

Archaeologist

by WonderfulChild

During the war, Hermione makes a deal with the devil and finds herself haunted by hidden meanings. Written for the Summer 2007 HG/SS Exchange.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The book store is too warm.

It is half past six and already dark outside, but the store is bright with florescent lighting. Cheerful Christmas music churns out of the speakers, Muggles drift from aisle to aisle browsing for presents, and the aroma of coffee mingles with the scent of new books.

("It's funny that I remember all of these details," she will say to Harry years later when she finally tells him the full story of how she really came by Ravenclaw's staff. "I don't remember noticing them at the time." She will pause, consider the mug of tea Harry has just set down in front of her, and add a teaspoon of sugar. She won't stir it, just stare at it until she can pick up the thread of her thoughts again.

"Oh, and also," she will finally say, "Snape was late.")

Hermione is nervous to the point of feeling ill. She wipes her hands on her jeans, fingers her wand hidden up her sleeve, nibbles her lip. Sweat is trickling down the middle of her back as she hovers in the back of the huge chain book store on Charing Cross Road, at the junction of the new age and psychology shelves, waiting. Waiting for a murderer and a traitor. Waiting possibly for her own death or capture.

She wipes at a droplet of sweat sliding down the side of her face and wishes someone would turn down the heat.

("But why did you go?" Harry will ask, probably because the first time he asked it several years before, she'd refused to answer.

Hermione will stare into her cup of tea, nibble on her lower lip, and finally shrug. "I had to know," she will say.

Harry will frown and stare at her with concern. "Had to know what?"

She will merely shrug again. "I don't know, but whatever it was, I had to know.")

She is mad for being here, but the note... the note was too tempting. It came to her unsigned through the Muggle post bearing no return address or readable postmark.

The spiky writing was easily recognizable, and instead of showing it to Harry and Ron or burning it on the spot like she probably should have, she read it, agreeing to a meeting because the note contained an offer of an item that could aid Harry in the war.

She knows this is a mistake. It has to be. What was she thinking? She should leave, now, before he gets here, before he can

"You're alone, I hope."

The voice makes her jump. She whirls, wand out, hand shaking, regretting that she didn't retreat faster. Snape is behind her, thin to the point of gauntness, eyes shadowed, wearing a Muggle coat that doesn't look quite right because it's been transfigured from wizard robes.

He doesn't seem terribly concerned that there is a wand aimed in his direction. He merely fixes her with that expression of mild disgust usually reserved for non-Slytherin students and snaps, "Hide your wand, you idiot girl. There are rules about revealing magic in front of Muggles."

Poised on the edge of blind panic, Hermione hesitates; Snape raises one eyebrow in a way that seems to berate her not only her stupidity but for her very existence as well.

In the next aisle over, she hears the low murmur of voices approaching, one person complaining about a mobile bill and the other commiserating. Conditioning born from half a dozen years in the wizarding world finally prompts her to obey. She drops her hand to her side, keeping her wand hidden behind her leg just in case self-preservation becomes a higher priority than secrecy.

Then Snape takes out his own wand.

Hermione flinches, nearly retreats, but Snape flicks his wand only once, and a bubble of silence descends around them.

The wand disappears again. Snape crosses his arms and glares down his nose at her, as if they are in class and he is trying to find fault with her flawlessly brewed potion. "Now, Granger, answer my question. Did you come alone?"

Hermione bites her bottom lip nervously and nods. "Yes."

"Then let's be done with this quickly. I can give you the location of something Potter desperately wants, but in exchange, you must do something for me."

Hermione eyes him suspiciously. If he is talking about a Horcrux... well, even the possibility calms her enough to focus on the matter at hand, though a healthy fear hovers just within her reach. "What kind of magical item?"

"The kind that the Dark Lord has gone out of his way to protect to the point of obsession. A staff of some sort."

A staff. Hermione's stomach twists not in fear, but in excitement. Ravenclaw's staff is the last missing possession of the four founders, the one Harry suspects is a Horcrux. And if Snape is offering to give it to them...

This is too good to be true. "Why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"You killed the Headmaster. You ran off with Draco and the Death Eaters. You're one of *them*." She spits out the last word with a viciousness she didn't possess six months ago. But then, six months ago, she had yet to sit through Dumbledore's funeral. Six months ago, she hadn't seen a man eviscerated by a silent spell or seen her best friend hardened into someone she could barely recognize or had to choose between protecting a friend or protecting a Horcrux during a skirmish with Death Eaters.

Six months ago, she hadn't known the true meaning of war.

Snape gives her a smile. It is sharp and predatory, full of venom, and Hermione very much wants to run. "Indeed. Yet here you are, meeting me in the back of a Muggle book store, where I could kill you without a witness, Muggle or otherwise,"

She shifts uncomfortably, swallows, resists the urge to raise her wand, but manages to retain some dignity by not replying. Snape sees that he is in control of their meeting now and takes a step forward. Hermione automatically takes a step back.

Snape tilts his head to the side, snares her with his cold black eyes. "Well, Miss Granger?"

She wonders what he could possibly want in exchange, her mind dancing around possibilities she would have never imaged before the night of Dumbledore's murder. "What exactly is it that you want?"

"I want you to fetch something from my rooms at Hogwarts. A photograph."

"A photograph?" She hates that she sounds so surprised. A dark artifact, a dark book, even something as prosaic as a bag of money, those would all make sense. But a photograph? That seems so... anticlimactic.

"Yes."

"Just a photograph?"

The corners of his mouth turn down with impatience, and his eyes narrow in that way that always promised multiple and unpleasant detentions. "Did I stutter?"

Hermione shakes her head, despite knowing that the question is entirely rhetorical. There is a certain amount of shame in being terrified of him, but she knows that if she wasn't afraid, she would be incredibly stupid. "So, um, the location of this magical item Voldemort wants to protect in exchange for a photograph?"

"No, a photograph in exchange for a magical item. You will bring me the former before I give you the latter."

"If I bring you the photograph first, there's no reason for you to give me the location of the magical item. In fact, there's no reason for you to let me live."

"That is true. I suppose that you must decide whether it is worth the risk of trusting me. If it isn't, I'll Obliviate you and obtain what I want by other, more destructive means."

Hermione nibbles her lip, weighs her options. Yes, she is probably stupid and reckless beyond the telling, but if Snape is speaking the truth and can give them Ravenclaw's staff, the risk is more than worth it. But he is also a murderer and a traitor, and this could be an elaborate trap for her and ultimately for Harry, and there are so, so many reasons why she shouldn't be doing this. And yet...

Snape sighs and shifts impatiently. "If I had known that offering you a means to destroy the Dark Lord would have rendered you mute, I would have tried this years ago. Do you want the staff or not?"

"Yes!" she nearly shouts, blushing with the knowledge of how desperate she sounds. "All right. I want it. But aside from the complications of getting into Hogwarts, the Aurors have warded your rooms. They are the only ones permitted in there now."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Despite your beliefs to the contrary, Miss Granger, some of us are as capable of forethought as you are." He pulls a piece of parchment from the pocket of his transfigured robes and offers it to her. "This is a list of likely wards the Aurors used and their counter spells. You will find what you need on that list."

Hermione all but snatches it from his hand like a starving and terrified animal taking a scrap of food from the hand of a human. She opens it, scans the list quickly, and says, "Are you sure? What do I do if none of these work?"

Snape eyes her, that faint look of disgust settling on his face again. "Your problem, Miss Granger, and Potter's as well, is that you think you know more than the adults. It is that more than anything else that has put us all in our untenable positions. Those counter spells *will* work."

He tugs briefly at his coat, reminding her of Crookshanks setting his fur straight after he has been touched without permission. "The photograph in question is in a silver frame on the mantle. It is the only photograph, so there should be no confusion. Mail a note to the address I've written on the top of that list when you have it. I'll arrange another meeting then."

Hermione nods, slips the list into her pocket. Snape looks her over once, the corner of his mouth twisting into a sneer, his eyes full of loathing, then pivots on his heel, his transfigured coat whipping behind him, and strides away from her.

She watches him go and wonders if this is what it feels like to make a deal with the devil.

It is easier than she expects to get into Snape's rooms.

("To the point of being irritating, actually," she will tell Harry in annoyance. "A week's worth of worrying and sleepless nights, the carefully thought out lies and cover stories, and it was all just so easy. I know I shouldn't complain, but it's things like that that make you wonder about fate.")

Harry will watch her with concern, but she will not notice.)

To escape the boys, all she has to do is put the words "library" and "research" in the same sentence, and they all but Apparate out of her presence. McGonagall is more than happy to allow her access to the Hogwarts library, though Hermione first has to endure a ten minute lecture on why it is so dangerous for the three of them to be off to Merlin knew where doing Merlin knew what. Madam Pince is a bit harder; Hermione has to wait for her to stop hovering and watching for any untoward behavior towards her books, but she finally disappears into her office, and Hermione escapes into the dungeons under Harry's Invisibility Cloak, which she had nicked from his trunk that morning.

(Harry will frown at that bit of information and mutter something about never letting her research alone ever again, but Hermione will merely ignore him and keep talking.)

It's even easy to get through the warding. Only three from Snape's long list of possible wards are protecting the room, and none of them are terribly difficult to disable. All that is left to do is to open the door and step inside. She hesitates, tightens her grip on her wand, wonders why she's never noticed how warm the Hogwarts Dungeons are before. Then taking a deep breath, she raises her wand and pushes the door open.

Six months of hiding and running has taught her the sort of caution Mad Eye Moody would approve of, and she enters the living area, an Expelliarmus on the tip of her tongue, expecting something, anything an Auror, a Death Eater, an ambush. But there is nothing and no one.

The room is as she remembers it from the night Dumbledore was murdered when she and Luna hurried in to look after poor Professor Flitwick, unconscious on the floor. Thick dust covers everything even the house-elves have been prevented from coming in to clean and it seems that the Aurors have left everything as it was when Snape left. The pair of reading chairs by the hearth, the desk, the overloaded bookshelves have not been moved, and as Hermione moves through the room, she realizes that little else has either. An open decanter sits on a side table, the alcohol it once contained now dried into a dark brown resin, a book lies open to page 394 on the floor next to one of the reading chairs, a stack of defense essays covered in scathing, blood-red comments still sit on the desk.

Perhaps the Aurors expected to find hidden meanings in the folds of teaching robes tossed casually over the back of a chair or in the bundle of baby's breath drying over the mantle, now too brittle and useless for potions, but Hermione sees this room for what it really is: a time capsule, a tomb, so still, so quiet the moments before Dumbledore's murder preserved in this sealed off room. She feels like she has fallen back in time like she could step back into the hallway and find herself hiding with Luna, could climb the stairs back to the main hall and find Death Eaters casting curses at students, could find Harry on the tower, watching Dumbledore fall.

"Enough of this," she chides herself. "Get the photograph and get out of here."

She hurries to the mantle and finds the photograph in its silver frame. It is an old Muggle photograph with still figures and the odd Technicolor hues of early color film; a less than attractive woman and a little boy are standing side by side in front of a dilapidated brick house, scowling into the camera. Neither of them appear to be particularly happy, and she can see a disembodied hand on the little boy's left shoulder. She realizes that the picture has been folded to cut out a third person, perhaps the father. Without a doubt, the picture she holds in her hands is a photograph of a very young Severus Snape and his mother Eileen, and she has the sudden and nearly irrepressible desire to open the back and have a look at the man.

Even though she is shaking with fear and anxiety, even though there are better things to be doing than satisfying her curiosity, she flips over the frame and moves the clasps. The back panel comes off easily, and she blinks in surprise as several pieces of paper slide out and fall to the floor.

(She will tell Harry that she wishes she hadn't given into her impulse, to that desire to see the picture in full, to include Tobias Snape in a photograph that Snape clearly wished to remove him from because the papers she found behind the picture will be the foundation of an obsession that will last nearly a decade.)

Hermione kneels down to collect them, her curiosity stirred even further as she picks them up one by one and examines them, discovering that they include a folded piece of parchment, a scrap of paper with a series of meaningless numbers, letters and words scrawled on it, and a five pound note.

She stays on the floor for a long time, papers in hand, her curiosity warring with decency. These are private things that belong to Snape; she has no right to look at them, but he is a traitor, and these three pieces of paper are worth enough to Snape that he is in theory exchanging them for a Horcrux.

Curiosity finally wins; what is so important about this photograph and these pieces of paper that Snape is willing to betray his master for them? It isn't like Snape will ever know she looked, and even if he does, well, she'll deal with it when and if she has to. Besides, she tells herself, it could be something dangerous and important to the war. All's fair and all that.

("I mean, what would you have done?" she will ask Harry because guilt at reading someone's secret correspondence a traitor's correspondence no less is still churning in her gut even after all of these years and for no good reason she can fully understand.

Harry will shrug. "I would have read them, too.")

Hermione settles more comfortably on the floor and unfolds the parchment. It is a letter of some kind and looks as if it had been crumpled up at some point. The wrinkles have been smoothed out, but faint lines are still visible, marbling the paper like veins. It has been read and reread, if the threadbare and dirty creases were any indication, and despite how rude Hermione feels, her curiosity won't allow her to put it away without reading it.

Dear Severus, it says, Please reconsider visiting this Lord Voldemort with Lucius Malfoy during the next Hogsmeade weekend. I know that young men your age desire to fit in with your social peers, but I fear this path will only lead to heartbreak, especially if the Malfoys are involved. They are poison, my darling. Poison. Please believe me when I say that they will never, ever accept you as an equal, no matter how often they express their friendship.

And this Lord Voldemort, this unknown wizard with his affected Muggle title, can be no better if Abraxas and his son are toadying for him. His political and social agenda looks unfavorably on Muggles and Muggle-borns, and I do not wish to see you fall into the trap of prejudice against ancestry and blood when people offer so many other reasons for you to hate.

But even more so, allow me to remind you that you are a Prince. A Prince, Severus, no matter the blood and name you received from father. Princes do not bow. We do not kneel. We take the bitter pill life forces down our throats, and we walk with our heads held high. We do not take what others may offer in exchange for our pride, and I am so very afraid of what this Voldemort person will offer you. There are whispers and rumors, none of which I find reassuring, and please, my darling, please do not forget that you are a Prince.

Write me soon.

Love, Mum

P.S. I have included five pounds. Exchange it and buy something for yourself on your next trip to Hogsmeade. Don't tell your father!

Hermione folds the letter up, inexplicably disturbed that Snape never exchanged the five pound note.

The scrap of parchment looks newer, and a string of numbers and letters and a few words are scrawled across it: 2P, 5A, 3A, Benton, Leo et Serpens. It is meaningless to Hermione, but she can feel the meaning in the nonsensical string of letters and numbers and can, in fact, feel it in the creases of the letter, in the five pound note and the photograph folded to hide the man who must be Tobias Snape it is there, hiding, waiting for someone to decode it.

She knows then what she has to do.

Once she manages to explain her disappearance to McGonagall and escape Hogwarts, she photocopies everything the letter, the scrap of paper, the photograph of Snape and his parents, even the five pound note, back and front and keeps them close by for the next nine years, four months, and eight days.

There are hidden meanings, and she will find them.

Her next meeting with Snape is in a Muggle book store, a different chain in a different part of London, but still very much the same: cheerful Christmas music, browsing Muggles, the aroma of coffee and books.

But Snape is not late this time. He is, in fact, already waiting for her, snow melting on the shoulders of his coat.

"Do you have it?" he says as soon as he has cast his Silencing Spell.

"Yes." Hermione pulls the picture frame from her pocket. In her other pocket are the photocopies because she is afraid Harry and Ron will find them if she hides them in her things, and of course, she is careful not to think about it, lest he sees it in her eyes.

Snape reaches out for it, and in a fit of what can only be a reckless sort of madness, she suddenly jerks her hand back. Snape gives her a look that would melt metal, so hateful that it nearly proves then and there that he is a Death Eater. "My photograph, Granger."

She shakes her head. She is trembling, utterly terrified, and barely able to breathe, but she needs to have some answers. But she doesn't even know the question until she blurts out, "Why did you do it?"

Snape's eyes narrow. "Why did I do *what*, Granger?"

"Why did you kill Professor Dumbledore?"

The look Snape gives her makes her take a step back; it is a horrible expression, twisted and murderous and nearly unhinged. It is as if she is looking at a dog, straining at the end of its chain, hackles raised, teeth bared, ready to tear out her throat. For a moment Hermione is really and truly in fear for her life.

And then, surprisingly, Snape answers her.

"For the same reason you're making deals with the devil, Granger," he snarled. "There was nothing else I could have done. Now. Give. Me. My. Photograph."

("I think about that a lot, you know, what Snape said." Hermione will pause again, barely aware of the mug of tea cooling under her fingers or the tick of the clock down the hall or the intensity of Harry's expression of curiosity. "It didn't make sense at the time. I did it to help you and protect you, to possibly end the war, and I thought at the time maybe he meant he did it to protect Draco or Voldemort or whomever, but I'm not so sure anymore.")

"Who then?"

"I don't know, but I've started to wonder if maybe he wasn't protecting himself.")

Hermione swallows back the lump of fear in her throat and slowly holds out the photograph, hoping that he won't curse her in return. As soon as Snape sees that she is handing it over, his rabid dog demeanor changes instantaneously, shifting into something like relief as he snatches the frame from her hands.

And she will remember that moment forever: the cheerful grating of Christmas music around them, the chatter of people three aisles over, the drops of melted snow on Snape's shoulder, the clumpy, unwashed appearance of his hair, the brown potions stains on his long fingers, and that smile as he brushed his thumb gently over the face of Eileen Snape.

("That smile," Hermione will say with a sigh. "I must have reinterpreted that little upward twist of his lips in a dozen different ways since that night relief, malicious satisfaction, smug overconfidence, nostalgia. But when it was actually happening, it looked like...")

She will trail off, thinking about that moment, wondering if she should reinterpret that smile again.

"Like what?" Harry will ask, impatient with her silence.

"Love.")

After that, her memory blurs: another piece of paper exchanges hands a map to the supposed Horcrux Snape sneers something caustic in her general direction as he leaves, his coat flicking against the shelves as he turns the corner and is gone. There is a walk to the Tube station, a fight with Harry and Ron about whether they should trust the directions to the Horcrux that came to them in the post from an unknown source, a near death experience, a broken arm retrieving it, and the inhuman screech when they throw the staff on a bonfire and burn out the fragment of Voldemort's soul.

("And you know what happens after that," Hermione will say. "There were battles and deaths and more battles. Snape supposedly died in the battle at Cardiff, and you nearly died defeating Voldemort. The war ended, or maybe it never ended, depending your point of view, and life went on. Since Snape was dead, I cast a Paper-Protection Spell on the photocopies and hid them under my mattress because I thought that I would never find those hidden meanings. Occasionally I would take them out and mull over them. Sometimes I even did a bit of research just in case, but mostly they stayed under my mattress.")

"What caused you to start researching properly, then?"

"You already know, Harry."

"Yeah. I do." Harry will sigh, refusing to meet her eyes. "McGonagall."

Hermione will nod in agreement. "McGonagall.")

"Hermione?"

Hermione buries her head against her knees and shuts her eyes, hoping Harry and Ron will go away. She hears them in the kitchen, clomping around, whispering together about how she's missed McGonagall's funeral, worries over whether she is ill, wondering how long it's been since she's done the washing up.

She should have expected them, considering that she's skipped the wake and the Order gatherings. She isn't sleeping, and she can see McGonagall dying in her mind's eye the blood pooling beneath her skin, then seeping out through every pore, every tear duct, through any escape route it can manage. She didn't witness it herself, but she heard about it in detail from Tonks over a pint at the Leaky Cauldron. And there are two others who died in the same way, both Wizengamot members associated with Minerva, and Hermione is certain that it is her fault.

She was, after all, the one who fetched the details for the Exsanguis Potion from Snape's rooms four years ago now.

"Oh, Hermione, there you are." It is Ron, calling out to her from the hallway, and he sounds relieved. At least he does until he sees her living room. "Are you blimey!"

Hermione looks up. Harry and Ron are in the doorway, staring at her lounge in awe, their eyes roaming over her three years of on-again, off-again research arrayed in a sunburst pattern across the floor.

("I remember that," Harry will say. "It was terrifying, Hermione. You had those papers laid out on your floor, and it was obvious you hadn't slept in days.")

"I know. But I thought it was my fault. I thought... well, you know what I thought, and I'm not entirely certain that I was wrong.")

"Hermione," Harry says, "what's going on?"

"There are hidden meanings." She wonders briefly if she sounds lucid to them. Probably not. "I have to find them."

"Hidden meanings?"

Hermione nods. "Look. Here's the letter from Snape's mum. There was a five pound note with it." She hands Harry the photocopy of Eileen Snape's letter, then reaches over a stack of notes for the back issue of the *Daily Prophet* Molly Weasley let her have. "I did some research. Eileen Snape was murdered by her husband in late April of 1976. He pushed her down the stairs; she broke her neck. Snape was still at school and never saw her again. Was it over the five pounds Eileen sent to Snape? Maybe. And maybe that's why he kept it. Or maybe he kept it because he didn't have anything else to remember her by."

The boys are exchanging looks of bewilderment and concern. They think she's mad. And that's okay. Maybe she is.

Hermione crawls the other way, grabbing the photocopy of the scrap of paper she once thought was covered in gibberish. She hands it to Ron. "2P, 5A, 3A, Benton, Leo et Serpens, right? Look! Look here." She picks up the thick tome to her left. "*A Compendium of Obscure Potions* by Eoin Benton. Benton! Page two hundred twelve. 'The Exsanguis potion is brewed when the constellation Leo rises in the night sky and is completed when the constellation Serpens sets.' Leo et Serpens. Sources say that three of the ingredients are pennyroyal, asphodel, and asafetida. 2P, 5A, 3A."

"Hermione, wait," Harry says before she can show them more evidence. He has the letter from Eileen Snape in his hand, and Ron is showing him the photocopy of the scrap of paper, and she remembers that they don't know about her meetings with Snape. They think the directions to Ravenclaw's staff came from an anonymous source. "What are these? Where did you get them?"

She hesitates, glancing from one to the other, and says, "I retrieved a picture from Snape's rooms in exchange for the map to Ravenclaw's staff."

It is clear that the boys haven't quite caught on yet; they are both watching her with identical looks of consternation.

"Who did you exchange it with?" Ron asks.

"With Snape."

The explosion is of course magnificent. Ron goes a shade of scarlet rarely seen on a human being. "Are you mad? What did you do that for? You could have been killed. It could have been a trap, or they could have dragged you off to do Death Eater things to you."

Once upon a time, Hermione would have leapt to her feet and shouted back, but Ron's temper tantrum is inconsequential in the face of her immense mistake, and she can't be bothered with him. She just ignores him, begins putting her papers in order, waiting for him to lose his steam.

Ron suddenly snatches the Benton text out of her hand. "You're not even listening to me, are you?"

"Ron, leave her alone." Harry's voice is gentle, but firm. He is across the room, crouched over her notes on known Death Eater movements she's kept since the war. He's studying her thoughtfully, his expression wary and concerned. "Hermione, are you saying that Snape killed the Wizengamot members? Because he's dead. Kingsley Shacklebolt cast the Killing Curse on him during that battle in Cardiff."

"But the bodies were destroyed in the fire, so we can't be sure of that."

"Well, no, but "

"Harry, look at the evidence." She gestures insistently at the sunburst of incriminating paperwork on the floor. "Look! And even if it wasn't him, he must have given the measurements to someone else."

Ron makes a sound of disgust and plops down on her sofa, tossing the book on the cushion next to him. "You've gone mad. When was the last time you slept?"

Hermione looks between them both, realizing that they weren't listening, which is ironic, considering that before the war they would have happily agreed that Snape was the cause of every war, murder, and political assassination since the dawn of time. "Harry, you don't understand "

"Look, if you're saying Snape is alive, well, I hope he's hidden well and good, because if I find him, I'll kill him. But I think he's dead. Besides, McGonagall and those other Wizengamot members were killed by a curse."

Hope wells up deep inside of her. Maybe it wasn't her fault after all. "Are you sure?"

Harry nods. "Yeah. Mad-Eye Moody confirmed it. That means McGonagall's death isn't your fault, okay?"

Hermione stares at him, then drops her eyes to the three days of work spread out in front of her. She suddenly wants them to leave, wants to sleep, wants to cry.

"Okay, Hermione?" The tone of Harry's voice tells her that if she doesn't say okay, they will probably be taking her to St. Mungo's in short order.

She nods, defeated. "Okay."

Harry stands and comes over to her, helps her to her feet. "Come on. Let's get you into the shower. We'll yell at you about going to see Snape alone tomorrow."

("We never did get a chance to yell at you properly," Harry will say, half in jest. "Funny, that.")

"You may get your chance," Hermione will reply in all seriousness. "I'm not done with this story, yet.")

Harry herds her into the bathroom, even goes so far as to run the faucet for her before he closes the door, trapping her inside. She stands in front of the mirror for a long time, staring at her reflection. Her hair is wild and matted. Dark circles ring her bloodshot eyes. The weight of guilt still weighs on her heart, and even if that potion didn't kill McGonagall, she knows that there is something important in those papers, in everything that's happened; there are hidden meanings, and only she seems to be aware that they exist.

Outside the bathroom door, the boys are talking and moving things around, probably intentionally destroying her research in the process.

"Funny, isn't it?" Ron says, and the way he says it makes her think that that they assume she can't hear them.

"What?" Harry says.

"Through the whole war, all that death and destruction, she was like a rock, and it's a scrap of paper with gibberish on it that makes her snap."

After that, she keeps her search for meanings a secret.

A year later she moves her search into the Muggle world for no reason she can really pinpoint. Snape is a half-blood, so it isn't so unreasonable to think that her hidden meanings are Muggle in nature. She puts in hours and hours researching in Muggle libraries, searching the internet for meanings to the mysterious letters, numbers, and words on the scrap of paper.

She discovers that there are hundreds of businesses and street names and people all over the world that that combination could refer to. There are over 170 Leo Bentons in the world and six Benton Leos. There are a multitude of Benton streets, roads, lanes, and boulevards throughout Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and the States. There are also several corners where streets by the name of Benton, Leo, and Serpens meet in various combinations. There is a small clothing company in Brisbane called Leo and Serpens. There is also a shipping company in Scotland and a bed and breakfast in New Zealand by the same name. There is a steak house in Charleston called Leo Benton's, fourteen towns in North America alone named Benton, and there are more. So many more. Toronto, the Virgin Islands, even Ibiza and Singapore and Rio de Janeiro have places and streets and people that could fit.

There are other options, too, options to which she has no access. Passwords on bank accounts, the combination for a lock, or other things she isn't creative enough to imagine, so she sticks to what she knows, relies on instinct and a few hours every now and then with her old Arithmancy books to guide her in her search.

Harry and Ron are suspicious of her, and from time to time they come by her flat unexpectedly, as if they think they will catch her with her hair in disarray and her research spread out in front of her. But she's smarter than that, not willing to let them catch her again, to call her mad, and she's more careful about where she keeps her research.

("Where did you keep it?" Harry will ask, obviously curious about how.

"At my parents'," she will say.

Harry will rub the scar on his forehead, sigh in exasperation, and say, "We didn't think to look there."

"Of course you didn't," Hermione will reply with a tiny smile.)

She never really thinks about the fact that at some point she began actively hunting for a man the Ministry has declared dead, but it's an obsession, and probably a bizarre form of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. The specter of Minerva McGonagall's death refuses to leave her, refuses to let her rest. No, not her death really, more Hermione's potential culpability in her death, in the death of others, in the course of the entire war. Because in the end, she never knew what Snape wanted that photograph for, and although she thinks there were probably sentimental reasons, she suspects that there was more to it.

Those hidden meanings seem to taunt her with answers to questions she doesn't even know. If she can figure them out, she feels like she will be able to understand why Harry had to endure his role as savior of the wizarding world, why Dumbledore and McGonagall and three of Ron's brothers and Harry's parents and so many others had to die, why the war even happened in the first place.

The years pass. She interprets and reinterprets the memory of Snape's smile sometimes on an hourly basis; she researches and reads, assembles and reassembles her information. She is like an archaeologist, diligent, meticulous, trying to piece together the entirety of another's existence with a few pottery shards and a toothbrush, building meaning from the detritus of someone else's life.

She doesn't think she will ever make any headway. Then one day, she is in Lavender Brown's new travel agency in Diagon Alley, planning a weekend trip with Ginny, when on a whim she picks up a brochure for a trip to the West Coast of the United States and sees what she's been missing all along.

Two days later, she cancels her trip with Ginny and takes two Portkeys to the States, Apparating five times from New York to Los Angeles, and another three times to Seattle, Washington.

2P, 5A, 3A.

They aren't potion measurements, passwords, or lock combinations.

They're directions.

Seattle is cold and dreary.

Hermione walks through the wizarding district, shivering in her coat. It is on the outskirts of the city, surprisingly modern and clean and quite unlike the wizarding areas of home. The streets are straight, the pavements wide, the buildings of sturdy Muggle construction. Shops and restaurants line the streets; the upper floors of the buildings seem to be flats along condominium style lines. It could have easily been a Muggle street, but for the magical items in the shop windows and the pair of elderly witches window shopping in their robes and pointy hats. Everyone else in the street wears Muggle clothing, a few have mobiles, and one woman is loudly discussing her son's desire to play American football rather than Quidditch.

Another time, she might have enjoyed the differences, the foreign accents, the way the American wizards seem to have blended much more easily with the Muggle world. But her stomach is in knots as she paces along the street, her eyes sliding uneasily from one shop sign to the next, until she sees what she's looking for.

She stops and stares at it from across the street. Leo et Serpens Apothecary at 253 Benton Street, two Portkeys, and eight Apparitions away from London. It is sandwiched between a Quidditch supply store and some kind of restaurant, and it is the only place she has ever found that matches all of the elements on that scrap of paper.

She is thrilled. She is terrified. She wants to rush in and demand answers. She wants to run the other way.

She is also wasting time, so after taking a deep breath and checking that her wand is easily assessable, she crosses the street and steps inside.

The store is brightly lit, with gleaming wood floors and white shelving, but otherwise resembles the apothecary in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade narrow aisles, jars and mysterious plants and insect parts crammed together on shelves, the heady, pungent smell of many potions ingredients shoved together into too small a place. There is a woman at the counter in her late thirties with auburn hair pulled back into a messy twist. She is wearing a Muggle button down and jeans, but there is a wand poking out of her back pocket. She greets Hermione with a friendly smile and an invitation to ask if she needs any help.

Hermione nods and thanks her, but brushes off her offer to help. Instead she walks through the aisles, her eyes skittering anxiously over the bottles with red plastic labels made with a Muggle label maker, expecting Snape to leap out at her at any moment, robes aswirl. Nothing of the sort happens, but soon the words on the labels begin to penetrate her mind, and she begins to see a kind of familiar organization of the jars, something that doesn't quite surface until she sees a bottle of Billywig stings next to a jar of newt's eyes next to a jar of lovgewort.

"Hermione!" Harry will say with excitement in his voice as he realizes what she saw. "That's how Snape organized the student Potions cabinet."

Hermione will nod. "But wait, Harry. There's more."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

Hermione starts and whirls around to see that the woman has moved from behind the counter and is standing at the end of the aisle, watching Hermione warily, as if she is expecting her to grab a jar of dragon scales and bolt from the shop. "Sorry?"

"You look a bit lost," the woman says. "Is there something I can help you find?"

"I, um, yes." Hermione blinks and manages to get herself together. "Do you have any Potions-grade ginger?" Her mind works furiously to grab onto a potion that uses that ingredient. "For, um, Wit-Sharpener Potion?"

"Oh, it's here somewhere," the woman says breezily, obviously relieved, and starts examining the rows of neatly labeled jars and canisters. "I'm not surprised you couldn't find it. This is my husband's organizational system, and it doesn't make sense to anyone but him." She pauses thoughtfully. "Hmm, I think it's in the next aisle over."

Hermione follows her into the next aisle in a daze with the word 'husband' knocking about in her head.

"Here on business or vacation?" the woman says as she is scanning the shelves for the ginger.

"Pardon?" Hermione replies, wondering if she should tell the woman she'll find the ginger next to the rat's spleens because they are both used in the Shrinking Solution, but keeps it to herself.

"Well, you're British, so I assumed you were visiting Seattle."

Hermione nods, thinking she might actually need that Wit-Sharpener Potion. "Oh, right. Yes. Um, vacation."

The woman crouches to examine the bottom shelf. "I'll have to tell my husband. He's always interested when other Brits come in."

"Hermione," Harry will say. His eyes will be very wide and there will be a tremble in his voice, but Hermione will only shake her head and say, "Just wait."

"He's British too?" Hermione asks casually, though she is nervous to the point of being ill.

"Yes. He refuses to go back even to visit, but he's always interested to know if anyone from that part of the world comes into the store. Ah, Potions-grade ginger." She pulls a jar of ginger fingers from the shelf and hands it to Hermione. "Here it is. You'll be needing a few other ingredients as well, right?"

"Just a few, but I think that I can find "

"Mommy?"

Hermione and the woman turn to see a little boy in pajamas, maybe five years old, standing by the counter and pouting. He has dark hair and black eyes and an unfortunately large nose for such a little thing. All of his visible skin is covered with red sores, and he looks absolutely miserable.

"Hermione!" Harry will say again, but Hermione will just ignore him.)

The woman sighs. "I'm sorry, but could you excuse me for a minute? He has Dragon Pox, and he just won't stay in bed and rest."

"Sure. No problem." Hermione knows she is openly staring at the boy, but just can't seem to stop. She itches to pull the photocopy of the photograph from her pocket and compare the boy to the picture of Severus Snape at the same age.

The woman hurries over to her son and scoops him up. "Oh, Brian, what are you doing out of bed?"

The little boy rests his cheek on her shoulder. "'M thirsty, Mommy."

"Poor baby," she coos and cuddles him close as she carries him behind the counter. "We'll get you some juice and see if Daddy will come up to mind the store for a little while."

"Daddy said not to bother him 'cause he's making Pepper-up," the little boy says as his mother pulls open a door at the back of the shop.

"Did he now?" the woman says in a way that indicates her husband won't be saying that to her unless he wants to sleep on the couch for the next week. "Oh, Dear! It's your turn to mind the " she calls, but her words are cut off as the door snicks closed behind her.

(Hermione will pause again and stare down into the now cold mug of tea. Harry will twitch and fidget and be on the verge of demanding she finish the story when she will finally say, "Can you imagine being that woman, happily married with a son, and then one day a stranger walks in off the street and tells you that your husband is a murderer? And not just a murderer, a mass murderer?"

"So Snape was there, then?"

She will pull one of her many sets of copies from her pocket the letter, the picture, the scrap of paper, the five pound note and spread them out across the table. "I mean, does it really matter anymore, what he did?"

"Yes!" Harry will say, outraged.

"But Harry, what if there was some sort of plan? What if what you saw on the Astronomy Tower wasn't what it appeared to be?"

"What are you saying, Hermione?" Harry's voice will be tight with anger, with the ghost of the person he was during the war, hard and tense and vengeful.

"Hidden meanings, Harry. No one ever really told us the full extent of the Order's plans or operations. Remember how Emmeline Vance showed up out of nowhere three years ago? Her death was faked, and she was hidden, but no one alive knew that she'd been hidden, so she never knew it was safe to return? Maybe what happened on

the Astronomy Tower was the same. Snape murdered Dumbledore in cold blood, but what if Snape killed him at his request? What if there was a plan? What if he wasn't begging for his life? What if he was begging Snape to carry through with the plan?"

"That's ridiculous, Hermione." Harry's eyes will be dark with fury, his jaw clenched. "I know what I saw. Snape was a traitor, and he murdered Dumbledore in cold blood. Now tell me, was he there or not?"

Hermione will take a breath and)

Hermione stares at the door for a very long time. Her heart is in her throat, and her blood is pounding in her ears, and her stomach is churning with a kind of terror she hasn't felt since the war. She feels a sort of numb disbelief that in a few moments she will have some kind of answer to years of searching. She will finally *know*.

And so she does the only logical thing.

She turns around and starts walking. She walks out of the apothecary and out of Wizarding Seattle. She returns to the hotel, packs her things, and

("You left?" Harry will all but leap out of his seat and tower over her with a rage she hasn't seen since they were fifth years and no one believed that Voldemort had returned. "You just left without finding out if Snape was there. He killed Dumbledore, and you just left!"

Hermione will frown at Harry, bite her bottom lip, and look away out of the kitchen window where she can just see a slice of the night sky over the building across the street. Her mind will be whirring, trying to make sense of the hidden meanings in her own behavior, in her flight from possibly knowing one way or another what she's been searching for since one cold night in a Muggle book store almost ten years ago.

"But what if there are no hidden meanings?" she will say, thinking of the organization of the apothecary's shelves, of that little boy with Snape's hair, eyes, and nose. "What if things were exactly as they appeared to be? What if Snape really did murder Dumbledore in cold blood? And what if Snape only wanted a picture of his mum? Or what if he really is dead?" She picks up her copy of the numbers and letters and words that have been the foundation of her search. "What if this is just a scrap of paper with gibberish and I've just spent nearly a decade trying to make sense of it?"

Harry will not answer, will only glare at her. She will have been expecting him to react to the ending of her story like this, so she will neither be bothered nor surprised by his anger, considering that she will be questioning the very foundation of their post-war existence, asking him to reconsider the past, to reexamine what they allowed themselves to believe just to live day after day.

"Or worse, what if it doesn't mean anything, Harry?" she will continue, staring at the paper in her hand, seeing for the first time an absence of meaning in symbols she has been obsessing over for so long. They will appear to be random marks for the very first time, their shapes and meanings arbitrarily applied by people centuries dead. "What if everything that's happened your parents' deaths, Dumbledore's murder, the war what if it's all just a series of events that happened one after the other, like dominoes falling in a line, with no rhyme or reason beyond what we give them? What if all the sacrifice and pain and death meant absolutely nothing?"

She will finally look at Harry, really look at him, at the scar just barely hidden by his fringe, at the invisible scars that mar his soul and the soul of every other witch and wizard who lived through the war. He will be trembling with anger and outrage and hurt, and she will be strangely and callously unaffected by it, because she will finally have some kind of answer, though it won't be the one she thought she would be happy with. "Can you handle knowing that? Because I can't."

"I can find him, Hermione. I know where he is. You told me."

Hermione will nod. "You could, but then you will know."

Then she will stand, collect the copies from the table, and fold them into quarters. She will drop them in the sink, raise her wand, and cast *an incendio*. They will burn like Hagrid's hut the night of Dumbledore's murder, like Ravenclaw's staff, like the battle ground at Cardiff where Snape's body supposedly lay.

When there is nothing but ash in the sink, she will turn back to Harry, arms crossed, and wait. He will stare at her in his silent fury for almost a full minute, fists clenched, his body shaking before he storms out of her flat, slamming the door behind him.

He will not speak to her for months, and Hermione will find it surprisingly easy to live with because he never goes to Seattle. He will never pick up the search where she left off, will never discover if it was Snape in that apothecary, married to that woman with the sick little boy.

And mercifully, Hermione will never have to know.)