

Immunity

by notplainjane

In which Hermione becomes entranced by the study of snakes, has troubled thoughts about Severus and his death, and enjoys chocolate cake. A mysterious man watches her. Set seven years after Voldemort's defeat.

Deliberation

Chapter 1 of 4

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Chapter One: Deliberation

Author's Note: As should be well known, I do not own or make any money off of the Potterverse or the myriad adventures of its inhabitants. This story is mostly, though not entirely, DH-compliant.

This story was originally intended to be part of the new livejournal community *Snape_After_DH*'s inaugural fest. Many wonderful stories now reside there.

I owe many, many thanks to my friend *littlelizzyann*, who introduced me to this fandom and did not laugh at me when I decided to write my first corny little ficlet. She also advised me and brainstormed with me about this story and lent her considerable editorial skill to this chapter. Thanks also for a careful reading by one of this site's admins. Don't fault them for any remaining nonsense.

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Hermione sat at her regular table at Hugo's Café. Located handily between Imperial College and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the café offered good and decently priced food and drinks, occasional musical entertainment, and a comfortable atmosphere. Soon after she first ate there, Hugo's became an extension of her sitting room. She went there nearly every day. She introduced friends to the place. She even arranged a couple of meetings there with her advisers. More often, she came alone to read or write at one of Hugo's small corner tables. This day was no different.

Hermione had spent the early hours of the morning in the Potions lab doing the kind of drudgery she thought more appropriate for a first-year apprentice than for the journeywoman she was. Far be it from her professor to lighten her student's load, however, simply because said student excelled. She had followed that work with an in-depth, hour-long conversation with her biochemistry adviser about her latest research. Now, Hermione felt drained, and she wasn't yet half way through her day.

She gazed down at her tea. *Tea... Water... I'd like to be floating in water*, she thought. *A beautiful, large bath at a luxury spa. Quiet. Eucalyptus-scented. Some Belgian chocolates on one side. A nice glass of wine on the other. A tall, dark male bath attendant to...*

Laughter at the next table jolted Hermione out of her reverie. *Damn! Just when it was getting good.* She scowled at her neighbors and rubbed her eyes. *God, I don't have the **time** to daydream right now. Too much to do.*

Hermione pulled from her bag a stack of mail she'd let accumulate for far too long at home and in her box at Imperial College's biochemistry department *Junk, junk, junk.* A

drawing of a pink dragon by Teddy Lupin that Andromeda had sent made her smile. *Ah, lovely, a bill.* A couple of event notices interested her, and she entered them in her planner. *Oh, this one's from Mum. They actually volunteered to organize a dinner-dance for the Sydney Dental Association? I thought they hated those things.*

Next was a letter from Ginny, who worked at Gringotts' Paris office. Unsurprisingly, that powerful Bat-Bogey Hex caster had followed in her brother's footsteps and become a curse-breaker. More surprisingly, the youngest Weasley had actually lost interest in the Boy Who Lived and declared herself much too young to decide permanently on either monogamy or strict heterosexuality. "The sextet will have to do without me tonight," Ginny wrote in her letter. "For next month, though, I promise a gorgeous tart, made by a gorgeous... *pâtissière!*"

Hermione started when she looked at the last letter, a large envelope. *It's from Dr. Watson. Why is he **writing** instead of...* Then she ripped into the packet and gave a shriek of excitement that startled the laughing women from the next table.

"I got the position!" she squealed. Times like this reminded her that she wasn't completely crazy for choosing to do a biochemistry Ph.D. and a Potions Mastery at the same time.

"I can't believe I was accepted," Hermione said as she closed her eyes and clasped to her chest the packet of documents assuring her a place on a prestigious AIDS research team. She might have been cradling a small child. For a moment, she had the absurd vision of a bushy-haired eight-year-old skipping rope and singing, "I can do my thesis now, I can do my thesis now!" She signaled to the waitress and ordered a slice of Hugo's rich chocolate cake to celebrate.

Hermione allowed herself a few minutes of chocolate-induced bliss before acknowledging that she could no more spend her morning basking in her accomplishment than she could daydreaming. She reminded herself that although Mary Watson would be quite happy for her achievement, the Potions professor would nonetheless advise her student, "All the chemical formulae in the world won't ensure a perfect Wolfsbane. Without the magic, it's nothing but goop." In other words, *the most cutting-edge biochemistry in the world still won't get you your Potions Mastery. So get to work, woman!*

In both the magical and the Muggle branches of her studies, Hermione was interested in protection. All human beings had immune systems that, when they worked properly, produced antibodies to fight off a variety of ordinary physical infections. The immune systems of magical folks, it seemed, also produced, when *they* worked properly, antibodies to fight off a variety of threats to their magic. A healthy magical immune system wouldn't prevent one from succumbing to the effects of a curse, but it would help one recover more quickly and could prevent one's total magical power from being diminished.

Neither Muggle scientists nor magical Healers fully understood how immune systems worked, or why they worked or broke down, or how they could be protected or revived. Both groups had made some progress, however, and, unlike in several other fields, Hermione found scientists and potioners closer together in their thinking than one might guess. She found the combination fascinating.

Too fascinating, sometimes. Hermione had discussed her academic interests in detail with Harry and Ron just once. About a year and a half after the war's end, several months after she'd returned from a year in Australia with her parents, Hermione had tried explaining her studies to Ron and Harry over dinner and drinks at The Leaky Cauldron.

After she'd spent several minutes breathlessly expounding on the challenge of understanding the relationship between physical and magical health, the table had suddenly fallen silent. Harry had nodded at his pint, looked up at her, and said, "We should talk about snakes sometime, Hermione."

Ron had looked back and forth between his friends and said, "We had an absolutely ~~killer~~ sale in the shop today. You should've *seen* the number of Skiving Snackboxes they were snatching up!"

The three of them had laughed and ordered another round of beer.

Hermione discovered that not only could she no longer lecture the boys about academics, but also that she no longer actually desired to do so.

After several years of ignoring Harry's offer to talk about snakes, Hermione began to take snakes more seriously. Over the previous year, discussions in the biochemistry literature about vaccines had led to discussions of the creation of antivenins for certain poisonous snakes. Discussions of Muggle antivenins had led to a search of the scholarly Potions literature on magical antivenins. Research on magical antivenins for venomous snakes had led her to contemplate long-suppressed memories of one particular magical venomous snake and the rather awful death at the snake's fangs that she had witnessed.

Severus Snape's death had affected Hermione deeply, more deeply than she admitted to any of her friends, more deeply than she acknowledged even to herself.

Witnessing Snape's death that *he* should be killed shocked and horrified her. Leaving him there in the Shrieking Shack afterward pricked her conscience. Now, contemplating his demise and its method in light of her current research roused all her suppressed thoughts of her former professor: admiration, curiosity, longing, disappointment, and guilt. Very soon after Hermione began reading up on antivenins and how they might be used, Nagini became the personification of the king cobras in the research and Snape the face of the venomous snakes' victims.

Having almost finished her cake, Hermione finally settled down to focus on her research. She sat pondering one of the articles on king cobras and their venom yet again. The articles had preoccupied her since she'd discovered them the previous week. She'd had an in-depth discussion about them during her meeting that morning with Dr. Watson and expected an equally thorough conversation that afternoon in her Potions tutorial. The articles spoke directly to the questions she was pursuing. She thought as she had when she had first come across this article, two others by the same author in one of the Muggle journals, and two related articles by a wizarding author that their relevance was almost uncanny.

The articles had crossed Hermione's path in the most unlikely manner. She had found loose pages from the middle of two of the articles left on her table the previous weekend while she'd been in the café's loo. When she determined what they were, she had tracked down the citations in the college's libraries and made full copies of them and everything else the authors had written. They were relatively recently published, so she forgave herself for missing them in earlier literature searches.

Their mysterious appearance on her table did give Hermione pause, though. Who else besides she was interested in *both* Muggle *and* wizarding studies of snakes? Who in the café would know of literature in both worlds? Who there knew *her* well enough to know of both her academic interests and her position vis-à-vis wizarding and Muggle society? And who would leave the pages, but not the citations? And why?

She ran detection spells on the pages when she first found them and encountered no Dark magic in them. She breathed a bit easier with that knowledge. Someone, however, was watching her; that much was clear. She sensed no magical detection when she felt for it the day she encountered the articles, but she remained wary nonetheless. She had learned the hard way that "constant vigilance" was more than the motto of a paranoid ex-Auror. The war was long over, but not everything had changed. She never discussed her feelings with anyone never even told her advisers or friends how she found the articles that currently obsessed her but she lived with the notion at the back of her mind that someone, some *witch or wizard*, to be more specific, was observing her, was interested in what she was doing, for his or her own reasons.

The article from Hermione's mysterious observer both fascinated and disturbed her. She had shuddered when she'd first read it. She didn't need to close her eyes to see the troubling image raised by its discussion of snake venom: Severus Snape's face twisted with pain and anger just after being bitten by Nagini, demanding Harry come closer so he could give her friend his memories. He'd writhed as the blood streamed from the huge punctures in his neck.

Another, earlier memory followed immediately after: Snape again in the Shrieking Shack, his mouth in a grimace, his eyes black steel, and his voice quiet but hard, growling at Sirius Black that he would gladly kill him as a murderer and traitor.

She had seen Snape, this man who had been her teacher, a colleague of a sort in the fight against Voldemort, and something of a bogeyman in her childhood *extremis* at the point of his death and at the point when he would willingly have killed. It seemed to her that he had always lived on the edge. He found no soft landing or even a

neutral zone while he was alive, and at his life's end, there were only the huge jaws of one of the world's most vicious snakes.

The voice of her regular waitress, Lola, roused Hermione from her dark musings. "It's about time you put the poor cake out of its misery, Hermione. It's never done a thing to you."

She looked up. "What? Oh, Lola!" Hermione smiled. "You know how I can get. Oh, god, look at the time! I'd better get going."

"You coming back later for the music?" Lola asked. "The violinist from the quartet that played at the V&A earlier today is coming, plus a couple of friends. They do experimental stuff. Should be quite fun."

"I wish I could. I've a tutorial now, and then I promised a friend I'd help make dinner later. A bunch of us get together every few weeks for a meal and some chat."

"Oh, well, that sounds fun, too. See you tomorrow then, yeah?"

"Most likely. You know I can't stay away from here for too long."

"More coffee, Shea?"

"Thank you, Lola, yes."

"She's not coming back tonight, you know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, you know. That woman you're mooning over, the one with the curly, brown hair. Hermione."

"I do not *moon* over her."

"Really."

"I *observe* her. She seems to be an intelligent woman, and the work she does *interests* me. I am a writer, Lola. It is my *job* to observe."

"Ohhhh, it's her *work* that interests you. I see."

McIntosh replied with a dirty look. "I observe you, as well, Lola."

"True, but you also order food from me, pay the bill to me, and leave a tip. You don't write pages about me in that journal of yours like you do for her. Besides, I can tell the difference in the looks."

McIntosh paused for a moment. "Oh?"

"Of course, Shea. Or don't you think women notice the difference between the way men look at women who interest them and the way they look at... well... their waitresses?"

McIntosh sneered. "You misread the situation entirely."

"Oh, do I?" She laughed. "I don't think so at all! Oh, you'd make a terrible spy, Shea McIntosh; you broadcast much too clearly."

McIntosh frowned at her. His face did flush slightly, though.

"I hope you weren't planning *finally* to talk to her tonight. It seems she's got plans with friends. Good for her, I say. She spends almost as much time here as you do."

"Are you complaining about a good, paying customer?"

"About Hermione?" He narrowed his eyes at her. "No, I wouldn't complain about *her*. *She* just spends a lot of time alone here."

"Your Hermione must find Hugo's atmosphere quite as *congenial* as I do."

"I think it's the scones, too." McIntosh rolled his eyes.

"Fishing for compliments, *waitress*? Your food is, shall we say, *tasty*. As in, it has a taste. There. Now. Go on to your other customers, Lola. I have writing to do."

"Charmer, aren't you, Shea."

McIntosh scowled at her.

The wizard known to Lola as Shea McIntosh, a Muggle writer, turned to the leather-bound journal on the table in front of him. He used it to record, among other things, his observations about Hermione Granger. He had been following the progress of her studies for the past five years, and he was currently pleased. When he'd first learned of her academic plans seven years earlier, he'd been surprised. He'd never believed her to have the instincts to be a true scholar, but prepared himself to be proved wrong. He hadn't spoken to her since then, but watched, interested in her progress. He had expectations for Hermione Granger and wanted to make sure they would be borne out.

Contrary to Lola's taunting, McIntosh knew Hermione Granger's schedule well. *Of course she's not coming back here tonight*, he thought. This was the second Friday of the month, the night she always dined with her Hogwarts classmates, the "sextet," as they jokingly referred to themselves. He rolled his eyes. The Golden Trio, those most annoying heroes of the British wizarding world Potter, Weasley, and Granger had become fast friends with the threesome sometimes referred to as the Other Trio Longbottom, Ginevra Weasley, and the Lovegood girl. The six of them formed a tight little group. He couldn't stand the way that the wizarding world still *fawned* over them. *Hermione would never miss a dinner with those idiots* he thought. Still, he approved of her loyalty, even if he could not approve of her choice of friends.

His initial intent in observing Hermione Granger had been purely selfish. His motivations multiplied over the years, though. Since he'd begun to watch her as he preferred to understand his activity he'd developed an appreciation for her personality and admiration for her intellectual prowess. She'd actually risen in his esteem, something he'd once never believed possible. Academically, she was working toward mastery in a combination of fields that, to his considerable knowledge, had never been tried before.

He approved of her choice to study at Imperial College, which had been London's premier institution for Muggle medicine and sciences since its founding in 1907 and an elite center for wizarding Britain's new breed of "systematic magicians," as they called themselves: witches and wizards who approached their chosen fields with the meticulous methodology of modern scientists, yet still recognized the Indefinable that was always part of magic. The Watson siblings Mary, a witch and Potions Professor, and Sherlock, a squib and noted British biochemist had impressed him since he first learned of their work decades ago. They had worked together with students very rarely, however, and the decision to study with them, which Hermione had made, still bucked the received wisdom in mainstream Potions work. Hermione Granger was walking on the edge of her chosen profession, and there were times when Shea McIntosh wished that he could more publicly walk it with her.

If I could do that now... He shook his head to dismiss a clearly ludicrous thought.

She had found the pages from the king cobra articles he'd left for her, though, and, he was pleased to note, was now thoroughly engrossed by them. He snorted. *She practically leapt when she saw them. At least she remembered to run Dark-detector spells before actually using them, but she always was the bright one in the group.*

He had always been careful to maintain his distance from her and to make sure that his glamour was undetectable. Hermione hadn't seen him place the pages on her table the previous week, and no one else in the crowded café seemed to care. The important thing was that Hermione Granger was now on a direct path to her appointed task.

He was pleased to see her making progress; he wanted to close the distance between them soon.

Potions Professor Mary Watson looked out the window of her laboratory at Imperial College's Magical Sciences Building and grinned. It always amused her that she could look across the way into the window of her older brother's biochemistry lab, but he saw only trees when he looked toward hers. She glanced up at the sound of the door opening.

"Hermione, I'm glad you're here."

"I'm not late, am I?"

"No, no, right on time as usual. Sit down and catch your breath. Sherlock told me about the interesting conversation you had this morning. Congratulations on your fellowship, by the way."

"Thank you, Professor. I'm really pleased. Those articles made me think of a different way to approach the biochemistry research I'm doing. They're most revealing in terms of the Potions research I've been considering. I've reviewed all of the articles I told you about, and I'm amazed by the overlaps between the Muggle and wizarding works."

"The wizard author is..."

"Diogenes Elapidae."

"Right. I'd never heard of him before, which surprised me a bit, but, of course, I haven't done much research on snakes. I took the liberty of looking him up through the Society, but they have no information about him. They actually have few masters or journeymen on record as working on snake venom. You're the only one on record doing this kind of work for her masterpiece, which is all the better for you. I also could find nothing by him in the literature before the publication of these articles. I think the name must be a pseudonym."

"I didn't have a chance to research the authors any further, but I think that the Muggle author must be a pseudonym as well: Eliot Drake. Drake obviously doesn't cite any magical sources, but his and Elapidae's styles are very similar: the way they present their arguments, the way they deal with the evidence and previous researchers whose work they dispute. They're both exceptionally bold. Their concerns are similar as well. This may be too big an assumption on my part, but I believe that they could be the same person, a wizard using two different pseudonyms. And, look, their surnames both refer to snakes or serpents."

"I suppose it's possible..."

"Why do you think he did it that way? Use pseudonyms, two different ones, and publish in wizarding and non-wizarding journals?"

"I don't know. Nothing sinister, I should think. But, it may be of some use. You could treat all five articles as one series in working with it in your research. Synthesize it, Hermione. What's the larger picture here? What are the implications of the Muggle research for the study of magical snakes?"

Hermione focused on an unseen point in the distance, and Mary Watson could practically see her student's brain working. Hermione had reached journeyman status quite early in her college study, something Watson had seen few students do. She knew from her friend Minerva McGonagall that Hermione had excelled at just about all of her subjects in school. Minerva had told Mary, when Hermione first approached the Potions professor, that Septima Vector had been surprised and disappointed that her prize student had not chosen Arithmancy. Watson was not exactly unbiased with regard to her own field, but she felt that Hermione had made the right decision for herself. She wasn't sure what drove her student, but Hermione put passion into her work. She used her heart as well as her formidable mind.

After a moment of intense silence, Hermione began to speak. "Well, they all look at aspects of the antidote for king cobra venom and how it might be used to help people with compromised immune systems. Elapidae's work takes into account magical factors that Drake couldn't, of course, such as the will or the magic of the antivenin's brewer. They look at different immune problems: treating the victim of a king cobra bite, the treatment of nutritional deficiencies, etc. I... I'm sorry, there's just so much. I'll have to go back through it all more carefully."

"Good. Do that for next week, then, and write up a report for me. Now, let's talk about these experiments you've been running this week..."

Deduction

Chapter 2 of 4

In which Hermione cooks, eats Indian food, and has Important Conversations with Luna and Harry. The mysterious man continues to watch her.

Chapter Two: Deduction

"So, wait, tell me again! Ginny said she'd bring *what* to dinner next month?" Harry asked, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

Hermione laughed, remembering Ginny's boast in the letter she'd received that morning about Giselle Fournier, the French pastry chef her friend had recently hooked up with. "She said she'd bring a gorgeous tart made by a gorgeous..."

"Oh, Merlin, Hermione, don't repeat it!" Ron interjected, giving his friends a long-suffering look. "I'm happy for Ginny, but I just can't take hearing details about her *love life*."

"Ron Weasley," Hermione teased, "who'd expect that you, of all people, would be squeamish about sex." Ron looked chagrined. "I won't say anything more. Just don't expect Ginny to be so reserved next month."

Ron's face grew redder, and he began spluttering.

"You know, Hermione, your new Muggle research position sounds really interesting," Luna said just a little too loudly, hoping to prevent Ron from getting even more worked up. "Tell me more about it, won't you?"

"Absolutely. I'd better spare these other three, though, and talk about it with you over the weekend. After all, we can't have Ron falling asleep at the table before pudding."

"Oi! I wouldn't *fall asleep*! I might... *tune out* a bit... but falling asleep would be just rude, and I wouldn't do that to one of my best friends... anymore."

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Luna giggled into their food.

Harry stopped laughing long enough to say, "Then tell us about the snake research, Hermione. You said there were some articles you found."

"Erm, yeah. We'd better talk about it another time, though, Harry. Ron's never going to be able to eat his pasta if I start talking about snakes." This set off another round of giggles.

"Hey! Is this 'pick on Ron' night? Besides, I feel fine about snakes. Now, if Hermione's research was about *worms*..."

Ron's fake indignation did its work, setting the group to laughter again. Hermione had renounced talking about her work during group dinners, and Ron had agreed to be her co-conspirator. He eagerly took up the job of interrupting any work-related questions that came up. She appreciated his willingness to keep up the image of himself as an adolescent slacker. Of course, Ron obliged quite happily, eager as ever to avoid conversation on anything even remotely related to academia. Meanwhile, Hermione reveled in the light-hearted conversation while preserving her image as "the serious one."

"This is a great dinner, Harry."

"Thanks, Neville, but I can only take credit for the salad. The market just happened to have some great-looking escarole this morning, and a friend told me about a particularly good balsamic. Hermione made the Bolognese. I had to beg." He snickered.

"It's delicious, Hermione. So, it must be true, then, about Potions masters and cooking, huh?" Neville asked with a teasing smile.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "You wouldn't say that if you'd tasted Professor Watson's roast. It's abominable, and she's brilliant. Besides, I can only make a few things really well. Aside from this, it's mostly toast and eggs." Hermione grinned broadly. "You should make the Bolognese with me some time, Neville."

Neville paled a little. "Cooking? Erm, you couldn't just give me the recipe, could you?"

"Oh no," Hermione drawled, "It's a traditional Italian recipe from my mum. You know: a pinch of this, a dash of that. It's always been one of my favorite meals."

"Traditional? Hermione, I didn't know your mum was Italian."

"You know she's not, Neville," said Hermione, giving her neighbor who had a grin spreading across his face a shove on his arm. "She learned it from the woman who kept the *pensione* where my parents stayed during trips to Italy early in their marriage. Mum and Dad went there a lot, actually. Said they had colleagues in Tuscany."

"Colleagues?" Harry dropped his fork. "You're saying they went to sunny, romantic *Tuscany* because they had *colleagues* there?"

Hermione grinned. "Yep. Colleagues."

"They went to see *Tuscan dentists*? So, um, at this *pensione*, Hermione, did they have a *room with a view*?" Harry asked, trying desperately to make sure that the food in his mouth stayed there.

Raising a single eyebrow, Hermione watched Harry trying to laugh, talk, and eat at the same time. "Harry Potter," she asked archly, trying to maintain a straight face, "are you saying that *my parents*, respectable, middle-class, English professionals, were closet hedonists with a fetish for all things Italian?"

"Well, if the boot fits..."

Out in the downstairs hallway, Kreacher quietly reassured Mrs. Black's portrait that the gathered youths making such an unholy ruckus were friends and defenders of Master Regulus. By now, the grouchy old house-elf knew that wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough, and it prevented her from shouting. He couldn't bear to hear his old mistress' howling insanity or to hear his new master called "blood traitor." Besides, he got to eat the leftovers when the meal was done, and he was rather fond of Bolognese.

When the group had regained its sense of composure, Luna spoke up. "Neville and I have some good news. We're getting a place together."

"Congratulations, Luna! How did you finally persuade your father that proper wizarding society wouldn't collapse if you lived together without getting married?" Harry asked.

"We didn't actually." Luna frowned.

Neville broke in. "That man is so frustrating! He's liberal about all kinds of things, but when it comes to Luna moving out and living with not just anyone, mind you, but the man she's been dating for, what, *eight years*, he becomes an insufferable prude!"

"Yesterday, he even claimed that mum's ghost agreed with him," Luna said quietly.

"Oh! But, Luna, your mum never came back as a ghost. Did she?" Hermione asked.

"No. She didn't. That's what finally did it for me. It's not as if this is a new issue. He's been quietly... talking me into... really *bribing* me to remain at home with him for quite a while. But now, he's *blatantly lying* to me about something like *that* to get what he wants. I never expected him to do something so underhanded to get his way."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sent discreet looks at each other, remembering their eye-opening encounter with a less-than-honest Xenophilius Lovegood while in search of the Deathly Hallows.

"I moved my things out of the, erm, *his* house today," Luna continued, "while he met with a field reporter. I'm staying at Neville's until we find a house of our own."

"Luna, what will do you about work?" Hermione asked gently.

"My father is a brilliant journalist,"...a statement that provoked shifty glances around the table..."and *The Quibbler* is important. But, my path is... leading me... elsewhere. I thought I might join the Unspeakables. I've heard they're working on twisting the space-time continuum," Luna replied earnestly.

"I think the Unspeakables would be lucky to get you," Hermione told her friend and grinned.

Ron looked around the table at the assembled friends. "It's official: none of us has taken the path everyone expected after the war. Harry is *not* the youngest-ever head of Magical Law Enforcement. I did *not* follow my dad into the Ministry. Hermione did *not* become a mere Ministry figurehead for intercultural relations. Neville... Neville did *not* making *Witch Weekly's* list of the hunkiest wizards despite the way he buffed up during seventh year. Ginny did *not* become Mrs. Harry Potter and start popping out sprogs. And now, Luna is leaving her father's side to do... well... something I really have no idea about. Still, good for her! Good for us all!"

"Hear, hear!" Harry shouted, holding up his glass of wine in salute.

Ron gave his best friend a mock-solemn nod and went on. "I know that I would hate to wake up ten or twelve years from now and realize that the most interesting things I've managed to do in all my life are... I don't know... learn to drive a Muggle car and send my kids off on the Hogwarts Express."

Looks of bewilderment traveled around the table.

"You kind of pulled that out of thin air, didn't you, Ron?" Harry asked.

"Um, yeah. I don't *where* that came from. Anyway, what I mean is, we're all doing what we *want*, rather than what other people think *weshould* do. With all of the ups and downs of life and all we've been through together, we so-called 'heroes of the wizarding world' are generally doing great." Ron lifted his glass. "A toast! Here's to... *exceeding expectations*!"

Glasses were drained, and Harry silently Summoned another bottle of red wine from the sideboard.

"Listen, Luna, Neville," Ron continued after a satisfying gulp, "if you need any help or advice, you know that Lav and I are always willing to help. We've done the whole parental opposition thing already, you know."

"Thanks, Ron," said Neville gruffly.

Neville made himself scarce on Saturday when Hermione came over to talk with Luna and help with a bit of redecorating. While Transfiguring the old sitting-room furniture into something spiffier, Luna listened carefully to her friend's in-depth exposition of the research literature Hermione had read and the hypotheses she was considering testing in the Potions lab. Over tea and biscuits, she offered Hermione observations from *Quibbler* articles about some little-known magical snake species and promised to owl her with reprints. Hermione repaid the other witch's interest with rapt attention to what Luna had to say about the space-time continuum and what the Unspeakables may have learned about it.

"And the Unspeakables repaired the Time Room in the Ministry," Luna explained. "I don't know how else they would be able to test these things out."

"Do you really think they were able to save anything useful?" Hermione asked. "It was pretty well destroyed when... we... well, you know." She stilled.

"The battle at the Department of Mysteries, you mean? In '96?" Luna asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered quietly. Her thoughts drifted. Her eyes became unfocused.

"Time can't stand still, Hermione. They had to."

Hermione looked up suddenly, giving her friend a fierce look. She'd forgotten that Luna, who often seemed to occupy her own special plane of existence, could be quite blunt when necessary. "People *died*."

"That's true. But you didn't. I've noticed you've been thinking more about the war recently than any time I can remember since you went to Australia. Your heart hurts, Hermione."

Hermione looked up with a confused expression on her face. "No... I... Well, yes, I suppose. We... risked so much."

"Yes, we all did, but you're thinking of Professor Snape, aren't you?"

"What? Yes, I am. How did you know?"

"I'm right. Hermione, we all took risks because we knew that we were doing the right thing. Professor Snape risked the most, and I think he knew that, but only he could have done what he did, as a spy, and in school, too, with the Carrows there. I think Professor Snape thought he *would* die in this war, but that it would be worthwhile."

"But, he didn't *have* to die. It was so stupid!"

"Why?"

"I should have known what to do in the Shrieking Shack! I mean, I had just spent months keeping Harry and Ron alive. I should have known how to treat him; I should have had what was needed. I was supposed to be the '*brightest witch of my age*'!" She snorted. "Real bright."

"Well, I was supposed to be 'Loony Luna,' remember?"

"Oh, *I* didn't think... I mean, *I don't* think of you that way."

Luna smiled. "I know. You *did*, then, but you grew out of it."

Hermione stared at her friend for a moment, blinked, and then said, "Oh. Erm, thanks." She felt strangely at ease.

Luna turned and straightened up the blanket hanging on the back of her armchair.

"I thought I'd made my peace with everything that happened, Luna, everything that I had to do, and what I couldn't do, but I think I just put dealing with some of it on hold until I felt a bit stronger."

"Do you *want* to talk more about it now?"

"No, I don't. Not right now, but soon. I promise. Right now, I just want to hear whatever you have to say about the Time Room." Luna gazed at Hermione for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

"I know that there are still Time Turners in use, Hermione, and the Unspeakables are doing some new research on them. I still don't know precisely what they're doing, but I know it has something to do with the shape of time and how far one can travel in it."

When Neville came home hours later, it took him Transfiguring the armchairs into live Shetland ponies for him to get their attention. Luna just blinked and smiled up at him. Hermione chuckled at the smug look on Neville's face, righted herself after slipping off her cranky pony/armchair, and suggested that going out for pizza and beer might be a good alternative to trying to cook something in the couple's sparsely stocked kitchen. Luna set the room to rights with a quick flick of her wand, and the three headed out.

On Sunday afternoon, Hermione descended on Hugo's, planted herself at her favorite table, and wrote up her analysis of Drake and Elapidae's king cobra articles. She only half-listened to the musicians who performed, and she ignored the other café customers entirely until she had finished.

When she placed the final period on the final sentence, she smiled in satisfaction. Her report was preliminary, and her brain was already churning over some of her findings, revising and questioning them, but it was enough for now. Tuesday's conversation with Professor Watson would be illuminating. And, maybe it was time to have

that snake talk with Harry. She called Lola over and asked for a glass of red wine. Closing her eyes, she listened to the music and tried to relax.

Suddenly, her eyes flew open. *I'm being watched again.* Since she'd found the article pages on her table, Hermione had been working on heightening her extrasensory perception. She knew that learning this extra skill verged on overkill, but she always felt safer learning how to *do* something. She was no Legilimens, but she had learned to reach out with her mind to find the source of thoughts directed at her. She knew that a magical someone in the café was focusing on her. *Where are you? Who are you?* she thought. But, Hermione wasn't able to pinpoint who her watcher might be. *Not many other witches or wizards come here.*

She scanned the room. She waved to a group of her fellow biochem students she hadn't noticed before. They chuckled when they walked past her table, telling her that they'd given up trying to attract her notice a full hour before. Hermione noticed several other regulars and exchanged waves or nods with the few she knew.

She spotted a man at a corner table who she'd seen several times at the café. He was a regular, as well, but they had never spoken. He looked to be in his forties. He was of average height with non-descript brown hair, unremarkable brown eyes, glasses, and clean-cut clothing. She knew he wasn't a student. She'd never seen him talk with anyone there, except Lola. When he wasn't solemnly and silently scanning the room, he tended to focus on the journal that was his only companion. The few times she had made eye contact with him, he'd looked at her strangely.

Could he be the one who left me those pages? she thought. *Is he the one watching me? Why?*

Over at his table, Shea McIntosh looked up from his journal to see Hermione Granger staring straight at him. *Not yet, Miss Granger,* he thought. He raised an eyebrow at her and scowled, then turned back to his writing.

She looked away. *What a look! I thought Professor Snape had trademarked that scowl.*

As Hermione turned away, McIntosh looked up at her and murmured a Notice-Me-Not spell.

Hermione turned to look back at the man at the corner table, but her eyes passed right across that part of the room. *Where is he? He's still here,* she thought, *I can sense it, but he's hidden himself.* She concentrated on locating the source of his magic, but couldn't detect it. *Where is he?* she asked herself again. She stayed alert, albeit uncomfortable, knowing better than to panic. She couldn't sense any animus on his part. *If he's my watcher, he's had plenty of opportunities to attack me - he's here as much as I am - but he never has. He wants something, though. I'm just not sure what it is.*

Hermione returned her attention to the spread-out papers on her table. Swiftly, but methodically and with an outward calm, she packed up her work, settled her tab with Lola, and left Hugo's for her flat. She'd never been watched *there*, that she knew of... *you will not let paranoia get the best of you, Hermione...* so it seemed like a good idea to settle in for the evening with a good book, or a DVD, or both.

After working in the potions lab all Monday morning, Hermione looked forward to what she hoped would be a congenial afternoon. She left the college grounds and caught a bus to Charing Cross Road. Walking into the Leaky Cauldron, she paused to say a quick hello to Tom the barman (*that name will never be ordinary again*) and made her way through the pub, out onto Diagon Alley, and down half a block to Mervyn's Magical Menagerie.

One of Professor Grubbly-Plank's nephews had bought the magical pet shop a few years back and lent the store his name. The shop's oversized **MMM** sign flashed brightly across the street at the equally big **WWW** sign of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, much to George and Ron's delight. "Fred would have loved it!" Ron told her when the shop had first reopened. Harry was currently doing a consulting stint for Mervyn, and Hermione looked forward to talking with him while they treated themselves to a curry at Harry's latest favorite Indian restaurant.

Harry's consulting business suited him. After the war's last battle, he had spent a month indulging the wizarding world's craving for celebrity news. Just at the point when Rita Skeeter had begun pestering him for a more in-depth story about his personal life, however, the Chosen One had dropped from sight. Harry went away to, as Hermione explained to the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, "get his head together." Minerva had not been pleased. After six months, Harry came back calmer than anyone remembered seeing him. At an Order meeting, he explained his plans.

"I want to be an independent consultant," Harry had announced. Dozens of confused witches and wizards, who'd expected Harry Potter to become an Auror, received this news in silence. Harry had told them about ways he could help Magical Law Enforcement, but, he'd explained, he was really more interested in exploring the magical talents he had gained through his link to Voldemort, in particular the ability to speak in parseltongue.

"It was such an incredible feeling!" he said to them of his experience as an eleven-year-old talking to the python at the London Zoo before starting Hogwarts. "So few people have this ability," he continued, ignoring mutterings of *Who would want it?* and *Inappropriate Dark gifts* among the crowd. "I want to work with witches and wizards who handle snakes. We could learn so much more about all the different species than we know now."

And so an obsession was born. Harry's new profession didn't sit well with some Order members, but it made him very happy. And sought after. At the moment, he was working with Mervyn for a nominal fee that he was donating to a new Care of Magical Creatures Fund at Hogwarts to identify the reasons why some of the more exotic species Mervyn had recently got into the shop weren't thriving.

When Hermione entered the Magical Menagerie, Harry was sitting on the floor next to a crate of tiny, beautiful snakes and hissing at them quietly. She watched in fascination as they listened to Harry, turned and hissed amongst themselves, and then, in unison, hissed a single phrase back at him. She couldn't help but grin when Harry shut his eyes, furrowed his brow, and blew out a breath in frustration. "*Ssssmall ssserpentsss* got you down, Harry?" she asked, repressing a giggle.

He threw Hermione a dirty look. "They're being so *difficult*. I'm making a simple request, but they don't trust me yet. And there are *four other species* I haven't even spoken with yet. It's a good thing Mervyn's so patient." Harry ran his hands through his already messy hair in exasperation. "So, are you ready for the best prawn curry in London?"

"The *best*? Really?"

"Well, according to *Time Out*. I haven't actually tried it yet. Last time we went it was all about the samosas. That was pretty much all we ate, with every kind of stuffing and every kind of sauce imaginable. I want to try other things this time."

"Wait a minute, did you say we, Harry? When are you going to tell me who you've been having all these lunches with? Hmmm?"

Harry reached for his messy hair again and gave her a funny look. "Don't go there, Hermione. 'Cause you know, then I'd have to ask you just how *serious* you and Evan are."

Hermione smirked. "That would be were. Not serious at all, I think. There wasn't any chemistry."

"Should I be saying 'I'm sorry'?" Harry asked.

"No. It's all right. Honestly." She gave him a nod of reassurance.

"Ah, well... *cough, cough... way too picky... cough cough*. Other fish in the sea and all that. Ready to go?"

Hermione shook her head at him. "You're getting quite good at changing the subject, you know."

"Annoying, isn't it?"

"Very. I'm hungry. Let's go."

They Apparated into one of the restaurant's back rooms. Harry had learned during his last visit that the owner was a Squib, a relative of some sort to the Patils. Surprisingly, though, he was one of the restaurant's few non-Indian wizard customers. Hermione stared and laughed at her friend as he placed an order for them for more food than she thought the two of them could possibly consume.

Wrapped up as she was in the exchange between an eager Harry and an equally eager waiter, Hermione didn't notice when another wizard, heavily glamoured, was seated a few tables down. Shea McIntosh slipped a small, velvet pouch into the *maitre d's* hand and silently cast a spell to make the two friends' interactions audible to him.

After Harry placed the lunch order, he and Hermione caught each other up on their current work. Hermione told Harry about the articles she'd found, omitting the fact of their mysterious source, and Harry told her about one of his recent gigs. It had turned out that Ireland was not quite snake-free. A group of researchers from the Institute for Magical Zoology had discovered an unknown species, and Harry had spent a month cataloguing and studying it.

Although she listened, Hermione retroactively sympathized with the boys' boredom with her lecturing during their Hogwarts days. She *really* wanted to steer the conversation back around to the distinctly *non-academic* subject that had been bothering her.

"...and they eat just about anything around there, Hermione. It's amazing."

"Harry, the Irish snakes are...so...interesting, but, erm, you know those articles I read?"

"The ones you *just* told me about, Hermione? I have a pretty good memory of them, yes." Harry smirked. He'd caught onto her impatience earlier.

"Yes, *those* articles. When I was reading them, I couldn't stop thinking of Professor Snape and the way he died." Harry's smile faded.

At this, Shea McIntosh paused in his writing and looked up. If he were a man who smiled, he would have then. As it was, he simply looked very satisfied. It was the first time he'd heard her express these thoughts.

Hermione continued, "Nagini was a king cobra, you know, magically enhanced somehow, but she started off as pretty dangerous even without whatever Voldemort did to her."

"Yeah, Hermione," Harry replied. "I've seen other spelled snakes since, and Nagini was pretty extraordinary even among those. I... erm... have wondered if making her into a Horcrux involved more than just depositing a bit of Voldemort's soul in her."

"What? Really? I... huh..."

McIntosh started at Harry's speculation. *Whoever would have guessed that Potter could be so thoughtful?*

"Do you think there's any research on the effects of making a living creature into a Horcrux?" Just as Harry opened his mouth to answer, Hermione cut in, "I'll have to look into that. That's a very interesting suggestion, Harry." At this point, Hermione was looking down at the pocket notebook she kept with her rather than at her friend, who just shook his head silently at the way she zoned out when caught up with an interesting academic question.

"So, Harry," Hermione said, re-entering the present moment, "do you think that Professor Snape might have survived that attack?"

"Hermione," said Harry quietly, reaching out for his friend's hand, "you know as well as I do, probably better, that there's no way he *could* have survived. Nagini's venom was deadly, and she bit Professor Snape in the jugular. Even if the venom didn't kill him, how could he have survived the blood loss? We got to him just after he went down, and he'd already lost more than a dose of your average Blood Replenisher could have fixed."

"I know, I know. That's all very logical..." *But, Mr. Weasley's wounds were just as severe.* "Harry, his death has been haunting me since I began this research. It doesn't seem right that a Potions master of his stature would die of a snakebite, or that Professor Snape would die from the bite of a snake with which he was familiar. It makes me think that he could have lived, despite the logic of the situation."

"Hermione, aside from the physiological realities that make that impossible, if Professor Snape had lived, why wouldn't he have let anyone know? He didn't have anything to fear from the Order or the Ministry. Minerva and Kingsley both saw the memories he gave me. They knew that he had always been loyal to the Order. He would have received full immunity from any prosecution of crimes committed in the course of his work."

"I know, Harry. Wait... did you say he would have immunity?"

"Of course, he would! You know that. We were all there when Kingsley promised it."

"Yes, certainly. I know. He wouldn't be charged. He wouldn't be put on trial. He... *immunity*... he was immune."

"You're babbling, Hermione."

"Harry, what if Professor Snape built up an immunity to Nagini's venom?"

"Well... one can build up immunity to snake venom, over time, just like with arsenic. But if he *did* try to do that, he failed. It didn't work. He died."

"Right. If he had built up immunity to the venom, he wouldn't have gone down so quickly. Unless he was faking it, of course."

McIntosh nearly snickered aloud.

"Hermione..."

"What? He was a spy. He had to deceive people as part of his job. So... But, maybe an *antivenin*..."

"Hermione..."

"Damn it, he was a *Potions master*, Harry! And, he had access to Nagini. Nagini's milk went into the potion that gave Voldemort his new body. Perhaps he continued to need it even after he got it. Maybe he thought that Professor Snape could milk her more successfully because he was a Potions master. Of course, we know that Voldemort liked to taunt his followers. Maybe he wanted to see how Professor Snape would react if Nagini tried to bite him. Either way, he could've taken some of the venom when he milked her."

"You're rambling, Hermione!"

"No, I'm *brainstorming*, trying to work out possibilities."

"I think you're reaching."

McIntosh frowned. Hermione *was* reaching, but in the right direction. *Don't listen to that idiot anymore, Hermione.*

Harry stilled Hermione's scribbling by placing his hand on top of hers. "Stop. Your antivenin research is important, but this... this is just pure speculation. There's just no way Professor Snape could be alive, and we don't have a body or his notes, so we can't tell whether he was even trying to build up immunity or come up with an antivenin for Nagini."

Hermione stilled and let out a deep sigh.

"Hermione, why are you so... *obsessed* by this?" Harry asked.

She quieted, looking down at her notes. She, Harry, and Ron had talked quite a bit about what had happened in the Shrieking Shack. Well, she and Harry had. Ron found it too difficult to reconcile his personal animosity toward their former teacher with the reality of Snape's efforts for the Order. After a conversation about Snape's death during which Ron could only say "bloody hell," he spoke not a word about the man again.

Harry had mourned Snape's death and had done everything possible to make sure that he was always remembered among the honored dead. Hermione believed that Harry was sincere in his admiration of the professor's heroism, but she also thought that her friend sympathized with the man more for his seemingly undying love for Lily Evans Potter than for his struggles in life.

For Hermione, Snape's death had stung, not only because of her complicated feelings about him, but also because... *I saw him die, and I didn't go back to help* Suddenly, she felt unable to share with Harry all the things she wanted to say. She wimped out.

"This has... just... brought up so many memories." *Honest. Incomplete, but honest.*

"I can see that. Professor Snape did so much for us, and we weren't always... very... *nice* to him."

"Speak for yourself, Harry Potter!" Hermione scolded. "You and Ron were horrid to him. *I* was never like that."

"You set him on fire!" he retorted with a mischievous grin.

"I did that for you!" she whined. "Besides, I was *twelve*, and I thought he was trying to hurt you, and I was... *wrong*. And... I would apologize to him... if he was still here."

"But, he's not, Hermione. And no amount of speculating about what he did or didn't do can bring him back. Don't get mired down in guilt."

Hermione frowned. *Guilt. Yes, there is that, and plenty of it. But, there's more.* "It's just..."

"Hermione, give this a rest. Please. You're chasing a shadow." He was pleading.

He doesn't want to talk about it.

He flashed his grin again. "What do you want to do, Hermione, go back in time? Just don't bring Buckbeak with you this time. I don't think Snape would take kindly to *that* at all."

Harry grinned at Hermione until she finally smiled back at him. She closed her eyes and shook her head at him.

"Harry, you're becoming entirely too fond of your own attempts at humor."

"Oh, you're mean, Hermione," said Harry as he stuck his tongue out as his friend.

"And you are distinctly not helpful today, Harry James Potter. Luckily, I still love you. Like a little brother."

"I'm at least half a foot taller than you, you know."

"And you always will be."

McIntosh watched Harry and Hermione discreetly while they settled their bill. *Hermione retreats to humor with Potter the way a spy retreats to silence in the face of the object of his espionage*, he thought. He tapped his quill impatiently against his journal. He wanted them to leave, but he wanted them to stay.

He quickly looked down and began scribbling in the journal when they looked in his direction. From under the hoods of his halfway lowered eyelids, he could see Hermione slightly frown in his direction. She was beginning to notice him, storing up the cumulative moments of recognition away in the back of her mind. *As she should.*

Author's Notes:

I do not own or make any money from the Potterverse.

Apparently, Hermione could have been absolutely serious about her parents' Tuscan colleagues. The website for some rather beautiful Tuscan dentists is: tuscanydentistDOTcom/index_enDOThtm. I don't know or do PR for them. But, if it brought me to Tuscany, I might just be convinced to do so. I'd like a house just like Diane Lane's in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), please.

I am most grateful to **littlelizzyann**: friend, editor, and head cheerleader. Thanks, as well, to **Angel Mischa** for a very thorough read.

Dedication

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione turns her research skills to Severus Snape's personal life and introduces us to the secrets of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers.

Chapter Three: Dedication

At the end of the day, Hermione sat at her kitchen table sipping a hot cup of tea and mentally reviewing the afternoon. Harry's thoughts about the effects of the Horcrux creation on Nagini interested her; the idea was worth pursuing. She felt frustrated, though. *Why couldn't he just agree with me?* She knew she was being childish, but it bothered her that Harry dismissed her ideas about Snape's possible survival.

Harry had wanted her to forget about Snape and just focus on the antivenin. But, she couldn't. Her research and Snape, Snape and her research; they were intertwined. Her grief at his death drove her on through the Potions research, and the research always brought her back to memories of the horrific sound and sight of his death.

Is it completely irrational to think that he might have survived? Maybe. Of course, so much of the wizarding world is completely irrational.

*But, even if I were looking at this from the perspective of a Muggle scientist, I would still want to know what exact effects this specific, distinctly uncommon snake had on him physiologically. That would be useful to know in formulating and altering the antivenin. **That** is a completely rational reason for investigating.*

*Oh, hell. Who am I kidding? Rational or not, I **do** think he might have survived. I know that I have no evidence whatsoever to support my feelings, and I have no idea where to find any.*

No wonder Harry thought I was ranting. Well, it's not the first time he's thought I'm a bit crazy. Of course, then I usually ended up saving his arse.

Walking over to her desk, Hermione pulled out a fresh notebook and quill and sat down to do one of the things she did best.

What is your basic research question? That will help you determine where you need to go from here. Hermione's mother, who frequently contributed to the *Journal of Dental Research* in addition to her clinical work, had given her daughter this sound advice when she'd fretted about writing her very first school essay.

She began writing.

Question: Could Severus Snape have survived Nagini's bite?

To answer that question, need to know:

* What was Severus Snape's skill level as a Potions master?

* What was his place in the Death Eaters? How close to Voldemort did he get?

*Snape...**Professor** Snape...was a skilled brewer. Even more, he was talented and intelligent enough for an alchemist of Albus Dumbledore's caliber to give him the Potions post and respect him professionally. Even if the old coot did shamelessly manipulate him.*

And, what else? He was brilliant and bad-tempered. She snorted. To say the least.

*I know about his parents, and where he grew up, and that he was a childhood friend of Lily Evans before James Potter came along. I know he joined the Death Eaters shortly after leaving Hogwarts. **How** shortly after? That I don't know. Good God, the man taught me for six years, and I barely knew him.*

Where did he train in Potions? Who was his master? Certainly not Slughorn. Snape probably would have gone mad at the mere thought of training with that imbecile.

Did he conduct his own research? Did he ever study snakes? And after Dumbledore's... death, when Snape became headmaster, would he have continued this possible research?

*What about during the year he taught Defense Against the Dark Arts? And how much exactly did Snape...**Professor** Snape, Hermione!...know about Dark Magic anyway?*

Voldemort.

He joined the Death Eaters early. He confessed to Professor Dumbledore. Became a spy.

She remembered the shock of the moment when Snape had revealed his tattooed arm at the Triwizard Tournament. She had been 15 and swept up by the grandeur of the event. *And by Victor. And worried about Harry.*

The three Gryffindors had known that Voldemort was gaining strength, was trying to regain human form. *Or some approximation thereof.* She had known that nasty as Snape had been to her and her friends, unfair as he'd been in class, biased as he'd been in house matters, Professor Snape not only hadn't mean them...even Harry...serious harm, but had actually tried to protect them. Of course, she'd kept this knowledge to herself most of the time; the boys had never been willing to be rational about Snape.

That day at the Tournament, she'd looked at the stands where Professor Snape had stood with the Headmaster and Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge and had watched them imperiously watching the gathered students, faculty, and dignitaries who had come to observe. Snape had looked exactly as usual: piercing eyes moving between his two neighbors and the crowd, slight scowl ready to emerge fully formed on his face. But, he had stood more rigidly than usual. He hadn't clenched his muscles or made any extra movements. His shoulders had been just a little squarer than usual, and his whole manner had simply been stiffer.

Then he'd closed his eyes and opened them again...it was longer than a blink...and turned to Dumbledore and Fudge, rolling up his left coat sleeve. She'd seen *something* on his arm, something inked and inflamed. She'd seen his face, then in full scowl and even wincing a bit. The Headmaster had looked at him with concern, then nodded. The Minister had simply furrowed his brow at the shape on Professor Snape's arm, given Dumbledore a worried look, and swallowed.

It had been the Dark Mark, and it had been burning. Snape had been in pain. Snape had been spying on the Death Eaters.

It had all happened in a matter of seconds: from the stance to the movement to her understanding of his role to the knowledge that Voldemort was back. The world had shifted.

*Professor Snape was almost killed that day. How did he survive? How did he manage to retain Voldemort's faith? He did, but **how** did he do it? He certainly must have brewed for the Death Eaters. What kind of contact would he have had with Nagini?*

Her questions had brought her full circle. To answer them, she needed to research Severus Snape, the man, the Potions master, and the spy. *I need a list.*

Places to Look:

*Hogwarts: Dumbledore's portrait; talk to Minerva.

*When Minerva asks why, I'll tell her I'm writing an article on Snape. Facing Dumbledore will be a whole other story. But he **has** to tell me more. Especially about the Wizengamot and Snape's trial.*

*Draco?

Professor Snape was his godfather, but would he even want to talk about him? To me?

*The Ministry's Library?

*Only if I **really** need to.*

*The Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers' Library: membership records, publications.

A good place to start.

*The wizarding world's media is laughable and would be useless in terms of Snape. Did he have any friends who were alive? Friends who **weren't** Death Eaters? Were there even any Slytherins he went to school with who **hadn't** become Death Eaters? Would one of them have any insight? Maybe. Would any of them be willing to speak with me? More doubtful.*

Hermione reviewed her notes. This would be a lot of work. On top of her biochemistry work, and her venom research in Potions, and assisting Professor Watson in her experiments. She groaned and laid her head down on her desk.

*Do I really want to do this? Do I really **need** to do this?* she asked herself and closed her eyes.

A series of images flashed through her head: Snape sneering at Hermione in class; giving her a shocked, displeased look when Dumbledore awarded her points for solving his logic puzzle; dressed as Neville's Boggart; raising his wand at Sirius in the Shrieking Shack; revealing his Dark Mark to Dumbledore and Fudge; glaring out at the Great Hall from the High Table; dueling with Lockhart; conferring with Dumbledore as they walked through the castle halls; demonstrating curses in the DADA classroom; looking back while running past her as she and Luna attended to a Stunned Professor Flitwick; lying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack with his neck bloody and silvery strands of memories drifting about his head.

Yes.

She checked her planner and rearranged her schedule for the next few weeks. Reviewing her list, she wrote out a few letters to owl the next day. Satisfied, she went to her bed, scooted Crookshanks from the middle of the covers onto one of her pillows, got in, fell asleep to the snores of the half-Kneazle next to her, and dreamed of piercing, dark eyes.

Society House, home to the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers, differed from the legendary Diogenes Club, the club for anti-social, distinctly unclubbable men, in just two respects: its membership was open to both women and men, and it featured a world-class research library and well-stocked Potions laboratory. The latter was immaculate and open only to full masters. The officers and staff were known to laugh at any apprentice or journeyman who even asked to take a peek at the room. Fortunately, journeymen enjoyed full access to nearly every other amenity in the place, including luxurious furnishings, top-shelf liquor, and gourmet meals served by silent house-elf waiters.

Hermione checked in with the porter at the front desk, walked upstairs to the locker room to put away her coat and bag, and, toting her favorite quill and some parchment, proceeded to the Library to begin her research.

The Society Library was, to Hermione, the Holy of Holies. To create it, the Society had employed the era's greatest Transfigurationists, who had truly outdone themselves. Within a physical space that was actually no larger than a large ballroom in a medium-sized London mansion, they had created a multi-storied temple to the written word. The ground-floor Reading Room was an enormous pentagon with dark wooden walls and a marble floor. Row upon row of tables provided ample space for researchers to read and study. Wood cabinets that reached halfway up the wall on all five sides of the room contained the card catalog for the Library's holdings. The sour-faced librarian who presided over this shrine from his large, elevated desk at the front had, when she first came to the Library, reminded Hermione of Hogwarts' own Irma Pince. She quickly learned that the resemblance was hardly coincidental; Irwin Pince was her elder brother and just as knowledgeable and protective of his priceless collection as his sister was of hers.

Although the Society, as well as Society House, was a mere 175 years old, the guild out of which it had grown went back centuries further. The Society's historian dated its origin to at least a century prior to the Roman conquest of Britain in A.D. 300. The Library's holdings, thus, were vast and exceptionally rich, including stone carvings, scrolls, incunabula, manuscripts, books published by some of the earliest wizarding printing presses (invented nearly a century prior to Gutenberg's press), and the personal Potions collections of several Potions masters and alchemists, including, most recently, those of Nicholas Flamel and Albus Dumbledore. The Society Library was truly the envy of the wizarding world. In fact, the Society's Board of Governors purposely withheld the extent of its holdings from the Transfigurationists who had created the Library in order to prevent any sabotage that might have arisen from professional jealousy.

The Reading Room paid tribute to the founders of the Society and their more antique predecessors. Marble busts of five of the so-called Ancients sat on top of the cabinets in the five corners of the room: Paracelsus (1493-?), Gregory the Smarmy (medieval, dates unknown), Dzou Yen (fourth century B.C.), Mary the Jewess (third century A.D.), and Brother Cadfael (12th century A.D.). They had been beautifully carved by noted wizarding sculptor Pygmalion Nutinhouse in 1830 when Society House was first dedicated. To the dismay of the Society's founders, however, the busts took on none of the characteristics of wizarding portraits, which moved and spoke, but rather remained entirely still and silent. There were no contemporaneous depictions of these Ancients, an apologetic Nutinhouse had explained, and later depictions of them were not endowed with the essences of the originals.

On the walls surrounding the researchers and the busts hung portraits of some of the Society's founders and later lights. The portraits were decidedly *not* silent. The portrait of Sacharissa Tugwood (1874-1966), inventor of the Beautification Potion, oh-so-sweetly recommended its use on a weekly basis, *at least*, to her neighbor two portraits down, that of Healer Grunhilda of Gorsemoor (1556 -1639), creator of the cure for Dragon Pox, who had lost an eye to the disease in her youth and inherited her mother's widow's hump when she had aged. While Grunhilda had been loved for her sweet disposition during her lifetime, in the 39 years since Sacharissa's portrait had been hung, Grunhilda's portrait had grown increasingly testy. The portrait of Glover Hipworth (1742-1805), inventor of Pepper-up Potion, which hung between those of the two ladies, found himself playing referee between them far more often than he wished. When one of the two fell asleep, Hipworth often stole the opportunity to go relax in the massive landscape painting of a medieval Potions garden that hung on the wall behind Librarian Pince's desk.

The discussions that most of the other portraits had tended at least to *include* intellectual matters, though gossip was a favorite pastime among them all. The portraits of Henri Gamache (1867-1967) and Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) often reminisced about the Hoodoo doctors they had known in the southeastern United States. New Orleansian Voodoo queen Marie Laveau (1801-1881) and Italian Potions mistress Laverne de Montmorency (1823-1893), inventor of several love potions, including Amortentia, debated the pluses and minuses of compelling love through one of their concoctions. These two especially bemoaned the inability of Gregory the Smarmy's bust to talk; they were in awe of the potion he had created to convince the drinker that the giver was his or her best friend. The implications for magical compulsion fascinated them.

Magical theorist Adalbert Waffling (1899-1981), though not strictly speaking a Potions master, had willed his portrait to the Society in order that at least the small bit of his essence in his portrait could engage in stimulating conversation with some of the late greats. Waffling's portrait could usually be found deep in talks with the portraits of early modern German alchemist Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), ancient Egyptian alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (a Thursday morning, late third century a dark and stormy Friday night, early fourth century), and witch Hesper Starkey (1881-1973), whose work explored the impact of moon phases on potion making. On slow afternoons, Librarian Pince himself was known to join in their learned discussions, which sometimes also veered toward Quidditch.

Both the Library's Reading Room and Society House's Board Room featured portraits of Hector Dagworth-Granger (1785-1935), who had founded the Society, but had actually done very little else worthy of note. He tended to travel back and forth between his two frames, trying to aid researchers or give advice to Board members, all of

whom found him tedious, and none of whom listened to him anyway.

Entering the Library, Hermione determinedly hurried past Dagworth-Granger's portrait, hailing him with a quick wave as he called after her, "What, ho! A pleasant afternoon to you, Journeywoman Granger!" She blushed as two visiting German journeymen snickered at the portrait's greeting. Hermione had foolishly engaged the departed Potions master's portrait in conversation during her first visit to the Library as an apprentice. She'd remembered Horace Slughorn asking her if she was related to the old pureblood during his first Potions class in her sixth year (she wasn't) and had been curious about him ever since. After having spent an hour listening to him discuss the disputes among the Society's founders in the 1820s over the color scheme for the new building's sitting room, she'd finally ducked out, claiming that she really needed to get home and feed her Kneazle. Now fully acquainted with his tediousness, Hermione made a point of rushing past his portrait and seating herself as far away from it as possible.

When she had settled her things into her preferred work area, Hermione walked up to the front desk and greeted Librarian Pince.

"Journeywoman Granger." He nodded to her. "You realize, I'm sure, that we at the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers do not ordinarily open our membership records to *anyone*, least of all to one who is not yet even fully qualified in our field. However, given the nature of your request, the fact that this member is deceased, and, most importantly, given the recommendation of your mentor, Potions Mistress Watson, "...*Oh, she **hates** that title!*..."we are making an exception."

"Thank you, sir. I do appreciate it."

"These are the conditions, Journeywoman Granger. You are to use a privacy charm while you work with the file in order to prevent other researchers from viewing or using it. You will use the file *only* in the Reading Room. Under no circumstances may it be taken out of the Reading Room, let alone out of Society House. You may neither remove any materials from the file nor add anything to it. There are protection spells on the file to make sure that you follow these rules. These spells will repel any ink that may fall on the file materials, but you are, nonetheless, *advised* to keep your quill and ink on *yourown parchment* and sufficiently *away from* the file. Finally, Journeywoman Granger, the Society does not grant you permission to publish any information you learn from this file and requires you to sign a magical contract consenting to this limitation. You will be denied access if you do not sign the consent form, and there will be *severe consequences* for violating it. Do you understand, Journeywoman Granger?"

From the depth of the frown Librarian Pince gave her, Hermione deduced that he would be most pleased if he had succeeded in frightening her into requesting a repetition of the rules or, better yet, if he had so frightened her that she fled his presence in terror. So, she smiled at him and said, "Yes, I understand perfectly, Mr. Pince, and I'll be happy to sign the form."

Exuding displeasure, Librarian Pince grabbed the signed consent form from Hermione's hand and grudgingly passed her the file. Thanking him extra-sweetly, Hermione returned to her workspace, cast the requisite privacy charm, and opened the file. It was fuller than it looked.

Just inside the file folder, a photograph of a young Severus Snape, probably taken when he first started teaching at Hogwarts, grimaced at her. The photograph was in color, but Hermione noticed that his eyes were still coal-black. She stared searchingly at them. When the photographic Snape started narrowing his eyes at her, she quickly flipped the image and proceeded to read the file.

MESP Membership File

Snape, Severus Tobias

Abstract

Vital Statistics:

b. 9 January 1960, Manchester, England

d. 15 May 1998, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Parents: Eileen Prince (pureblood) and Tobias Snape (Muggle)

Education:

* *Home-schooled in magic* by Eileen Prince Snape (M), Alexander Prince (Mat. GF) and Brigid White Prince (Mat. GM), Manchester, England, 1960-1971.

* *Muggle primary school*, Manchester, England, 1965-1971.

* *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*, Hogsmeade, Scotland, 1971-1978.

(O.W.L.s, 1976: Ancient Runes: O; Arithmancy: O; Astronomy: E; Care of Magical Creatures: O; Charms: O; Defense Against the Dark Arts: O; Herbology: O; History of Magic: E; Potions: O; Transfiguration: E)

(N.E.W.T.s, 1978: Ancient Runes: O; Arithmancy: O; Care of Magical Creatures: O; Charms: O; Defense Against the Dark Arts: O; Herbology: O; Potions: O; Transfiguration: E)

(Seventh-Year Honors Potions Project with Horace Slughorn, P.M., 1977-1978: O)

* *Informal apprenticeship* in healing Potions with Brigid White Prince (Mat. GM), Manchester, England, 1965-1971; summer holidays, 1971-1976.

* *Apprenticeship* with Arsenius Jigger, P.M., London, England, summer holiday, 1977.

* *Apprenticeship* with Damocles Belby, P.M., Shrewsbury, England, June 1978-June 1979.

* *Journeyman Status* attained, July 1979, under Damocles Belby, P.M.. Honors given by MESP for work on improving the Wolfsbane Potion.

* *Mastery work* with Vincent Shingleton, P.M., Great Hangleton, England, full-time, July 1979-August 1981; part-time, September 1981-September 1982.

* *Mastery work* with Albus Dumbledore, P.M., T.M., Hogsmeade, Scotland, part-time, September 1981-September 1982.

* *Mastery Status* attained, September 1982, under Vincent Shingleton, P.M. and Albus Dumbledore, P.M., T.M. Honors given by MESP for further work on the Wolfsbane Potion.

Employment:

1981-1982: Potions Teacher, resident brewer, and Head of Slytherin House, Hogwarts.

1982-1996: Potions master, resident brewer, and Head of Slytherin House, Hogwarts.

1996-1997: Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, resident brewer, and Head of Slytherin House, Hogwarts.

1997-1998: Headmaster and resident brewer, Hogwarts.

Publications:

"From Relief of Symptoms to Cure? New Findings on the Wolfsbane Potion," *Ars Alchemica* 268, no. 1 (1984).

"The Impact of Lycanthropic Self-Perception on the Palliative Properties of the Wolfsbane Potion," *Ars Alchemica* 268, no. 4 (1984).

"Sympathetic Magic and Biology: Aconite, Belladonna, and Hellebore," *Ars Herbaria* 320, no. 2 (1986).

"The Potioneer and the Herbologist," *Ars Herbaria* 323, no. 3 (1989). Written with input from Pomona Sprout, H.M., Professor of Herbology, Hogwarts Schools of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"An Inquiry into the Effects of the Brewer's Intent on Potions-Making," *Ars Alchemica* 276, no. 2 (1992).

"Power and Potions: Demarcating the Line Between Light and Dark Magic," *Ars Alchemica* 278, no. 3 (1994).

Hermione charmed a copy of the abstract into her notes and went through the rest of the file. There were Professor Snape's grade reports from the Muggle primary school he'd attended in Manchester ("a bright but troubled child") and a handwritten summary of the magical skills he'd studied with his mother and grandparents ("Severus' wand work...done only in the presence of adult witches and wizards, of course...is quite fluent, and he is well on his way to proficiency in his knowledge of magical herbs").

Hermione noticed, with a glee she tried to conceal, considering her august surroundings, that Professor Snape had taken ten OWLs, as she had, but that overall she had done better than he had; she had ten Os to his seven Os and three Es. She'd also got straight Os on her NEWTs, but he had done eight subjects to her seven. *The exams offer promise, not prediction*, she silently reminded herself. But giggles threatened again, and she had to snicker over the fact that he'd received an E in Transfiguration on both tests. Snape and Professor McGonagall must have tested each other's patience even during his student years.

She spent hours reading through the material on Snape's Potions training. Each of the Potions masters with whom he'd studied had submitted a syllabus of Snape's studies and an evaluation of his performance and future prospects.

Hermione found his grandmother, Brigid Prince's, statement touching. Madam Prince, in a gently chiding tone, noted the areas in which her grandson needed to improve and expressed pride in the things he did well. A memo from the Society attached to Madam Prince's report recognized her as "a learned and talented native healer who, while not a P.M., has earned our respect."

His later teachers consistently noted Snape's quiet, serious demeanor. Slughorn's reports on young Severus' work throughout his years at Hogwarts recorded the boy's developing talents: an almost encyclopedic memory of Potions ingredients, animal, vegetable, and mineral; ingredient location and preparation; knife skills; an understanding of the effects of various cauldron and stirring rod materials on particular brews; experimentation methodology; and the historical development of particular Potions. Slughorn described young Severus as coming "truly alive when he is focused on preparing a potion. The awkwardness he has when interacting with the other students disappears, and he becomes graceful, fluid, and keen."

Arsenius Jigger noted Snape's great interest in making the necessary trips to collect ingredients from the fields, gardens, and forest where they were grown (or lived). Belby wrote of his delight in his apprentice's preparedness for his daily work. Snape was efficient yet thorough in the brewing he did for his master. He read the literature Belby recommended, often going further when particularly captivated by a topic. Shingleton reported that his normally taciturn student grew increasingly edgy as his training went on, though Snape was still as conscientious and focused as always in his preparations.

Snape's journeyman and mastery work on the Wolfsbane Potion greatly interested her. Certainly, it made sense that he had studied that potion under Belby, the Potions master who'd first created it. Belby, as well the teachers under whom he took his mastery, however, wrote at length of Snape's great interest in and facility for working with this difficult brew. Was it concern for werewolves or concern for their potential victims that drove him? Or was it simply the challenge of working with a potion that few masters brewed at all, let alone with great skill?

Hermione knew of the "prank" Sirius had pulled on Snape during their sixth year at Hogwarts. Long before the invention of the Wolfsbane Potion made it possible for a werewolf to keep his or her human mind while transforming, Sirius had nearly got Snape killed and Remus' werewolf status exposed. Headmaster Dumbledore had dismissed Sirius' act and sworn all four boys involved to secrecy. Hermione imagined that it was Snape who howled that night, though, out of rage.

She also remembered Snape brewing Wolfsbane for Remus during the year he taught DADA. Despite Snape's apparent enmity, he had prepared the potion for Remus successfully each month. The month that Remus had transformed into his wildest form before Harry, Ron, and her outside the Shrieking Shack, it was due to Remus forgetting to take his regular dose, not Snape forgetting to brew the potion. Snape had been furious. Hermione still adored Remus, but, she thought, *Snape's anger was completely justified*.

At first, the fact that Professor Dumbledore had supervised the final part of Snape's mastery work in Potions surprised Hermione. Considered in terms of the war with Voldemort, however, she realized that it made great sense. Dumbledore, she had sadly learned, rarely acted out of sheer benevolence, at least concerning Tom Riddle and his desired downfall. From Dumbledore's comments on Snape's mastery work, she felt certain that he had truly admired his student's skills. But becoming his mentor, as well as his employer, also helped him keep Snape close, giving Voldemort confidence in Snape's spying skills while, perhaps, providing Snape with some space in which to be safe.

Hermione looked back at her original list of possible research sources and wondered if talking with Dumbledore's portrait might be an actual possibility.

Jigger and Belby are both long dead... Vincent Shingleton. That name sounds very familiar, Hermione thought.

A quick search of the card catalog for listings of his book and articles refreshed her memory: Vincent Shingleton had studied poisons in greater detail than Hermione ever wished to know. It appeared that he, too, was dead.

Another Shingleton appeared just before Vincent's in the drawer: Gaspard. *I've heard that name before too. Who is he? Oh, good god, it's Gaspard Shingleton, the inventor of the self-stirring cauldron! He must be... He's Vincent's son*. Checking the available cards again, she saw that, aside from his "great invention" in 1985, Gaspard had only published two short articles, both in the glossy monthly *The Practical Potioneer* and both on "improved" versions of the self-stirring cauldron.

For some reason, the idiots who put out the Famous Wizard Cards had given one to him, the inventor of one of the silliest, and least used, "innovations" in recent Potions history. Disparage the Famous Wizard Cards though she might, Hermione nonetheless remembered a great deal of what some might dubiously call pertinent information from her perusal of Harry and Ron's collections. Gaspard Shingleton, a funny-looking man whose spiky hair had gone white very prematurely, was born in 1959, which meant that he would have been just one year ahead of Snape at Hogwarts.

Rechecking Vincent Shingleton's report on Snape's work, Hermione confirmed that Gaspard and Snape's mastery work with Shingleton, Sr. overlapped. Looking back through the other reports, she noted that Gaspard had been at Slug and Jigger's during the same summer that Snape had worked there. She also supposed that the son of such a prominent colleague would have found a ready welcome in good old Horace's Slug Club.

Could Snape and Shingleton, Jr. have been friends? Snape had disparaged Gaspard Shingleton's "amazing invention" loudly during his classes. Some poor student

inevitably brought one of the self-stirring cauldrons to school every year, and amazingly, it wasn't always a first year. Apparently, Snape alternated between destroying that year's model himself and allowing the foolhardy owner to use it once and watch it immediately melt during the brewing of the first Potion in the first class of the year.

Shingleton had been in... She checked his father's report again. ... *Ravenclaw? OK, so he was intelligent enough. He might be useful to talk with. I wonder what he remembers about Snape from school or their mastery work?* Hermione jotted down some notes and resumed reading Snape's file.

For a few years after achieving mastery, Snape had published nothing. *Starting teaching and figuring out how to deal with Dumbledore must have taken a while* Between 1984 and 1994, the year before Voldemort's return, he had published six major articles in the scholarly journals. To her own astonishment, Hermione hadn't read any of them. No time like the present, she thought.

One of the Library's house-elf pages pulled the relevant issues and brought them to her table. Hermione skimmed them, reading the abstract for each and dipping into a couple when a paragraph caught her eye. His first two articles resulted from the research he'd done on the Wolfsbane Potion while working to become a journeyman and then a master. The second of these, "The Impact of Lycanthropic Self-Perception on the Palliative Properties of the Wolfsbane Potion," particularly interested her.

"In addition to the potency and purity of potions ingredients and the magical intent of the brewer, potioners must also seek to understand the status of the magical being ingesting or otherwise using a given potion. This is easiest to comprehend in the area of medicinal potions. While Healers' admonitions to patients to 'maintain a positive attitude' usually sound inane, especially coming from most contemporary, ill-trained mediwitches and wizards," Hermione snorted as softly as possible at that snark and continued reading, "senior practitioners and scholars in the field have amply demonstrated the power of patients to assist in their own cures and recoveries (Pye and Jekyll, 1902, 1920, 1936; Camber, 1953; Bulstrode and Bulstrode, 1962 and 1979).

"The Wolfsbane Potion is, among other things, a medicinal potion aimed at treating the chronic disease of lycanthropy. As is well known, it is not a *cure* for the disease (Snape, 1984), but it does provide significant relief of its most unpleasant, and dangerous, symptoms. I argue here that the Wolfsbane Potion becomes an even more important palliative when the werewolf consuming it 'maintains a positive attitude' both toward the potion's power and toward him- or herself. We ignore the psychological factors in the Wolfsbane's success to our detriment, as well as to that of werewolves and their prospective victims."

*Severus **Snape** wrote this? Very interesting...*

In his 1986 article, on the sympathetic magic involved in using potentially deadly plants as part of healing, stress-relieving, and other potions, Snape presented what Hermione considered a valuable insight into the theory of the efficacy of certain potions.

"The theoretical underpinning of sympathetic magic in the Potions field involves utilizing ingredients that, in their raw form, would produce symptoms at least as deadly as those the Healer or potioneer is trying to cure. The ordinary observer may find that their use seems counterintuitive. Potioners (as well as Muggle herbalists and homeopaths, incidentally)"...*That's daring of him to mention...*"know that plants such as aconite, belladonna (known also by its more lurid moniker, deadly nightshade), and hellebore are, in nature, extremely toxic, but when prepared and utilized properly, each has superior medicinal properties.

"The magical healing properties of aconite, belladonna, and hellebore are intrinsic to these plants. The ability of the plants to produce magical effects is also, however, affected and magnified by their combination with other magical ingredients and their incorporation into the relevant potions through the precise and exacting methods of the witch or wizard brewer."

Hermione forgot her admonishment to herself simply to *skim* through the articles and save the in-depth readings for later. She found herself absorbed by Snape's findings in his experiments with the three deadly herbs and appreciated the insights that the belladonna and hellebore concoctions provided into the use of aconite and the creation of the Wolfsbane Potion. *This test might be useful in my research. I wonder if I can adapt it to venom and other animal-derived ingredients?*

The more she read, the more she found herself mentally responding as a peer to her former professor's work *Oh, Severus, I don't know about that statement; I've never even **heard** of that use of belladonna... I should tell Neville about this... Of course, you would be mortified to hear that!*

"Traditional magical theories of sympathy are, then, entirely too simplistic to account for more recent insights into the workings of sympathetic magic, and by recent I mean the work of the last *century* or so. Cause and effect in these potions is more complex than slogan-like descriptors such as 'contagion' or 'like responds to like' would suggest. In fact, these traditional theories mask the infinitely more important definition of 'sympathy' as 'agreement.' In potions in which the main ingredients are the otherwise deadly plants I have discussed here, these plants become instruments of healing or amelioration because all of a particular potion's components...mundane and magical ingredients, the magic of combining, blending and otherwise brewing, and the brewer's own magical input and intent...work in *agreement* to achievement to accomplish the stated goal. In the subtle science and exact art of potion-making, theory that simplifies rather than expands narrows the imagination and the striving for innovation and improvement."

Hermione sighed audibly as she read the article's final sentence, earning her shushes from the occupants of nearby tables. She blushed. It was the phrase from his first-year speech to his Potions class: "subtle science and exact art." *He really **believed** it! It wasn't just some rhetorical flourish he'd written to strike the fear of... well, him... into us. And his theory!*

Hermione couldn't help but think of her own research into antivenins and the possibility of extending their curative powers. The Potions literature on sympathetic magic was *still* woefully inadequate, despite Snape's 20-year-old article. She couldn't remember finding anything else like it in her reading, but she'd look again now.

Why didn't I read this earlier? she asked herself. She did remember steering clear of his name in her earlier studies. It had been difficult then to consider reading the work of her dead professor. *But this is just what I need now. There's some evidence that contradicts his findings in relation to hellebore... but that doesn't invalidate the rest of his findings... and definitely not the theory. I wish that Severus were still around so I could talk with him about this. I'll have to reread it and make more notes... "Agreement"... I wonder how this will affect...*

"Ahem. Journeywoman Granger?"

Hermione looked up at the sudden appearance of the cranky Librarian. "Oh, Mr. Pince. Is something wrong? I'm being very careful with the file."

"Yes, well, good, Journeywoman Granger. As you should. There is, however, another patron who would like actually to *read* one of the journal volumes currently simply laying on your desk. May I give it to him?" Librarian Pince's glare suggested to Hermione a man who had somehow added salt rather than sugar to the lemons life had provided him.

"Actually, I would like copies made of this list of articles. So, if you wouldn't mind doing that before giving this volume to the gentleman, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Copies? You do realize that there is a *fee* for that service, Journeywoman Granger?"

"Yes, sir. Naturally. I'll be happy to pay it. Would you add it to my monthly bill for the Society? Thank you so much."

After the Librarian had stalked off to order her copies and help other patrons, she made some notes and turned back to Snape's file. He had never written for the monthly *Practical Potioneer*, which she always thought resembled a weird cross between a trade publication and *Witch Weekly's* gossip columns. His file, though, did contain several clippings *about him* from that magazine. Short columns reported on the international prizes he'd garnered for several of his studies. The accompanying wizarding photographs showed the young Potions master standing between his two mentors, Shingleton and Dumbledore; shaking the hand of the president of the International

Assembly of Potioneers upon receiving the IAP's highest award; and standing amidst his Hogwarts colleagues.

Hermione observed that Snape aged notably from picture to picture, even within the short span of time in which they were taken. He never smiled. The war had never ended for Snape, even after Voldemort's first defeat, and it showed in his face.

Standing between his two mentors as a newly minted Potions master, nervousness and pride warred on Snape's face. He occasionally glanced back and forth between them. In the second photo, Snape glared imperiously at the elderly wizard handing him a golden, cauldron-shaped statuette. His eyes narrowed slightly at the man; his lips were pinched together. Still, there was some satisfaction in his eyes in these two photos, even amidst the gravitas.

In the last picture, though, Snape's frown stood out amidst the happy faces of the rest of the faculty. The grimace pulled his whole face down, accentuating his long nose. Sporadically, Snape raised one eyebrow at the photographer. The lines carved into his forehead made him appear to have a permanent tension headache. Hermione noted that his eyes had lost something, some spark that had lit his eyes in the previous two pictures despite the apparent solemnity. She frowned at the change.

The Practical Potioneer had published little about Snape after 1994. After an initial article speculating about the rumors of Snape's involvement with the revived Death Eaters, the editors made sure to stick with carefully neutral statements that, nonetheless, conveyed distaste with the man. Their 1998 obituary awkwardly combined a glowing evaluation of Snape's early work in Potions, condemnation of his true Death Eater days, sadness at the "terrible perversion of our noble art" that he was forced to commit as a spy, and rather stilted prose mourning Snape's death "in the brave service of the Light." She found it nauseating.

Upon reaching the end of the file, Hermione felt as if she'd come to know Severus Snape, or at least a part of him, in a curiously intimate way. Between the file on his Potions career, his articles, and the memories he'd given Harry all those years ago, which she had insisted upon viewing at the time, Snape's character emerged more fully.

He was brilliant, she thought, something that she had already believed as a student. The Society's file, though, went far beyond her teenage impressions. It presented a portrait of the young wizard as a Potions researcher deemed gifted by elders in his field, who had no reason to buy into his domineering classroom persona. In this file, Snape was neither a git of a teacher stifled by the everyday demands of students nor a grouchy cynic ruined by the corrosive influence of the Death Eaters and the psychological intensity of spying. His intellectual passions lived on beneath both façades. *Oh, the Potions innovations Severus could have made if not for Voldemort... and his own stupidity for signing onto Snakeface's agenda in the first place!*

Outside his Potions research, Severus had to have cultivated a particularly ruthless brand of ingenuity Hermione thought. He'd have needed it in order to spy as effectively as he did on a powerful, mad Dark wizard and his demented minions. Further, Snape was himself a formidable wizard who had developed his magic in directions that few attempted, let alone mastered. *Occlumency, Legilimency, special spells, advanced Apparition skills. And he flew! I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall behind Minerva when Severus flew out of Hogwarts.*

He was damaged in his childhood by his terrible parents, by his...troubles... in school with the Marauders, by feeling abandoned by Lily. His tetchy personality certainly couldn't have helped matters any.

*Dumbledore didn't protect him when he should've. His Head of House was a self-important, self-indulgent **nincompoop** who wouldn't have known how to help a floundering adolescent if a whole library of childhood development literature had fallen into his lap. Unless, of course, some Quidditch hero or high-up Ministry lackey he'd once taught had written said literature.*

Severus had to have had felt some self-hatred to join the Death Eaters and remain even as long as he did. His father was a Muggle, though by all accounts not much of a father. Severus was attracted to the Dark. It's not like he was an angel or anything. He probably couldn't have spied as long and as well as he did without that attraction... and knowledge of Dark magic.

A less-than-discreetly mumbled "Ahem" alerted Hermione and the rest of the Reading Room's patrons to the fact that Librarian Pince would be ending his hours in just ten minutes and expected them to return their requested material *now*. She returned Severus Snape's file and made a note to herself to Floo Minerva that evening. *She'll believe that I'm writing an article about Severus...erm, Professor Snape...and that I need to speak with her as well as Professor Dumbledore. Won't she?*

On her way out of Society House, Hermione stopped at the porter's office and asked him to put a note in Gaspard Shingleton's pigeonhole. She knew that the Owl Post's service owls were perfectly competent, but she was just paranoid enough to think that one of the Society's owls would be better able to track down one of its members. "You'll make sure he's notified that he has a message, won't you?" asked Hermione. "I don't really know how often he comes in."

"Certainly, miss," the porter replied. When Hermione had left, the porter rolled his eyes. "Notify him? Merlin, the nerve of that woman!" At the sound of a Floo call from the other end of the room, the porter retreated.

From around the corner came a nondescript, brown-haired man, who plucked the note out of Shingleton's box, properly addressed it, tied it around the leg of one of Society's hardy-looking owls, and sent the creature out the window to make the delivery.

Gaspard Shingleton ran a hand through his spiky white hair as he read the curious note. The Granger woman's name sounded familiar. *Was it from the Daily Prophet? Or maybe she was the redhead from that party the other weekend?* She wanted to meet with him to see if he could tell her anything about... *his student days with Snape! Bloody hell. Definitely not the redhead, then.* He wrote out his reply and gave it to the owl to take to *Journeywoman Hermione Granger. Oh, the bloody war, that's it.* And he got up to fix himself a large firewhiskey.

Author's Notes:

Gracious thanks to my editor, **littllezzyann**, who has achieved the perfect combination of hand holding and butt kicking.

With the following exceptions, all the Potions masters/alchemyists discussed are canon (though some were also "real"), either from the books themselves or from the Famous Wizard Cards: Mary the Jewess (real), Brother Cadfael (Ellis Peters' mysteries), Pygmalion Nutinhouse (mine, all mine), Henri Gamache (real, or at least the pseudonym of the real writer of several hoodoo books from the mid-20th century), Zora Neale Hurston (real African-American novelist and anthropologist, and if you haven't read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* yet, you should), Marie Laveau (real), Zosimos of Panopolis (real), and Vincent Shingleton (fabricated). The Diogenes Club belongs to the Sherlock Holmes universe created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Society House's atmosphere was also inspired by the Bellona Club in Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey novels.

JKR hasn't provided us with an exact date for the Final Battle or Snape's death. *DH* places it sometime in May 1998. While not historically significant, like the Ides of March, I think that the Ides of May might also have appealed to Voldemort's sense of the morbid.

Dates for Severus' formal schooling and employment by Hogwarts come from canon and the interpolations of the *HP Lexicon*. I made up his OWL and NEWT scores based on what we all really know, deep down in our hearts, about our beloved Potions master and what I believe based on his character as a student and on his history. JKR never addressed Snape's post-Hogwarts Potions training. My depiction builds on the interesting portrayals created by the fanfic authors who tread this ground before me and draws on my knowledge of the medieval guild system (very incomplete knowledge) and the development of the professions in modern Europe and North America. Arsenius Jigger, Damocles Belby, and Gaspard Shingleton are all canon characters who were Potions masters, though JKR provides us with very little information about them. Although there's no indication in canon that Snape knew or worked with any of them, it would be reasonable to assume that he at least *knew* Shingleton, since they would have attended Hogwarts at the same time.

Professor Watson's hatred of the "Potions mistress" title and use of the term "palliative" are in honor of littlelizzyann.

Diligence

Chapter 4 of 4

Hermione fantasizes about one man and has enlightening conversations with two. Our spy comes clean.

Chapter 4: Diligence

Aside from the massive bookshelves in her front room, the oversized, claw-footed bathtub was Hermione's favorite part of her old flat. The bathroom walls were painted a color called "molten lava," a sort of jewel-tone red that was bright enough to warm, but cool enough to relax, and the tiled floor was covered with a large matching rug. Next to the tub sat an end table with just enough room for a candle, a glass of wine, a bottle of bubble bath, and a book.

After her day at the Society's Library, Hermione felt that she deserved a good soak. She filled the tub with hot water, made sure the surface was covered with foam, lit the eucalyptus-scented candle, poured herself a glass of merlot, and sank into the tub with a sigh. Closing her eyes, she slipped into her usual bath-time fantasy.

A spa... A woodland scene outside the window... Warm and steamy... Ah, there's that dark-haired male bath attendant again. More merlot? Thank you. Don't mind if I do. Still here, huh? Do stay. Silent type, aren't you? You want to rub my shoulders? Okay. Mmmm... that feels so nice. Strong hands... Long fingers... You're quite talented.

Move around to this side. You're very striking, whoever you are. Not conventionally handsome, but quite striking, and you have a very knowing look about you. What could you be thinking, staring at me so? And, your eyes, dark as coal, but much shinier. You look like... You are... Snape? No, you're Severus, like in the photographs. Sssseverusss...

Fantasy-Hermione smiles broadly at him. What brings you to my fantasy, Severus? Don't get me wrong. I'm thoroughly delighted to find you here. Again. I had some fantasies about you at school, you know, but you're different now.

You're intriguing... Fantasy-Severus whispers something. I can't hear you, but whatever you're saying sounds delicious. Tell me again...

A loud *crack* shocked out Hermione out of her fantasy. "Damn it!" she cried. The noise turned out to be an owl determinedly tapping, tapping at her bathroom window. "'Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!'" she shouted. Hermione sighed. "I don't suppose you have any appreciation for poetry, do you, owl?" she asked the affronted bird while opening the window to let him in. The owl looked at her curiously.

"You have rotten timing. This better be good." After she threw on her bathrobe, she signaled for the bird to follow her into the kitchen, where she offered him some food, sat down, and opened the note.

Dear Ms. Granger:

I was surprised, but interested, when I received your note. I read the articles about Snape in the Daily Prophet at the war's end, but I haven't thought much about him since he left my father's laboratory for Hogwarts more than 20 years ago. We were not the best of friends, but I did respect his intellect and his commitment to Potions. My father thought very highly of him. I don't know how much insight I can offer, but I am willing to talk. Are you available next Wednesday at noon for lunch?

Best Wishes,

Gaspard Shingleton, P.M.

"Next week it is," Hermione said to the owl and sent the creature on his way.

The next afternoon, Hermione was back at her favorite table at Hugo's.

Shea McIntosh was there, too, watching as usual.

Hermione was reviewing her notes on Severus' Wolfsbane articles when Lola set down a pot of tea for her. Hermione didn't notice until the friendly waitress spoke up.

"That's the second pot today, Hermione. Don't float away, now."

"Huh? Oh! Thanks. Ooh, biscuits too?"

"Certainly. A girl can't live on salad and tea alone. Oh, must go. Another regular needs me."

Hermione poured herself a cup and turned back to her work.

He knew his stuff, she thought. In her short career, she'd read plenty of mediocre books and articles and had listened to more pedestrian talks at Potions conferences than she liked to remember. Mediocrity bored her to tears. Severus Snape's writings did not. His knowledge was extensive and deep. He offered both careful empirical scholarship and daring use of magical theory.

She could read his personality in his writing too. Snape was thorough. *He must have known as much about magical theory as Waffling. He even cites conversations he had with him.*

Snape was unafraid of opposing viewpoints. "Indeed, an entire school of thought is devoted to the inviolate nature of Light or White Magic, an understanding that has underpinned much of normative magical practice and theory for centuries. Waffling, this school's major proponent, offers lasting insights to any scholar of magic. This paradigm, however, raises as many questions as it answers and must be reevaluated in light of newer research," Snape wrote. *He's not dismissive of his predecessors or unafraid to challenge them*, Hermione thought.

Snape argued clearly and sharply. He explained his methodology carefully, mapping out each step in detail. He welcomed the reader into his writing, the very opposite of

his pedantic classroom performance. *At least he doesn't call his readers dunderheads!*

Still, his sardonic humor shone through. He pulled no punches in mocking the Potioneers he thought fools. "Bureaucratic red tape...particularly the speed associated with Ministry Potioneer Armand Slug's animal namesake...slowed the development of this groundbreaking potion as much as did the level of difficulty it presents to the average brewer." *Very cutting. Sharp intellect, sharp wit. He's certainly **not** boring. Damn sexy, actually.*

Good God, she thought, *I'm nearly pining over the man who was an utter, utter bastard when he taught me. Get a grip! Sexy, yes, but hardly a happy, easygoing guy*, she told herself. *I know that. I do. Why would I ever expect him to be that way?* She frowned. *Don't be a silly little girl, Granger.*

It's the work that's important, she admonished herself, *and I'm paying him respect by doing it. He was too talented to die... At least not without having tried some serious magic to counter Nagini's poison. Plus, he was attractive. Very attractive. Not that that has anything to do with it... Shit! I'm doomed.* She laid her head face down on the table with a groan. When she looked up, she caught sight of someone familiar negotiating the crowded café on the way to her table and slipped her wand down her shirtsleeve just past her wrist.

McIntosh frowned when he saw Hermione's surprised expression and followed his eyes to its cause. The corners of his mouth turned up in the slightest of grins when he saw who was on the way to Hermione's table.

"Put it away, Granger. We're long past that, aren't we?"

"Does that mean you don't want to kill or maim me anymore?"

A heavy exhale answered her.

She narrowed her eyes at her visitor and returned her wand to its usual resting place. "Did you come here in response to my letter, Draco?" Malfoy's face darkened ever so slightly. "Erm, I mean, *Malfoy*. Wait... How did you know I would be here?"

"A mutual friend told me that you hang out here a lot."

"We have a mutual friend?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. We do, but let's leave... *that person* out of this for now."

"OK. Well. Thank you for coming, then. Have a seat. You're really willing to talk to me about Se..., erm, Professor Snape?"

Malfoy dropped into the chair across from Hermione, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and looked her in the eyes. "I never imagined I'd be doing this, Granger." He squirmed. "I will, *but* that doesn't mean that I'm going to answer *all* of your questions."

"No, of course not. Well, thank you, Malfoy. Did... ah... did you want to *order* anything? I mean, since we're here? The food's very..."

"Save it, Granger. I didn't come here for the food." He laid his hands on the table, turning his head away from Hermione to stare down at them. "You must know how shocked I was when I got your letter." Malfoy looked up sharply. "Furious, actually. I thought you were being a nosy little Gryffindor busybody who had no right to *know* personal stuff about Snape, let alone to ask *me* to tell you."

Hermione frowned, but held her tongue.

"But as you can see, I'm calmer now."

Hermione found Malfoy's behavior a little melodramatic. *Of course, he always laid it on thick if he thought it would get him something he wanted.*

"I'm still not clear exactly *why* you want to know, but our friend assures me that whatever your motivation, it has nothing to do with dishing dirt or exacting revenge."

"I would never do that!" *Who does he think I am? Rita Skeeter?* She took a deep breath. *Don't let him get to you; he's always tried to do that.*

"Well, we'll see about that, won't we? Let's just get this over with."

Hermione motioned for him to begin.

"Snape was my godfather. Of course, being a know-it-all, you're already aware of that." Malfoy curled the right side of his mouth.

Does he have to insult me every time he says something?

"He and my parents were old friends. My mum and dad were both prefects when Snape started Hogwarts, and I think they kind of looked out for him."

Hermione suspected that she and the senior Malfoys had different definitions of "looked out for."

"Snape was good to me, attentive, when I was a kid. We were close. He got me a stuffed toy dragon when I was three or so." His voice dropped. "I had it for ages."

Malfoy looked up at Hermione to gauge her reaction to this statement. Hermione, picturing a younger Severus on the floor making a toy dragon fly as a blond toddler laughed and clapped his hands, grinned at him.

"He actually talked with me, too. Most of my parents' other friends treated me like, I don't know, some brainless spawn. When Snape came to dinner, though, he used to start off talking to me before turning to my parents. You know: what kind of mischief I was getting myself into, what I was reading. When I was first learning, he had me read to him every time he came over. He was like a member of the family, an uncle."

Malfoy shifted in his seat. Hermione figured that Severus probably was the closest thing Malfoy had to an uncle when he was younger. The Lestranges were in Azkaban, the Tonkses were *personae non gratae*, Narcissa's Black cousins were out of the picture in some form or another, and as for Lucius, she believed that he'd been an only child like his son. For such a socially prominent family, the Malfoys didn't have many close relatives about when Draco was growing up. Had he been lonely?

"Snape even came to my birthday parties, if you can believe it. He didn't give me a lot of presents, a lot of *things*, but he spent a lot of *time* with me. When I was about eight, he gave me a tour through my own greenhouse! My mum's greenhouse, that is. He taught me all about the plants and the bugs, what he would use for which potions. We dug in the dirt, watering and replanting things, arguing over which plants were the ugliest, which bugs would go fastest in a race. Then, of course, he cleaned me up so that my father wouldn't know that his model son had been playing in the dirt." Malfoy grinned at the memory.

"My parents were condescending about Snape. You know, 'Oh, dear, don't be upset. Severus can't afford to buy you a *real* gift, but he loves you just the same.' Of course, they never said anything to his face. I once overheard my mother tell my father how much she liked Snape despite the fact that he had no money and was a half-blood. He had apparently 'cleaned up so well.'"

Hermione shuddered.

"Snape was way more interesting than any of my friends who were my own age. I used to hope that he would just stay poor so that he would keep playing chess or cards with me or let me watch him brew simple potions or whatever. Pretty snotty of me, wasn't it?"

Malfoy looked away from Hermione, and his eyes unfocussed for a minute. He shook his head and resumed.

"When I got to Hogwarts, I took Snape's interest and affection for granted. I got a lot of attention from other students, more because I was Lucius' son rather than what I actually did. It was kind of exhilarating to be idolized, even if it was for the wrong reasons."

"You acted like a prat, Malfoy," Hermione said.

"I know!" he replied, trying to refrain from shouting. "You lot certainly pointed that out enough."

Malfoy looked for Hermione to respond. She shrugged and said, "I thought you'd change if you realized it. I was naïve."

"I thought you'd quiet down eventually if you got frustrated enough." He smirked. "I guess I was naïve, too."

Touché.

"I came to think that Snape *owed* me his attention because I was his godson and the Malfoy heir," Draco continued. "But I didn't spend much time with him after I started school, not outside the classroom. Godfather or not, I didn't want to hang out with my Head of House any more than any other normal kid did."

Severus must have been disappointed in him. He really cared about Draco, Hermione thought. "I liked spending time with my Head of House," she said.

"Yeah, well, you were a Muggle-born, Gryffindor suck-up, Granger. No pureblood Slytherin would ever have been that obvious."

"Snape still favored me in class, though. He had to, I suppose. It certainly didn't have anything to do with my stellar personality. Outside of the Potions lab, our relationship cooled. More my fault than his. If I'd been less arrogant and more observant, sixth year might have been different."

"I knew Snape was a Death Eater. Being a Malfoy, I assumed that he was subservient to my father. After all, Father was a wealthy, well-connected pureblood, and Snape merely a poor, half-blood, nobody schoolteacher, right? I had no idea. I underestimated him, his position, his intelligence, and his abilities. I never stopped to think that his loyalties might be elsewhere. Like all the other Death Eaters' kids, I thought he had the Headmaster fooled. I never considered the opposite until it was too late. I never considered why an intelligent person would ever repudiate the Dark Lord."

"I knew what my parents' friends did, Granger. Not in any great detail, of course. Contrary to what you lot believed, though, I never took the Mark. Hell! I never even attended a Death Eater meeting until after my father was sent to Azkaban and Voldemort gave me my *assignment* the summer before sixth year. I wanted to prove myself, but I never wanted to be a *murderer*." He said that last firmly and looked directly at Hermione.

He sighed. "I'd like to believe that if I'd realized earlier that year just how wrong I was about Snape's abilities and true loyalties, I would have made different choices. I might have at least talked to him about what I was being compelled to do. I truly don't know, however, if my own arrogance wouldn't have won out anyway."

Hermione kept her eyes fixed on Malfoy's face, which had flushed in the course of his explanation, and remained quiet. Malfoy took a deep breath.

Sensing Malfoy's distress, Hermione asked, "Can you tell me more about what Professor Snape was like outside of school?"

"Oh! Yes. Well, he was still a right bastard, of course. A true curmudgeon. He had a *killer* wit. Once at a dinner at the manor, he insulted a couple of Ministry lackeys who worked for my father so cunningly that they left feeling as if they'd received the highest praise! I don't remember what he said, but right after they left, Snape laughed, *really* laughed. It took me a sec to get over my shock and join in."

"Another time, Snape and my father were in the lounge talking with a couple of foreign, erm, colleagues. They thought of some pretty creative insults for each other. After about a while, Snape said something that silenced them all. Then they burst out laughing and went around shaking his hand and congratulating him. He must have said *something* that none of them could top. Snape just flashed 'em a smug grin, but his eyes fairly sparked. You could tell he was in his element."

Malfoy's own eyes fairly sparked.

"I can imagine that," Hermione told him. "I've been reading his scholarly articles. He got furious with shoddy things his peers wrote, and he criticized them with the most biting sarcasm. It's brilliant! You can almost picture the smirk on his face while he wrote it."

"That's Snape."

"Do you think it was some sort of defense mechanism? His humor?" Hermione asked.

Malfoy flashed her his most exasperated grimace. "Of course it was, Granger, but he was still damned funny. Well, not precisely *funny*... he certainly wouldn't have liked to be described that way, but dead humorous."

Hermione tried to look chastened. She was finding Draco Malfoy more insightful than she'd imagined.

"Snape... played chess with my father and taught me to play. He brought my mum flowers whenever he came over. He spent a lot of time in our library. He and my father used to sit up late talking over Ogden's and cigars. I got caught by my nanny spying on them a couple of times."

Hermione smiled and said, "Yeah, I got caught a couple of times spying on my parents' cocktail parties. I thought it was so 'grown-up.'"

Malfoy smiled.

"Malfoy," Hermione asked, "did Snape get along with other Death Eaters? I mean, besides your parents?"

"Well... I know that he hated my Aunt Bellatrix with a vengeance. Not surprising. She was an absolute loon. I mean I didn't actually *meet* her until she escaped from Azkaban during our, what, fifth year?"

Hermione stilled and then nodded.

"Right." Malfoy's face reddened; he realized how blithely he'd asked that question. "Snape loathed her, and she, him. I guess she was jealous of him: his skills and his standing with my father and with Voldemort. All that *and* he was a half-blood." He paused and shook his head. "I used to believe that Snape admired the Dark Lord. But, well, now... I suppose underneath it all, he felt disdain... and fear. I mean, he must have believed in it at some point. I never figured just out when he changed his mind, and he certainly didn't tell me. I wish he had."

Hermione watched Malfoy's face as he told her what he knew about Severus' beliefs. He was struggling to make sense of the difference between what he had believed as a child and what had become clearer to him. Malfoy had to know how Severus felt about Harry's mother...from the way Harry had taunted Voldemort, if nothing else...but it seemed he didn't know the rest. Hermione chose not to tell him about the Potters, Dumbledore, and Severus' defection from the Death Eaters.

Hermione reached out a hand to her former nemesis, but drew back before touching his. "Malfoy," she asked quietly, "what did your parents think of Professor Snape after

the war? When they'd learnt what he'd done to help Harry and the Order?"

He looked up at her quickly, then back down at his hands. "They were devastated when they found out about his death. My mother felt guilty because of the Unbreakable Vow. She was furious with Aunt Bellatrix for pushing him to make it and then doing all she could to undermine him, trying to get him disgraced and killed. Mum was angry with herself for making the request in the first place. She was just trying to protect me..."

"I don't think Snape's real loyalties surprised my father. When he heard, he just furrowed his brow and then, nothing. Maybe after that last year without a wand and practically Aunt Bellatrix's prisoner, Father thought that Snape had simply caught on to the Dark Lord's lunacy quicker than he had. Or maybe he thought it was like one of Snape's jokes: Snape had pulled one over on him, and although he resented being taken in, he had to admire the man's skill. My father hasn't said a thing against him."

Malfoy stilled. Hermione watched him.

McIntosh watched them both, wondering what the young man would do or say next.

Malfoy took a shaky breath, but when he spoke, his voice was even. "Anything else, Granger?"

"No. Malfoy... *Draco*, thank you. I know this must have been really diff..."

"Like I said: save it. Spare me your *concerned friend act*. Just... Look, I'll never be able to make up with Severus. So, don't go... You know that he'd hate for everyone to be talking about his private life. Promise me that you won't let that happen, Hermione? OK?"

She didn't hesitate. "I promise, Draco."

Draco nodded and left.

Hermione felt as if she'd just tussled with a small hurricane. She was still in one piece, but felt a little shaky.

Shea McIntosh watched Hermione struggle to compose herself, pack up her things, and leave. He sipped from his cup of tea. It had gone a bit acrid, but that suited his mood. The conversation he'd just witnessed made him pause. For the first time, he felt that he shouldn't have listened in. He didn't feel *guilty*; trailing Hermione Granger served an important purpose. He did, however, feel unsettled. The more she learned about Snape's past... *no*, my past, *damn it!* The closer that Hermione got to a fuller picture of *his* past, the more difficult Severus Snape found it to maintain his distance.

His McIntosh persona had always provided just enough remove from his past life at least to pretend to himself that he was an objective observer. But she was getting closer. He wanted her to get closer, but it unnerved him to see her talking with someone he knew and cared about...Draco...about himself. He knew that Hermione was making this Potions project personal. It was no longer only about intellectual curiosity. And he knew that it *couldn't* be merely about intellectual curiosity. The woman had an inherently crusading spirit that could never be completely crushed. The task she was to undertake demanded a brighter passion than mere intellectuality. More broadly, though, intellect without passion, without emotion, was a cold, dead crust of a thing. He believed that. He'd seen it.

The further that Hermione Granger moved along in her inquiry into Severus' life as a scholar and a Death Eater, the closer she got to him; not only to a body of work by a scholar, not only to the movements of a spy, but to *his* scholarship, *his* espionage. She was becoming more intimately familiar with his life than anyone had before, and he knew that she needed to in order to... to... do her work...*I can't even say it aloud*...but it still, after all he had learned, unnerved him.

Hermione will get by, he thought. She always has more than got by. And I will compose myself. There is more to be done.

The following Wednesday found Hermione at Hugo's again, wondering where the rest of the week had gone.

She'd prepared ingredients and potions for Professor Watson. She'd scribbled in her journal, trying to articulate the theoretical foundations for her Potions Mastery project and had run experiments on different bases and equipment to be used in the final creation. She'd allowed several Weasleys to drag her to a Quidditch match, substituting a mental review of what she'd learned so far about Severus for attention to the game. She'd had tea with Luna following her friend's interview with the Unspeakables, listening to as much of a debriefing as Luna was permitted to relate.

On the day she was due to speak to Gaspard Shingleton, Hermione reviewed his biography and her notes. The conversation with Draco the previous week still disturbed her. *Severus doesn't provoke dispassionate description, that's for sure.*

The trouble was that the conversation she'd had with Draco hadn't really been a conversation. It had been more like a confession. In revealing part of Severus' private side, Draco had also revealed a still-wounded part of himself. She'd found what he'd said useful, but a part of her wished that she could apologize and return it. She was touched that someone who really didn't like her had agreed to tell her this truth. Hermione was certain, however, that she couldn't offer Draco the absolution a priest would provide in exchange for the revelations. She had no means or right to do so. She prayed that talking with Gaspard Shingleton would be easier.

Hermione's nervousness about the meeting was compounded by the fact that Minerva had insisted she come to Hogwarts that very evening to dine with the faculty and stay overnight before speaking with her and Dumbledore's portrait the next day. Minerva had spoken to Hermione in her sternest 'I-will-brook-no-dissent' voice, and Hermione had caved.

When she saw a man with tanned, wrinkle-free skin and a shock of spiky, white hair approach her table, all Hermione could think was that Gaspard Shingleton was a lot better looking than his Famous Wizard Card made him out to be.

When Shea McIntosh, who, naturally, was also sitting at his regular table at the café, saw the man approaching Hermione, all he could think was that Shingleton had always been a small-minded, womanizing wanker. He looked forward to watching Hermione put the fuckwit in his place.

"Hermione Granger?"

"Oh, hello! You must be Mr. Shingleton. Please, sit. Thanks for meeting me here rather than at the Society."

"Not at all." He grinned. "The median age of the members who actually spend time there must be about 50 years my senior. I bet you find eating there as tedious as I do."

"The atmosphere there can be rather stuffy," she agreed, grinning back.

McIntosh rolled his eyes. *Wipe the grin off your face, woman.*

Shingleton perused the menu for a few minutes, and they placed their orders.

"So, Hermione," Shingleton began. "May I call you Hermione? Good...so much friendlier that way. You really want to talk to me about *Severus Snape*?"

"I do, yes, erm, *Gaspard*. I learned that you two studied Potions at the same time, and you both apprenticed under your late father. Master Shingleton's work on poisons is very interesting, by the way. I've been re-reading some of it lately."

"Really? I always found my father's work *deadly* dull," he drawled, giving her a half-grin. "I'm sorry. I know that was a terrible joke. Honestly, though, I never could

understand Father's morbid fascination with poison."

Hermione and McIntosh separately, but simultaneously, mentally groaned. *That did it*, McIntosh thought. *It's just a matter of time before our Miss Granger puts him in his place.*

"Erm, yes, well... I'm writing an article about Professor Snape, and as a peer of his who studied alongside him, your perspective is really very important... Gaspard."

McIntosh smiled. *Flattery will get you everywhere with this one.*

"I'm happy to help if I can, Hermione. As I wrote in my letter to you, though, Snape and I weren't exactly friends." He snorted. "I don't think he actually *had* any friends. He had one friend early on...some girl in Gryffindor...but I heard he treated her abominably, and she dropped him." He flicked his hand as if he were flicking a fly off the table, and from his look, Hermione surmised that silently Shingleton was adding, "And the little snot deserved it, too."

Shingleton continued, "He spent time with Lucius Malfoy, but I think Snape was more of Malfoy's acolyte than a friend."

There it is again; he's looking at me like we're co-conspirators! Hermione thought.

"Snape was terribly intelligent, but socially he was worlds apart from Malfoy's set. Snape seemed to be something of a social climber, if you know what I mean."

Hermione bristled. *Another snob.*

Shingleton took her silence as assent and continued. "But he was a star in Potions; there's no denying that. Snape was just as sullen and arrogant with Professor Slughorn as he was with everyone else, but the old man just loved him. Snape had no social connections, but he was smart. He must have done well in seventh-year Potions. I was already graduated by then, you know."

Hermione nodded. "You were apprenticing with Arsenius Jigger when Snape studied with him during the summer of... 1977. What was that like?"

"I don't know if you could call what Snape did *studying*. I was studying with Jigger. Snape was still in school; this was just a *summer job*. He was more like a low-level assistant. Master Jigger had him preparing ingredients, waiting on customers in the apothecary, that kind of thing. Tedious stuff, really. I think he sometimes prepared simple potions for Master Jigger, but that was as far as it went."

Hermione knew from Snape's file that Jigger had him do much more than Shingleton acknowledged. *He's turning the focus away from Severus and onto himself*

"Master Jigger was renowned for brewing some rather complicated potions for special order," Hermione noted. "You must have learned a great deal from him."

"Oh, yes. It was a wonderful opportunity for me. He had me making several potions for his special-order customers. Xenographical Dip, the Anti-Yex Solution, Zythum."

Shea McIntosh let out a shingle snarf of a laugh and then covered his mouth.

"Wait," Hermione said, "Zythum? Isn't that an ancient Egyptian *beer*?"

"*Malt beverage* would be more accurate."

"Ah. Right." *Utter wanker.* "And Snape?"

"He observed from time to time. He did some ingredients prep. I had him fill in for me on some of the more tedious parts of the process, especially stirring. He was actually *fascinated* by that dreary aspect of potion-making, if you can believe it."

"That's where your invention came in?"

"Yes! The Self-Stirring Cauldron takes the tedium out of potions making, allowing one to focus on the more interesting, more important aspects of the process. It's done very well, you know, helping ordinary witches and wizards brew some of the simpler draughts at home! They have to look after so many other things in the house. Who has time to spend all that time stirring?"

Hermione, remembering failed brews and exploding cauldrons, offered Shingleton a feeble smile. *It must really have been him doing those infomercials on the Wizarding Wireless.*

McIntosh gnashed his teeth. *Merlin, the man's an imbecile! Doesn't he know the most basic things about the woman with whom he's speaking? It seems like the fact that she's a war heroine and good-looking is enough for him to go into prattling mode.*

"Anyway, Snape was fascinated with ingredients. He and Master Jigger did talk from time to time about the proper way to gather herbs and such. Snape was very *thorough*, always so focused on the nit-picky details. He pestered Master Jigger with all kinds of questions and then constantly parroted the answers back to us. He was a tedious know-it-all."

Hermione chuckled to hear Snape described with same moniker he'd later used to mock her.

McIntosh, to his credit, blushed.

Shingleton took her laughter as amusement with his tale and smiled broadly at Hermione. "Has anyone ever told you what a lovely smile you have, Hermione?"

Oh, no, she thought.

"Thank you, Gaspard," she said. "What a kind thing to say."

"I'm not saying it just to be kind. You really do, you know. Your whole face just lights up when you smile. It's very attractive."

Hermione blushed at the compliment despite the circumstances. She got the feeling that Shingleton believed that all women found *him* attractive. *He is good looking. That white hair is so unusual. Very striking. He's a bit of git, though.*

"Thanks. Can I ask you about your experiences apprenticing together under your father?"

"Yes. I had gone to study with my father for my Mastery after apprenticing for Master Jigger. It used to be thought quite important to study under different masters for portions of one's training. Anyway, it was quite interesting to study under Father. Except for the poisons, of course. Luckily, Father didn't push me to follow along the lines of his own studies. He understood the need for me to establish my own, unique contribution to the field.

"Snape began working with my father as a journeyman just about two years after me. He'd studied the Wolfsbane Potion with Belby and was still interested in it. I think that's why he came to study with my father. He'd taken up Belby's idea that lycanthropy was an infection that could be treated...I suppose most people think about it that way nowadays, feel sorry for the werewolves and all that...and thought studying poisons and their antidotes could be applicable.

"The two of them got along quite well. My father's work, as I'm sure you know is encyclopedic... *exhaustive*... or is that *exhausting*?" Shingleton cracked another smile. "Snape tended to approach Potions in the same way. He was so solemn about it, took all the fun, all the mystery, right out of it. He must have been terribly boring as a teacher."

Hermione blinked. *An irritable git, but definitely **not** boring.*

"Anyway, Snape worked hard. He was committed. And his mind was like a sponge. He simply retained everything. I don't know how he did it. I worked regular journeyman's hours, but Snape... It seemed like he was just always there. He wasn't, of course..."

"You knew about..."

"Voldemort? Well, I didn't know then, but I suppose I should have guessed. I was... well, I still am, just blind to politics. It's a mess!"

He was almost gleeful about it, and Hermione was tempted to use just one, little hex. She restrained herself.

Shingleton continued, "I can honestly say that it's one arena in which I have *no* skills and *no* desire to acquire them. I didn't know much about my father's involvement. He wasn't *really* a Death Eater. No mask or cape or Dark Mark. But he... somewhat... admired the Dark Lord. He favored purebloods and made no bones about it."

"So he didn't know that Voldemort was actually a half-blood, then?" Hermione asked.

"Was he? I'm sure Father didn't know at all."

"Professor Snape was also a half-blood, you know," Hermione said.

"Him, too? I certainly didn't know. Not sure if my father did either. Hmmm... He must have known Snape was a Death Eater. I can't see any other real reason why Father would like him."

Because I was the intelligent son the man never had, you idiot Snape, er... *McIntosh, damn it, think McIntosh*... McIntosh thought.

"Do you know what kind of work he did? Aside from his journeyman's project, of course."

"Oh, you know, the standard curriculum at that rank: charmed potions, some of the more complex medicinal potions for treating mental and neurological problems, recreating recipes from partial historical accounts, transfiguratory potions, higher-level protection potions, that sort of thing. That, plus his special study of the Wolfsbane, but he spent more time on that only after he'd begun working with Albus Dumbledore along with my father.

"I have to admit...completely off the record, of course...that it could be pretty nerve-wracking working alongside Snape. I was older and further along in my studies, of course. But Snape was really *advanced*. He had learned a great deal since the days at Slug and Jigger. He had the most amazing grasp of and passion for the subject. He really was quite clev..., er, annoying. His intensity, it was most... unusual. *Abnormal*, I think."

"Uh huh. Erm, what about Albus Dumbledore? I mean, did your father mind that Professor Snape went to work with him at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know for certain, of course. He didn't really like the man personally... or politically, but Dumbledore was an alchemical genius, one of the most powerful wizards alive, and the Headmaster of the most prestigious wizarding school in Britain.

"Plus Snape got a respectable teaching position out of it. That was part of the deal, I think. Snape was, to be frank, poor. He would never have the kind of independent fortune that most Potions masters we knew did. It's a rather expensive field to enter, after all. A position at Hogwarts wouldn't make him wealthy, but it provided a decent living, and in our field...as you must know...status counts."

"So, you don't think Professor Snape left because he didn't get along with your father?"

"Oh, no. He liked Father." Shingleton coughed to clear his throat. "Very much, as I recall. Snape respected both Belby and my father. The good words of his mentors meant a great deal to him. Goodness knows, they offered him *enough* of them..."

"I don't think Snape's family life had been especially *happy*, if you know what I mean. I doubt the company of the Death Eaters was much better. He should have just focused on Potions, despite whatever my father said to him about... Er, Snape would have been better off sticking to the lab. Happier, too."

Not too subtle, is he? Still, Hermione pictured a young Snape working away in Vincent Shingleton's laboratory, every once in a while letting something more than a smirk grace his lips. It pleased her. "You're probably right."

"So, if you've no other questions, Hermione, fancy getting a drink?"

Hermione smiled weakly, made her apologies to Shingleton, and left as quickly as she was able. Outside the café, she cast a quick *Scourgify* on her coat. *I don't think smarminess has a distinct odor, but it certainly feels nasty.*

McIntosh watched Hermione rush out, glad that she'd finished with the white-haired wizard. He'd made sure this meeting had happened, but wasn't happy about it. Shingleton wasn't properly qualified to evaluate the subject of Hermione's inquiries or much of anything else. *He's a simpleton. And he's a wanker.*

Said wanker remained at the table, ordered a glass of wine, and flirted shamelessly with the waitress. It was always amusing to watch Lola chat amiably with one of her friskier customers and then put him in his place by referring to her burly boyfriend, who butchered all the meat bought by the café. McIntosh relished the look of Gaspard Shingleton's Adam's apple dipping when he gulped at the mention of a man who slaughtered for a living.

That evening, Hermione Apparated with a soft *crack* just outside Hogwarts' warded grounds. Thoughts about her interview with Albus Dumbledore's portrait pursued her through an uncomfortable dinner with the faculty and into the guest quarters afterward. Hermione gathered her research notes on Severus and collapsed into one of the overstuffed chairs by the fireplace. Hours slipped by before a particularly loud crackle in the fireplace startled her, and she gasped. She realized that it was nothing but the dying fire and decided that bed was in order. She wanted to be completely awake for tomorrow's interview.

Before getting into bed, Hermione pulled out a copy of the photograph of youthful Severus she'd found in his MESP file and gazed at it. Photograph-Severus raised one eyebrow at her and sneered. She wondered with what expression portrait-Dumbledore would receive her questions and dreaded the next day's meeting.

Author's Notes: Whenever I start feeling guilty that I've kept you all waiting so long and want to bemoan the fact that I don't have more story written far in advance of posting, I try to remind myself that many Dickens novels started as serial fiction with an episode or chapter appearing in a periodical each week. And Dickens and all his readers lived through weekly suspense. The thought that I am like Dickens in any way...save for the fact that we both use versions of the English language...is patently absurd. The comparison does, however, placate the part of me that likes to use the rest of my consciousness as a psychic punching bag. Temporarily placate.

All this is by way of offering an apology for keeping you either teetering on the edges of your seats or disgusted enough to chuck the whole thing. I can offer nothing except the standard excuse: real life got in my way. In this case, it was the real life that pertains to getting a full-time job: a real, live, 9-to-5 job. The job and commuting and

apartment hunting left me too exhausted to write. That, and Draco was sulky, Gaspard Shingleton kept indicating that he wanted to be even slimier than originally written, and Shea McIntosh couldn't decide until the last moment that he wanted to "come out" as Snape. Bad boys.

Oh, and yes, who else but Hermione would throw Edgar Allan Poe quotes at an owl? The line is from "The Raven," of which I recently found a reading online done by (ahem) Christopher Walken. Quite appropriate. It's here: <http://www.ojai.net/swanson/theraven.htm>.

Thanks go to **lizzyann**, who is, above all, a truly excellent friend. She is also Official Coach, Nudge, and Cheerleader in my world and a very talented storyteller in the wider universe.

Please keep reading, friends.

Coming up next: The showdown of the century! Or, at least a very difficult meeting between Our Miss Granger and the portrait of the not-so-recently-deceased Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.