable* of it scares me. Your father could be diagnosed with terminal cancer and beg me to put him out of his misery, but with all my might, Hermione, I couldn't do it."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Sometimes you have to love someone enough to give them what they want. Severus was a double agent for years, Mum. He'd been taking orders from Dumbledore for decades. At what point was he supposed to stop?" she asked, her voice broken.

She grabbed her mother's arm as Jean turned to walk away. "He saved us. He saved *all* of us. He has saved my life more times than I could count, most recently this last summer." Jean's eyes widened, but Hermione continued. "And in case you don't remember the conversation we had about the war a few years ago, Voldemort tried to kill him we all thought Voldemort *had* killed him! I watched Severus *die* in front of me, Mum! I watched him die for his service." A tear spilled out. "He deserves another chance at life. He is brilliant and witty and he challenges me and he cares about me. He is a changed man and I..." She cut herself off abruptly.

Jean's face was a bit stunned. "Do you love him?"

"I don't love him," Hermione automatically responded. *What?* She started to walk again, a bit dazed.

Jean put a gentle hand on her daughter's shoulder. "All right, Hermione. All right. I just worry for you I am bloody terrified for you, actually being with a man like that. What mother wouldn't be?" She paused. "Has he ever..."

"He would never physically hurt me, Mum."

Jean sighed. "The fact that you specify abuse of the body but not of the mind and heart is alarming, my dear."

Hermione shut her eyes. "I care for him. I always have "

Jean looked agog. "You fancied him..."

"No, no," Hermione said, frustrated. "I didn't fancy him at school. I've always cared in the platonic sense. I have always respected him, defended him..."

"You've clearly had practice."

"Mother."

"I do not mind the age difference or the authority issue, but I do mind that this is a man who no matter how innocent his motives found it in himself to deliberately kill."

"To which I ask, how different is that from a bodyguard of the Queen or the PM who shoots a would-be assassin, who deliberately attacks a threat to all they hold dear? How is it different?" Hermione asked, her voice small, arms crossed across her chest.

The women stood in silence for a long moment. "Well, the bodyguard doesn't shoot his boss " Jean raised a hand " but the point is taken."

"Stop pestering me?" Hermione put one hand on her hip and sipped her drink.

"One last question," Jean asked.

Hermione looked at her mother, exasperated.

"What did he do to upset you?"

Hermione winced. "I... invited him here. He wouldn't come."

Jean chuckled, none too amused. "A wise decision."

"Mum!"

"Look at this holiday as preparation for the future, darling," Jean said. "As readying your father and I for the next Christmas, alright?"

"Okay," Hermione said after a moment. *Next Christmas. Us. Together. Here. On the beach. With my family.* "Okay."

Jean returned her arm to around her daughter's waist and sipped her pina colada as they walked barefoot in the surf, turning to walk back to the cottage.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Is the sex good?" Jean asked, grinning at her daughter's stunned face.

"Mum!"

"Oh, it is good then."

"Since when do you talk about this sort of thing?"

"Since you grew up."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, sipping their drinks, watching the sun set over the glistening water, perfectly at ease with each other. Hermione could not recall ever feeling closer to her mother in her life.

*

Hugo Granger was equally thrilled to see Hermione, though she and her mother kept mum on the details behind the early arrival. It wasn't too difficult to distract her easily excited father with tales of France, her work, and her flamboyant co-workers. It was good to hear her father laugh. His joy was always so catching.

Hermione was interested to note that her father had also let his hair grow what was left of it, anyway, given that he was nearing seventy. His blond curls had long since

thinned out, but Hermione thought that her father still looked as robust as ever. He had wrapped his daughter up in a big bear hug, lifting her clear off her feet, big man that he was, and had set her on his lap in front of the telly after Jean went to bed. Hermione had rested her forehead on his chest and inhaled, smelling cigar smoke and his familiar cologne, smells that meant safety and home and comfort and love. Hugo had stroked his daughter's hair as she fell asleep, somehow knowing that that was exactly what she needed.

*

Present

"So I spent the rest of the holiday with my parents," Hermione concluded, watching the candles flicker absentmindedly. "We had a large barbecue out on the beach with the neighbors there were quite a few retirees on that stretch of beach and it was really lovely. It was my first hot Christmas." She chuckled.

Rose was looking at her mother, her face intense with interest. "What else did you do with Nana and Grandpa?"

"Well, they took me scuba diving, and we went to a few concerts in the park, and there were fireworks on Christmas, of course, and we did a bit of shopping. It was a very relaxed, wonderful holiday. It was the first time I got to know my parents as an adult, and in retrospect, it was good that Severus wasn't there. He was right, of course, and I was quite petulant with him." Hermione sighed and sipped her wine.

"I miss Grandpa," Rose said quietly, twining her fingers together in her lap. Hugo Granger had died two years ago at the ripe age of ninety-two.

Hermione nodded, a wistful smile coming to her face. "I haven't thought about that Christmas in years." She rested her chin on her palm thoughtfully. "I wonder if we could go visit Mum in Sydney." Jean Granger still lived in that home.

Rose's face lit up. "I would love to visit Nana in Sydney! We haven't been there in years!"

Hermione nodded again. "I'll write her tomorrow and ask if we can come for a visit. It would be lovely to get away..." She trailed off and inhaled.

Rose reached across the table and put a hand on her mother's arm. "It's all right, Mum."

Hermione put her head in her hands. "I just..." She breathed. "I have kept them entirely separate for my whole adult life. It's the only way I could manage," she said, her voice almost breaking.

"Mum..." Rose started.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, looking up. "It's just so...*strange* for me to talk about this with you."

A wave of guilt swept over Rose. "Mum, this is my fault; I'm sorry I asked. I pried..."

Hermione held a hand up. "It would have come up sooner or later. And even if it hadn't, well..." Rose saw a shadow pass over her mother's face. "Well, it would have come up. And it's only right that you know."

Rose couldn't quite make out the expression on her mother's face.

"Where was I?" Hermione asked, sighing. "Ah, yes. Christmas, 2001." She rubbed her forehead. "I was with my parents for a while. Ten days, I think. Something like that." She waved a hand, clearly tired. "Anyhow, I missed Severus terribly. I was desperate to get back to France."

*

December 30, 2001, Paris

Hermione arrived in her flat around ten o'clock Paris time, completely exhausted, despite the fact that she'd left in the afternoon in Sydney. She'd had a wonderful time with her parents it had, in truth, been a far better trip than she'd expected but she missed him. She needed him.

But first things first. She pulled her wand out, her arm twisting elegantly as she warmed the room, opened the windows, lifted the stasis charm from the refrigerator, and returned her suitcase to its normal size, flinging it towards her bedroom as clothes and toiletries shot out, returning to their rightful places.

Satisfied, she turned back to her fireplace and grabbed a fistful of powder.

"Severus Snape's flat!"

*

He had long since changed his wards to allow Hermione to come through his Floo, provided she give him notice that she was coming, and Hermione was relieved that he hadn't blocked her over the hols. She stepped into his flat, which had clearly endured a thorough cleaning since she'd been gone.

"Severus?" she called quietly, but she was not certain whether or not he was here, or perhaps he was asleep. He would surely have come right away had he heard the Floo start up. It was extremely curious that he was not here.

She walked quietly to his bedroom and opened the door quietly. She peered in and saw the empty bed. Her stomach dropped a bit, but she glanced around and was relieved to see him in his reading chair by the fire, slumped ever so slightly in the chair, his hands still framing the open book on his lap.

She leaned against the doorframe and admired his sleeping form. His face looked drawn and weary, even in sleep had he been sleeping regularly? How exhausted must he be, that he did not awake at the sound of a visitor?

She tiptoed across the room and knelt in front of him, taking his hands in hers as she gently removed the book from his lap. His eyes fluttered open as her fingers stroked his palm.

"Hello," she said.

He swallowed and closed his eyes. "You're back."

She kept stroking his palm and silently willed him to look at her. "I needed to see you," she said, her voice small.

"Did you, now," he murmured. He opened his eyes and met hers.

"I missed you, Severus," she said quietly. "Merlin, I missed you so much." She crawled up onto his lap and put her arms around him as best she could. She sighed contentedly as she felt his arms wrap around her and couldn't suppress a small grin as she felt one of his hands rest on her bum. He gave it a brief squeeze, and she chuckled into his neck.

"So I see," he said, amused.

"My parents were wonderful, but it was too long without you," she said and pressed a kiss to his neck.

"It was long without you, too," he said quietly, and she smiled, pressing herself into him more. She squirmed, trying to settle into a comfortable position and quickly felt that it had been long for him, too.

She kissed his neck again, her lips lingering this time.

He inhaled, and Hermione felt his arms tighten around her. He quickly stood up with her in his arms, strode across the room, and deposited her on the bed, charming their clothes off in the process.

"Severus," she said, pulling him on top of her, incapable of patience. She moaned softly at the sudden feel of his skin against hers. She hadn't felt his comfortable weight on her, his lips on her, in far too long. His hands, however, stilled her impatience. She arched an eyebrow at him, and he gave her a smirk that was quickly replaced with what she thought was tenderness as he brushed a curl from her face. He kissed her, then, and cradled her head between his hands. She wrapped her legs around him and gave herself up to him, thoughts of deeper feeling lingering on the edge of consciousness.

*

A/N: I hope you're all still enjoying. As a note, my last day of school is in approx. 20 days, so you will probably not see an update from me before then - I'm hurtling towards the finish of the year, and it's already almost surreal.

Thank you for reading. Your support means so much to me.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Shug is my Beta Extraordinaire. Thank you, honey.

*

May 2002

Hermione awoke sprawled out across the massive bed with sheets tightly tucked around her, the sunlight piercing through the windows. She smiled and rolled onto her side, her head landing on Severus' pillow. She inhaled his strong scent it was one of the most potent smells she had ever experienced. It could rouse her from sleep faster than anything even coffee.

Coffee, she thought dimly.

She glanced at the clock. 9 AM. It was Saturday, and she hadn't slept in nearly as late as she usually did. Severus had already left for the market; he typically had breakfast prepared by the time she woke up.

She inhaled his scent once more before rising from the bed and tossed her frizzed curls over her shoulder. She wrapped herself up in a dark bedsheet and walked to the bathroom to relieve herself.

There was a note on the bathroom mirror.

Gone to Paris on business. Back tonight. SS

She felt her stomach drop. She cherished these weekends these weekends when time stood still and all the world was merely him and her and meals and books and lovemaking.

Tonight. Ah, well.

She washed her hands and walked back into the bedroom. There were things she could do to spend the time wisely. There were lots of chores that needed to be done.

Chores *oh...*

She could...

YES!

For all Severus' fastidiousness at the apothecary and his apartment, the cottage in Capois had been left nostalgically musty for years, or so it seemed to Hermione. If not for the complete living room set and china in the back cupboard, she would have called it a Bachelor Pad. And Merlin knew that Severus Snape was the epitome of the bachelor mentality.

Men. Harry and Ron were the same way about their places, honestly.

It was rather ironic, really. Severus was self-sufficient, but the man couldn't pick up a broom or mop to save his life.

Come to think of it, he'd probably never had the need. There was magic for that sort of cleaning... for him, at least.

She'd been itching to clean, and here was the perfect opportunity... she'd made a list for such an occasion at some point...

Where is that darned thing...

She rummaged threw the drawer of her bedside table, unable to find anything remotely related to non-sexual activities, and then went around to his.

What...?

On top of the table there was a book she hadn't seen before... likely because she never went into his personal drawers.

She picked the blue leather-bound book up off the table. SONNETS was engraved on the cover. She flipped the book open. *John Donne: The Complete Collection*.

Her eyebrows arched in surprise. Severus was exceedingly well read and had a library that routinely put hers to shame, but she hadn't thought he would read...

Her hand graced the cover and ruffled through the pages, and she felt a cloth bookmark. She opened up to the page:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,

For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,

Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures bee,

Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and souls delivery.

Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,

And better then thy stroke; why swell'st thou then;

One short sleep past, wee wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

She shut her eyes tightly and set the book gently back down on the table. Their conversation from the night before came back in a flash. They'd been curled up in bed together, reading, and Severus had asked her a most unexpected question...

"Why did you come back for my body?"

Even in the light of the morning, in the aftermath of a night of sweet tenderness, it was difficult to think of.

"Because you were a hero. Are a hero," she corrected herself.

"I was anything but."

"I beg to differ."

"Don't."

"Severus..."

"I deserved to die, Hermione. I expected to. I wanted to I had never been sorrier in my life then when I realized that Nagini would be the weapon."

"Because you were immune."

He nodded.

"But if you were so desirous of death," she said slowly, heart racing, "then why did you inoculate yourself?"

"A snakebite is no way to die."

"So death had conditions?"

"Everything has conditions."

She was silent.

He grunted.

"Why..." she barely made out.

"I hated myself. I still do, sometimes."

She could hardly bear to hear those words from him, let alone accept them, and she had had a choice at how to react sob or scream.

Like many perhaps not entirely rational women before her, she'd chosen the latter.

She had smacked him, had yelled and screamed at him

He sat against the headboard in frustration as she shouted at him from the end of the bed how could he say those things about himself, sell himself so short, hate so

deeply? His eyes were a merciless black pit, his body still as stone.

"Why do you care?" he asked icily. "Why do you honestly care how I... felt... when it was beyond your control? When you weren't in the picture?"

The words came to her automatically. Relief flooded her being even as she spoke

"Because I love you. It doesn't matter that I didn't love you then; I love you now, and so now everything you've felt and experienced is significant how could I not care that you were suicidal?" She tried not to let the lingering hysteria touch her voice. "How could I not care that you had so little self respect, so little cognizance of who you are... what you are... how beautiful and heroic and..."

She had crawled up the bed then, forcing his eyes open, making him look her in the eye, forcing him to acknowledge her words even if he denied their validity. They had slept curled against each other, limbs wound the same bed, the same breath.

"Death be not proud," she murmured. She shook her head. She'd recreate the damned list. She needed a shower. She needed coffee. There were things to do.

*

After a hot shower and a steaming cup of coffee, Hermione sat at the kitchen table until she finished recreating the long-lost list of chores. She'd wanted to get her hands on the whole place for a while, and she had yet to go through the attic. Truth be told, she was extremely curious. It was probably not the best place to start, as she wouldn't be able to throw anything out without Severus' permission, but she could dust and wipe windows and attempt to clean the floor... and look around...

She anxiously tapped the pen against the hardwood table. The entire cottage needed a nice, thorough scrub. It really needed a spring cleaning. God only knew the last time the place *had* had a spring cleaning, and it was May as it was she was a bit late.

Hermione poured herself another cup and finally got to work on making breakfast. She was starving, and she was used to breakfast on Saturday mornings Severus usually cooked for her. She wasn't the best cook and had dropped enough eggs and burned enough toast to have been thoroughly validated in that self-assessment.

Focus, Hermione, focus! The attic. She'd start with the attic. Severus had shown her the entrance only last week there was a latch in the kitchen ceiling that pulled a set of stairs down. It was quite fascinating.

Inhaling sharply, Hermione set about her work. She stepped up on a kitchen chair and pulled down the latch. She gently unfolded the stairs that were collapsed in the pull-down door, and making sure they were firmly set on the ground, she went up the ladder. She'd Summon the rags and cleaner after assessing the damage.

The attic wasn't as bad as she'd expected, though it was stuffy as hell. She waved her hands and windows on opposite ends of the room opened, letting the breeze in suddenly. It blew the white sheets covering the furniture sky-high.

Lord, it was humid. She wiped her brow and Summoned the cleaning supplies. They came up quite nicely and landed at her feet in one fell swoop.

Hermione got her wand out and promptly Vanished the dust and cobwebs but sent the spiders flying out the windows she didn't quite have the heart to kill them.

Cleaning with magic was always entertaining to Hermione's eyes. She'd grown up with Saturdays as the designated cleaning day: Dad would tend the lawn, and she and her mother would give the house a good scrub. Even their new Sydney house was immaculate; it had stayed relatively so, even with her mother missing the Saturday clean in order to cook for the beach barbeque...

Magical cleaning was, consequently, fascinating to Hermione. But while she enjoyed watching, she found herself unable to do a serious clean in the magical way. She'd once forgotten that she'd left her pots scrubbing themselves in the kitchen sink, and when she'd gone in for a drink an hour later, they'd been scrubbed completely raw and the sponge-thing had been grated to the size of a Knut.

Suffice to say, this was one area of her life best kept Muggle.

Hermione took the cleaning spray in one hand, paper towels in another, and promptly got to work.

*

An hour later, she was nearly finished. Vanishing the dust and cobwebs had proven immensely helpful. Hermione was just setting down her supplies and preparing to descend down the ladder when something caught her eye...

BOOKS was scrawled across a box barely four feet ahead of her.

Books!

There were BOOKS in the box!

She quickly went over to the box before pausing with her hands on her hips.

To open... or not to open?

Well, they were in the attic. Given the apparent age of this box, they clearly hadn't been read in a while. Surely Severus wouldn't mind.

And if he did, to hell with him. He of all people would understand.

As long as they weren't priceless family heirlooms... doubtful...

She wrestled with the tape, opened the box flaps, and nearly fell over at the jet stream of light that burst through the box. She covered her eyes, shielding them from the light's intensity. As it dimmed, she looked in the box...

There was only one small book lying at the bottom, maybe eight inches wide and eight or so inches long, but it was a good inch thick, if not more.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat, but not at the fact that so small a magical book could radiate such brilliant, pulsing light no, it was the book itself...

Is it really...?

She reached for it carefully, touching its cover softly. She quickly withdrew her hands and cast shielding charms on them to prevent oils from damaging the book...

It's magical, she thought immediately after. *That probably was not necessary.*

The fact that it was probably protected didn't stop her reverent tenderness with the handling. It was ornate, delicate... extremely lavish.

She picked it up ever so gently this time, and when it came into the natural light, she thought she might drop it.

The book's cover and back were a brilliant contrast in ebony and ivory wood, with what looked to be garnet, onyx, and pearl sewn into the binding. *Oh, my God. It's so beautiful... how much would this cost?* Hermione ran a hand down the cover, completely mesmerized. There was no title, merely a silver latch. She opened it slowly, and it opened like it was brand new well, clearly it was in excellent condition. It definitely had protective spells on it warding against wear and tear.

The pages were thick; the paper was handmade, and there were slight ribbons of gold that bounced off the pages where the light hit them.

Hermione read the title page:

Faerie Tales

A Collection

Compiled by Brigit Prince

For her daughter Rose

Prince. A family heirloom, then. She winced at how quickly she'd discarded the idea that the Princes would have anything valuable stored in the attic. *Does Severus even know about this?*

She sat there a moment, an internal battle of respect and curiosity raging against each other...

Curiosity won.

She turned the page.

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Hermione's breath caught in her throat. She ran a loving hand across the page, caressing it like she caressed her lover's back in the dark, and she turned the page and read...

*

Hours Later

Hermione was reading the faerie book a second time when she heard a deep voice call out

"Hermione?"

Her heart stopped. *Severus*. She cast a Time Charm, and the numbers appeared before her. It was four in the afternoon. *Merlin!* She hurried to her feet, and placing the book back in its precious and probably protected if flimsy box, she cast a multitude of charms in a flurry before scrambling down the ladder.

She was half-way down when she felt hands on her hips, firm and hot, pulling her down the rest of the way. She landed against a hard mass of flesh and bone and muscle.

He pressed his lips to her hair. "You stink."

She snorted, her heart still beating wildly in her chest. "I've been cleaning."

"Mm." He trailed his hands across her stomach. "For how long?"

"A few hours."

He let go of her. "*What?*" he asked, clearly shocked.

"The Muggle way." Hermione turned to face him and saw his grimace.

"Why on earth would you clean the Muggle way? It takes so long!"

Hermione snorted with mirth. He truly did sound like a petulant child right now. It was unsettling, considering how mature he looked in the three-piece black suit. She was suddenly very conscious of her grungy capris and T-shirt. And where the hell had he been in a three piece suit?

"Hermione?" he asked, a bit annoyed.

"I clean that way for comfort," she said, startled out of her self-recrimination. "Also, I'm shite at remembering everything I've charmed or spelled or whatnot."

"Nonsense."

"And where were you today?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked lowly.

Her stomach grumbled loudly, and Severus looked down at her, his expression shifting from casual annoyance to complete disbelief.

"When did you last eat?" he demanded.

"Oh, I " Her eyes widened at the realization "I I haven't eaten. I had coffee before I went up to the attic..."

He growled, slid a hand about her waist, and effectively lifted her off her feet before setting her down on the table.

"You weren't here," she said, knowing that sounded completely pathetic.

"That's no excuse to not eat!" He took off his suit jacket, threw it over a chair, and started rummaging through the refrigerator, looking for something edible.

She sighed. He'd find just the right thing to prepare. He always did.

"I can't cook, Severus," she said patiently. "There's a reason I never cook. I burnt *toast*."

"I happen to like my toast burned. And I'll teach you it's not as if you've never been able to learn anything you set your mind to before."

"I am wretched at Divination."

"You hate the subject."

"I can't fly."

"You're terrified of heights."

"Stop being right!"

He turned to her and smirked.

She crossed her arms. "You do know that you're an impossible man."

He grinned.

"You can't do that!" she exclaimed. She hopped off the table and wrapped her arms around his torso. "You can't be gone all day and then come back and just *smile* like that. I'm quite unprepared."

He gently removed her arms from his waist. "Let me cook you something, damn it."

"But "

"Hermione."

She pouted and watched as he elegantly strode throughout the kitchen, mixing ingredients, standing watch over the stove, and finally serving her an enormous ham and cheese omelet.

He sipped a glass of wine while she ate.

As she finished, she nudged her foot against his. He arched an eyebrow at her.

"Not that I don't appreciate the proposition, but I couldn't possibly "

At that precise moment, a letter shot out of the fireplace.

Hermione groaned as Severus leapt from his chair to get it. *Anything to have his way. But what man doesn't want...?*

"Ginny," she heard him say right before he dropped the letter in her lap.

And it was, indeed, Gin's handwriting. Well, he was observant, if entirely disinterested in sex and unwilling to tell her where he'd been. Not that she'd asked yet. But she would.

She opened the letter.

15 May 2002

Hermione,

I'M ENGAGED! Harry proposed last night very romantically, I might add and, well, I'm completely incoherent right now, I'm so happy.

The wedding will be in December I've always wanted a Christmas wedding and darling, you must be there. We both miss you wretchedly and forgive me, but I'm newly engaged and emotionally quite willing to give him whatever he wants but I broke down to Harry and confessed that we've been writing each other please don't hate me, but we saw everyone today except you and he was so miserable and so, long story short, I've included a note from him. Don't hold me responsible for anything Harry says; I've not read it. I'll keep you posted on what's going on here.

I love you.

And I'm engaged!

-Ginny

P.S. I knew that the no sex rule couldn't last long!

Hermione grinned. Ginny had finally instituted that asinine rule a month ago, but it had got her what she wanted. Hermione's heart felt like it was ready to burst, she was so happy for them. She ignored the pit in her stomach when she opened the charmed note Harry had included.

Harry.

Hermione, it began.

She inhaled sharply and began to read again.

Hermione,

I don't know where to start. Gin and I are engaged, but I expect she told you about that. You would be proud of how well I did on the planning the night out part you'd have loved it.

We miss you so much.

So fucking much.

I can't ask why you left because I know you won't tell me. Clearly you would have told me before. And that hurts like a bitch, because you are FAMILY to me... I've been mad at you, frustrated, pissed as all get, depressed, sad, but... it doesn't change the fact that I love you and I'm always going to. Always.

Please come back for the wedding. Please come.

Harry

Tears dripped onto the parchment as she folded the letter back up. She wiped her tears away, suddenly self-conscious...

"Harry and Ginny are engaged," she said, but why would he be interested?

"So Mr. Potter finally pulled his head out of his arse."

She chuckled through the waves of melancholy that were coursing through her.

She stared into her lap and heard rather than saw him come over to her. He lifted her out of her chair, and she stiffened, surprised, but she relaxed as he held her to his chest and walked towards the bedroom.

When he dropped her on the bed, she looked up and arched an eyebrow.

"I thought you didn't want..."

"Let me hold you."

He crawled up next to her and drew her to him, his arm casually draped across her waist.

She was completely and utterly undone.

"Why do you do this?" she asked softly.

"Do what?"

"Put up with me."

He grunted. "So I can fuck you later?"

She smacked his arm. "That was callous."

"Do you want me to apologize?"

She chuckled and he snorted, but his face turned hard, serious, very quickly. "Frankly, I hate seeing you upset and I'd rather calm you down," he said.

"You don't mind making me upset."

"But that's me," he explained patiently, and she wanted to smack him again. "I don't like other people hurting you."

"Ginny didn't hurt me and neither did Harry," she said, noticing the fierce look in his eyes. She sighed. "I just miss them." She paused but decided to forge ahead... tentatively. "Do you ever miss Britain?"

He stilled.

"Sorry," she said immediately. "Stupid question."

He was silent.

"I want to go to their wedding," she said, filling the void, "but I don't want to have to talk to people... see people... see anyone aside from Harry and Ginny... I wonder how I could..." she started and found herself pushed away as Severus violently rose from the bed.

"Severus!"

"You don't want to have to explain us," he said flatly, glaring at her from the end of the bed.

"No! I love you, damn it! I wouldn't trade *anything* for this, and I don't want to have to explain my choices! They don't deserve an explanation!"

"You think we could be together if we were in Britain? Are you honestly so deranged?" he asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

"Severus, you're completely off the point," she said, trying to make him be reasonable. Why was it so hard for him to be ~~be~~asonable?

"You're ashamed to admit you're with me?" He turned, but she was faster; she grabbed his arm and pulled him down on top of her and wrapped her legs around his waist to keep him there.

"*I love you*, and I am not ashamed of you. I am *never* ashamed of you! People here know we're together, and we'd be together in Britain even if we weren't here, but would life there be harder? Of course it would be," she said, her hands cupping his face. "People think they're entitled to every fucking detail of my life of your life and I don't want to answer to them. I don't want to have them follow me back here and destroy everything we have..." She trailed off, watching his eyes flicker.

"How do you intend to *not* answer to them?" he asked after a long moment.

Her shoulders slumped with relief, and she released him from the death grip her lips had held him in.

"Harry's invisibility cloak. I can sit in the back."

He laid down next to her, still. She reached over and tentatively brushed a finger down his cheek. He caught her finger with his hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it.

He was sorry. If only he could say it...

But maybe. Eventually.

"You said you don't want this destroyed," he said softly. "What are we living in, Hermione? Some fragile fairy tale fantasy, doomed to ruin?"

"God, I hope not." She curled against him and threw an arm across his chest. "Don't wax melancholy. It makes me nervous."

He chuckled.

They lay side by side for a while, and Hermione had almost fallen asleep when he said, "I'll be gone frequently for the rest of the year."

Alarm bells went off in her head. She bolted upright, suddenly awake.

"What?" she asked, keeping her voice calm, looking down into his still-vigilant eyes.

"Work," was all he said, and his tone had the ring of fatal finality to it the 'don't you *da*re question me' tone that she had become intimately acquainted with.

The problem was, she couldn't help but question.

"How long?"

He shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, as he was prone to do when she was at her most bothersome.

"A week at a time."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he clamped a hand over it immediately.

"Don't even think about it. It's for work, it is absolutely necessary, and no one else can do what I do."

"Is it dangerous?" she asked when he released her.

"Not particularly."

She rolled her eyes. "Fabulous."

"*Hermione*."

"I know. A week at a time," she repeated. "Does that include weekends?"

"I don't know."

She flopped back down on the bed and bounced a little. "Wonderful," she said in a tone that made it clear that this development was anything *but*.

"You can still use the cottage whenever you like," he said, propping himself up on an elbow so he could look down on her. "I'll give you a key and all my passwords."

Her eyes lit up, and her heart swelled. "Really?"

He sighed dramatically. "You're here every weekend, anyway."

"Oh, *Severus*!" She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down on top of her, completely joyful.

He grunted and pushed himself back up when her fervor had subsided. "I am an old man, you know. You can't expect my limbs to keep up with yours."

She wagged her eyebrows at him. "Is that a challenge?"

He groaned. "You were practically asleep ten minutes ago, and I am exhausted. You're a fiend, woman." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in against him.

"How many weekends do we have left?" she asked quietly after a moment.

"As many as you bloody well want. This project won't take forever. I hope."

Hermione chose to ignore that last bit as her emotional weariness dragged her into sleep.

*

A/N: The John Donne sonnet is #72 and is sometimes titled "Death Be Not Proud." Also, as it is summer, I will be updating more frequently. *smooches you all*

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: My thanks to Shug for her excellent work on this chapter and to MollysSister for giving it a once-over to help calm my nerves. The two of you are angels!

*

November 30, 2002

Hermione was at Severus' flat for the first time in ages. He'd been sleeping for nearly a day straight after this last trip. It had taken a lot out of him, and he hadn't had the energy to go to the cottage. They were spending the weekend together in Paris. A change. It certainly broke the monotony... if there could be monotony in a relationship where one partner was consistently torn away for weeks at a time.

She had been mulling around the flat, reading, checking in on him while he slept, ordering in Chinese as he had yet to teach her anything in a kitchen, and had gone looking for a book she'd lost in his study when she'd found... it.

A very disturbing piece of paper that listed bloody terrifying potions.

Is there such a thing as happiness in a bottle? she had asked herself while reading.

Hermione had never had an ethical issue with potions work, which at a base level was similar to Muggle chemistry and pharmacy. But some *of these* potions...

How can you bottle emotion? Lust potions were the most obvious offender, and other potions could calm you... well, so could green tea, she supposed. But when did the importance of potions' medicinal properties become outstripped by human addiction and need for unnatural mental and emotional relief and suppression when was it unethical to start blocking emotions, mental pain, and thus real personal development? Potions to suppress heartache, relieve guilt... Such potions were not well known or easily made... but they were mere child's play for masters.

Severus was a master. And from the looks of this list, he was making them.

Hermione usually did not question Severus' business decisions, but this was troublesome. This list was composed of potions that blocked pain or created patience... were they merely ideas or were they in the trial stages or were they in production being sold?

This was entirely unethical. It created *faked* emotion.

It was undeniably a slippery slope.

"There you are," a voice said behind her.

Hermione whipped around. "Severus. You're awake," she said, surprised, and attempted to hide the paper behind her.

He looked at her quizzically and reached behind her back, taking the paper from her hand.

His lips tightened as he read.

"You've been in my papers," he said, his voice level. Hermione met his eyes. They were blank. That was never good.

"I was looking for one of the books you said I could borrow, and that was on your desk. It was out in the open."

"So my personal papers are only private if they're locked away?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "But it was right there, and I couldn't help but notice "

"This is *private* information that is to do with my business," he said fiercely.

"It's unethical!" she blurted out, unable to hold her tongue in check any longer. "Do these potions actually do what you say they do?" She pointed at the paper.

"They're meant to, yes. And I fail to see how creating potions that *help people* is unethical," he said, sardonic and dismissive at the same time.

"They create false emotions," Hermione insisted. "I don't see how creating a lust potion is any different."

"They help people oh, sweet Merlin, woman, would you let it go?" He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No."

"They help people become better versions of themselves," he said at last, staring directly at her, clearly amused by his words.

"That's what personal *growth* is for!" she exclaimed, frustrated beyond belief.

"Not everyone shares your idealism."

She inhaled sharply. "Basic growth is *not* an ideal. It's how we "

"Become better able to handle situations? Tell me, Hermione," he said conversationally, leaning against the table, "how will a patience *potiomo* help a mother of young children and make the situation better for everyone involved?"

"It's habit forming."

"Are endurance potions any different?"

"Those are like Muggle caffeine," Hermione responded automatically. "They assist the body "

"So do these."

"But emotions are *different!* There's an entirely different physiology "

"Do not lecture *me* on physiology. I am a Potions master, lest you forget," Severus said lowly, his tone threatening. A moment passed, and the look in his eyes cleared away. He relaxed again, clearly enjoying baiting her. "What would you make of a Calming Draught then, my dear?" he asked, and the tone he took with 'my dear' was so disdainful that she wanted to throw up.

"It's a sedative," she said slowly. "Also, they can only legally be administered by health professionals, and you know it. Just because you work outside the boundaries of propriety "

"Are you calling *me* unethical?" There was that tone again. His entire demeanor looked fierce and ready to pounce.

Hermione gulped. "No. But I do think that you have your own standard that you adhere to, which sometimes lies outside the norm." That was fair and ambiguous enough.

He was ethical, in his own way this she knew. But one did not serve as a double agent for over twenty years and maintain a strict moral code...

His morals were... flexible. Yes, that was the word. The Big Sins murder, robbery, assault, and so on he opposed. But when it came to manipulating the human condition...

Well, he was a Potions master. Moreover, he was a master who researched every corner of his field, leaving no stone unturned, finding every dark and disturbing nook and cranny, if only to further complete his own knowledge.

He was consistent, though. She gave him that.

He sighed and broke the tension. "I'm only researching these potions, Hermione. But *will* sell those that can be made successfully made without overly addictive ingredients, I can assure you."

"Such potions can still be habit-forming. People can still become addicted."

"That's their prerogative."

"*Severus!*"

"Personal responsibility, Hermione have you ever heard of it?" he asked tersely, looking ready to pounce again. "You can't save the whole fucking world through your own example of a Fine Moral Code."

Her fists balled at her sides in anger. "Are you making fun of me?"

"I do believe I am," he said as he sat down. "Who stole from my stores? Who led Dolores Umbridge to the centaurs?"

"I thought we decided we weren't bringing up the past."

He was silent.

"I only did what was necessary!" she insisted.

"*So did I.*"

They both looked away from the other.

"I think I'll leave," she said at last.

"That would be best."

"And don't Floo me," she called as she stalked out of his kitchen.

"Come to bed later," he called to her.

Merlin, he was infuriating.

And she felt guilty.

Oh, so guilty.

She Apparated back to her flat, fury and shame coursing through her.

*

He left on another blasted trip two days later.

*

December 19, 2002

Hermione arrived at her office, coffee in hand, a stain already firmly soaked in her white pantsuit. She was just sitting down at her desk when a whirl of black sped into her office.

"Cosette!" she exclaimed as her friend's body launched against her.

"Hermione, *ma chere*, it has been too long!" Cosette exclaimed, releasing Hermione from her crushing embrace.

"It's only been forty-eight hours," Hermione said, grinning as Cosette pulled up a chair next to her.

"The office is so dull without you, darling, painfully dull."

Hermione snorted. "You're usually not so melodramatic. And I would think that you are the vivacious one in this relationship."

"I missed you," Cosette insisted. "How was the wedding?" Her eyes were bright with curiosity.

Hermione waved a hand, and the door slammed shut. Pierre wouldn't mind. He'd be in the office within a half hour to ask her the same thing, anyway.

"Oh, it was beautiful, Cosette," Hermione said, turning back to her friend, her face lit with joy. "Outdoors, in the snow *love* magic!" she exclaimed. "And we were all warm and everything!"

Cosette laughed. "Winter weddings are truly magical things."

"Oh, shut it," Hermione said playfully. "Harry was... so happy. So happy. I don't think I've ever been hugged longer in my life. And the look on his face when Ginny walked up the aisle..." Tears came to her eyes. "Beautiful. And Ginny was just radiant. Her dress was stunning. She looked like something out of a fairy tale, I tell you. Her hair was curled and the dress was glistening, just radiating off the decorative snow and the sunlight, and she was wearing this beautiful pearl drop necklace. The vows were lovely and very funny and honest and everyone was laughing and crying at the same time. Kingsley officiated, and Luna stood up for Ginny and Ron was Best Man..." She trailed off.

"This is the one you were engaged to?" Cosette prompted.

Hermione nodded. "He looked good. He was smiling, but he was the only person there whose mind was completely elsewhere."

"You know this?" Cosette looked slightly incredulous.

"I know him."

"Ah."

Silence.

"Did Harry or Ginny speak of him to you?"

"No," Hermione said softly. She looked down in her lap only to see the coffee stain glaring back at her angrily. She Banished it.

"And what did you wear?" Cosette asked.

"An invisibility cloak."

"You still dressed up."

"You only know that because you helped me pick an outfit!"

"As if Hermione Granger would attend a *wedding* in casual attire! Please," Cosette said, playfully exasperated. "Also, I helped you picked out three outfits. Which did you wear?"

"The black one." Hermione smiled.

Cosette snorted. "An ode to your mate."

Hermione's eyes darkened. "He's not "

"Have you seen him yet? When did you get back? Last night?"

"He's been on a trip for two weeks. I don't know when he'll be back," Hermione said, barely able to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

Cosette sighed patiently. "We've discussed this."

"I know, I know!" Hermione exclaimed, frustrated. "He's respectful *of my* work situation, and I can't help but be frustrated when *his* is secret. I know that's a blatant double standard. I *know*."

"At last, you acknowledge it."

"At least he tells me he's going somewhere. He didn't that one time in October." Hermione put her forehead in her hands. "Oh, that man drives me crazy. Like I wouldn't *care* that he had gone for a week and didn't know where he was!"

"He can't talk about it, Hermione. That is something you need to let go of."

"I know, I know. It's just so bloody infuriating! I think it's because I got used to hearing about his work "

"You still hear about the apothecary, just not about the trips."

"Do you know how many weeks he's been gone in the last six months? Eight," Hermione said flatly. "That's *eight weeks* we haven't been together in six months. That's two months unexplained "

"If I were Muggle I'd say you sound like a military wife..."

Hermione sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Don't give me that, Cosette. I don't need that from you, of all people. Your significant other and our precious boss have done more than their share of attempting to assuage my concern." She paused. "And don't joke about that word, either."

"What, the Muggle military?"

"You know what I mean."

"The word 'wife?'"

"Cosette..."

"You were just at a wedding, Hermione "

"Theirs, not ours."

Cosette was silent for a moment. "Do you want to marry him?"

"No. Yes. Maybe. No. I don't know. Let's not talk about it."

Cosette's face remained blank. "Of course. What are your plans for New Year's?"

"We don't have any and probably won't. I don't even know if he'll be back by then."

"Well, would you and Severus or just you, if you prefer be interested in having a wonderful midnight meal in the Eiffel Tower with Henri and me?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "How tourist of you, darling."

Cosette shrugged, nonplussed. "We've never been to the Eiffel, and Henri is rather fond of romantic clichés. What do you say, though? Are you up for a double date?"

"Or third wheeling," Hermione said dryly.

"You'll come, then! Excellent."

"You know, this is one of the things I love most about your friendship, Cosette the *choices* you give me. Such a thoughtful friend."

"You love me for it." Cosette grinned, and Hermione wanted to shake her because she was right. Cosette rose from her chair and started towards the door. "I'll send Pierre in now. He's dying to hear about it. He's worse than the old gossips down at the fish market."

Hermione cringed. "Do I have to tell him?"

"He's our boss. He controls the paychecks."

Hermione groaned. "Send him in. The old ninny."

As she waited for Pierre, she wondered why it was that she hadn't told Cosette that she had stood next to Kingsley in between Harry and Ginny standing up for both bride and groom for the entire ceremony. That Luna had kept casting strange looks in her direction. That she'd been a foot away from Ron and could have sworn he felt her there.

That she was relatively certain that Harry had told Kingsley she would be standing there.

That her secret might be out of the bag.

*

Hermione entered the Capois cottage that evening with trepidation. She was anxious, and the spell she'd just cast revealed that he had indeed returned from his trip.

"Severus?" she called, shutting the door tightly behind her, relieved to be warm again. She unzipped her parka and hung it on the coat rack. She hadn't had the heart to use the Floo and had thus Apparated to the village and walked. And Lord, was it *frigid*.

The atmosphere in the house was similar. The only light was coming from the sitting room. She walked in to find him relaxing in a chair with a glass of brandy in hand. The amber color reflected brilliantly in the firelight. It was all rather picturesque, damn him.

What's more, it was a familiar sight that should make her comfortable. But it didn't. She was on edge.

"Hello, you," he said casually. His lips twitched at the edges almost a smile.

She put her hands on her hips, still annoyed. "Your trip was productive?"

"Mm. Come here." He set his glass of brandy on the table and reached for her.

"Severus?" she asked, halting just short of his arm's reach. "What's going on?"

He arched an eyebrow. "In case you haven't been counting, which I know you have the huge tally marks on the kitchen calendar are quite noticeable, by the way I have been gone for the last three weeks. And I have missed you " She rolled her eyes, still annoyed as hell, and he leaned forward and grasped her hand. "Yes, I have missed you, and I should like to hold you now."

"On your terms." She tried to jerk her hand away from him, but he pulled her into his lap *Damn him and his strength* "Always on your fucking terms." He rubbed her back, and she tried to stay mad at him. Tried. Very hard.

He was damn difficult to be away from.

"I do miss you when I'm gone, you know," he said in her ear.

She leaned her head back against the chair. "No, Severus, I don't know. 'Hermione, I'm tired; Hermione, I need rest; Hermione, I can't see you tonight, it's important,'" she mimicked. "Even when you are here, you are flooded with work. I'm not on your priority list."

He sighed and circled his arm around her waist. "I won't be taking a trip for at least another month or two. Satisfied?"

"Not nearly," she muttered.

He let his arm drop. "I know my absence has... taken a toll. We are both easily wrapped up in our work. I admit that."

She ignored the dull feeling in the pit of her stomach. He was more important to her than her work. Had she not told him she loved him a thousand times? How could he say that about her?

He pulled her tightly against him and kissed her head. "Are you still angry?"

"Yes," she said through gritted teeth.

He merely laughed.

*

The next day

"So you've made up," Cosette said, looking at Hermione from across the table. She bit into the pizza they were sharing for lunch.

Hermione grunted. "He thinks we have. I'm still annoyed." She sighed. "But it will pass."

"Well, now that you're on better terms, do you want to go Christmas shopping? What are you doing for Christmas?" Cosette asked her. "Your parents?"

Hermione shook her head. "They're on a holiday cruise with their neighbors. It's me and Severus," she said slowly. "Our first Christmas." She shivered. "That sounds intimidating."

Cosette laughed. "I remember Henri's and my first Christmas together. Everything went wrong. It was fantastic."

Hermione groaned. "Don't tell me that! Things can go wrong with you and Henri, and it's funny. Something going wrong between Severus and I lands us in the middle of a fucking minefield of emotion."

"Right." Cosette leaned her elbows on the table. "So what are you doing for gifts?"

"Somehow he got me to agree to one gift each and a nice dinner," Hermione said slowly.

"Somehow?" Cosette arched an eyebrow. "He told you in bed, didn't he?"

"Well, I shanghaied him into spending Christmas with me, so I suppose fair's fair..."

"Watching the two of you try to have a relationship is better than watching a Muggle soap opera," Cosette quipped.

Hermione threw her napkin at her.

Both women laughed.

The waiter came over. "Can I get you refills on your drinks? Are you ready for the bill?"

"No, and yes, two checks please." Hermione smiled.

He walked away. Hermione checked her watch. "We're late getting back to the office. Again."

Cosette snorted. "Who cares? Oh, and we're going shopping tonight. I have to pick up some stocking stuffers for Henri, and we need to find that one perfect gift for Severus." She waggled her eyebrows at Hermione.

"Sod off."

"I'm not the one who agreed to the one-gift rule in the aftermath of orgasm."

"*Cosette!*"

"It must have been good why on earth would you agree to one gift? Especially on the first Christmas. Multiple gifts mean that you have many opportunities to get something right. With one gift..."

"Could you possibly make me feel worse?" Hermione asked.

The waiter returned with the checks, money was thrown on the table, and the two women quickly exited the bistro.

Cosette hooked an arm through Hermione's. "It'll be okay, you'll see. How difficult can he possibly be to buy for?" She looked at Hermione, who glared back. "Right. Well, this will be fun! An experiment I love experiments!"

Hermione did not share her enthusiasm.

*

December 24, 2002, 8:30 PM

The snow was falling slowly. Its icy sweetness had spread across the ground and exquisitely, ever so exquisitely, woven around the Capois landscape like a river. A riveting pastiche.

Which was rather how Hermione imagined she'd looked earlier that evening in her backless halter blue satin gown. She and Severus had spent most of Christmas Eve day reading by the fire, but at five o'clock he'd pulled her up from her chair and told her to get ready and wear the gown he'd purchased for her on his latest trip. They were going out for dinner, he'd said. She'd suggested that Buckingham Palace might be a suitable location, given her dress.

He'd snorted and given her a gentle shove towards the bedroom.

She'd emerged twenty minutes later with her hair wound up in a chignon and a crystal brooch adorning the V of the dress. He had been in his black three-piece suit with his hair pulled back in a queue.

Both had been rendered quite speechless.

They'd Apparated to Paris where Severus had hailed a cab to take them to Taillevent. Hermione had been shocked. The Taillevent was one of the finest restaurants in Paris three stars, perhaps?

Their reservations had been for six, and they had been seated quite promptly. The surroundings had been stunning hardwood ~~pl~~d wood... the place screamed of old wealth and refinement.

Her jaw had dropped upon viewing the menu, which was both incredibly impressive and ungodly expensive.

"When did you make these reservations, Severus?" she'd asked.

"A month ago," he'd replied without looking up.

She had been touched. Still was.

It didn't change the fact that she felt rather like a fish out of water in such an environment. It was a change the gifts, the expensive restaurants.

It was a bit uncomfortable.

She'd changed into her comfortable sweatpants and a t-shirt upon their return to the cottage only ten minutes ago. The dress was still lying in a heap on the bedroom floor. She didn't want to touch it for a while.

She sighed and looked away from the window. There were two gift bags one large, one small sitting by the fireplace. Only a candle and some twisted holly and ivy adorned the mantle. That was as much as Severus would permit.

Best get it done with.

The suspense was honestly killing her. Thank goodness she hadn't chosen his gift earlier; she couldn't imagine how she'd feel if she'd been sitting on that surprise for a month.

"Severus? Would you like to open gifts?"

"On Christmas Eve?" he called from the kitchen, surprised.

"Oh," Hermione said. They'd never discussed it. "We always opened gifts on Christmas Eve in my family."

He walked into the sitting room with two mugs of eggnog. "I'm flexible."

She snorted and accepted the mug gratefully.

He smiled and sat down next to her. He picked up his gift for her the large red gift bag and set it in front of her.

She smiled up at him. "Thank you." She grinned.

He arched an eyebrow. "You haven't even opened it."

"Well, I'm thanking you in advance," she said and pulled out a small black box from the white tissue paper.

Her heart skipped a beat. She fought to keep her face blank and opened the box quickly.

Her breath hitched.

Earrings.

Relief.

They were beautiful.

Pearl earrings, probably to compliment the necklace he'd bought her for her birthday.

She looked over at him, a wide smile on her face, ashamed that she'd even thought it could be

"They're stunning, Severus. Thank you."

He nodded. "There's more."

She whipped her head around and glared at him. "You said *one* gift!"

He shrugged. "I can change the rules."

"Without telling me?"

"I see no reason why not."

She groaned and pulled out the rest of the tissue paper before coming to a very solid, wrapped, square item at the bottom of the bag.

She lifted it up. "Is this a book?" she asked, smiling widely.

He said nothing.

She tore the wrapping paper off and found that she held

The faerie tale book.

In her hands.

The faerie tale book.

Her stomach dropped as her heart soared.

Did he...?

"How did you " she started.

"You talk in your sleep." His lips twitched.

"You're not upset that I saw it in the attic?"

"Why should I be?"

Thank God! She was immensely relieved.

"Don't you..." She was at a loss for words. It was all hitting her. This was a family heirloom

"It's..." He paused. "You should have it. I've little use for it."

"You shouldn't have."

"I loathe people who say that," he said dryly and proceeded to wink most suggestively at her. Hermione laughed. She couldn't remember the last time he'd winked.

She relished the feel of the book's weight, of its cover and binding. She opened the cover, eagerly anticipating the familiar engraving, and found

Faerie Tales

A Collection

Compiled by Brigit Prince

For her daughter Rose

Given to Hermione Granger by Severus Snape

Christmas 2002

May your idealism never fade.

"Severus " she choked, fighting tears, and ran her hand across the page. *I love you*, she thought.

She looked up at him, her expression full of gratitude and love, and he put his hand over hers. She knew it was to avoid having to say anything, but she didn't care.

"Thank you."

"Finally, coherence!" he exclaimed, withdrawing his hand.

She wiped at her tears. "It means so much to me."

He snorted. "Well, you've sung enough Disney songs in the shower to last us both a lifetime. This should keep you better occupied."

They laughed.

She set the book down reverently and reached for the glossy black gift bag.

"And this is for you."

He took it in his hands and stared at it for a long moment.

"The bag isn't the gift," Hermione said.

He looked up at her, his expression balancing on the precipice between amusement and annoyance. She thought she heard him mutter, "Impossible chit," while he removed the plethora of tissue paper.

The elegant champagne saber emerged in his hand.

"Ah," he said, clearly pleased. "A very fine champagne saber, indeed."

"Are you kidding me?" she exclaimed. "You *knew* what that was called?"

He smirked. "Of course. I know everything."

"No one knows what that's called!" Hermione said, completely shocked, not caring that her partner was enjoying her reaction far too much. "I went to four different employees in the store before I could get one who could tell me its official name!"

Severus grinned. He truly was an impossible man.

"It's a very fine gift, Hermione," he said, setting it aside.

"There's more," she said. "You think that's all I got you?"

"It's an expensive gift, my dear."

"It was on sale you could hardly expect me to be so cheap!"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Hermione, if something *looks* to be expensive, do not disabuse the recipient of that notion. Not that I'm offended in the least, but that is an easy way to placate and impress people you are obliged to buy for but do not care for. Do you not know this?"

She ignored the question. "I care about you. The second gift..."

"I told you *one* gift, Hermione."

"Both of us can benefit," she said, grinning at him.

"How unlike you, to think of something that could actually benefit yourself. I'm impressed," he said as he pulled an envelope out of the bag. He opened it.

"A one-day tour of Champagne for two," he said, clearly surprised.

"Twelve hours of wine tasting and sight-seeing in the region," Hermione intoned.

"This pleases me," he murmured and reached for her hand. He kissed it. "Thank you."

"We get to go to Champagne!" she exclaimed, scuttling across the floor to climb up on his lap.

"We get to taste some of the best wine in the world," he murmured, examining the brochure. He looked down at her and smiled, so pleased he was almost feral.

It made her inordinately happy.

"It will be a lovely time. Thank you." He kissed her head. "You still broke the rules."

"But you got me two gifts as well, and neither benefited you," she insisted.

He lay down on the floor in front of the roaring fire. "Hopefully you won't sing anymore bloody Disney in the shower. That would benefit me greatly."

"You're an impossible man," she muttered for the umpteenth time.

"Yes," he said, "and you love me for it." He pulled her down to lie next to him.

"Happy Christmas, Severus," she whispered against him.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione."

*

Present

"And that was our first Christmas together," Hermione finished, her eyes bright. "I've not thought of it in a long while." She looked down at her plate, the pasta long gone cold. She Banished it.

They sat, silent.

"Do you still have the fairy book, Mum?" Rose asked. Her mind was whirling. There was an image flickering on the edge of her conscious mind something that ~~just~~ familiar

"Have I ever seen it?" she blurted out.

"Something in you clearly remembers," Hermione said, folding her hands together on the table. "Yes, you've seen it, though not since you were... oh, you must have been younger than two years old. I read it to you when I was pregnant with you, and then I read to you from it when you were a baby. I stopped once I thought you'd be old enough to actually ask for it."

"Why?" Rose asked, incredulous. "Oh because of the inscription does it say something like 'To Hermione from Severus?'"

The look on her mother's face told her that choice details had been omitted from the story.

"The book says 'Given to Hermione Granger by Severus Snape, Christmas 2002, may your idealism never fade.'"

Rose sat back, stunned. "Wow, Mum."

"There's that detail, but it's also a priceless book. Ebony and ivory, onyx, pearl, and garnet it's a stunning antique. Your father could never afford such things. I didn't want or ask for them," Hermione qualified, "but you can see how such a valuable gift from another man would hurt your father's ego especially since that other man was Severus Snape."

"Hmm." Rose tilted her head thoughtfully. "But you said there was a beautiful engraving before... when you told the story about first discovering it in the attic."

Her mother looked caught between a rock and a hard place.

Rose knew she wasn't getting every detail of every scene, but how much was her mother withholding?

Does it matter? You're being nosy as it is sounded the little voice in her head.

"Did I ask a difficult question again?" Rose asked, regretful. She bit her lip.

"The engraving above Severus' inscription," Hermione started slowly, "says 'Faerie Tales: A Collection, compiled by Brigit Prince for her daughter Rose.'"

Rose's mind went blank. "I'm I'm " she stuttered " I'm named for a book? For Severus'... relation?'*Bloody Merlin!*

"His grandmother," Hermione informed, her tone now matter-of-fact. "The one who the cottage had belonged to in the first place. Brigit was her mother, Severus' great-grandmother. Rose's daughter was Eileen, and the tradition of bookbinding ended with her, partly because the women bound the books, and she only had a son. Another break from tradition Princes always had a son and then a daughter. Severus was an only child."

Rose's mind was reeling.

"Have you never noticed that you are the only grandchild not named for a friend or relative?" Hermione pressed. "Your brother is named for both of his grandfathers, your middle name is for your aunt, but I for one have never met a Rose in wizarding Britain. Although I like the name," she said, suddenly wistful. "I always have." She sighed. "When we were pregnant well, when I was pregnant, but your father was there, of course we bantered names around every day for months. We cast the gender diagnostic immediately." Hermione smiled. "It was too suspenseful otherwise. Neither of us does very well with suspense, your father especially."

Rose noticed her mother's slip speaking for her and her father as if they were still a couple, both still living...

She bit her lip again.

"Your dad and I just couldn't figure out for the life of us what the name should be. Everyone was naming children after well, everyone. Harry and Ginny and Bill and Fleur had already established that tradition, and you know how your father loved traditions. Also, neither of us had ever thought about the subject." Hermione sipped her wine. "Ginny forbade everyone from passing her name down directly she said we could use it as a middle name if we absolutely must. Luna " Hermione chuckled. "I'm still surprised Ginny gave Lily that middle name. Luna is one of a kind. It seemed a crime to name someone after her. We seriously considered Jean for a while, after your Nana, or Jane, as it's my middle name, but I never liked it much." She sighed. "Quite honestly, everyone expected us to name you Molly. But she'd just passed. We couldn't."

"You never considered Cosette?" Rose asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Touché," Hermione said. "I couldn't, mainly for the reason that, much like Luna, Cosette is one of a kind in a very different way, of course."

"And the other reason?"

"Your father."

"He didn't like Cosette?"

"He didn't know her."

"He never met her?"

"Meeting someone and knowing them are two very different things."

"You thought it would be painful for him, to have me named after your friend in France?" Rose asked, sensing the issue at hand. "But it wasn't too painful to name me for one of *Severus'* relatives?"

"Like I said," Hermione said tersely, "I didn't read you the book once you could ask for it. I kept it hidden. He never saw it."

"I can't believe that." Rose sat back, frustrated.

"So you choose this subject to fight me on?" Hermione asked, frustrated. "Merlin, Rose. That wasn't the only reason I gave you your name, you know."

"Do tell," Rose said sharply.

Her mother glared at her, and she was immediately remorseful.

"Sorry. Continue."

Hermione nodded. "I read you the fairy book when I was pregnant. One day I was reading you *Beauty and the Beast* "

Rose smiled. "My favorite."

"Yes, well it was your favorite then, too. You always moved around like a little gymnast when I read it. But one day when I was, I don't know, five or six months along, I was reading the part where Beauty's father plucks the rose from the Beast's garden, and you kicked." Hermione smiled, tears glistening in her eyes. "I must have read that sentence a dozen times. And then, of course, I remembered that the book was written for a Rose in the first place, and when your father got home I told him I'd had an epiphany, and he liked it, so that was that. It... suited you." She wiped a tear from her eye.

Rose reached across the table and took her mother's hand. "I love my name," she said sincerely. "It's good to know where it comes from. It's lucky I've never really thought about it."

"Oh, my Rose." Hermione squeezed her daughter's hand and let it go. "Now, where were we?" she asked, getting back down to business. "Ah, yes. Entering 2003." The storyteller voice resumed. "We had a New Year's Eve midnight meal at the Eiffel with Henri and Cosette you must do it sometime, my dear, it's just an incredible experience. And you must be sure to go with the right people, of course, so it's raucous and fun, but... we had such a wonderful time." Hermione sighed happily, her face once again lost in remembrance.

Rose hesitated. "The way you've been describing your... fights with him... well, it sounds like it's the beginning of the end, almost."

Hermione sighed, not so happily this time. "In a way, it was. The thing is, though, our relationship wasn't inevitably going to lead up to a blow-out fight and then that would

be that." She gesticulated wildly. "We did have quite the showstopper, but... the relationship... broke apart, I suppose, in little ways. It didn't die. It failed to grow. The secrecy, the inability to compromise, our combined hard-headedness and lack of patience, the lack of communication it's all the little things that grow and grow. They're like weeds in a garden. Weeds don't kill right away they choke the life out of something." Hermione clenched and unclenched her fist in demonstration.

"I see," Rose said softly. "So... what happens next?"

Hermione paused. "An engagement."

*

A/N: For those who missed one of my previous entries, I never meant for the issue of Rose's parentage to be a mystery. There are those who have extrapolated that Severus is Rose's father -- he's not. Rose has been described as having red hair throughout the story. I thought I had been clearer on timeline issues, but going back into chapters one and two, I realize I wasn't, for which I apologize. I never meant to cast doubt on the issue. Hermione does not marry Ron immediately upon returning to Britain, and Rose is born after the 9 month mark into the marriage, so there is no plausible way for her to be Severus' child. Y'all are certainly a creative bunch! I am sorry to disappoint any pro-Severus theorists. :-)

I have, however, always known that Rose's name came from the fairy book, which was one of the first details I added to my first outline back in August 2007.

Thank you for reading! I would love to hear your thoughts -- feel free to leave a review. :-)

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: My thanks, as always, to the fabulous Shug for her rampant enthusiasm and editing skills. *muah!*

*

June 2003

Months passed. They toured Champagne, attended a conference in Greece, and Severus kept his promise to Hermione by not taking a trip the first two months of the year.

It made her happy, so he was happy. There was peace.

Until March, when he left for four weeks. Then he returned, was with her for a weekend, and left for another three weeks.

She saw the strain it placed on him, noticed the exhaustion in his features, felt his thinning body beneath her hands.

Forgot his weakened condition when she attempted to address her concern, as he flew off the handle

"You want me here, Hermione. Do not attempt to mask your selfishness with words of concern for my well-being."

"I'm concerned!" she exclaimed, hands on her hips. "I love you, damn it! You're practically sick! You're losing weight, you're "

"Less attractive?" he sneered, and her heart clenched at the blatant insecurity.

"Severus," she started patiently.

"What about the emotional state these trips have pushed me to?"

"You have emotions?" she retorted and immediately regretted her words. He retracted his arm. "Severus " She reached for him.

He rose from his chair and walked to the bedroom.

She followed, only to have the door slammed in her face.

She put her hands against the door and leaned her forehead against it, feeling entirely defeated. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. I love you. Of course I miss you. I'm sorry I've been so unobservant. I should have told you I understood, even if I didn't... I still don't understand. I miss you like hell when you're gone. I love you," she repeated. "I'll sleep on the couch," she whispered, almost to herself.

There was no response from the other side.

She sighed and walked to the couch, murmuring charms to plump up the pillows and soften the throw blanket.

*

She found herself woken by roaming hands that circled her waist.

She didn't open her mouth; his lips pressed against hers almost instantly. She felt one hand running smoothly across her stomach and one slipping beneath her sweatpants and into her knickers, brushing against her, and she moaned softly.

"Severus," she whispered, his name falling from her lips like honey. He moved down her body, tugging at her clothes, and at last he took her with his mouth, seeking reconciliation.

She arched against him and cried out.

*

They slept on the floor, lying exhausted and content in each other.

*

7 June 2003

Ginny,

I love him so much I think I might burst.

Do you remember what I wrote to you at Christmas about our gifts and such? I was relieved when I opened the box and found pearl earrings instead of a ring, even though I could have sworn I was hoping for a ring.

I dreamt of it last night only it was different. I dreamt that he'd given me a ring and that I'd thrown it back in his face, full of contempt.

I woke up crying, so ashamed of myself. I didn't feel that way on Christmas Eve, but I felt relief. I feel so awful for that. So guilty.

My dream made me wonder how I'd react if he proposed now. Not that he will or even would, but

I'd say yes.

My answer changes every day, but today I would say yes unequivocally, unabashedly, with my whole heart.

I woke up crying, like I said, and this is probably too much information, but he woke me up, worried, and I said that I'd had a nightmare, and he held me and comforted me, and we made love well, it was beautiful. I barely kept myself from crying afterward. Pathetic, I know. But I wanted to weep.

I know. Too much information.

God, it was beautiful.

I love him. I would marry him. No one has ever held me like that

He doesn't say he loves me, but he has to, Gin, and I just feel it. No man can touch a woman like that if he doesn't love her

I think. I hope.

I just I needed to tell someone.

You understand.

I love you,

Hermione

*

The next day, they fought.

Naturally.

*

16 August 2003

"Severus, we're leaving in ten minutes!" Hermione called, scurrying to pull her dress up. Pierre's birthday gala was being thrown at the Edén Hotel in downtown wizarding Paris. It was new, it was posh, it was trendy.

All Hermione knew was that Pierre was having the Rossi Hotel's limoncello flown in from Italy.

Severus had just returned from yet another trip. She needed limoncello desperately.

Sometimes she really adored her boss.

"You're the one taking all the time to get ready, darling," Severus said sardonically.

Hermione walked out of her bedroom they were at her flat and twirled for him. He nodded, approving. "You look lovely. Let's go before the dress comes off."

"It's coming off?" Hermione asked playfully as he took her arm.

"In either ten seconds or three hours. Take your pick."

Hermione sighed. "We're already late."

"I'm a patient man," he said and Apparated them to the hotel.

*

One thing was certain: the birthday party was themed. It looked like Little Italy well, Hermione should have guessed. Severus raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything. Hermione perused the sea of faces before finding the one she was looking for Cosette's. Cosette and Henri waved and bid them come sit. As they walked, Hermione noted the stage and was surprised when she saw that it was one of her co-workers onstage singing the song was something from South Pacific.

"It looks like there's musical-themed karaoke," Hermione said, amused.

Severus rolled his eyes, and she squeezed his arm. "It'll be all right, darling," she said, comforting him.

"Karaoke. Wonderful." He snorted, and they finally reached the table.

"Darling, how are you?" Cosette exclaimed and embraced Hermione immediately.

"I'm well," Hermione said as Severus responded similarly to Henri's courtesy.

"I take it that this is a theme party?" Severus asked, eyebrows raised in incredulity.

Henri and Cosette laughed heartily.

"We have a large and talented network of singers here tonight. Pierre loves musicals," Cosette told.

"Cos and I will be singing, actually," Henri said.

"I didn't know you could sing!" Hermione exclaimed, putting a hand on Cosette's arm.

"I can. I don't often," Cosette said softly. "My mother was a singer," she told Severus.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Severus said, surprising Hermione with his kind tone.

"So am I," Cosette said. Hermione hugged her.

"We're singing a duet. It will be quite the show," Henri said, smiling broadly at Cosette, who brightened instantly.

He's so good to her, Hermione thought.

"From which musical?" Severus asked. Hermione noted that he kept the disdain out of his voice.

"Pierre's favorite." Cosette winked. "You'll never guess."

"Moulin Rouge?" Hermione asked. Cosette stared at her, amused.

"Decidedly not."

Hermione shrugged. "It's hip, unique, and depraved."

Henri laughed. "Good guess, but no. Do you know the classics?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Hermione said.

"It's not quite *classic*," Cosette started, and Henri clamped a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet.

"Finally," Severus said as music from a recording filled the room. "Decent music." He looked at Hermione. "Dance with me?"

"You don't need to ask twice," Hermione said, gracing him with a full smile.

*

That smile was plastered on her face as he led her onto the parquet dance floor. She couldn't help herself. He was a strong lead firm but gentle. He knew not to take her hand in a death grip or spin her out only to leave her on the floor alone.

He took her hand in his slowly, his palm sliding against hers as it moved into its hold.

The song was slow. He immediately lowered the hold to hip-level and drew her in against him as he turned their bodies in tandem, their feet staggered, thighs barely touching, torsos pressed. Hermione closed her eyes and reveled in the familiar chords. Heavenly Day. It was one of her favorites.

Her hand snaked up his arm and rested on his shoulder. She inhaled the glorious smell of his shirt and was caught off guard when he pushed lightly on her back and turned her. She came back into his arms, surprised at the move, and he smiled.

"Pay attention," he murmured. "I do not merely sway."

"I've danced with you before."

"Not like this," he murmured against her ear, and she ignored the tingle that ran down her spine.

They danced close, twined, and spun, leaned and dipped, and he dipped her deeply at the song's end, looking into her eyes the whole time.

She swallowed hard.

They walked back to the table, slightly flustered.

*

It was nothing that wine couldn't help a half hour later, the two couples sat, laughing and drinking, when a tall redhead approached the table.

"Henri and Cosette?" she asked. They nodded. "You're up in five minutes."

"*Merci*," they both said.

"Wish us luck!" Henri said as he took Cosette's hand and led her to the center floor.

"This should be interesting," Severus said, amused, to Hermione. They both sipped their wine.

"It will be lovely, I'm sure. Neither of us knows very much about musicals is all," Hermione said.

"With good reason," Severus said. He sighed. "Henri has a good voice, though. He insisted on singing karaoke in a Florentine bar... he was sloshed, but still decent."

"Cosette's mother was a singer," Hermione started.

"Yvette Bedard. Very popular on the continent," Severus said, setting his glass down. "I heard it was a drug overdose."

Hermione nodded.

"A shame."

They turned towards the stage where Henri and Cosette were being announced. Pierre was briefly spotlighted. He was grinning, though whether it was due to knowledge of the song they would sing or the attention he was receiving from the two scantily clad women he had on either side of him, Hermione did not know.

"Henri and I will be singing a duet from Pierre's favorite musical," Cosette said. "Happy Birthday, darling! We both love you terribly, you dirty old man," she said directly to Pierre. She winked, and everyone laughed.

She and Henri stepped back, bowing their heads as they slipped into performance mode, and Hermione was shocked when the vibrant, full music swept the room

"No more talk of darkness " Henri started.

Hermione whipped around in her seat. "I *do* know this! Phantom of the Opera. 'All I Ask of You,'" she said, shocked. Severus nodded and directed her attention back to the stage.

Henri's voice was strong, and Cosette's soprano was sweet yet contained, as if it was a bird perched and waiting to soar.

Hermione's breath caught as she saw two doves appear out of thin air right above the couple. They flew in tandem throughout the ballroom, seemingly tuned to the music as they soared and swooped with every crescendo and

"Wow," she whispered.

Hermione's eyes glistened with tears. Everyone in the room was spellbound, but Henri and Cosette were only looking at each other, singing to each other, and Hermione knew instinctively that they meant every word they were saying...

...except the part about Henri always leading and Cosette always following that was negotiable.

Hermione's heart swelled with the music and their voices. She had had no idea they could sing like that.

They were brilliant.

As the ending approached, Henri took Cosette's hand, and they sang the final bridge

"Anywhere you go, let me go too. Love me; that's all I ask of you."

"Love," Henri said into the microphone, and Hermione and the entire room gasped as he knelt down on one knee. "Cosette," he said again, grinning. "Will you marry me?"

Cosette's hands flew to her face. She was crying.

Hermione was, too.

Cosette didn't speak but just nodded, and the crowd exploded in applause and cheers. Hermione clapped loudly, but she couldn't speak through her tears. Oh, she was so happy for them. Her heart felt like it would burst.

She turned to take Severus' hand and was confronted by an empty chair.

He wasn't there.

Her eyes continued to rake the room for the next two minutes. She'd stayed in her seat; the crowd was still flooding forward to congratulate the happy couple. She would speak to Cos and Henri soon enough.

The room was brimming with noise and commotion, but Hermione heard only a dull roar. It would be nice to have a companion to talk to, just now.

To listen to. Commiserate with. Joke with.

He'd left.

Black pierced the corner of her eye, and she saw him at the front of the crowd, a smile on his face, shaking Henri's hand, kissing Cosette's cheeks.

He wasn't with her.

She saw Cosette's lips move, and Severus glanced over in Hermione's direction. Cosette followed his gaze and waved ecstatically. Hermione waved back and mouthed "Later." Cosette nodded and turned back to her well-wishers.

He's there, not here.

Hermione put her head in her hand, leaned her elbow on the table, and closed her eyes tightly, wishing this moment away.

Engaged. Cosette and Henri who didn't even *live* together, the 'we'll see each other when we see each other' couple were *engaged*. They'd been together for four years, but still

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up.

"Pierre," she said, immensely relieved.

He took the seat next to hers and scooted closer.

"Where is Severus?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

Fuck, she thought.

"I don't know," she said flatly.

"I thought I saw him leave," Pierre said.

Her heart clenched. "Naturally."

"He cannot keep leaving you like this, with no warning."

Hermione sighed. "He can, and he does. There is nothing I can do about it." She folded her hands in her lap.

Silence.

"I'm worried about you, *ma chere*. About what this relationship is doing to you."

"And what is it doing to me?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sucking the life from you."

She winced. "Harsh."

"True."

"We have problems, Pierre. Everyone has problems."

"Yours are greater than most."

"And who are you to judge? You're my boss."

"I'm your friend," Pierre answered swiftly. "And your boss. But working together does not preclude friendship."

Hermione chuckled and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "I love you, you old tosser, and you know it."

"Old tosser, am I?" Pierre laughed. Hermione laughed with him.

"Even so," she said, sobered, "have you honestly ever had a serious relationship, Monsieur Bachelor?"

"Would you count marriage as serious?" Pierre asked thoughtfully.

Hermione gasped. "You were married?"

"Shocking, *oui*? Don't be so surprised. I was quite dashing in my youth."

"You're still dashing, Pierre."

"How kind. It was a long time ago, though," he said, reminiscing. "I was twenty, she was nineteen. She was pregnant. It didn't last long."

"You're a father?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"My son, Philippe." He gestured to the striking dark-haired man now congratulating Henri and Cosette.

"Oh my God," Hermione said, dumbfounded. "Philippe Caron. The company's VP. I never thought..."

"We're discreet."

"You raised a child." Hermione sat back. "I'm impressed."

"Oh, do not put such stock in my fathering skills. His mother and stepfather raised him. He's in his thirties now, and he better understands the situation. I saw him on holidays and sent cards and took him to Italy every summer. We have an amicable relationship. I am pleased his skills fit so well with the company. He has a skill for the clandestine." He paused. "It is a skill both of us appreciate in those we care for."

"Such a subtle transition, Pierre," Hermione remarked dryly.

"Forgive me, then. But please, take care of yourself. And if you need something anything do not hesitate to ask," Pierre said.

Hermione recognized it for the gesture it was.

"Thank you," she said, turning her face as he kissed her on both cheeks before walking away.

Hermione rose out of her seat and began walking to the entryway when someone grabbed her arm.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked, his breath hot on her ear.

She turned around, whipping her hair in his face. "You're still here?" she demanded. "Pierre said you left!"

"I went to the men's room," Severus offered, his face expressionless. "But I've been here. Are you angry?"

"Let's just go." She yanked her arm away. "I'll see you at the cottage."

"We need to talk," he said slowly. He pulled her against him and Apparated.

*

Words flew out of their mouths as soon as they were at the cottage.

Severus chucked his coat against the chair. "Where did I go? I went up to congratulate them. I thought you would follow."

"You went up before he was even finished!" Hermione exclaimed.

"People were already coming forward. Did you not see?"

"You left."

"Pierre was with you."

She smacked her hand against the countertop hard. "No. You left me on purpose and you know it."

"Now why would I do that? Do you think the subject of commitment makes me uncomfortable?"

She couldn't say anything.

"Don't tell me you are desirous of some other arrangement. I am not the marrying kind, Hermione. I have never pretended to be."

"I know! I don't want to get married right now!" she exclaimed defensively.

Both of them ignored her qualifier.

Right now.

The words dangled in front of her, errant and teasing.

Hermione could swear the tension was making her sweat.

"I am not the marrying kind," he repeated slowly. "Take it or leave it."

She gulped back her shame, gall, and worry.

She'd worry later.

She'd wonder later.

Right now, she thought as they lay in bed hours later. For the first time that she could remember, they were not touching in bed. They weren't curled up against one another. His arm wasn't thrown across her chest. Even their legs lay separate, stiff. His back was turned to her.

Right now. Do I even want to get married?

The thought of a large ceremony made her stomach turn. Small. It would have to be small.

What was marriage, anyway? She and Severus had an ideal arrangement. They lived together at the cottage and kept separate flats and bank accounts. They were exclusive. They could talk. They cared about each other... in a twisted way, at times. They she... she loved him desperately. He could make her happier than anyone else in the world. *He also makes me angrier than anyone else* she thought. She wanted to come home to him at the end of the work day *Needed* to come home to him after work. And he liked that she worked, liked that she was somewhere in his intellectual stratosphere. He cooked for her, for God's sake! And the sex was fantastic.

Why on earth would we want to get married?

Legal. Binding. Commitment. Life.

No, not necessarily life.

She turned her head and looked at him. The sight of his back sent her heart spiraling downward into her stomach.

Binding.

The trips, she thought. *Would they stop?*

No.

Why should they get married?

The thought was unsettling.

Right now.

So maybe she did want that kind of commitment.

She thought of her parents and how they had looked last Christmas, walking on the beach, holding hands, grinning at each other like silly school children.

Twenty-five years now.

Maybe it was retirement. No. It had always been like that. Well, not always. But her parents had stayed and fought to stay madly in love with each other.

I want that, she thought. *I want to grow old with someone. I want a man to look at me like Dad looks at Mum. Like she's the most beautiful and fascinating woman in the world. Like he'll never get enough of her.* Her parents had been each other's only loves, this Hermione knew.

Lily.

Her name came unbidden, and Hermione felt the coldness wash over her body, permeating the sheets. Severus had had a love... a violently passionate, if gradually unrequited, love. A tragic love. The kind of love a man would give his life for.

How did Severus look at her?

With passion, at times.

With care, at times.

With bemused annoyance, at other times.

With interest. Indulgence.

How the hell was she supposed to know how he looked at her?

He's never said he loved me.

Her breath caught, and she turned her face into the pillow.

Could she stay with a man who had never told her he loved her?

She felt his arm slip around her waist then, felt him against her back, and she breathed a sigh of relief as her thoughts fled.

"I need to hold you," he murmured. "Please."

Surprised by the 'please,' she turned her eyes up to his. How was he looking at her?

With tenderness. And desire.

"What are you looking for?" he asked softly. "It's just me."

"I know." She cupped his cheek, and he bent to kiss her. His mouth slid against hers, and she wrapped her arms around him, desperate to lose herself in him.

Desperate to not think.

*

Hermione awoke early the next morning curled up against Severus. She breathed deeply and let her alert body sink back into the mattress.

She rose after a while, surprised that Severus still lay asleep, exhausted. Well, it had been a long night.

She wrapped her robe about her and walked into the kitchen. She had just put the coffee on when she heard a letter come in through the Floo.

She padded across the floor to the sitting room, still a bit tired, and picked up the letter. She smiled *Ginny*.

She opened the letter and chucked the envelope into the rubbish bin on her way to the kitchen. She unfolded the parchment.

17 August 2003

Hermione,

I'm pregnant! 8 weeks! You're the first to know, aside from Harry, of course. We're hesitant to tell anyone until I'm well at the twelve week mark, but oh, I am so happy!

We aren't going to find out the sex we think we can wait but we do know that the name will be either James or Lily. We didn't expect to get pregnant so fast, but oh, we are thrilled, and we both wanted you to be the first to know. You know Ron; he's bloody awful at keeping secrets. He'll find out with everyone else.

I love you.

Ginny

A wide smile spread across Hermione's face, and she clutched the letter against her chest as tears fell.

A baby. Harry and Ginny were going to have a baby!

After ten minutes of reflection and two cups of coffee, Hermione realized that she'd never seen a letter from Ginny peppered with so many 'we's.'

Marriage.

She drained her cup and poured herself another.

She stood in front of the kitchen window and watched the sun rise over the mountains in the distance.

*

Liner Notes:

"Heavenly Day" is sung by Patti Griffin and, to the best of my knowledge, was first released on her album "Children Running Through" in 2007. Lyrics [here](#). I love the song, and it very much fits Severus and Hermione at this point in their relationship. I found a random nature video on Youtube that has the song [here](#).

"All I Ask Of You" is my favorite song from Phantom of the Opera, a product of Andrew Lloyd Weber's genius. Lyrics [here](#); watch the film version [here](#).

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: My thanks to the fabulous Shug for her lightning-fast beta skills and irrepressible enthusiasm. I am also absolutely indebted to Septentrion for providing details on traditional French wedding customs, as well as for correcting my French accents and making sure it's not completely obvious that I'm American.

*

New Year's Eve 2004

Hermione stood, grinning ear to ear behind Cosette as her friend exchanged vows with Henri. The wedding had been planned in a whirlwind, and Hermione was in awe of the petite force now more than ever. Cos had planned a New Year's Eve wedding in Florence, Italy in less than three months, and considering that her guest list was upwards of two hundred, it was truly a grand fete. Severus had dubbed Cosette the "miracle girl," but Hermione knew it was a fond nickname.

They were on one of Italy's magically protected beaches. The moonlight shimmered off the Mediterranean, mixing beautifully with the candlelight on the sand. The largest candles floated above the crowd, and the ambiance was sumptuous. Temporary limestone had been laid over some of the beach to allow for seating, and enchanted sheets of white and blue tulle gently bordered the area in a floating perimeter.

Cosette and Henri stood in front, barefoot in the sandy surf. Henri wore black trousers and a white button down, and Cosette was resplendent in a cream and blue lacy

garment that wrapped around her like cling-film. *As always*, Hermione thought. An enchanted white garden trellis enclosed the bride, groom, and cardinal in a private space.

Surprisingly, Henri and Cos were being married by an Italian cardinal. Henri was Muggle-born, and Hermione always forgot that he unlike herself had had a religious upbringing. He was Catholic, and his one religious request had been that a priest conduct the ceremony. As in all things, Henri and Cosette had gone above and beyond the call of duty and found one of the most highly respected cardinals on the continent. Hermione wondered how they managed it, as Cosette was decidedly agnostic. It was a nice personal touch for Henri, though how a Catholic cardinal was officiating a wizard wedding...

Well, he's either a relative or about to be Obliviated, Hermione thought, idly watching the old cardinal. *Probably both.*

Hermione was Cosette's sole attendant; Henri's brother Raul was his. Hermione was wearing an elegant, simple dress the color of midnight.

Her eyes scanned the audience, and she could see Severus' seated silhouette through the candlelight. He was sitting next to Pierre, a situation which Pierre was likely not happy about. Hermione stifled a sigh. Pierre had continued to express concern over her relationship with Severus. Hermione had told him to shut it or he'd be an employee short.

He'd behaved well... so far.

Hermione had been surprised when Cosette and Henri had engaged in traditional Catholic vows. Everyone had been shocked, and Cosette had practically trembled with laughter. Hermione had been tempted to poke her.

She looked up at the moon. *Almost midnight*, she thought.

"...And do you, Cosette Bedard, take Henri DuBois to be your lawfully wedded husband for as long as you both shall live?"

Hermione could only imagine the glow on her friend's face when she heard her say, "I do."

"You may kiss the bride!" the dotty old cardinal exclaimed gleefully.

Henri reached for Cosette and pulled her into a passionate kiss as the midnight chimes started.

They pulled apart and turned to their guests. *'Bonne Anné et, Bonne Santé à vous tous!'* they exclaimed, and the assembly responded in kind. Henri kissed Cosette again as nearly everyone turned to or sought someone to kiss at this precious, precarious hour.

Hermione felt a hand wrap around her, and she grinned. "You moved fast."

"You look delicious," he murmured, nipping at her ear. Heat ripped through her. "Happy New Year's, Hermione," he whispered, pulling her against him to kiss her deeply, soundly. She heard Henri and Cosette cheer at them, presumably and she pulled away, embarrassed.

"Happy New Year's, darling. Our friends just got married, remember?" she stammered, blushing. She smiled, content that Severus kept a possessive arm wrapped around her as the cardinal announced the husband and wife, and the happy couple walked down the 'aisle' to whoops and cheers.

"Bonne Année!" the couple shouted, and Henri took Cosette's hand and Apparated away.

"Where have they gone, now?" Severus asked.

"I already told you this," Hermione said, sighing in feigned exasperation. "Henri and Cosette are having the *in d'honneur* and their pictures at the park. Everyone will drink champagne and give last-minute gifts and mingle and chat and watch Henri and Cosette take their pictures, and then there will be a brief break before all the close friends and family head to the Rossi for the main buffet and reception."

"And open bar," Severus added.

"Yes, the open bar. There will still probably be a hundred people at the reception. Cosette doesn't know how to host a small party, let alone a traditional one."

"Mm," Severus murmured, nuzzling Hermione's neck as they watched the various guests "The reception isn't for an hour yet." He pressed a kiss to her throat. "Are you interested?"

She turned to him and smiled wickedly.

*

The reception began an hour later. Hermione was seated with Raul at the head table, listening to his animated raptures over the first wizarding wedding he'd ever witnessed. She was entirely amused and was desperately trying to right her knickers without drawing suspicion. Why the hell had she worn knickers, anyway? The dress was bloody tight!

The conversation halted when Henri and Cosette sped into the room which, like the ceremony, was entirely candlelit. Various shades of blue and white and black were everywhere, candles were floating, and the liquor was already flowing freely. Cosette's Aunt Amelie's café was catering the buffet, for which Hermione was thrilled.

Hermione reached for her limoncello to toast the couple as they approached the head table.

*

After Hermione, Raul, and the newlyweds' parents had offered toasts to health and happiness, Cosette and Henri went to the floor to dance their first dance. Hermione snuck away from the head table to stand with Severus, who was seated with some of his and Henri's mutual friends from the conference circuit. She knelt down next to his chair as he reintroduced her to them, and they all smiled and greeted each other. Severus excused himself and went to stand with Hermione at the bar.

"This is a beautiful song," she said after he had ordered their drinks.

"It's Cosette's mother," he said. "This is her most popular love song, I believe."

"Oh, my goodness." Hermione put her hand over her heart as she noticed how Cosette clutched Henri, her face buried in the crook of his neck as they swayed to the slow, gritty melody.

"It's a touching tribute. Amelie looks a little worse for the wear." Severus nodded towards the café owner, who was wiping her tears away. He put his arm around Hermione. "How are you holding up?"

Hermione looked up at him with a rueful smile. "I didn't even know Yvette and I'm all torn up."

Severus squeezed her shoulder, a grin spread wide across his face. "You'll be all right."

"If you say so."

"Your emotions are remarkably resilient."

"That's quite optimistic of you, darling."

"Note who I am applying the optimism to."

"Drink your whiskey, Severus."

He arched an eyebrow and did so, smacking his lips in satisfaction. "Your toast was well done," he said, changing the subject.

"Thank you." She beamed and sipped her wine. "I have a poem that I think I'll be reading soon. Henri and Cosette are opening up the microphone for the entire crowd to share memories and whatnot. An 'open mic,' as it were."

"Trusting of them," Severus said dryly, and Hermione punched his arm playfully. "Oh, come now," he said, setting his drink down. "As if you would ever open up the microphone for anyone to share any memory of you they ever had. It's particularly trusting seeing as how they're loosening everyone's tongues and morals with the free bar."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but the song ended at that moment, and everyone clapped as Henri dipped Cosette and placed a chaste kiss on her lips.

Hermione sighed. "That was very sweet."

"Mm." Severus nodded noncommittally. "Ah, a new song. Dance with me?"

Hermione grinned. "I love that you always ask me to dance."

"We cut quite a rug, *ma chère*."

Her heart swelled as he led her to the floor it was the first time he had ever used that endearment.

*

A half hour later, Hermione had managed her way to the microphone.

"*Bonjour*," she said. "I know you are all probably sick to death of me by now " Laughter and what Hermione took to be encouraging phrases in many languages were shouted. She chuckled and continued, "But I do have one more thing to share a poem. Don't worry, Henri. It's short." She smiled playfully at the groom, who dramatically gestured for her to continue. "Cosette and I were reading through books of love poetry at a bookshop the other day just for fun, you know, but this poem really stuck out, and now that Henri and Cosette are married " She put a hand over her heart "I can read it. It's entitled 'To my Dear and Loving Husband,' by Anne Bradstreet."

She cleared her throat.

"If ever two were one, then surely we.

If ever man were lov'd by wife, than thee.

If ever wife was happy in a man,

Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

I prize thy love more than whole Mines of gold

Or all the riches that the East doth hold.

My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,

Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.

Thy love is such I can no way repay,

The heavens reward thee manifold I pray.

Then when we live, in love let's so persever

That when we live no more, we may live ever."

She smiled at her friends and ignored the tears swelling again in her eyes as Cosette, who had been standing, bent to passionately kiss her new husband at the poem's end. The crowd cheered the cheers of the intoxicated sort.

Hermione smiled gracefully and walked straight back to Severus, who was once again positioned at the bar.

He nodded. "Again, well done."

"Two compliments in one night?" Hermione feigned shock. "Whatever am I to do?"

"Oh, shut it, woman. You get nervous about public speaking, which is why I'm here to assure you."

Hermione sipped the drink he handed her. "Who doesn't get nervous about public speaking?"

He paused. "After the sorts of audiences I've played to, trust me, I could speak for the Queen herself and not have a single nerve."

Hermione threw back her drink, choosing to ignore the latent message

Voilà

She shut the name off in her head. She did not want to hear it, think it, speak it

She was immensely grateful when Severus pinched her derriere playfully, promptly sending her into a fit of giggles.

*

The rest of the reception went swimmingly, with Hermione and Severus dancing until they were too inebriated to feign any grace at all. They Apparated to their hotel after Henri and Cosette's departure and proceeded to spend the rest of the week in Florence.

*

March 2004

Hermione had just returned to her flat from work when a letter shot out of her Floo. She set her tote down, walked to the fireplace, and picked up the letter. URGENT was scrawled across the front in Harry's jagged handwriting.

The baby! Ginny was due any day now.

She tore the letter open

4 March 2008

Ginny's delivered a healthy baby boy at 3:56 p.m. He was seven pounds, ten ounces and has my hair and her eyes. It was a hard labor, but Gin is doing okay.

We named him James Sirius Potter.

Come as soon as you can, day or night! Write, and I'll meet you at our flat to take you to St. Mungo's. Ginny is in a private suite.

Love you,

Harry

Hermione squealed and started jumping up and down. She quickly ran through her to-do list and decided that everything could wait. She needed to see Severus, of course it was Friday night, and he'd be expecting her.

She already had a stack of baby gifts a fleece Gryffindor-red baby blanket, an ivory rattle she'd bought in Africa, and several books two fairy tale books (the Muggle one for Harry, the wizard one for Ginny) as well as one of her favorites, *Goodnight, Moon*.

She stepped into the fire to go to Capois.

*

She stepped out and was immediately swept up in his arms. He bent and kissed her, his hands sliding along her waistband, and it was with great reluctance and a gentle push that she separated him from her.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, brushing a curl from her face.

"No. I can't stay tonight I'll be here tomorrow."

"You're here right now," he pointed out.

"I came to tell you that I'm going to London. Ginny had the baby this afternoon," she rushed to explain, desperate to counter his rapidly darkening demeanor. "And I have gifts "

"Can you not see them later?" he asked.

"I want to be with them tonight. I imagine everyone has already seen him."

"A baby boy?" he asked. She nodded.

"Please, Severus."

"Won't the exhausted new parents need their sleep?" he asked, leaning into her, nuzzling her neck.

"Yes, but it's the principle of the thing," she said, barely able to speak through the shockwaves that were shooting straight to her core, making her practically quake in her shoes. Instant desire.

The bastard.

"Severus " she started. "I can't."

He released her and landed a hard hand on the mantle.

"You and your goddamn principles," he muttered.

She reached for him, but he shrugged her off.

Her expression hardened. "Fine. I'll be here later tonight or maybe tomorrow."

She turned on her heel and went back through the Floo, furious with Severus and eager to see Harry and Ginny's new son.

*

She visited with Ginny and Harry, dropped her gifts off at their flat, held the new baby, and was back in France within two hours.

She didn't see Severus that weekend.

*

A few days later, her stomach was still twisted in knots. It felt like there was a Nargle trapped in her chest desperately trying to escape.

She crawled out of bed, still in her pajamas, and stepped into her fireplace to Floo to Capois. She wanted to sleep in their bed, clutch his pillow, smell him.

She was a coward, and she knew it.

She stepped out of the dusty Capois fire a moment later and was startled to find Severus sitting right in front of her in a wing-backed chair, glass of brandy in one hand, a book in the other.

He arched an eyebrow before returning his attention to the book. The John Donne sonnets, she noted.

He's in a morose mood.

"Severus?" she asked.

He didn't look at her.

She took the seat across from him.

He sat, austere, like stone.

"I'm sorry I haven't seen you."

He slammed a hand against his armrest, and she jumped in surprise.

"You haven't seen me in days. This is your problem, not mine. Do not make an issue of it. *Why* are you so determined to discuss this?" he growled.

"Because it troubles you."

"*You* trouble me. You trouble every fucking aspect of my life."

"Is that why I'm in your life, then? For the fucking?"

He glared at her. "That's not what I said."

"Then tell me."

He sneered. "You've no respect for my privacy. I respect your work; you pester me about mine. I just want peace and quiet when I am here. It's why I come here." He paused. "And I do *not* want to have your friends infiltrating every parameter of my existence."

"They don't they won't!" Hermione insisted, taken aback. "I just went to the hospital"

"And the questions you were assaulted with where you've been, what you've been doing how did you answer them? Any answers you give will eventually lead them here."

"Sweet fucking Merlin!" Hermione exclaimed. "No one asked me questions! I was alone with Harry and Ginny the whole time, and they know me well enough to not ask any questions about you! *Merlin*, Severus, did you honestly think I went to see the baby in order to tell them every fucking detail of my life here? I didn't say anything! Why would I? They didn't ask questions! Why the fuck would they?"

She was shocked at how quickly the tension left his body. His relaxation was palpable.

"Did you think I wasn't seeing you because I came back repulsed by the idea of you?" she asked quietly. He was silent. "The trip was all planned out, Severus. Have you ever known me to not consider all the particulars?"

He sipped his brandy.

"Damn it, Severus, you can't do this to me!" she said, tears forming in her eyes. "You can't be upset and not tell me *why* and *justssume!*"

"I've made a life out of drawing correct assumptions," he said slowly, his eyes black.

She gestured helplessly. "What more can I do?" she asked. She put her head in her hands. "I've given up *#ife...*"

"You didn't give it up for me, and I have made no claims to keep you here."

Her breath hitched. Tears spilled. That stung far more than it should.

"I know," she said.

He sighed. "I have to work tomorrow as well. I need rest. So do you." He rose, and she heard him stand next to her, felt his hand on her hand. "You'll get back alright?"

She nodded dumbly. She felt him kiss her head before walking into the bedroom.

She stepped into the Floo and disappeared. She arrived at her flat and was barely able to stumble to the couch.

When she woke the next morning, the throw pillow was soaked with tears.

*

Present

"We never really got our boundaries sorted out," Hermione said, sipping her wine.

Rose sat, slightly aghast. "But for him to push you around and just assume and not compromise..."

"It's not his way."

"*That's* not a relationship."

"Note that I am sitting in front of you having been married to your father for over twenty years."

Rose was silent. "It's easy to forget that you were... separated."

Hermione laughed. "You're sitting here in front of me, darling." She took her daughter's hand. "That's proof enough."

"He was just so... *obstinate*," Rose exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. She put her elbows on the table. "What kept you there, Mum?" she asked, though she was certain that she knew the answer.

"I loved him," her mum responded. "And when he told me that he had not brought me to France that was the first time he said that; he told me many times oh, how I longed to tell him, but I just couldn't bear to put that information in his hands..." She halted abruptly, regaining her composure. "And we just went very well together." A smile touched her lips. "Do you remember the nursery rhyme that I used to tell you all the time? 'There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead...'"

"And when she was good, she was very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid," Rose finished, grinning.

"That's the short summary," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "It wasn't horrid, but it was damned difficult, and that year..." She sighed. "That year was when I started to crack. He didn't tell me he loved me, for one thing. Not that I rationally expected him to, but a woman in love does long to hear such feelings requited. Also, our entire relationship lacked a definition. 'Companion' is the word Severus took to using," Hermione said wryly, her fingers drumming against her glass. "Companion is all well and good and settled, but we weren't any of those things. I was madly in love with him, and I didn't care for his using the tone he adopted when speaking of his potions."

Rose snorted.

*

Mid Year, Capois

"You're leaving again," she said flatly.

Severus sighed and stared back at her. He crossed his arms over his chest.

They were at an impasse. Again.

He was in that three piece suit. That was the reason why she was so upset. Or perhaps it was just because he was leaving. Probably both. That damn suit signified something important that she wasn't meant to know about. That she couldn't know. And he looked good, and she couldn't even enjoy that. He made an effort for this but not for her.

Was she reading too much into this?

Yes, nagged the little voice in her head. She couldn't stand watching him leave and not knowing when he'd be back. This suit had last made him disappear for eight weeks.

A trip from which he'd only returned last week.

Eight long, miserable, depressing weeks.

"You need to let this go," he said, staring at her unflinchingly.

She looked at the ceiling and stared at the attic latch.

"You were gone for two months last time," she said, knowing she sounded broken. "What if you're gone for that long again?"

His eyes flared. He crossed the floor in three long strides and reached for her, crushing his mouth to hers. Her stomach swooped as he backed her against the counter, hands roaming.

"Severus," she gasped against his mouth as he moved his lips to her neck. "*I oh.*"

His hands snuck under her shirt and snaked up her back. She felt her bra unclasp, and her top and bra were off before she knew it.

She lost quite a few things after that her jeans, her knickers, her mind. The usual.

*

"That doesn't make goodbye any easier, you know," she told him a half hour later.

He rested a casual hand on the door, which was askance, offering them a beautiful view of the countryside in autumn. "I know," he murmured, reaching out to run a finger down her face. "It tends to have an adverse effect."

"You miss me more?" she grinned.

He smirked. "Occasionally." The clock chimed in the kitchen.

"I need to go," he said and bent down to give her a chaste kiss on the lips.

She embraced him. "I'll miss you. I love you."

He removed her arms from his neck and started down the front steps, not meeting her eyes.

"Say *something*," she said, leaning against the door, slightly annoyed. "Don't ignore me."

"I cannot return the sentiment," he said sharply, turning around to look at her. "Don't expect me to say it."

It felt as if she'd been doused with cold water.

She leapt down the steps and went to stand right in front of him, nose to nose, or rather her nose to his sternum.

"I've never said it and I refuse to be guilted," he said matter-of-factly. "I care for you, and the fucking is good."

She slapped him hard.

He touched his lips gingerly, his expression dark. "I see the sarcasm is lost on you. Now, if you'll excuse me." He turned.

Guilt swept over her.

"I'm "

She saw him hold up a hand, but he didn't turn around.

She staggered back and sat on the steps of the cottage, watching him walk away into the sunset.

She put her head in her hands and cried.

*

9 November 2004

She couldn't recall ever feeling worse in her life. Halloween had come and gone. It was November. It had been over a month since he'd left. He hadn't returned. At least, he hadn't told her if he'd returned.

She was beginning to think he'd left her.

No. She knew he hadn't. If he'd decided to end things, she would have found herself Banished from the cottage and unable to enter.

She'd banished herself from the cottage, though. After her cry, she'd packed her things and taken them back to her flat.

She had, however, been blocked from *his* flat. It was a damn shame. She'd left some of her favorite books there.

And he'd blocked her...

That rankled.

No it didn't just rankle. It felt like she'd been dragged across a bed of hot coals.

She'd been sad for a long time.

Depressed might be the right word.

Pierre, who had experienced an unfortunate bout of fatherly concern, had scheduled counseling sessions with the company psychiatrist and had assured Hermione that he was attempting to find Severus.

He'd been unable to locate him, and that news had been damn unbearable to hear. Hermione had screamed and cried in Pierre's office while he attempted to console her.

Pierre's inability to locate someone did not bode well for a situation.

It had ached. Physically *ached*.

If she was willing to be honest with herself, she'd admit that it still did.

She poured herself a cup of coffee. She had to be to work soon. That's one thing she'd learned. Life goes on. The person you love more than almost anyone leaves, but life goes on.

Pierre had banned her from the office for a while, which had been difficult. Hermione did not cope well without work she had tried to tell him this, but he hadn't listened. She needed to *do* things to stay sane... she would go stir crazy if left alone in her apartment with books and her frayed nerves for company.

October had been hell. On top of her depression and Pierre's *mothering*, Cosette and Henri had been in South America, away from the situation for four weeks. And she hadn't had the heart to write Ginny, a frantic new mother.

Oh, how her circle had shrank. But even if she was in Britain, who would she go to? She had never needed many confidantes. She'd go to Harry and Ginny... but she couldn't go to them now. When she had interned at St. Mungo's there had been Margot Caron Pierre's niece for the occasional vent or sob session. There had been Ron. And Luna.

Luna would have understood.

No it wasn't that Luna would have understood, though she probably would in her own special way... it was that Luna wouldn't question. She would accept: would be absolutely, unconditionally accepting.

Hermione leaned against the counter, drained her coffee cup, and picked up her briefcase.

She hadn't written Luna, in spite of how much she may have wanted to.

And she was feeling better now. She really was. And Cosette was encouraging her to be angry at him for how he'd treated her.

She was almost too angry. Honest.

She drew in a deep breath and left for work.

*

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

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*

9 January 2005

Severus hadn't returned for Christmas. Hermione had gone to her parents for the holidays once more, making her excuses for him. "Who has to work on Christmas Eve?" Jean had exclaimed, casting an all too wary eye on her daughter.

Hermione had been put through the gauntlet the gauntlet every woman faces from her mother at some point in time. The marriage and children gauntlet. Even if she and Severus had had a decent relationship where they openly accepted his inability to commit and her overwhelming insecurity, it would have been torture.

Given their current situation, it was utter hell.

All things considered, it was best that he hadn't been there, but Hermione was still angry. He'd been gone for months with nary a word.

The damned necklace and bouquet of flowers that had been delivered to her parents' house on Christmas Eve had not helped her mood, but that had definitively put her out of depression and into rage. That the flowers had continued after she returned to Paris that she had just received another bouquet was positively infuriating.

"He says you're a good fuck and you get depressed. He sends you flowers to apologize and you get angry. If only Pierre had known the effect white gardenias would have..." Cosette had quipped just the other day.

"It's not enough," Hermione had said. "He's been gone since *August*. I'm through."

Right, Hermione thought as she put her earrings on. It was January 9th. It was his goddamn birthday a birthday he was missing. Fortuitously, it was also a Friday night. She was going out with Cosette and some girls from work.

She heard a knock at the doorway and glanced at the clock. Cos was early.

"Come in," she called. "It's open."

She walked out into the hallway. "You're early so I'm not quite ready..." She trailed off.

He was standing in her doorway.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

She glared. "No."

"Okay," he said slowly. "I deserved that."

"You're damn straight you do." She crossed her arms. "You've been gone *formonths*." She paused. "Over four *months*."

"I'm back."

"Much good may it do you."

"You haven't been to the cottage."

"I moved out. You don't need me in your life, remember?"

"Hermione." He stepped forward, and she held up a hand.

"No," she said. "I can't *take* it anymore."

"That was the last trip," he said quietly, his hands in his pockets. "The last one."

She swallowed hard. "Why?"

"Our research is done."

She raised her eyebrows. "Research?" She grunted. "Naturally."

He sighed. "You never asked."

"You wouldn't have answered."

"Fair enough." He paused. "Move back in."

"A diamond necklace and flowers," she said slowly. "But no note."

"Then you didn't look closely at the flowers."

She raised an eyebrow, and he stepped forward, and then stopped.

"May I come in?" he asked beseechingly. "I'd like to show you something." He pulled a stack of cards out of his pocket and walked to her dining table, not waiting for her to grant him permission.

"Are those " she started.

"The florist returned the cards that you returned."

"Oh."

"There are quite a few of these. December 24th through the ones you just returned today," he said, and he began laying the blue and white cards out on the table for her to read.

Christmas Eve Forgive the gift; forgive its faults it could never hope to be as beautiful as its new owner. And forgive the gift giver for an utter lack of communication. I've been in Asia. I will tell you more upon my return. SS

Christmas Day Merry Christmas, ma chère. SS

26 December These match your eyes.

27 December And these your lips.

28 December Forgive what I said that day.

29 December Please accept my apology.

30 December I beg you.

31 December Happy New Year's, Hermione.

1 January A new year new beginnings.

2 January I will be home soon.

3 January I have reset the wards on my flat to allow you entrance. I'm sorry for your exclusion. It was necessary.

4 January I still miss you.

5 January I dreamt of you last night.

6 January And again last night.

7 January And again.

8 January And again.

9 January And again.

Hermione looked up at him. "I " she halted. He held his hand out to her, and she accepted it.

"I have missed you," he said quietly. "Forgive me."

She wiped her eyes. "It's not that easy."

"Anything worth having is difficult."

She looked at him ruefully. "I'm mad as hell."

"Rightfully so. Do you still love me?" he asked, clearly sure of the reply.

She looked at him, annoyed. "Yes," she said. "I'm not moving back in."

"Let me try to convince you?"

She sighed. "I'm going out with the girls tonight. Life goes on, Severus."

He was still. "Yes, it does," he agreed. "Will you meet me for coffee tomorrow? As a birthday gift?" He quirked his lips at her.

She chuckled. "Yeah, fine."

"Seven at the Dam Café?"

She nodded.

He squeezed her shoulder as he rose and Apparated away.

She put her head in her hands and breathed deeply.

Count to ten.

Un, deux, trois...

*

Present

"How could you let him back in, Mum?" Rose asked, slightly accusing. "Oh, yes you loved him."

Hermione sighed. "I was at the end of my rope. I still loved him. Of course I did. If anger and depression canceled out love, there would be far more single people in the world."

"That's what's dangerous about love," Rose said. "Love someone enough and you'll forgive them anything. Even the wrongs they do to you."

Hermione was quiet. "Don't say that, Rose," she said at last. "Please never say that again."

Rose looked at her, puzzled.

"You are here because your father loved me enough to forgive me anything," Hermione said. "Unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness are not bad things, Rose."

They were quiet.

"It just how you acted it doesn't seem like you, Mum."

"It's not," Hermione said frankly. "Those years with him... well, they have a lot to do with the woman I am now."

"You mean the 'take no prisoners' mentality?"

"In my desperation to be loved to be needed I put up with a lot in my youth. I overindulged bad behavior in those I adored in your Uncle Harry and your dad during school, and then with Severus later on."

"I'd say Severus was a different kind of bad behavior," Rose said.

"Relationships are messy."

"Yours was a train wreck."

"Do you want me to continue?"

Rose sighed.

"Do you remember what year I said we're in, Rose?"

Rose thought a moment, and recognition dawned. "2005," she said slowly. "The last year."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. The last year. Actually, we're in the last three months."

*

Late February 2005

Cosette and Hermione were having their weekly Wednesday brunch at Amelie's café in Capois when Cosette dropped a bomb-shell surprise.

"I'm pregnant," she said, grinning.

Hermione choked on her drink. "*What?*"

"Eight weeks. I know it's early, but I had to tell you. It's such a surprise! Henri and I never even thought about having children, but " She took Hermione's hand from across the table. "Oh, it's wonderful. Say you're happy for us?"

"Of course I am!" Hermione exclaimed, the news finally catching up with her brain. "Oh, honey." She grinned. "I'm just shocked is all. I didn't think you'd have kids."

"I know, right? It's crazy! But we're so excited."

Hermione squeezed Cosette's hand. "I'm so happy for you."

Her friend smiled. "Have you ever thought about having children?" she asked, sipping her juice.

Hermione looked down at her plate. "Yes."

"Do you want children?" Cosette asked tentatively.

"Yes."

Cosette whistled. "With Severus?"

"He doesn't want children." Hermione sighed. "He's told me as much several times."

Cosette shook her head. "I don't understand that man."

"He's brilliant, tortured, and has a dark past where he sacrificed everything, so now he's a selfish bastard who is unwilling to compromise anything."

Cosette raised her eyebrows. "You've thought about this?"

"He expresses any emotion he has through gifts and sex," Hermione added.

"He loves you. I know he does."

"Well, the gifts are expensive and the sex can be earth shattering. Draw your own conclusions."

"He loves you."

"He won't say it." Hermione rested her chin on her hand. "And he maintains that the trips have stopped, but how can I know for sure?"

"Have you moved back into the cottage?"

"No."

Cosette sighed. "So what the hell *are* you doing right now?"

"Trying to decide if I can stay with him."

"And what does Severus think about this?"

"He's acting like I'm a student working on a project that he will have the final say on."

"Idiot."

"What?" Hermione looked up, surprised.

Cosette shook her head. "Severus is a lot of things, and he's a Class A bastard, but I've never seen him be so genuinely *stupid*."

"He "

"If he was smart, he would be groveling in front of you on his knees, professing his undying love and promising you whatever you want."

"Well, that's Severus. And that's assuming that he loves me."

Cosette threw her napkin on the table. "Christ, Hermione, you've been together for almost four years *He loves you*. Does he realize how close he is to losing you?"

"No," Hermione whispered.

"Do you realize how close you are to leaving?"

"What?"

"I don't want to put any ideas in your head, but the writing is on the fucking wall," Cosette said, frustrated.

"Wow." Hermione sat back. "Are you angry or just hormonal?"

"Both, and I don't want my best friend to leave me because of her arse-backwards idiot boyfriend."

"Oh, Cosette." Hermione reached a hand across the table. "I'm not leaving you, sweetheart."

"You will," Cosette said. "I saw what you did to your friends back home. They didn't hear from you, didn't hardly see you "

"I'm not going back anytime soon, but if I ever did, I would write you and see you. You know this."

"Do I?"

"Yes. I promise." Hermione paused. "Can we just talk about the baby? Do you know what gender "

Cosette grinned. "We're having a little girl."

*

Present

"I should have liked to meet Cosette," Rose said, trying to keep an accusing tone out of her voice.

"That's my biggest regret, you know," Hermione said automatically, and Rose was taken aback. Hermione continued, "I don't can't regret leaving Severus, because then I would never have had you and Hugh, and the two of you are more precious to me than anything in this world. But I do regret that because of my own selfishness and desire to keep my record I don't know, spotless I never introduced you to my dearest friend aside from Ginny. And Luna, as well." She rubbed her forehead. "Cosette has been a far better friend to me over the years than I have been to her. We've been constant correspondents, and I have visited their home several times a year, but she has never even met you and Hugh, save when you were inside me," Hermione choked, and for the first time Rose recognized her mother's severe self-recrimination. "She is a far greater woman than I far more forgiving, far more understanding."

"She wasn't at Dad's funeral, then?" Rose asked.

Hermione rubbed her face. "In a cruel twist of fate, Henri's mother died the day before your dad's funeral. She had her own family's grief to attend to."

"She met Dad, though?"

"She and Ginny were my attendants. Our wedding was small family and friends only and Cosette merely said she was a longtime friend. It was true, and everyone thought she was a girlhood friend from my summer holidays in France. We didn't bother to correct them."

Rose paused. "How many children do Cosette and Henri have?"

"Just their daughter, Claire. She was born September 4, 2005. I'm her godmother, and her namesake her middle name is Hermione. Claire Hermione Bedard Dubois," her mother said. "She's the spitting image of Cosette petite, wild black hair, and a fierce disposition to boot. She's got Henri's eyes, though. Ice blue. She's a beautiful girl and she's smart, too. She's studying art at the Vrije now." Hermione chuckled. "Cosette pitched a fit about her going there, said she didn't want her only child going to school in Amsterdam." She snorted. "It's funny what motherhood does to a person. Henri had to call me over from work to help calm her down. She was in a right fit."

"How often were you there?" Rose asked quietly.

"Several times a year. More when you and Hugo were at Hogwarts. And we'd all run into each other at the occasional conference."

"And Pierre," Rose asked. "Have you kept in touch with him?"

Hermione laughed. "It's very difficult to keep in touch with that man. He's a wretched correspondent." She shifted in her chair. "He retired five or six years ago and, last I heard, had moved to Florence with his latest twenty-something girlfriend. No offense," she added.

"Oh, none taken." Rose grinned.

"The company turned over to Philippe Caron, who was the second in command even when I worked there." Hermione smiled, amused. "Claire always wanted to meet you, you know," she said, returning to the original subject. "She asked me every year when she was little for her birthday, could I please bring Rose? It broke my heart to tell her no. But after a while she stopped asking. I think as she's gotten older, Cosette has told her... more than what is probably advisable about the situation, to help her understand my family's distance."

"So she's twenty-one then?" Rose asked.

Hermione nodded. "She's eight months older than you."

"We could have been friends," Rose said.

"I'm sorry I am so sorry, darling. I made my own bed, and I forced everyone to sleep in it. It was wretchedly selfish. I'm well aware," Hermione said apologetically.

"Could I meet her meet Cosette and Henri?" Rose asked tentatively.

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, I think you should."

"Thank you," Rose said, grateful. She hesitated. "February 2005. Grandma Molly died in March...?"

"Yes," Hermione said, and launched into the last portion of her tale.

*

2 March 2005

Hermione had just arrived at her flat after work when a letter shot through the Floo. She walked over to the fireplace in the pending dark, beams of twilight and city lights streaming through the windows. She bent awkwardly to pick up the parchment *damn* this skirt! It was uncomfortably tight. She had no idea why she'd bought it.

No, she did. Cosette.

She shook her head and attempted to make out the writing on the letter. She could hardly see anything.

She flicked a finger and the lights came on.

She recognized the handwriting instantly, and her knees almost gave out. She barely made it to the sofa.

Ron.

*
Fifteen minutes later, she was still sitting on the sofa, staring at the unopened letter which she'd placed on the coffee table. Her hands were tucked under her chin in a prayer like position.

Her lips tightened.

Clearly, Harry or Ginny had caved.

It was Harry. She knew it was Harry.

It wouldn't be hard to convince him to give her address up, she thought. Work was stressful and James' first birthday was in a few days. George had just married Angelina Johnson last month, and there were two newborns in the family Percy and Penelope's Lucy and Bill and Fleur's Louis.

Life goes on.

Ginny's last letter exhausted but undeniably *content* had been difficult to read.

She didn't want to see what he had written...

At the same time, she did.

She shut her eyes tight. Ron hadn't been seeing anyone for months, Ginny had said *He's bloody miserable and tries to be cheerful, which is worse than him taking it out on everyone*. Ginny had speculated that this curious development in Ronald Weasley, the King of Lashing Out When Upset, was a result of his being depressed about a situation he didn't think would change.

Ginny was a wonderful friend who could say the most damning things without assigning blame to anyone.

She had practically said that Ron still missed Hermione.

Hermione sighed. She still loved Ron how could she not? but she was not in love, had never been in love with him.

She missed him and his warmth and joy and unassuming demeanor. The camaraderie. He loved to do "nothing" with her oh, the number of times they'd laid out on the Burrow's lawn at night, finding constellations and making stupid jokes, just laughing.

She missed Ginny. Harry. Luna, who was engaged to Dean Thomas.

That's long overdue, she thought absentmindedly.

Ron's letter.

Fine.

She reached for it and tore it open.

Hermione was scrawled across the top in all-too-familiar writing.

Her heart was pounding.

2 March 2005

Hermione,

I can't believe I'm writing to you after all these years. Can't believe that Harry gave you up you know it was him. It was torture, knowing that Ginny was writing you all the time, knowing that you knew about everything that was going on here but that I couldn't tell you myself.

Mum is sick. Mum is... very sick, and everyone is worried. That's why I'm writing. She got sick yesterday morning. I told Harry and Ginny that I would tell you.

Dad is a mess.

That's why I'm writing my dad has loved my mum all his life, and the mediwitches and Healers at St. Mungo's don't know what's wrong, and he's scared that he'll lose the person he loves the most in this world.

We all watch Dad with Mum, and Bill kisses Fleur's cheek and George hugs Angelina and Percy holds Penelope's hand and Harry takes James so that Ginny can go pace in the hall and I realize how much I need you right now.

I know you're with him. Ginny and Harry haven't said anything, but I'm not dumb. I saw a picture of the two of you at a conference in the papers when I was in Italy on holiday last year. I have no idea how the Prophet didn't get a hold of that picture, but I saw it.

Yesterday, I asked Ginny if you were happy. She didn't tell me anything, but she hesitated, and I know my sister, and if you are happy, Hermione, you can Incendio this letter right now, but she hesitated enough for even me to notice, and I still love you, so I'm taking my shot.

I miss you. I can't even write how much I miss you. I've dated other people tried to get back together with Lavender, who is a Healer now but no one is you. No one is you, no one can be you, and I'm done pretending that anyone can be. It's not fair to them, and I'm just cheating myself.

I've grown up now. I wish you were here to see it.

I just reread what I've written, and it might sound like I just miss you because my siblings all have their spouses here to cry on. That's not it. I've known how badly I need you for a long time. I've just been stupid about realizing it.

I've been depressed for a while. I've been drinking and trying to be happy, and I haven't gone out with anyone in over six months.

I still love you. I'm still in love with you. I will always be in love with you. That's a fact. That's just how it is.

I'm asking you if you are happy with him. I hope that he treats you well. You deserve the best because you are the best. I didn't realize how good I had it until I lost you.

I lost you once. I can lose you again. Tell me not to write, and I won't.

But if you would let me, Hermione, I would give you everything. Love you every day, marry you you do know that we never technically broke off our engagement. (Which is sort of funny.)

I would marry you, have a family with you, build a life with you.

That's all I really wrote to say. You can take it or leave it, but I had to tell you. If you're happy, then I can be man enough to let you have your happiness, and I won't bother you again.

And Mum is sick. You needed to know.

There's no good sign off to use for this kind of thing, is there?

Okay.

Love,

Ron

Trembling, she set the letter down, laid down on the couch, and cried herself to sleep.

*

When she woke up, Severus was standing over her, perusing a

"That's my letter!" she said fiercely, bolting upright, skirt askew.

"Oh, really," he said casually. "How... touching."

"Severus," she said, holding her hand out. "Give it to me."

"What is your answer?" he asked, not giving her the letter.

She glared at him and did a non-verbal *Accio*.

He smirked and sat down in the chair opposite her.

"Well?" he asked.

"This is mine. *My* personal paper. *My* letter. You had no right "

"You've gone through my papers. I was merely returning the favor."

She tensed. "That happened once and it was years ago."

"November 30, 2002."

"You're keeping *track*?" she asked incredulously. "You're keeping a tally of my mistakes?"

He shrugged.

She rose from the couch violently. "Did you read the part about how he hopes you treat me well?" Her nostrils flared.

"I treat you fine," he said.

"Fine is not well." She stalked over to the kitchen.

He followed. "It's a touching letter."

"Don't make fun of him! He loves me an affliction *you* have never experienced!" She grabbed a bag of Columbia coffee. She needed a drink. A caffeinated one, preferably.

"You don't think I love you?" He leaned against the counter.

"No. You've never said it."

Hermione could swear she could hear the hum of the tension.

"I do," he said slowly. "I am not good with words."

"Bullshit."

"I love you," he said. "I have showered you with gifts and "

"Lots of orgasms and a key to your cottage?" Hermione slammed a cupboard door shut. "Yes, Severus, because every time a man makes me come I just *now* that that means he loves me "

He grabbed her by the arm and swung her body around so that it pressed against his. "I do," he said firmly, "which I have been showing you for three months now."

"Two questions," Hermione said. "First, how do you prove to a woman that you love her when you've never actually said it? You usually *prove* a claim, and you yourself have said you have no claim on me." She sneered. "Second, you've only loved me for three months?"

"See? I tell you, and you throw it in my face."

"I've been telling you I loved you for *years*, and you only tell me *now*?"

"What does 'now' mean, Hermione?"

"Do you even *know* what you feel, Severus, or are you so steeped in self-induced denial and misery that you refuse to acknowledge any *good* emotion "

"And what good can come of love?"

She stopped in her tracks. "Just because you've been hurt in the past doesn't mean that it has to hurt now."

"Your reaction to this isn't reinforcing your words "

"Because *you* have hurt me!" she exclaimed. "I have given you *everything* and you don't care! I gave you my heart and you broke it! It went to rot on your watch."

"Do you love him?" Severus asked after a moment.

"I'm not in love with Ron," she said, walking back over to the coffeepot as it stopped brewing. She poured them each a cup.

"I wrote a letter like that once," he said, accepting the cup she offered.

She looked up at him sharply. "To Lily?"

He nodded. "She never responded."

Hermione slammed a hand on the counter, startling him. "How long are you going to let her affect your worldview?"

"I don't love her anymore."

"But you have never dealt with the damage she did to you or the damage anyone else did to you. *Voldemort. Dumbledore. Your father. Your mother.*

"She's dead," Severus said, ignoring the implicit references. "You don't get closure from a dead woman."

"You can achieve closure on your own."

He snorted.

"So you love me?" Hermione asked flatly, trying not to shake.

He grimaced. "Yes."

"So what now?" She crossed her arms. "Do we just carry on "

"If you're asking about marriage and children, the answer is still no."

"Are we moving in together permanently?" she asked.

"No."

She threw her cup against the wall, and it shattered in a dozen small shards. Coffee sprayed everywhere.

"You're out of control," Severus said. "*Evanesc*o."

"You want me to give you everything without you offering me anything," she said through gritted teeth. "Story of our relationship."

"I love you."

"Too little, too late."

He threw his own cup against the wall. "So what now, Hermione?" he practically shouted. "You go back to England? *To him*?" He walked back to the sitting room.

"I don't know!" she yelled.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes! It doesn't mean *I like* you, though, because I don't like you at all!" She followed him over. "You have treated me *like shit*, and you refuse to acknowledge it! How can we have a relationship now? We've tried to have one for years without any success!"

"You've spent a lot of time blaming the trips. They're over."

"They were a big part of it, but even when you were home..." She trailed off. "Merlin, Severus, have we ever had an open conversation?"

"Listen to yourself, Hermione," he said, walking over to her. He cupped her face in his hands. "I beg you, consider what you're doing."

She shook his hands away. "Now that we acknowledge how far this has disintegrated, now that " She breathed heavily. *Now* you want to fight for it."

"Don't destroy us."

She looked up at him, fury washing over her in waves. "Personal responsibility, Severus have you ever heard of it? Take responsibility for ~~what~~ *you* have done."

They stared at each other for a long while, mouths set in matching thin lines.

"Will you leave?" he asked, going over to stand in front of the fireplace.

"I don't know."

"I await your decision."

Hermione watched him disappear into the flames.

She took a deep breath, willing the rage away, and then summoned her Patronus. She held her wand to her throat. "We fought. Please come." She sent it to Cosette.

She sat on the floor with her back against the wall, her head in her hands.

She couldn't think.

There was nothing left to say.

*

5 March 2005

Hermione walked down the corridor to her office, completely exhausted. She'd been up all night packing. She had informed Pierre that she was taking a leave of absence. She'd sent Harry and Ginny James' first birthday gift. His birthday had been yesterday. She felt... she didn't know what she felt. It was over. It had to be. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. She was out of rope.

She was going to Sydney for a while. She'd stay with her mum and dad and sort things out... take time to think.

Her mind was entirely scattered, and the coffee she'd inundated her system with was only just beginning to help her thoughts coalesce. She nearly bumped into two of her co-workers.

"*Excusez-moi*," she mumbled as she walked into her office which was open.

She looked up, and her jaw dropped.

"Harry," she barely managed. She dropped everything coffee included and ran to him. He threw his arms around her in a crushing hug, and she wanted to cry. She put a hand on his head.

"How did you "

"Not to brag, Hermione," he said in a low, controlled voice, "but I'm Harry Potter. I could have found you long ago if I wanted."

She gulped. "Thank you for finding me."

He nodded.

"Why "

"Molly died this morning."

Any air she had in her exited in a swift breath. Harry caught her as she sagged against the desk.

"I got Ron's letter " Shock. Numbness. Shock. "He said she was sick "

She looked up at Harry. His eyes were black. Black with exhaustion. With grief.

"Oh, God, Harry." She took his hand. "How what "

"We don't know."

"Oh, *God*."

She wasn't crying. She was heaving gasping for air Molly was a constant how

"We need to get back. That's why I came. To take you back, if only for a little while. You have to be with us."

"Ron Ginny "

"Luna's with Ginny right now, but I need to get back soon. Hermione " Harry caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You need to be seen. Face the music, sweetheart."

She nodded dumbly.

"Come on." Harry got her off the desk and supported her at the waist. "I've talked to Pierre and he's writing to your parents. Let's go."

And they left.

*

London

They arrived at Harry's flat in record time. Ginny came immediately into Hermione's arms crying before she went to her husband.

"Hullo, Hermione."

Hermione's head jerked around and she saw Luna waltz into the room, James in her arms. She looked..*adult*. But the radish earrings were still there.

"It's good to see you," Luna was saying.

Hermione practically ran to embrace Luna, making sure to hug her tenderly as James was squashed in between them. "I'm so sorry I didn't write," she whispered, regret hitting her full-force.

"It's all right," Luna said, patting Hermione's back reassuringly with her one free hand. "I always knew you'd come back." She released Hermione and handed James to Harry. She took Hermione's hands in hers.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered, but Luna's eyes were radiating nothing but warmth and forgiveness.

"It's good to see you," Ginny said, coming over, and the three women held each other tightly.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Hermione said. "So sorry." She kissed her friend's head.

Ginny took her hand. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course." Hermione looked around the room, suddenly noticing... "Where's Ron?" she asked.

"He's at his flat," Ginny said quietly. "He won't see anyone right now."

"Is everyone else at the Burrow?"

Ginny nodded.

"I'll go see him," Hermione said.

"That would be best," Ginny said.

*

Hermione opened the door to Ron's flat slowly. Harry had given her his key.

"Ron?" she called softly. She stepped in and immediately saw him sitting by the fire.

The sight of him shocked the hell out of her. He filled up the whole chair broad, tall, scruffy hair, five o'clock shadow, and his clothes looked like he'd slept in them... which he probably had.

He looked up at her, eyes drawn, face worn with exhaustion. "You're here."

She nodded. "I'm here." She stepped forward. "I'm sorry. So sorry."

"For what?" he asked, his voice surprisingly level.

"Your mum's death," Hermione said. *For hurting you*, she thought. "For everything," she murmured, walking over to him.

He rose from the chair, and their bodies met with a hard smack as their arms wrapped around the other.

He wasn't her... he wasn't that right now.

He was one of her oldest, dearest friends who had just lost his mother.

"I'm sorry," she said again and felt that he understood exactly what she meant. "It's all right, Ron." He was tense, but Hermione thought that he felt as breakable as glass. "You can let go."

He started to cry.

And she cried with him.

*

6 March 2005

Severus,

Molly died.

I'm in London for the funeral.

I'm staying.

*

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Shug is amazing -- she's cheerleader and beta all wrapped up in one, and she's spent a lot of time today going over the chapter and smoothing my feathers. *muah* Thank you, dear.

*

Tears fell from Hermione's eyes. "And then I was back."

"What did you do?" Rose asked softly, slowly.

"I tendered my resignation to Pierre. He sold my flat to a new employee. I went back to Paris once to say goodbye to Cosette and Pierre. Cos helped me move out and then into my new flat in London. That was when she met them all, the first time," Hermione said. "We kicked Ron and Harry out after a while, though, and James was fussing so Ginny had to leave, so it was just Cos and I." She sighed. "We cried a lot, talked things over. We knew things had changed, but we weren't about to let each other go. That was one thing I learned. You never let the ones you love go prematurely."

"You let Severus go right when he said "

"What was I supposed to do, Rose?" Hermione exclaimed. "He said it *months* after he'd known it. And he refused to act on it refused to compromise."

"Did you expect him to?" Rose asked softly.

Hermione paused. "No, no I didn't." She sighed. "I know I made mistakes. I know it. I was young and impatient and I had finally*finally* realized what I wanted... I tried to foist it on him. I wanted him to be something he wasn't, and as uncompromising as he was, as stubborn, as ill has he treated me at times, the subject of commitment he

never said he would. Then again, he didn't send me away. Who's to say which of us is to blame? I stayed with him anyway; I thought I could change him." Hermione looked at her daughter straight on. "I left England because I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know who I was. I left Severus because I had realized what I wanted, and it was something he couldn't give me. I had grown up."

"And you were gone."

"I was gone. I had gone home."

"Not to shift gears." Rose shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "But... what about Dad? What... happened?"

Hermione stilled, clearly thinking about what she was going to say. "Grief it does things to a person. Grief intensifies every emotion. That first week after Molly's funeral trust me, Rose, your dad and I didn't leap into some rebound relationship right off or jump in the sack "

"Mum!"

"Well, we didn't," Hermione said stubbornly. "That week love, rage, pain. Everything came out. It was volatile. We knew we had to get things sorted out, and we would yell and scream and cry and shout. It's always been like that, goodness, since we were kids; even then opposites attract," she said wryly. "Trust me, he asked me every question you could possibly think of that week, and I was honest. And I asked him about the whores and the boozing, and he was honest, and we raged at each other. Harry and Ginny left us alone to sort things out. Going back was anything but easy, but I wasn't about to step into some self-made fantasy created by my own desire or denial. No, if Severus taught me anything and that relationship taught me a lot it was that you *deal*. You take the emotions and you deal with them and you take active steps towards growth you do not let yourself simmer in denial and fantasy of what could be or what could have been. And you *don't* pretend to feel something you don't, and you don't hide what you feel. Skewed relationships that's what that makes for. You need open, honest, and direct communication. You need to be on the same page and have a similar vision for the future in order to last."

"And you and Dad did?"

"I wouldn't have married your father under false pretenses, Rose."

"It's just Severus "

"I had fallen out of love with him by then, Rose," Hermione said, tearing up again. "When you come to full awareness of how ill you've been treated, of how little they are willing to compromise when you stop denying the truth, when you step out of the fantasy well, once I had been in Britain for scarcely a week I knew that while I still loved him, I could never risk that again."

"But "

"I did still love him. Deeply, passionately. But it was a remnant of what it had been, and it was a small love, broken, burned, bruised it had bled out on the floor before my eyes. I carried memories and pain and somewhere in those things there was love, but I did not want anything to do with him."

"You and dad "

"Got engaged quickly?" Hermione raised an eyebrow in challenge. "I've always made quick emotional turns, and after a few months, it became relatively clear that marriage is what your Dad and I wanted."

"So you got back in March, engaged in June, and married in August?"

"And pregnant in August. Don't forget that part."

Rose looked away.

"Your father and I *loved each other*, Rose." Hermione reached for her daughter's hand. "We wanted to marry each other and we knew why. You weren't an accident. The marriage was not a mistake, and I never considered it one. You and your brother your dad." Hermione sighed. "You three our family it is one of the few things in my life that I look on with complete contentedness, with the irrevocable knowledge that for once, I did something wholly *right*. Your dad and I did something few people accomplish we loved each other, and we built a life and raised two of the most beautiful, talented children, until death do us part." She wiped at her eyes. "I would not have traded *any* of you for the world, and I never considered going back to France. Never."

"Did you ever miss it?"

Hermione sighed. "When I would visit Cos, of course, I inevitably lamented that we were so far apart. I fucked up my family's relationship with her family royally, as well, I fully admit. But I never wanted that life back. I never considered leaving."

"If I hadn't been born " Rose started, trying to sort things out.

"Rose, *stop*," Hermione said firmly. "Don't even think that. I had months to decide that marriage wasn't the answer months and three fantastic girlfriends who held my feet to the fire, challenged my desires, my wants, emotions. Trust me, they left no stone unturned. Do you think Ginny, Luna, and Cosette not to mention Harry would have let me marry Ron if they were not absolutely certain of my reasoning?"

"Well, you're their friend."

"Have you forgotten the first thing I told you? Think back to the conversation I had with Ginny the day that I left," Hermione said slowly. "There was no other man then I did not feel anything remotely romantic for Severus, mind, merely fascination, and I had no hope in hell of ever finding him. I surprised myself by leaving so quickly. Anyhow, Ginny was still prepared to pull out all the stops to make sure that my reasoning, my emotions, were fully in line with Ron's. Now, multiply that conversation times ten, picture us having it four or five times, and you have an idea of what it was like several years later."

Rose nodded. "Okay. Okay."

Hermione squeezed her hand. "Your father was my dearest friend, and I will apologize to no one for what we had."

"You loved each other," Rose said.

"Yes, my darling, we did," Hermione said softly.

And Rose started to cry.

*

Hermione tucked Rose in her childhood bed a half an hour later and made the slow trek across the house to her room. She was still in her work clothes. God, it was late.

Yes, she reflected. She and Ron had loved each other.

Had she been *in* love with her husband though?

Yes no yes and no. What did "in love" mean, anyway? At different points in their marriage, she had been crazy in love with him. She would dare any woman to watch her husband dance their newborn daughter across the hospital room and *not* feel utter joy and contentedness. It was one happy memory among many.

The passion and craziness came and went. They had had passion, certainly, especially in the early years. But it had never been a constant in their marriage, never like she had shared with Severus, which was fine with Hermione, because that sort of intensity was explosive it wreaked havoc, caused trouble. She was unwilling to let herself feel like that again.

She and Ron she had loved him still loved him deeply, devotedly, down to her bones, but how could she have told her twenty-year-old daughter that she had not always been *in* love with her husband without Rose taking it to mean that her parents' love was somehow fake, somehow less, and it had never been either of those things.

There were some things better left unsaid. Some secrets of the heart best left undisturbed.

She passed by Ron's bedroom that he'd kept these last few years, tracing her hand along the door as she walked by, willing the tears away.

*

Rose lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, trying desperately to fall asleep and failing at it miserably. She wished she could say that hearing her mother's story had made something "click," that the mysteries of her parents' marriage had come screaming to light, that now she understood the whispers and secrecy

The thing was that she'd never *seen* whispers or secrecy, never suspected anything amiss.

There really hadn't been anything amiss.

Her mum had come back, and that was that.

Life had gone on.

The story well, it made her parents' story more complicated and remarkable than the Hogwarts Sweethearts storyline, but still... what had drawn her parents together, what had kept them together...?

There was no new revelation there.

The story had been a drop in Rose's mental bucket labeled 'Mum' that pond had rippled out, washed up over the banks, but receded, eventually lying still as it always had.

Her mother. The changes made a difference in her perception of her mother, which meant that her perception of her parents' marriage had changed, as well, she supposed, but...

Her parents had married each other knowing exactly what they were doing, knowing exactly who they were marrying and why.

Her parents had grown up and reunited in the life everyone had always expected them to have.

Only this time, they both knew why.

It gave Rose a new respect for her dad.

And her mum

Rose sighed. She had no idea what she thought.

She turned over and pulled the covers up about her. *How do you love two men?*

Her mum hadn't ventured an explanation on that, really had only said that she was in love with Severus and then out of love with Severus and then... loving Ron, marrying Ron.

And now...

Now her dad was dead.

Her mum had never said if Severus was alive. But she'd have mentioned his death. *Sweet Merlin*, Rose thought, *he's still alive*.

What now?

*

Hermione was getting ready for bed in her room. She had already decided that telling Rose had been absolutely the right thing to do.

Time to undo the damage.

She'd just finished writing to Cosette, Harry and Ginny, and Luna, telling them that she'd told her daughter and that they were to be on their guard for visits from a certain Rose Weasley, but that they could tell her anything they liked.

She went to her vanity to take off her jewelry when she noticed the blue box, still sitting out in the open the blue box that had started it all. It was a miracle, in retrospect, that Rose had only seen the one letter. The box contained far more damning evidence, after all.

She ran her fingers across the smooth woven lid it was every shade of blue, beaded and beautiful. Severus had bought it for her in India.

She lifted the lid. There Ginny's letter, right on top. Then the bundle of letters from Ginny, the ones from Ron and Harry beneath. A photograph of Cosette, Pierre, and herself in Florence at the café on the deck where they'd been that fateful day before the conference. Cosette and Henri's wedding pictures. Photographs of Claire.

Her pearls. The cards from the florist.

His letters.

Notes from those years and

The ones from after.

Letters he had written her.

His handwriting. She traced a letter with her finger, following the jagged scrawl as it zipped across the parchment.

She lifted the last photograph from the bottom of the box.

A photograph of her and Severus dancing at Pierre's birthday party.

Heavenly Day, she thought. God, she looked young. Then again, so did he. How old would he be now? She snorted it wasn't like it mattered. He was barely entering wizarding middle life now, as it was. He'd live until he was a hundred, at the very least. His body had been to hell and back, but he was powerful, and that certainly counted for something in a wizard's life span.

Sixty-five, she thought. She was forty-six; Severus would be sixty-five.

She waved her hand, and the contents of the box all flew back in, perfectly arranging themselves as they had been before. She replaced the lid and pressed, making sure it was shut, sealing what, exactly, she did not know. She put her hands on the vanity and sighed. She looked up at herself. There were lines laugh lines, optimistically but they were there. She had already gone through menopause, but then, her mother had also gone through it in her early forties.

Widowed. *Merlin*. She was forty-six with two grown children, a phenomenal career, and widowed.

Ron was gone.

She felt stripped of her defenses. Vulnerable. Open.

She was as alone now as she had been at twenty Rose's age, she thought.

Come to think of it, it would be good to be alone for a while.

A while *what?* She shook her head and pressed her hands to her face. *Get a grip*, she told herself. *Get a bloody grip on yourself*. She picked up her robe, slipped her arms through the sleeves, and went to sit out on her balcony, overlooking the hill.

What could she be waiting for? No Patronus was coming. No, those only came with the letters for big events marriage, anniversary, children, promotion.

Death.

She knew what she was thinking, and she hated herself for thinking it.

The correspondence had been sporadic over the years, always letters and Patronuses sent by him...

She had never contacted him or returned a correspondence.

She wouldn't. Couldn't.

She had loved Ron.

Passionate love had never been her way. She was never exuberant with anyone. Except with Severus. She had never shown such virulent love towards anyone else...

She and Ron had trusted each other, completely, unequivocally.

She had expected a lifetime had looked forward to a lifetime with her dearest friend.

Fate clearly had other plans.

She Summoned a bottle of brandy and a glass from the kitchen. She'd already consumed a massive amount of wine over the course of the evening, but she didn't care.

The moon was full, and it was high. Its beams danced intermittently across her house, across her lawn oh, this space. She loved this space. The moon shone brightly on the trees in the nearby forest. It was a well-lit night.

A full moon.

She gripped her glass tightly.

A cure for lycanthropy had been released on Hermione and Ron's first anniversary. It had been discovered, papers said, by an anonymous and independent group of researchers on the Continent.

Harry hadn't confirmed Severus' involvement until well after Hugo's birth, but she had known all along. Nearly every Minister in the world had lauded the discovery, praising the group's intellectual prowess and devotion to research "... having traipsed the globe, spending weeks and sometimes months away from their families..." Kingsley had said.

And it had clicked.

Hermione had got drunk that night.

It didn't absolve him by any means, but still...

Andromeda Tonks had thrown a party in Remus' posthumous honor. Teddy had been Hermione did the math ten years old. He was twenty-nine now married to Victoire Weasley-Lupin and with twin daughters to boot.

Everyone had grown up. It had happened slowly and quickly at the same time.

It was a different time, Hermione reflected. There were practically no werewolves in Britain. No significant Dark Threat had risen since Voldemort several imitators had come along, but none had amassed nearly that level of power or done near that level of damage, and all had been quickly vanquished.

Neville was Headmaster. Nearly all of Hermione's Hogwarts professors had retired. Vector still taught Arithmancy, but she was nearing retirement, and her apprentice was ready to take over.

A different time.

She had grown.

Had he?

Well, he was older, too. Older, perhaps wiser. He had apologized, had respected her boundaries, had kept up with her career over the years. Had always respected her wishes. There had been ten years where there was no communication, because she had told him to stop. That period had broken with a congratulatory Patronus on her

promotion to Department Head five years ago.

Cosette rarely mentioned him, even though Hermione knew he was close to their family and had become a trusted confidante of Henri's over the years.

Hermione had only to remember Claire, animated at her childhood birthday parties, where she always had a gift from Severus, where she lamented his absence from her dinner.

That Cosette had let him so close to her family spoke volumes, or so Hermione thought. That Claire held such a tender love for her "Uncle"

Hermione couldn't imagine it, and Cosette made sure to not enable her imagination.

That corner of her heart had been so assiduously locked away, and she had been sure to keep it that way.

Stop it, Hermione!

She would meet him professionally in a month or two. Kingsley demanded it, so she'd go to France to meet with the powerhouse group that had discovered cures, created groundbreaking new potions, and was now dabbling with the properties of Veritaserum.

Severus.

Hermione rose and walked back into her bedchamber. She couldn't think about it. She wouldn't borrow trouble. Trouble would be at her doorstep soon enough.

She breathed in deeply as she turned down the covers.

*

A/N: We are within a few chapters of the end. I hope you are enjoying the story -- reviews are always appreciated. :-)

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

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A/N: I am indebted to Snapeophile for alpha reading and offering critique and suggestion, as well as to Shug for her excellent beta work. Trust me, that woman works hard!

This is the second to last chapter and may have a different feel for reasons which will soon become apparent, though I feel that it fits with the story. I've wanted to write this chapter for a long time. I am content, and I hope you all find it fitting, as well.

*

Two months later February

Nervous. Unsettled. Panicked. Utterly off her rocker.

Hermione couldn't quite describe how she was feeling. No word she could think of hit the mark everything lacked the intensity, the complexity...

Merlin. She had no idea how she was going to get through the next two days.

She'd given Kingsley her schedule... was anticipating the meeting in France...

Severus.

Her new year had wrought a nervous ache in her gut that had intensified with every new week. Every 'x' on the calendar was significant.

She'd alternately worried over the meeting and refused to think about it. Mostly, she worried.

Her detached discussion with Rose had brought her memories back in full, bright, Technicolor force, played out for her conscious mind in vivid colors and costume like a Muggle film.

Her conscience was currently straddling the line between "Get away, this can't be good" and blatant curiosity mixed with intrigue, and somewhere there lay a near visceral need to see him in the flesh, as if to remind herself that she hadn't imagined it all.

It was scary as hell, but she was prepared for it. On a work level, at least. She was prepared for the meeting.

She wasn't prepared for *their* meeting.

How did one honestly prepare for such things?

With decency, perhaps. Dignity. Maturity. Bury the hatchet and all that.

All of that implied calm composure, though, and her heart was practically out of rhythm it was beating so fast.

And there were still forty-eight hours left to go.

She sighed and signed off on another memo.

"Hermione?"

Her head jerked up to her office doorway.

"Kingsley," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you busy?"

"Just memos." She gestured to the small pile next to her.

"The meeting for Thursday has been postponed."

Her stomach plummeted, and her nerves were already so frayed that it felt like lightning had ripped electricity through her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Two members just returned from South America and are ill with an unknown ailment. Magical," he offered. "Apologies and regards were sent, but health must come first. We've agreed to meet later."

"Of course," she said. "Thank you."

He nodded and exited.

Before she could even think, Hermione reached for a piece of parchment and scribbled furiously

13 February 2027

Severus,

Are you well?

-Hermione

She wrote his name at the top of the parchment and sent it flying to her Floo before she could talk herself out of it.

She slumped back in her chair as numbness registered.

*

Three weeks later early March

Rose walked into her flat and threw her coat over the coat rack.

It had been a rough day at work.

She walked down the short hallway and stripped out of her work uniform dark pants, light button-down shirt, white lab coat, solid, dependable black shoes. She tugged a camisole on over her head and pulled her pajama pants up over her bum. She was ready to settle in for the night.

She was in the last term of her internship, thank Merlin. It was March. She'd be done in May.

The fourth of March. It was the fourth of March. James' twenty-third birthday.

Her eyes darkened. She walked into her small kitchen and pulled a Coke out of the refrigerator. Muggle soda and photography those were her weaknesses.

She hopped up on the counter and opened the can over the sink before taking pleasure in the fizzy carbonation that slid down her throat. She looked at the can. It was her favorite soda. James', too.

She sighed. James had been gone for nearly a year now. He was her best friend well, aside from Delilah Finnigan, who had inexplicably decided that dating Hugo would be a good idea.

Hugo had fancied Delilah since he could walk. He was probably in heaven.

Rose rolled her eyes. She wasn't one for romance, for frills and thrills and cheap sex and even cheaper beer. That's what romance was when you were twenty, anyway. Her twenty-first was coming next month, now that she thought about it. She and Delilah had already made plans to go to Paris for the weekend.

In the meantime, it was James' birthday.

"Here's to you, James," she said aloud. "Wherever you are so long as you are well." She raised her glass in the air in a mock toast, which reminded her

She and James had gone out with a huge group of friends in Muggle London for his last birthday. Delilah had been there; so had their cousins Fred, Roxanne, Molly, Lucy, Dominique, and Louis. Zeke Thomas, Adam McCormack a good friend of James, an ex of Rose's. Lots of others. And the Terrible Twosome, of course. She chuckled. James' best friends, both Muggle born, had coordinated the party, even though James could have done it himself. Ryan McBride and Isaac Christensen Rose got along with them both fabulously, though she hadn't seen much of them lately. James and those two had been near inseparable in school, and Ryan and Isaac were practically family.

As such, they'd beat away most potential boyfriends for Rose and Lily, especially Rose, since she was closer to them in age. Not that she'd had an abundance of suitors, Rose thought, smirking, but there had been a few from her house, like Adam. Unfortunately, Isaac had been in Ravenclaw, too, and Rose could have sworn that James was on standby whenever anything happened in the common room. Isaac had sent her out to talk to James in the hall on several occasions... Well, he had tried to, at least.

They'd been an interesting trio still were, come to that. James the Gryffindor, son of the Chosen One, leading the way alongside two Muggle-borns who had had no clue who the hell he was. Well, most people didn't, not at first glance anyway. He wasn't an explicit physical likeness of Harry, not like Al was. James was a blend of both his parents he had Ginny's hazel eyes and a head of chocolate-brown hair that had a reddish tint to it, but it wasn't identifiably *Weasley* like Rose and Lily's hair. And he was tall tall and broad-shouldered, not lean like his dad or stocky like some of his uncles just hard and tall. Rose's dorm mates had *all* had crushes on James at some point. Al was the quiet one, very bright but also shy, whereas James was the social butterfly, friends with everyone, always up for a laugh, a consummate entertainer. Rose shook her head. Could the two of them be any more different?

How had she gotten on this train? Ah. Ryan and Isaac. She sipped more of her soda and glanced over at the pictures on her refrigerator. There was one of her with Ryan

and Isaac on either side on their way into a Weird Sisters reunion concert. Isaac Christensen was the exceptionally gifted, blond-haired and blue-eyed heartbreaker in Ravenclaw, charming, polite the delight of his professors. Ryan McBride was the dark and swarthy, uncannily cunning Slytherin, the more discreet half of the practical jokes he and James were so fond of pulling.

He had been, in fact, the first Muggle-born to be put in Slytherin in over sixty years.

And he was a *most* excellent Slytherin.

Scorpius, she thought, and her eyes narrowed automatically. Scorpius had been at James' party naturally. She'd forgotten about that. He was her age but had been good friends with Ryan and thus had become friends with James. "Why do you have to be friends with *everyone*?" Rose had demanded of him, only to receive laughter and a smile in return. She and the Malfoy heir had entertained a fierce rivalry all through Hogwarts. Scorpius had never been mean, per se, but

Well, their friends and professors had been forced to physically restrain the two from coming to literal blows on numerous occasions, especially during their last few years.

She flushed even thinking about it. He was so bloody *infuriating*.

He was why she'd had a bad day, actually he was also interning to be a mediwizard, and they'd got in a fight over a patient's diagnosis.

He'd been right this time, damn him. It'd been a stupid mistake on her part, and he'd pointed it out in front of everyone.

Well, he had to get his kicks somehow, she thought. She *had* been at the top of her class all through school. He'd been number two and was never going to forgive her for it. Ah, well. His loss.

Smiling smugly, she finished her soda, squeezed the can, and chucked it in the rubbish bin.

Rose hopped off the counter and heard a knock at the door not a second later.

"Coming," she said as she walked to the door. She looked through the peephole and nearly fell over as she jerked the door open and flew smack into James' arms.

"Hey, hey," he chuckled, patting her on the back as he walked them into the flat and kicked the door shut.

Rose was squeezing him as if she were hanging on for dear life.

"You're here," she said as he set her down. Bloody hell, she'd forgotten how tall he was. She looked him over, making sure he was still in one piece, the same as always, and not someone Polyjuiced.

"You are James, aren't you?" she demanded. "Not Ryan or Isaac or Scorpius playing a trick? Tell me something only I would know."

"Your favorite color is blue." He smirked and leaned against the wall.

"Anyone would know that!" she insisted and smacked him on the shoulder. "Come on, something *real* so I know it's actually you."

He sobered.

"You cried yourself to sleep your first night at Hogwarts, and I came and waited outside of Ravenclaw tower and sat with you every night that first week before bed until Flitwick came out and sent me away."

She launched herself at him again, holding him in a fierce hug. "I have missed you so much."

He patted her head. "I'm so sorry, Rose, so sorry that I didn't tell you, but I couldn't "

"It hurt like hell." She released him.

"Forgive me?" he asked.

"You know I already have." She nodded towards the couch, and they went to sit down on opposite ends. "Tell me about where you were," she said, wiping her eyes. "Are... are you back for good or are you leaving again?"

"I'm back for good," he responded, sitting down and propping his feet up on the coffee table as Rose sighed in relief. He looked at her strangely. "You're taking this really well," he said. "I thought I'd have to tie you to a chair and make you listen or browbeat you into submission."

"That's not funny, James," she interrupted.

"Sorry."

She rolled her eyes.

He grinned.

"So where have you been?" she asked, already frustrated with him, which was probably a good sign.

"The Continent, traveling around, playing music."

Her jaw dropped. "You actually " She grinned stupidly, encouraging him to continue.

"Played with a band? Yeah." That grin was still plastered on his face.

"You've always wanted to be a musician."

"I always *have* been a musician," he said. "I've played guitar ever since I borrowed Ryan's first year and "

"You play so beautifully." Rose leaned her head against the couch. "I'm so happy for you."

James paused. "You're seriously not mad? I feel like I'm missing something."

You are. "I have been mad," she said. "I'm very, very hurt that you didn't write." She looked at him accusingly. "But I've had to trust that you would come back and tell me when you were ready." She took a deep breath. "So... who did you play with?" And as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew.

"Isaac on bass and Ryan on drums, of course. We've been a group since Hogwarts."

"You guys always played the balls and in Hogsmeade..." Rose trailed off, remembering.

He nodded. "We've been playing the Muggle and wizard circuits to see where we could make it."

"And?"

"We just got signed to a wizarding label out of Dublin." He grinned. "Which is why I'm back."

"Congratulations." She paused. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked in a small voice.

He sighed. "Honestly, Rose, I don't know. I just wanted a clean break."

"Who knew where you were?" she pressed.

"Ryan and Isaac."

"Aside from your friends."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Teddy and Victoire," he said at last. "Teddy's like my big brother. He's just... there." He gestured with his hands. "I couldn't wouldn't tell Mum or Dad; they just don't get music so much, you know? But Teddy takes me no matter what, and Victoire is a writer, so I figured that they would understand better than anyone. And I didn't want to lose my flat," he continued, "so I offered it to Victoire as writing space. She's been wanting to lease an office now that the twins are older."

Rose nodded. "When Harry went to your landlady, she just said that it had all been taken care of."

"I made her promise under pain of death," James said, smirking.

Rose froze. "James Sirius Potter," she said sternly, "you did *not* have your landlady make an Unbreakable Vow!"

"She likes me," James said cheekily, and Rose groaned. "Oh, come on," he continued. "I couldn't let anyone except Teddy and Victoire know. Dad's name carries a lot of weight."

She put her face in her hands. "Oh, James, there are *rules* about that sort of thing..."

"Stop lecturing me?"

"Fine."

"Agree with me that Dad would have been able to find out."

She looked at him. "Fine." She sighed. "Yes, I know that your dad's name carries a lot of weight."

"It's part of why I left," James said quietly.

"What was?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"Dad the family the whole thing." He raked a hand through his hair. "I've come to better grips with it now, but do you have any idea how hard it is to be the firstborn son of Harry Potter?"

"No," Rose said frankly. "But I have it pretty hard, too."

James nodded. "Dad was the Chosen One, and everyone reveres him and... I was an average student who was always in trouble."

"The trouble was your own damn fault," Rose said primly, and James laughed.

"I know. But I wasn't as smart as you or even Albus, and this sounds awful, but I wasn't as stunning as Victoire or Dominique or Louis "

"They have Veela blood, James. None of us can hold a candle."

"And I wasn't brilliant at Quidditch like Fred and Rox."

"You are smart, James," Rose said firmly. "You are smart and good at Quidditch you're an effing good Keeper and you're good looking, too, or did the massive crowds of girls following you around school somehow escape your attention?"

"I'm not the best at anything," James said, plowing forward, "but the first time I picked up a guitar it was magic." His entire face brightened. "Ryan and Isaac and I all loved music more than anyone in our families, we were all basically self-taught, and no one else we knew really 'got' it. Half the time we were in trouble first year was because we got caught going in and out of the Room of Requirement between jam sessions."

"The Room of Requirement..."

"Our practice space, music room, classroom. We all thought it was fun, though. None of us ever took it seriously as a possible profession wizards really don't take music seriously in school. When we left Hogwarts, we all went into desk jobs that we hated. Then one day Ryan asked what we thought about just taking time off to try and make it as a band, and none of us had taken the idea seriously before, but we were all thinking 'is this it?' It didn't take us long to decide. I couldn't stand any more of Britain," he continued. "Do you ever just get sick of it all?"

"Not really," Rose said. "But I've always been more internally oriented than you."

"Yeah. I wish I was like that sometimes."

Rose snorted. "Shut up."

He grinned at her again. "But back to why I couldn't stand Britain..."

"It's always got to be about you, James," Rose said, only half-serious.

"Rosie." He sighed and raked a hand through his hair again. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry. But Britain was just it was always the same people everywhere, all the time. It wasn't possible to get enough trips in to Muggle London to escape it all. Family was everywhere and friends and people from school and everyone just *thinks* they know about our family "

"That, I understand."

"I know you do," he said quietly. "It just got to the point where I couldn't take it anymore, and there were Ryan and Isaac wanting to tour the Continent. It was a no-brainer. I thought what the hell, let's go. So we did. And soon, I forgot about Britain. Not about the obvious things," he hastened to say, "cause obviously I missed you and I even missed Dad and Mum on occasion. But soon it became about the music, not about escaping. Music isn't taken seriously as a profession in wizarding Britain, but it is over there, and sweet Merlin, Rose, the things we heard in Prague and Venice and Paris and Amsterdam it was fucking amazing. We grew so much. We learned so much, met

so many new people. The attitude is just completely different."

"I can only imagine," Rose said softly, thinking of her mum. "So you have a record deal now that's what it's called, yes?" she asked more brightly.

He nodded. "With a wizarding label, which is what we really wanted, of course. What you can do with magic in a concert venue is just incredible. You'll love it."

"I'll be in the front row." Rose grinned back at him. "I'm so happy for you, James." She reached to take his hand, gave his fingers a squeeze and then let go.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "It's such a... a relief... that you understand and just accept it at face value. I was expecting hell," he said, "so I'm grateful."

"Well, I love you."

"Ditto, Rosie."

She snorted. "Still emotionally incapacitated, I see."

"Well " he started, then stopped himself, and Rose's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"What?" She went on high alert and sat up straight. "Oh my James Potter! Have you *met* someone?"

Merlin, she was practically squealing.

He flushed. "It's not like that "

"Oh, *please* tell me it's like that!" she exclaimed. "You have *never* had a real girlfriend. Your hit and run routine is still legendary at Hogwarts."

He winced. "Ouch. That hurts."

"Well, you deserve it," she said frankly. "You kept a lot of girls on the run, and you treated a lot of them like crap after you got what you came for. Inexplicably, they kept chasing." She shook her head in mild disbelief. If she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she wouldn't have thought it possible for half of Hogwarts' female population to be in love with one boy at the same time.

And James was looking quite smug sitting across from her.

She snorted. Really, he could be infuriating.

He grinned at her. "Yes, they chased. Inexplicably."

"Shut up."

For all James' talk of Bill and Fleur's kids being the best looking in the family, he had been the real heartbreaker... of the men at least; her cousin Molly broke hearts almost as often as she broke noses. But on the Y chromosome end of things, Louis had been noble, Albus was shy, and Fred had been in love with Kyla Lovegood-Thomas since they were kids, regardless of the fact that he was a few years older than the poor girl and that Kyla's older brother Zeke was his best friend.

"Don't kill me over school stuff, Rose," James said, adopting a penitent air. "I was always up front with the girls."

"You weren't," she sighed.

"I was young!" he insisted.

"Pfft."

"I was *seventeen*. I'm older now."

"I know." She relaxed. "So this new woman. Explain."

He chuckled. "You'll meet her tomorrow night."

Rose clapped her hands, joyful. It was about time that he found someone he cared about. "Where are you all playing? When?"

"At Mundy's. It's a bar in Muggle Dublin a small joint, really good for live music. We're playing tomorrow, and I'll invite Mum and Dad and your mum, too."

"Why my mum?" she asked, confused.

He paused for a long moment. "I wasn't at your dad's funeral," he said quietly. "I owe her."

Rose felt like an awful daughter for having forgotten, in her excitement at his return, that James had been absent for the most important family function in years.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Okay," she said. "So... you haven't been to your parents?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

He shook his head. "I just got in."

"And I'm the first person you saw?"

"Yup."

She launched herself across the couch and into his lap. "Thank you. I love you." She got up and walked over to the kitchen. "I'm a bad hostess. Can I get you anything? Coke, water, Guinness?"

"No, actually. I've got to get to my parents' and then to Teddy and Victoire's."

"All right," she said as he came over to hug her.

"Be at the pub around seven," he said.

"That's early."

"We start at eight, but I want to catch a bite to eat with you before. You can yell at Ryan and Isaac about how awful they are for not telling you where I am."

"Yeah." It dawned on her. "I did talk to them way back in September you'd been gone for some time but I saw them in Diagon Alley and I didn't even think "

"Hey, hey, it's done now," James said. "Like I said, though, you can yell at them tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it." She grinned.

"See you tomorrow." He flashed a smile and walked out the door.

*

The next evening Mundy's Pub, Dublin, 7:25

Mundy's was an old family establishment in what had been the height of downtown Dublin in the '50s, and Rose was inordinately pleased when she entered the dark, slightly smoky, inexplicably homey pub, completely decked out in hardwood. The floors, the bar that ran almost the entire length of the back wall, the chairs, the booths (which were accented with threadbare green lining) everything was wood, and it was glorious. One wall was plastered ceiling to floor with photographs of musicians and their performances; there were candles on every table, and the stage had already been set up.

Rose loved places like this atmosphere was a hard commodity to come by. It was expensive as hell. Authentic atmosphere was priceless and extremely rare, but this place had it in spades.

She loved it already.

"Rosie!"

She turned towards James' voice and was surprised at how fast he moved across the pub to her, lifting her off her feet in a bear-tight hug.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she said apologetically.

"It's all right. We've already eaten, though."

"That's fine."

He smiled. "All right, then. Ryan, Isaac get over here!" he called.

Rose saw the others then, and she laughed as they ran over and sandwiched her in a hug.

"Hi, boys," she said.

"James has informed us that you are going to verbally filet us and eat us for dinner," Isaac said, cocking his head in James' direction. "Is that true?"

Rose looked the three of them, conveniently standing in a line, noting the coordinated cuts of their clothes the dark, boot-cut jeans, the tight black shirts, steel-toe boots, and varying levels of gel in hair: Ryan's was spiked, Isaac's slicked back, and James' was tousled.

"I think it's just darling that you all dress to match each other," she said saccharinely and was very pleased with their reaction.

"She's done it at last! She's cut off me balls!" Ryan exclaimed, and Rose and Isaac slugged him.

"Oh, shut your mouth, you old tosser," Rose said, walking arm-in-arm with Ryan and Isaac up towards the stage.

"Old tosser, am I?"

"I am younger," Rose said brightly, batting her eyelashes at him just so.

Ryan broke away, laughing. "Christ, woman. I pity the man you end up with. He'll have absolutely no say in the matter."

"You already scared the men away, Ryan, as you well know."

"Note how she says you and not me," Isaac said, handing Rose a Guinness from the table.

Rose shrugged. "You're just kind."

Isaac grinned and kissed her cheek. "Sorry we took him away for so long."

James glanced at his watch. "Time for sound checks."

"When will everyone else get here?" Rose asked, noting the other patrons mulling around the bar, looking at the stage with curiosity and expectation.

"I told the parents 7:45," James said.

"Claire should be here soon," Isaac said, strapping on his bass.

James flushed, and Ryan chortled. "You'd think he'd never seen a woman before Claire DuBois," he said raucously, and Rose sat down at the front table with *ahud*.

"Rose? Are you all right?" James asked, concerned.

"Yeah," Rose said. "I just drank the Guinness too fast."

"I remember you having a decent tolerance..." Ryan said, and James glared at him. Ryan winked at Rose and twirled a drumstick between his thumb and forefinger. He always had been a show-off.

As the men fiddled with their instruments, amps, chords, and then the sound board, Rose's heart felt like it was racing a mile a minute.

Claire. Claire DuBois.

Henri and Cosette's daughter, unless there was a Claire DuBois she didn't know about, which was unlikely.

Her mother's godchild.

Mum! Mum will be here!

She put her hand on her chest and rubbed, nervous. Her mum had said that Claire had wanted to meet her

Her heart fluttered, and she breathed deeply, feeling old insecurities rise up in her.

I hope she likes me.

Rose pulled her sweater tightly around her and watched her old friends prepare for the show.

*

A few minutes later, the doors opened, and Rose startled as James whipped around on the stage and grinned, his attention riveted elsewhere

Rose turned around in her chair and saw a lithe, black-haired woman walk through the doors, replete in tight jeans and a snug black t-shirt. Merlin, she almost matched the band. Rose tucked an errant curl behind her ear and watched Claire's progress towards the table.

Claire nearly stopped in her tracks as she saw Rose. Her eyes met Rose's with clarity and understanding.

"Rose?" she asked, her voice light and airy.

"Claire," Rose said and rose from her chair as Claire ran towards her and embraced her like a long-lost friend.

Rose was almost a head taller than Claire and thus felt rather masculine while embracing the other woman, but her self-consciousness was overridden by a near-tangible sense of relief

Her first interaction with her mum's old life, she realized.

A new addition to her own life.

Tangible. A bundled Frenchwoman in her arms, looking almost exactly like the woman Rose had pictured laughing side by side her own mum on a rainy day in Paris.

"I have wanted to meet you my whole life," Claire said as Rose released her. "I'm glad that day is here."

Claire took Rose's hand in hers, unwilling to let go, and Rose smiled.

"Umm." James' confused reaction sounded from the microphone. "Do you two "

"I'll tell you later, *ma chere*," Claire said, grinning at him before blowing him a kiss.

James smiled and went back to tuning his guitar, already slipping into another gear.

"He's wrapped up in that guitar," Claire noted, sitting down in the chair next to Rose's.

Rose smiled at her. "Yes."

"One of his more attractive qualities," Claire said with a wink, and Rose winced.

"He's my cousin," she pleaded, and Claire laughed. "I just can't believe how..." Rose continued.

"Crazy, no?" Claire interrupted. She leaned in and put her elbows on the table to speak more intimately. "I didn't recognize his name, but when he started talking about his family and aunt and uncle and especially his cousin Rose..." Her face softened. "I went to talk to *Maman* a while ago. She told me that you... knew about it, now." She paused.

"Mum and I talked last December," Rose said. "I'm so sorry."

Claire waved a hand. "What's done is done. We can't change our past, let alone our mothers' past. We can only adjust our present expectations."

"True. Now, how did you and James meet?" Rose asked, smiling, and then she cut herself off. "I'm sorry! I'm so torn between asking for your life story and asking about how you and "

"The part with James and those two ruffians is shorter," Claire intoned as Rose signaled the bartender for another round. "It's simple. I'm an art student at Vrije a Muggle university in Amsterdam, you know and James and Ryan and Isaac were playing at a local wizarding bar in oh, last October, maybe? and I was there with some of my girlfriends and..." She grinned. "It's clichéd, which my papa loves and my maman hates, but we made eye contact during the last song of the first set." She shrugged. "We talked all during that break and then ended up getting coffee after. I just " She put her hand on Rose's. "I'm sorry, I know I'm being terribly forward and emotional, but I just feel that I've known you my whole life."

Rose smiled back at her. "I want to get to know you. I want to be friends," she said.

"Well, your mum is lovely, and James cannot sing your praises highly enough. He missed you, you know." Her eyes softened. "He just didn't know how to tell you."

Rose nodded. "It's forgiven. James is like my big brother. I love him and I forgive him. Simple."

"Love someone enough and you'll forgive them anything, yes?" Claire asked, and Rose sat back in her chair, stunned.

"What?" Claire asked, concerned. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh, no, no," Rose said quickly. "I just I've said that exact same thing before. With a lot less kindness," she added.

"Well, you have to be careful with who you love," Claire said. "But sometimes the people we love the most hurt us the most, anger us the most not abusive, of course, you have to know the difference, but the people we love often require the most forgiveness. They're the ones we let closest to our heart; they're the ones who can wound us deeply. But it goes both ways. Iron sharpens iron and all that."

"Mm. Good point." Rose sipped her beer and looked up at the stage, at her old friends, smiling and laughing. "It seems like you and James get on well together, based off my first impression... and by how much James and Mum adore you, of course."

"Well, I love them, too."

"We have a few things in common."

"We do." Claire grinned. "Will your mum be here tonight?"

"Yes," Rose said, and Claire squealed with excitement.

"I'm so glad," she said. "I haven't seen her in so long, and it's good to get away from my family wait, that came out wrong. Seeing Hermione is like seeing family, only not my parents."

"Are you at home now?" Rose asked.

Claire nodded. "This is my last semester at school, but one of my uncles has been sick, so I've been visiting a lot."

"It's hard." Rose lowered her eyes.

"You lost your dad last year?" Claire asked quietly.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. *Maman* was going to attend the funeral, but then my grandmother passed away, so yes, family tragedy is awful." Claire looked at her straight on. "Life is hard."

Rose looked at the stage and then at Claire and then heard familiar voices at the door, only to see her mum, Harry, and Ginny come in.

"Life can be good, too," Rose said, smiling, and nodded towards the door.

"Hermione!" Claire exclaimed, bolting out of her chair, running straight at a very surprised Hermione, who immediately enfolded her goddaughter in her arms and kissed her hair.

James had leapt from the stage to greet his parents who were, Rose noted, looking happier than they had in a long time. She saw her mum release Claire, and James took Claire over to meet his parents as Hermione came to sit with her daughter.

"I see you've been talking with Claire," Hermione said, squeezing Rose's shoulder as she sat at the table.

"She's wonderful," Rose said truthfully.

Hermione took Rose's hand. "So are you, my dear. You look lovely tonight," she said.

Rose looked down at her indigo-blue tank top, white cardigan, and gray trousers. "I missed the memo," she said wryly, "everyone's dressed in black well, except Ginny." Ginny was still in her work suit.

"I'm still in my suit, too. It just happens to be black today," Hermione said.

"You look tired, Mum."

"It's been a long day," Hermione said.

Rose and Hermione stood as everyone started pulling more chairs and another table over.

"It's filling up nicely," Ginny said while Harry asked the boys what he could get them from the bar.

Rose heard James' cheeky "Just Guinness, Dad" reply. "We'll raid your liquor cabinet later," he called after his father, laughing, before he turned to everyone sitting at the table. "Or maybe Hermione's you and Ron always had the best booze," he said to her.

Silence descended, and James walked over to Hermione and hugged her tightly. Rose thought she heard him say "I'm sorry," and she knew she heard her mum reply "I understand."

James didn't know that his aunt was the one family member he had who had never questioned his disappearance, had never been angry with him, had never resented him for not attending Ron's funeral.

Harry returned and handed the boys their beverages, and James raised his Guinness in toast. "To Ron," he said, and they all toasted their Ron and drank deeply. There was scarcely a dry eye around the table.

Even Claire, Rose noted, had tears in her eyes.

Ryan downed half his glass and motioned for the boys to go back on the stage to finish the sound check, and Rose looked around saw that, indeed, Mundy's was filling nicely. It was damn near standing room only.

Hermione was talking with Claire, Harry, and Ginny, and while everyone was animated and eager, the air of newness still hung in the air. Rose quietly excused herself to go to the restroom, and as she walked back to the ladies' room she heard a slew of voices and snippets of conversation

"They were great last time "

"They'd *better* be as good as last time"

"*Such* great arses"

and Rose finally reached the ladies, relieved to be free of the noise and commotion.

When she left the ladies' room, the performance had already begun with James welcoming everyone to Mundy's and cracking jokes.

It took Rose the exact length of one of James' raunchier jokes to make it to the front table where her family and Claire were all sitting.

"We'll open up the set with my favorite song, actually," James said, and Ryan and Isaac laughed into their microphones. "It's not one of ours, but it tells the story of how this wonderful woman, Claire" He nodded towards Claire, who blushed prettily "and I met. Sort of." He grinned. "And she's just met my parents" the crowd chuckled along with him "so this is how we're going to start. Our song. For Claire." And then they began to play.

"I took a stroll down the old long walk

Of the day I-ay-I-ay

I met a little girl and we stopped to talk

On a fine soft day I-ay

And I ask you friends, what's a fella to do?

Cause her hair was black and her eyes were blue

And I knew right then, I'd be takin' a whirl

Down the Salthill Prom with a Galway Girl"

Claire was smiling, and Harry patted Ginny's knee as Rose looked at her mum and smiled. James was damn near giddy up on that stage.

"Let's see how suggestive he can say this line," Claire murmured suddenly as James began the second verse.

"We were halfway there when the rain came down

On the day I-ay-I-ay

She asked me up to her flat downtown

On a fine soft day I-ay" he winked

"And I ask you friends, what's a fella to do?

Ah, cause her hair was black and her eyes were blue

So I took her hand, and I gave her a swirl

And I lost my heart to a Galway Girl.

Oh!"

Claire was completely flushed, Rose noted, and she heard Ryan say, "Claire looks a little offended there, James," while they played the bridge.

"Aye," Isaac chimed in. "Claire's not that kind of girl, you know." The crowd laughed. "What really happened was that James was walkin' her home after one of our gigs in Amsterdam, and he tripped over his own two feet and twisted his ankle." The crowd roared. "So Claire, who is this wee pipsqueak of a thing, had to drag him up the stairs by herself and get him on the couch with ice on his foot."

"*Levicorpus*," Claire muttered, and their entire table burst out laughing as James, still grinning, continued the song.

"So when I woke up I was all alone

With a broken heart and a ticket home

And I ask you now, oh what would you do?

Oh, if her hair was black and her eyes were blue

You see, I've traveled around; I've been all over the world

Boys, I've never seen nothin' like a Galway girl!"

Everyone cheered wildly as the boys finished playing out the song, and they quickly launched into their next tune, another cover about an urge for going...

*

Everyone talked and laughed and enjoyed each other's company as well as James, Ryan, and Isaac's company during their breaks. They had incredible stamina, Rose thought. There were clearly many long shows ahead in their future.

*

The band stopped playing around half past eleven, and everyone talked and helped them pack everything up. "My least favorite part of playing *this* sort of venue," James muttered to Rose. "No magic."

*

Around two in the morning, the raucous, jovial, ever-so intoxicated group of Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Rose, Claire, James, Ryan, and Isaac got the boot with the rest of the stragglers.

*

Harry and Ginny went to their home in the countryside and slept like spoons, content and resting easy for the first time in months.

*

Ryan went to Isaac's flat in London and crashed on the sofa while Isaac barely stumbled to the bed.

*

Claire slept nestled in James' arms on his sofa, where they had continued talking after returning to his flat.

*

Rose stripped herself bare and slid in between the cool blue sheets, completely exhausted, pleasantly tipsy, and eager for sleep.

*

Hermione did not sleep, for there was a letter awaiting her when she returned home.

*

Liner Notes:

Please listen to [this version of "Galway Girl"](#) it's my favorite and is the one that I used when writing the scene with the band. Read the scene with the song while listening to see where the interlude dialogue fits in!

Also, the pub is obviously named after the artist.

I sincerely hope that you all enjoyed this chapter.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 21

For nearly thirty years, Hermione and her family have lived in peace and prosperity. When the unexpected occurs, buried secrets of a time long forgotten vie to make themselves known. Confronted by her daughter, Hermione allows herself to remember her past. What she doesn't expect is to come face to face with it. R/Hr, HG/SS. OWL Awards 2008: Fire & Ice, Order of Merlin 3rd class; Tearjerker, Order of Merlin 1st Class; Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 1st Class. SSHG Awards: Best Novel-Length, Round 3.

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JKR. This is all for personal fun and enjoyment.

A/N: Thank you to Psykiapa for talking me through my blockage and to Snapeophile and Shug for your thorough critique, suggestion, and editing. Bless you all.

Hermione tore open the letter that lay perfectly placed in front of her bedroom fireplace.

5 March 2027

Hermione,

I am in full health now – I'm well enough to write, at least. Thank you for your letter. To see your writing in print after so long was heady indeed.

Would you be amenable to meeting before our official meeting? If so, I will be at Crystalline at five o'clock tomorrow evening. Let me assure you, their French Roast is excellent.

Yours,

-SS

Her fingers shook, and she set the letter down on the fireplace mantle as relief swept over her.

He was healthy. He was safe.

He's alive.

And he wanted to see her before the work meeting –

He wanted to see her tomorrow.

Hermione shucked her work clothes off and took a bath before bed, all the while dwelling on his invitation.

He'd be there, regardless of her reply.

But how to reply... such a decision rested on impulse and instinct, not on rational thought.

She could attempt logic and make as detailed a pro/con list as she could think of, but the possibility of seeing him was resting on one night's sleep and half as many waking hours.

She took a draught of Dreamless Sleep, something she'd kept to help her sleep in the days following Ron's death. She needed to rest.

She'd think about it tomorrow.

*

The next day, five o'clock

The sun was setting, and it hid behind clouds near the horizon. It was nearing twilight, a time full of romance and intrigue.

Crystalline was a well known wizarding café near Scarborough. Situated at the top of a cliff, it overlooked the North Sea and was popular not only for its superb coffee but for its stunning vistas and the excellent charm work that afforded comfortable outdoor dining in the midst of a chilly British March.

Hermione's heels clicked gently against the dry cobblestone steps that wound up the rockface. Her fingers clutched at the rail. Even though the staircase was charmed warm and dry, and though it was impossible to fall from it, her fear of heights persisted. She'd forgotten why she didn't come here often: she was always bloody terrified to climb to the top, and she wasn't familiar enough with the café to attempt Apparation.

The light breeze rustled through her hair, which she'd let down. She'd cut it to shoulder length a week or two ago, with a few strands still curving over her shoulder. She'd gone home to freshen up her makeup and fluff her hair, but had stayed in her work clothes – a classic grey pantsuit and an ice blue shell underneath.

Click, click. Her heart raced in time with her steps, and she attempted to mentally strike the fear out of her.

She had spent a good deal of work time thinking about how to approach this meeting and had concluded that she could be scared shitless or she could be fearless.

She'd chosen the latter.

It didn't entirely calm the butterflies, though.

She was meeting him out of curiosity – curiosity and a much dwelled upon need to see him in the flesh. The need stretched taut across her skin.

She was a woman ignited. She hadn't felt this alive in months.

She could do this.

She reached the top of the stairs and was relieved to see the paneled glass that separated her body from the cliff's edge.

"Welcome, Madame," the maitre d' said. "Will you be dining alone or joining a party this evening?"

Her eyes scanned the outdoor patio – the café was all outdoors, even the kitchen – and her eyes finally found who they sought.

"I'm joining someone. Excuse me," she said with a gracious smile.

He was seated at a table right at the cliff's edge. *A symbolic precipice if ever there was one* she thought wryly. He had, thankfully, taken the seat that faced the cliff.

He was in profile, and she quickly noted his black trousers, crisp white-collared shirt, and the silver streaks that radiated from his temples.

When she was barely a meter away, he turned to look at her, and he smiled, and her heart felt like it was going to go out of rhythm it was beating so fast.

"Hermione," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

She ignored the sensation.

"Severus. It's a pleasure," she said, taking the seat across from him.

"I took the liberty of ordering a pot of French Roast for us," he said. "It's excellent."

"So you said in your letter," she said smoothly. "It is good to see that you are well."

He leaned forward and met her eyes for the first time. "It is good to hear your voice," he said.

Fuck. "It's certainly been a while," she said.

"It has." He paused. "I do not think the initial awkwardness can be helped, do you?"

She laughed, somewhat relieved. "No. But I want to talk with you all the same."

"I am pleased to be meeting, as well." He graced her with a smile and strummed his fingers along the table as the waiter arrived with a coffeepot and two cups.

"Do either of you need room for cream?" the waiter asked as he poured the steaming dark roast.

"No," they replied in tandem and smiled at each other.

The waiter nodded and walked away. They both reached for their cups.

"So what have you been doing all these years?" she asked, leaning forward, going on the offensive.

"Cosette didn't tell you?" he asked wryly.

"We don't speak of you," she said softly.

"Ah." He paused. "Well, I sold the apothecary ten years ago or so to devote myself to research and consulting."

"The group?" she asked, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Individual work, for the most part. But the group has done quite a bit of work over the years."

"The cure for lycanthropy, yes, of course. I am remiss for not mentioning it already – it is incredible, Severus, really. Words cannot describe the immensity of your contribution."

"I can assure you that the Galleons can." He sipped from his coffee, keeping his eyes on her the whole time.

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you did it for the money."

"You know me better than that," he murmured, strumming his fingers against his cup. "The challenge was... intoxicating."

"Impossible to resist?" she asked, trying to keep the edge out of her voice.

He noticed it anyway. "We all sacrificed a good deal for that cure," he said.

"And was it worth the sacrifice?"

There was a heavy pause.

"For me, no," he said, and she gaped at him. "I had sacrificed decades of my life and, at the risk of sounding trite, nearly my entire soul for a fight far greater than that cure."

"But you helped people!" she exclaimed.

"It wasn't life or death."

"To some people it was," she said stubbornly.

"I lost the love of my life," he said frankly, looking straight into her eyes. "To say that some people are now more comfortable just doesn't seem a sufficient counterweight."

She struggled for words, reeling from his revelation. "Are you so selfish?"

"I had earned the right to be selfish, and yet I still sacrificed. It's deliciously ironic."

"That sounds rather heroic, Severus." She gave a weak smile.

"Save me the accolades. I took out my selfish behavior on the lamb I was sacrificing."

"I was a lamb?" she asked, amused.

"It sounds more innocent than a lion."

"But decidedly less powerful."

"Or dangerous."

They laughed.

"And what were you doing in South America, if I may ask?" she asked with a smile, desperate to put her emotions back on an even keel.

"Claudette and I were visiting an old friend we met through Pierre – an old herbologist who breeds some of the rarest... potions ingredients... in the world," he said, noting her too-obvious excitement, "and no, I am not going to give the British Ministry my contact information."

"There are women in the group?" Hermione asked, acutely aware of the twisting in her gut. She fortified herself for the inevitable.

He met her stare dead on. "Yes."

"Were there – then?"

"Yes," he replied, not saying more than was necessary, the stubborn arse, and he seemed to be enjoying watching her squirm.

"Fine, I'll ask the question," she said, frustrated, and he waved a hand to cut her off.

"I was never unfaithful."

She paused. "Have you had any... relationships... over these last few years?"

"Yes," he said. "None significant," he added after a moment.

"Claudette –"

"The only romance that ever blossomed in the group was between Claudette and Cynthie, and they've only been together for the last ten years or so."

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling like a complete dunderhead. God, she was supposed to be more grown up than this. "I'm sorry to have pried."

He shrugged. "Romantic attachment is commonplace and is often significant in the human life."

She snorted. "Now who's the philosopher?"

He grinned. "It's nice to know you care, Hermione."

Her heart fluttered. "Yet you don't ask of my..." she started, but then cut herself off.

"I know your life story," he said, leaning back in his seat comfortably. "Hermione Granger," he said, semi-mockingly, which made her laugh, "Married to war hero Ronald Weasley for over twenty years, phenomenal career in the Ministry which culminated in a position as Department Head, two children who are reportedly just as brilliant as she is, and she is still seen in the company of her childhood friends." Severus folded his hands on the table and looked at her seriously. "There is no mystery about you, Hermione, and there is little possibility of the rest of us escaping news of a war hero's life, I assure you," he said sardonically.

"You escaped it," she said.

"I didn't want it."

"I didn't, either."

"Regardless, you lived there, and living in the center of the activity renders you complicit to the consequence. You had to endure, and so you did. Your children sound like they are no worse for the wear," he remarked.

"How do you – Cosette," Hermione finished lamely. "So she told you about me."

"Never in detail, and only because I asked."

"I couldn't ask," she said softly.

"I know," he replied. "I respect your dedication to your family, even though I, of course, wished it otherwise."

"You'd have rather I threw it all away?"

"You did once."

"I had children."

"A fact which I noted and respected. Don't hate a man for harboring feelings for you, Hermione. Consider it a compliment."

She huffed, something she did not know she was still capable of doing.

"I'm sorry," he said lowly, and she met his eyes with understanding.

She breathed deeply. "So am I."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you ready to talk about this?"

"Why else would we be here?" she asked, surprising even herself.

He looked up at her sharply. "I was a bastard," he said flatly. "I didn't treat you as you deserved."

She chuckled. "I know." A wry smile touching her lips. "But I made a cock-up of it, too. I wanted what you wouldn't give – my expectations were unfair and..." She waved a hand. "I ignored your protests. Stupidly, I might add."

"*C'est la vie.*" Severus shrugged.

"I should have left earlier. You could have sent me away. There's blame on both sides."

"I was too bloody selfish to dismiss you. I couldn't if I had tried," he said. "And the blame is mostly mine, though I do appreciate your finally acknowledging that I wasn't"

husband material."

"You weren't."

"And yet you still found a husband. Resourceful, you," he said, arching an eyebrow.

"I won't apologize for Ron."

"I didn't ask you to."

"I loved him."

"But not like you loved me."

"You have some bloody cheek," Hermione said, eyes flaring. "And a lot of nerve."

"Women do not excommunicate their former lovers unless the dam is barely holding the water back," he said, sipping his coffee.

Hermione glared at him. "I wasn't in love with you when I married Ron. You can disabuse yourself of that notion right now."

"Oh, I wouldn't presume. The water was *behind* the dam, after all."

"If you are going to mock me –" She swallowed hard. "I'd have thought you would have matured by now."

"I have. Just seeing if there's still fire in the old girl is all."

She couldn't help but chuckle. He certainly knew how to get a rise out of her. "I have missed you," she said, surprising herself once again.

"You cannot imagine how I have missed you," he said lowly, and she stirred.

"I couldn't write," she said. "You know I couldn't."

He paused. "I do. I've had twenty years to reflect, after all."

"I won't apologize."

"I'm not asking you to. I'd have left me, too."

They chuckled and sipped their coffee.

"Henri helped me... after," he said slowly. "Helped me to see my fault in it."

"You couldn't see what you were then?"

"I turned to drink, not therapy. Henri and Cos had other ideas."

"They didn't want to lose you."

He shrugged. "They've been stuck with me ever since. I consider that sufficient punishment."

She chuckled. "And Claire. Claire was stuck with you, too."

"You are shamelessly digging for information." He sounded amused.

"I know." She grinned. "Oblige me?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "Claire has certainly grown to be a lovely woman. She was a precocious girl and always wore her heart on her sleeve – she still does. She's positively willful in her acceptance of everyone. But then, you know this," he said ruefully.

"I just wanted to see how you talk about her," Hermione said, tracing the rim of her cup with her forefinger. "She's with Harry's son now."

Severus snorted. "I know. The whelp seems to have more of his mother in him than his father, thankfully."

"You've met him?" Hermione asked, stunned.

He nodded. "Claire brought him home for dinner sometime before Christmas. I joined them for dessert at her behest."

Hermione put a hand over her heart. "She cared for your approval?"

He shrugged, and Hermione said, "Oh, Severus."

He grimaced. "Enough sentimentality. Tell me of your children. I hear they're a chip off the old block – yours, that is," he said, and Hermione did so.

*

The candles flickered well into twilight, and Hermione and Severus had spoken of her children and career in exhaustive detail.

"I must ask one more question about your daughter," Severus said, and Hermione nodded in acquiescence. "Who is she named for?" he asked, and her heart dropped.

Severus continued shamelessly. "All Weasley grandchildren are named for someone – Hugo is named for his grandfathers, and Rose's middle name is obviously for the impressive Mrs. Potter."

"Ginny *is* impressive, Severus. Don't tease," Hermione chided him.

"For once, I was being completely serious. She's been revolutionary for the Wizengamot, and that is something they badly needed. But I digress. Who is Rose named for?"

"Beauty and the Beast," Hermione said, and Severus looked at her, disbelieving.

"The story or the book in which it is written?" he asked softly, his eyes boring intently into hers, and she lowered her eyes.

"I've loved the name since I saw it in your grandmother's faerie book. Also, the first time she kicked in the womb was when I was reading Beauty & the Beast."

"You read her the faerie book?" he asked.

"Yes, I did."

He nodded. "I had thought that it was a possibility, when I first heard her name."

"She knows the source of her name, as well," Hermione said slowly, and Severus looked up at her sharply.

"She knows – about –"

"Us. Paris. Everything. Well, not everything," Hermione amended, "but she saw a letter of Ginny's last November, and in December we had a – a long talk. A very long talk."

"How on earth did she see –"

"It was on my vanity," Hermione said, fully cognizant of what she was admitting. "It was barely two weeks after Ron's death," she plowed on, "and I've kept Ginny and Harry's and your letters." She paused. "I kept them in the blue box."

"The one from India?" he murmured.

"Yes. There, I said it. I still thought of you. I told my daughter about you – us." She inhaled. "What do we do now?"

"I'd like to be friends," he said.

"We've never been good at being 'just friends,'" she pointed out.

"We can try," he said. "I am willing to partake of whatever you are willing to share."

She smiled. "My time would be a good start. We should try to get to know each other again."

"Indeed," he said, quirked his lips. "But I've felt quite comfortable tonight, haven't you?"

She let out a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, Severus, how could I?" She shifted in her seat, and her leg brushed against his under the table.

They froze for a split second.

It was enough.

"Hermione," he said urgently, reaching for her hand across the table, and the heat that encompassed her knocked the breath clear out of her.

"Slow," she said.

"Slow," he repeated, withdrawing his hand.

She looked around the café. "They haven't brought the bill."

"It's on my account," he said.

"Was this a date?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He chuckled. "It's a little late for that question, don't you think? Besides, we don't 'date' at our age. We meet old friends for coffee."

"And ex-lovers," she added.

He paused. "That, too." His eyes darkened as he looked at her. "That, too."

She attempted to swallow discreetly.

They talked only a little longer before confessing mutual exhaustion – emotional as well as physical – to the other.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," Severus said wryly as his knees creaked as he stood.

"I'm no spring chicken, myself," Hermione said, brushing a curl behind her ear.

He looked down at her admonishingly.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"I am drinking in the sight of you, living and breathing and warm under my hands." He cupped her face.

She put a palm against his cheek, and the feel of his stubble rasped against her palm and ignited a brushfire that shot up her arm.

He gave her a near-feral grin, and her eyes darkened at the sight. So, he remembered that she preferred a little rasp on his face.

He turned his head and kissed her palm, and she inhaled sharply before withdrawing her hand.

"Beast," she said accusingly, and he laughed.

"You haven't lost your pluck, have you?" he asked.

She grinned at him. "You'll just have to find out."

He smiled. "I look forward to getting to know you again."

"And I, you."

She turned to walk away, sincerely hoping that her adrenaline rush wouldn't plunge her down the stairs, until he called out, "I love you, Hermione."

She whipped around only to see him walking the opposite direction, all tall length and broad shoulders, black trousers and white shirt, black and silver streaked hair, and he disappeared with a crack.

She closed her eyes and smiled.

*

One Year Later

Rose wrapped her coat tighter about her as she walked down the rocky path. It had already been a long morning – she had caught an early Portkey from London to Paris and had met Claire for breakfast at their favorite café. They'd strolled the city streets for a while before Rose had traveled by Floo to the wizarding transportation center in southern France, near Montpellier. She'd taken a cab through the city and was walking the last two miles of her trip on the centuries old, rocky path that curved about the Mediterranean's shore. The breeze coming off the sea was more brisk than she'd anticipated, but the view was breathtaking.

This was her inaugural visit to her mum's new house, the one she shared with a certain Severus Snape. Hermione had broken the news to her friends and family just over a month ago, and it had been met with significant trepidation, with Ginny and Rose proving her principal supporters. She'd retired from the Ministry mere months behind Kingsley, and she was currently consulting. She had gifted their family home to Rose.

Rose hadn't yet moved in – probably wouldn't, come to that. Her flat in London more than met her needs, and she was in the midst of a hectic first year as a full-fledged Mediwitch at St. Mungo's.

Rose breathed deeply. She was acutely aware that she was making this trip alone, had talked about it with Claire that morning, with Delilah the night before. Hugo, for all his good-heartedness, had not taken the news well. Hermione had sat him down and told him in sparse detail of her history with Severus and why they would be cohabitating again, and Hugo had not wanted to hear it. Rose was sure he would come around soon. *He has to*, she thought. *For mum's sake, for my sake, he just has to*. She tried to think of the situation dispassionately; from that point of view, Hugo was a young man who had been very close to his father and who possibly perceived that his mother had "replaced" Ron.

Rose snorted. As if anything could be further from the truth.

Still, it pained her that Hugo had vehemently rebuffed her invitation to join her this morning.

She finished the slow climb to a high hill – presumably the one her mum had told her about in the directions – and she gasped at the view.

The downward descent was considerably steeper than the climb. About half-way down, the old path met with slightly newer cobblestone, which snaked through orchards and gardens, which were black in the dead of winter but which would be sure to bloom brilliantly come May, or even late April.

The path wound to intricate stone steps, which led to the door of the villa. It was an older villa, nineteenth century, her mum had said, and it was just beautiful. Rose crossed her arms over her chest as she stared at the view for a long moment, basking in the peace that pervaded the landscape. The villa, she noted, butted right up against the shoreline of the sea.

She was definitely visiting in the summer.

She let out a deep breath and then started to walk down the hill. There was only a bit of snow on the ground, but it made the path slick. Rose took her wand out of its holster and blasted the snow to the sides of the path. She could make it disappear, but she rather liked snow.

Her mum had said to dress casually, that Severus wouldn't be impressed with finery. Rose had taken the advice to heart and had dressed in jeans and a cream turtleneck. Her black pea-coat and thick dragon hide boots kept her warm.

Rose dearly wanted to make a good impression on Severus. Her mum had assured her that Severus already liked her –*which is completely preposterous, we haven't even met yet!* – but Rose knew she had one thing working in her favor: she was named after his grandmother. And yes, her mother adored her, as well. Those would be reasons enough for a man to be satisfied with his partner's daughter, but still, Rose fretted. Claire had attempted to calm her nerves over coffee. *I'll be fine, I'll be fine, of course I'll be fine*, Rose thought to herself as she continued the slow descent.

She did know one thing – she was damned determined to like Severus. She couldn't recall ever seeing her mum so happy, and for that alone she could kiss the man's feet.

She felt a sudden vibration in her pocket and leapt in surprise. She never carried her cell phone – camera – whatever it was – in her pocket, but she had been trying to travel light today. These new magical phones were all the rage among the young professionals.

She stopped walking and checked to see who was calling. She set her mouth in a grim line as she answered.

"Scorpius Malfoy, this had *better* be important."

"Giving yourself a pep talk, are you?" came the cheeky voice on the other end.

"That's not funny."

"Of course it is. That's the sort of neurotic habit I adore you for."

She tried to keep her lips from quirked in a smile. "Why are you calling?"

"Just seeing how you're doing."

"I was better before."

"I thought I'd give you incentive to make a good first impression."

"What?"

"We're placing bets on how well the meeting goes."

"Who?"

"Everyone."

"*Scorpius* –"

"And by everyone, I mean James, Ryan, Isaac, Zeke, Louis, me, your family members... Merlin, Rose, what do you take me for?"

She groaned. "So you're placing bets. It's not my money, so explain to me why I should care."

"I made a bet that you will do fabulously, and if you do make a good first impression, then we'll go to the restaurant of your choice tomorrow evening."

A stupid grin plastered itself on her face. "Instead of the surprise you said you were going to do?"

"I do know how you hate surprises."

She giggled and then mentally berated herself for giggling. "We'll talk about this tomorrow, then," she said, attempting sternness.

She could practically see him rolling his eyes on the other end. "I'm picking you up at seven. Don't forget."

"I won't." *Click.*

She put the phone back in her pocket and walked hurriedly through the gardens and approached the back – front? – door.

"Rose!" she heard her mother's voice from inside the house and saw her mother bound out the door and down the steps to wrap her up in a tight hug.

"Oh, my darling, I am so glad you're here," Hermione said, kissing Rose's cheek.

"I am, too, Mum," Rose said. She squeezed her mum and let her go.

"Who were you talking to just now?" Hermione asked, linking arms with Rose as they walked up the path.

"Scorpius," Rose said, exasperated, and Hermione laughed.

"You're going out again?" she asked knowingly.

"I've no idea why."

"Some things are better left unexplained," Hermione said as a tall shadow came into view. Rose halted in her tracks.

Both women breathed deeply, and male laughter filled the air as he moved from the shadow into the light of the doorway, and then down the steps and onto the path.

"Like mother, like daughter," Severus said, and Rose tried not to stare.

He was tall, austere, and inordinately striking, with silky black, silver-streaked hair and dark eyes. Lean but muscled, wearing only white and black – just as Rose had pictured him.

"Severus, I would like you to meet my daughter, Rose. Rose, this is Severus Snape," Hermione said, and Rose noted her mother's scrutinizing gaze as the two of them clasped hands.

"Good handshake," Severus noted with a slight wink.

Rose grinned. "Mum taught me well."

"Do you need time to rest, or would you like a house tour?" he inquired.

"A tour would be lovely," Rose said, smiling, as she rubbed her hands together.

"Oh my goodness, what a mother I am, letting us all stand out in the cold," Hermione said, practically shoving Rose and Severus towards the door.

They entered the house, and Rose was immediately struck by the skylights and large windows, by the large fireplace in the center, and by the general openness of the space.

"Is the main floor all one room? Like Nana's?" Rose asked, admiring the room.

"Almost," Hermione said. "It's an old villa, very closed off, but we've already done some work opening the space up."

"Would you like some coffee with your tour?" Severus asked.

"Everything goes better with coffee." Rose smiled at him, and he chuckled.

"You raised her well," Severus said to Hermione. He brushed his hand against her mum's as he walked in what Rose presumed was the direction of the kitchen or the nearest coffeepot.

"Well?" Hermione asked Rose softly.

"I think we're going to like each other," Rose said, squeezing her mum's hand.

"I'm sure," Hermione said. "Besides, you're both stubborn as oxen, and if you want to like each other, you will."

Mother and daughter laughed as Severus levitated three cups of coffee into the room, and they all claimed a cup and commenced on a house tour.

All was well.

More or less, Rose thought, smiling to herself, *which is as much as any of us could ask for.*

She followed her mum and Severus into the next room, watching as they walked hand in hand.

Fin.

Closing Notes:

And so our tale ends. Sage has been a year in the making, and, thrilling as the serial format is, I am inordinately pleased – and proud – to have a finished product. My first completed novel, as it were.

Regarding this chapter specifically, I would like to note that the café is entitled Crystalline in tribute to the Stevie Nicks song "Crystal" which, for me, is the song that defined this story. Whenever I needed to find my way home, "Crystal" was waiting for me.

I would like to acknowledge four wonderful women who have been on board the H.M.S. Sage since the beginning: Psykiapa, Shug, Snapeophile, and Septentrion. Thank you for your time, for your energy, and for offering your skills with editing and translation. Above all, thank you for your friendship. I am indebted to all of you in the most literal sense of the word.

Most of all, thank you to the readers who connected with this story and saw it to its completion. You have blessed me more than you know. Thank you all for your encouragement and trust.

curtain closes