

For All Intents and Purposes

by rhiannononthemoon

A moment of inattention transports Hermione to one year after the fall of the Dark Lord, but with no way back to her own time. Her only clue is a small object that she finds between worlds. She enlists the aid of a young Professor... but he has his own agenda. EWE

Alligators on the Brain

Chapter 1 of 20

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Edited by: thyme_is_a_cat

Chapter 1 Alligators on the Brain

"I can't believe you volunteered our summer to muck out that greasy git's dump," Ron Weasley grumbled as he nudged a stack of moldering newspapers with the toe of his shoe, wrinkling his nose as the yellowing pages crackled under the gentle pressure.

Hermione sighed gustily, tired of that particular mantra; he had repeated it at least once every day that they'd been by to clean, varying only the insult he used to refer to the house's late owner. Mopping her brow and smearing gritty dust across her forehead, she adjusted the bundle of moth-eaten towels in her arms and gave her own version of the oft-repeated conversation. "He was a very brave man and suffered more than any of us could have imagined. Without his aid, we would have never defeated Voldemort. The least we can do is fix up this place to offer a memorial for all of his hard, *unappreciated* work."

"He was still a git."

Rolling her eyes, she stomped out of the kitchen door to the rubbish heap and released her load of towels. Git or not, she still felt guilty for Severus Snape's ignoble, lonely death. If only she'd known, maybe she wouldn't have given his cooling body a brief glance before heading back into the tunnel leading away from the Shrieking Shack. Perhaps she would have tried a bit of first aid, or verified that he was, in fact, dead and not suffering silently as he was left to bleed out on the floor.

Even after his deeds had come to light in those tumultuous weeks of celebration and mourning lost friends, few had cared to give him the respect that Hermione felt he had deserved. Only Harry and select members of the Order of the Phoenix seemed to acknowledge that he'd given Harry the final key to Voldemort's demise. Hermione had been shocked and dismayed at the resistance put forth by Hogwarts' Board of Governors to having Professor Snape's portrait added to the ranks of late Headmasters and Headmistresses. Not even Headmistress McGonagall had put much effort into getting the motion passed. So, four years after the revelation of Snape's true loyalties, few people knew and still fewer cared.

Always the champion of the underdog ('or underbat,' Ron's voice joked in her mind), Hermione had started the Association for the Acknowledgment of Severus Snape. One

of the goals of A.A.S.S. (Ron routinely dropped the first 'A' when referring to her Association) was to get that bloody portrait painted and hung where it belonged. The other was to build a place where people could learn more about and perhaps gain an understanding of one Severus Snape. His Muggle home would become a memorial and museum of sorts. It wasn't her fault that the year she had finally acquired permission to "muck out the dump" happened to coincide with an unusually warm summer. As her long-standing boyfriend, Ron had been obliged to help her, as unenthusiastic about it as he was.

Hermione really didn't see the need for all of his complaints. She was just as hot and sticky as he was. More so, since she had been doing actual work instead of bugging about and griping. She knew there was a reason she loved him, even if she couldn't quite remember it all the time.

Granted, the chore would have been easier if they had been able to use more magic, but they were still uncovering traps that a careless spell could trigger, causing much unpleasantness for the caster. However, she didn't resent the manual labor: it helped to bring her closer to the man she had grossly misjudged. He must have been miserable here, living in this horrid, industrial neighborhood in this squalid little house. Nothing she had found so far implied an ounce of enjoyment in life. Even the dusty books that lined the shelves were of a Dark and grisly nature.

Propping her hands on her hips, Hermione gazed out over the back yard of Spinner's End: a barren patch of earth scattered with stunted dry, brown grass withering in scattered, uneven tufts. A gnarly tree jutted from an uneven ring of stones laid close to a rusty chain-link fence, beyond which was a rambling field of more dry grass bordered by a dirty, sluggish river off in the distance. Tall, thin towers of a factory reached for the sky like the spidery fingers of the house's late master, raised in supplication... but for what? What would Severus Snape have wanted? Hermione didn't know.

The lowest branch of the tree, thick and sparsely leaved, was faintly scarred in long, vertical strokes. The marks of a swing, perhaps? She snickered as an image of Professor Snape, perched on a tire and swinging with his long, skinny legs stuck out in front, his black robes billowing behind, rose in her mind. "Not bloody likely," she muttered quietly and wandered over to the tree.

Scars or no scars, there was nothing left of a swing, not even a bit of rotting rope. They could have been scorch marks left by a spell, for all she knew. Pursing her lips, her amusement evaporating like drops of water sprinkled on the front sidewalk, she circled the tree, gliding her hand absently along its rough bark. Her way was partially blocked by an old, decaying pallet leaning against the fence, the bottom edge sitting mere inches from the base of the trunk.

"This will have to go, too," she sighed as she bent down and grasped the sides of the pallet as close to the top edge as she could, hoping that nothing too beastly was crawling on the underside of the wood. With a grunt, she lugged it up as she stood, gasping as its true weight made itself known. Tottering a few steps and then dropping it as her muscles screamed in protest, Hermione glared at the pallet. A quick glance at her hands showed that no insects had decided to crawl onto them, and she was just about to head back to the house to fetch Ron when something caught her eye.

There was a hole in the chain-link fence. It was triangular in shape: not very large but intentionally widened, if the two sides of bent and folded wire mesh were any indication. Curious, Hermione crouched down by the hole, testing the mettle of the wire with gentle prods of her finger. She estimated that a fit woman like her could get through it, albeit with a little wriggling, and a child could definitely get through, but a grown man would not fit. Testing her theory, she hunched her shoulders and eased her upper body through the hole, glad that she had worn a tight fitting camisole and shorts instead of typical witch's robes that would have snagged on the wire. As it was, her breasts dragged in the dirt and one of the side pockets of her shorts got caught on the tip of a wire that hadn't been bent backwards, but all in all, she got through unscathed.

Brushing dirt from her front and shoving her wand back in her shorts pocket, she ambled along the fence line, scanning the field with bright, inquisitive eyes. An odd formation that might have been rock but seemed too angular to be natural jutted out of the grass several meters deep into the field. A closer study of the field showed many such protuberances, all dark and ominously obscured by dead grass. Despite the heat of the summer afternoon, Hermione shivered, wondering if a young Severus (she liked to think of him by his first name when imagining him as a child) would have felt the same grim oppression from this place as she, a battle-hardened adult, did. Then again, he'd been a boy, and boys liked creepy things.

Shaking off her apprehension, she approached the first of the strange shapes she had seen, keeping a careful eye on the ground in front of her. At ten paces, she could see, indeed, that the object was not rock. Rusty brown and corroded, it was a chunk of metal half-buried in the dirt. Time and weather had worn away its true purpose, leaving it an empty carcass.

She let her feet carry her as she wandered to each large scrap of metal in what she now dubbed the industrial graveyard, trying to picture a young boy with oily, black hair squirming into a waffled, pitted tube here or resting in the shade of a rusted-out structure there. Finally, the sound of her name, muted by distance, shocked her into realizing that she'd been in the field for longer than she had planned.

"Coming!" she shouted back, surprised to note that she couldn't even see Ron's red head or the hole through which she'd passed. She knew the general direction, however, and quickening her pace, headed back to the fence line.

"Hermione!" Ron's shout sounded closer and just a tad impatient. Huffing, Hermione shouted back. It wasn't like she'd been out *that* long. He probably just wanted to take a quick breather (from not working) and have a glass of something cold to drink, maybe do some light whinging. Honestly, he complained nonstop about his training at the Auror Academy; one would think he would appreciate the break away from it. But no! He had to go and...

Hermione's silent diatribe was cut off mid-stream as her foot hit something wooden and hollow. With a dull crunch, the wood beneath her shoe cracked, falling away into nothingness and taking her with it. She had barely released a shriek when she was plunged into unforgiving blackness. A moment later, the daylight above her was extinguished.

After her third scream, Hermione realized two things: one, that she had been suspended in air for far too long to have fallen into a normal oubliette, suspended seeming to be the right word because she didn't hear the rushing of wind in her ears that she would normally associate with falling, and two, she could see a light.

It wasn't the whirling tunnel of cloud and shining love described by people who died and been resuscitated; nor was it a fast approaching bit of daylight that would mean the end of the shaft. In all actuality, it reminded her of a lightning bug, like the kind she'd seen in Florida when her parents had taken her on an educational trip to the Everglades. She'd also seen alligators in Florida; the memory of the long rows of fearsome teeth almost stayed her hand as she reached blindly into the blackness for the light, desperate to find purchase on something other than the void surrounding her.

Her fingers closed on nothing, the light continuing to twinkle at an unknown distance ahead of her. The space she occupied was odd, really: seeming to have no dimensions, no top or bottom. She could feel no pull of gravity on her body. Thinking about her situation in analytical terms helped calm the frantic beating of her heart, though she still gasped in fear and quailed at unseen, probably imaginary, enemies hidden in the blackness. '*Alligators*,' her mind whispered and she shuddered.

"Alligators, my arse," she said out loud, testing the sound of her voice on the space around her. It fell flat and two-dimensional, lacking an echo or reverberation, but not muted or muffled. That ruled out her floating in a cave or shaft, but was otherwise very little help. With a shrug and a steadying breath, she reached for the light again, kicking against the air for good measure. Whether or not it did any good was anyone's guess, but the light did seem to bob closer. Encouraged, Hermione kicked and reached in a parody of swimming (decidedly *not* thinking about alligators), stretching her fingers ahead of her.

It was just about when Hermione had wrapped her fingers around the point of light when she realized that it was not only gently illuminating her hand, it was also reflecting off a round, gaping maw and countless rows of needle-like teeth bearing down on her fingers. Squealing in horror and terrified disgust, she snatched at the light, catching it just before the mouth snapped shut with a squelching click. She backpedaled, her eyes wide and straining, her breath hitching in thin, hysterical shrieks as she clutched the light to her chest. The light flared brightly, creating a halo in the void that did nothing to pierce the darkness except to expose the giant, maggot-like creature with a gullet full of teeth wriggling straight for her.

The light flared again, completely blinding her, and then her rump hit hard ground. Wincing and wringing another scream from her already raw throat, Hermione kicked against the ground, even as her eyes adjusted enough to see that she was now flailing at the bottom of what appeared to be a dry well. And she was alone.

Almost faint with relief, she twitched and shuddered with the strongest case of heebie-jeebies she had ever had the misfortune to contract, including the time she had found moth larvae wriggling about in the biscuit she had been nibbling. After a minute or so, she pulled herself together and opened her hand. Instead of a lighting bug or fairy or tiny, fallen star, she was clutching a small, faceted crystal vial that tapered to a sharp point, stopped with an ornately carved topper. It was very beautiful, but it was not glowing and appeared to contain only a bit of fine, gray dust at the bottom.

Voices echoed down the shaft and Hermione scrambled to her feet. "Ron! RON! I'm down here!" she shouted, waving her hand at the empty patch of sky overhead. Impatiently, she tucked the vial into one of her shorts pockets, freeing her other hand to wave with the first. "I'm down HERE!"

"It is coming from over there."

"What do you *put* down that thing, anyway?"

Though faintly familiar, neither of the voices sounded like Ron, but Hermione didn't really care. They were probably volunteers from her Association. Even if they weren't, they were potential rescuers, and Hermione wanted out. "Please, help me! I'm down here!"

"Who is down there?" the first voice, a rich, irritated baritone asked.

"If it's a Muggle, then I say leave it," the second voice said in smooth, cultured tones.

Hermione gasped in outrage, and then remembered the wand stuffed into the other pocket of her shorts.

"Never mind," she called up coldly, insulted by the second voice's words and annoyed by her own empty headedness. She'd spent almost thirteen years in the wizarding world and still occasionally forgot that she was a witch. Pulling it from her pocket, she cast a non-verbal Hover Charm on herself, levitating toward the sunlight. 'Odd,' she thought as she floated out of the unobscured well opening. 'Didn't I break through something when I fell?'

"Well, she's got a nice arse, even if she is a bit slow," the second voice drawled appreciatively. With a flick of her wand, Hermione turned in midair and then stepped neatly onto the ground, titling her head to fix the owner of said voice with a disgusted glare over top of her nose. He was young, mid-twenties or so, well built, handsome and possessed a thick mane of shoulder-length blond hair that he wore free. The cut of his robes seemed a bit off, but they were obviously expensive.

Flushing under the blond man's appraising scrutiny, she chose to address the attack on her intelligence and pretend her posterior had not been mentioned. "I thought I had broken my wand when I fell," Hermione lied defensively. "Good thing for me that I hadn't." Sniffing, she added, "I suppose they're right: chivalry *is* dead."

Another sniff, and Hermione realized she smelled of rancid sweat and probably looked like an urchin who'd been crawling through the dirt, which is exactly what she'd been doing earlier. With a discreet swish of her wand, she cast a non-verbal spell of her own design that not only cleaned her clothes and body; it pressed the wrinkles from her garments, dusted her with a light, citrus fragrance and tidied her hair.

The blond's companion snorted. In stark contrast of his friend, he was thin and pallid with long, lank, black hair, a beak of a nose, and a surly expression that spoiled any handsomeness that his face might have possessed. He looked to be in his late teens or early twenties, though the soul glistening in his black eyes seemed tired and bitter.

Glaring suspiciously, he asked, "What you are doing here?" His clipped enunciation wasn't as cultured as his companion's, but it was far silkier. He shifted his grip on the strap of a small canvas sack that he had slung over his shoulder.

Hermione was positive that she should recognize these men, though she couldn't remember where she'd seen them. Their names weren't on the tip of her tongue, more like lodged at the back of her throat, but they were there. She also had the feeling that something was very, very wrong.

"I was out for a walk, and I fell in," she said firmly; it was no less than the truth. Glancing around the mouth of the well, Hermione spotted a roughly made, rectangular panel made of a pallet that had had the boards taken off one side and nailed between the boards of the other. It was distinctly lacking a Hermione-shaped hole. Of course, she wouldn't have had to fall through that exact cover; she hadn't gotten a good look at it. However, she would expect to see some evidence of her fall, and there was none. Had someone removed it while she had been attacked by the giant, man-eating flobberworm?

"Likely story," the dark one snapped, narrowing his eyes. "You've moved the cover off the well. Who are you and what do you want?"

"She looks like a Mudblood to me," the blond said in a scornful stage whisper.

It didn't stop him from eyeing her legs, Hermione groused as she tried to relax the grinding of her molars. Oh, how she wanted to slap the disdainfully wrinkled nose right off his pale, pretty face. Swallowing her ire and adopting the haughty air trademark of certain pureblood families, she straightened her spine and sneered, "Of course I look like a Muggle." She let the silent "you idiot" linger in the air a moment before adding, "I'm in a Muggle neighborhood."

"Ah, yes. Of course," the blond man agreed, his demeanor lightening as he smiled charmingly and grasped the fingers of her right hand. "And might I have your name?"

"He..Heidi," she responded, catching herself before she said her given name. The squidgy feeling in her stomach told her that it just wasn't a good idea. "Greenglass."

"Greenglass, was it? The Bristol Greenglasses or the Portsmouth Greenglasses?" the blond asked idly, now staring at her chest and leering. His companion was also staring at her, piercingly, as if he could see through the flesh and bones of her face into her very thoughts.

"Canterbury, actually," Hermione dissembled again, determined not to fidget under the penetrating gaze of the dark man. She wasn't about to let a man barely out of his teens intimidate her. "Do I know you?"

"I've forgotten my manners, Miss Greenglass. Lucius Malfoy, at your service." He sketched a quick, informal bow and smiled into her eyes. Hermione shivered; though younger and softer, those stormy eyes were still slick with malice and cunning. And it was impossible, wasn't it? All of the time-turners had been broken at the end of her fifth year! She wasn't aware of any time traveling spells, let alone had cast one! Had someone ambushed her in the field with a spell or device? Perhaps there had been a trap at the bottom of the well?

Malfoy misinterpreted her gobsmacked expression and smiled genteelly, kissing the backs of her fingers. With a disgusted glance at his companion, the dark man stomped up to the well and slung his sack from his shoulder, reaching into its depths. Dazed, Hermione followed his jerky motions with her eyes until the blond tightened his grip on her hand, bringing attention to bear once again on him.

"Yes, *the* Lucius Malfoy. Not someone you'd expect to meet in *this* kind of neighborhood, no? I'm slumming it, you might say." He gave her a conspiratorial wink as he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and began to lead her to the fence line and a low gate that she hadn't noticed before her fall. It was all Hermione could do to not tug her hand out of his grasp and wipe it on her shorts. Considering her predicament, however, she hummed and nodded as he babbled amicably. "I'd stopped by to ask Sev, here, to brew me up a potion. He's quite talented at brewing, you know. Come along, Sev!" he called over his shoulder, as if summoning a pet dog. "He's the Potions master at Hogwarts," he continued, not bothering to wait for his companion.

Feeling the approach of a tension headache and trying to pay attention to Malfoy's words over the roaring in her ears, Hermione glanced behind them at the dark man, who was shooting them both furious glares as he held an empty, glass container upside-down over the well, then tossed in a handful of white powder. Stowing the beaker back in his bag, he pulled the wooden cover over the mouth of the well, kicking it in place with the side of his boot. There was little doubt in her mind whom "Sev" could be. But the question was: how?

Adams, Tolkien, and a number of other fantasy and sci-fi authors. Thank you for reading.

This fic is also almost finished. At this moment of time (1/8/08), chapter 17 of 20 is with my beta. I won't leave you hanging with a WIP. I plan to update regularly.

Friendly Overtures

Chapter 2 of 20

A moment of inattention transports Hermione to one year after the fall of the Dark Lord, but with no way back to her own time. Her only clue is a small object that she finds between worlds and she enlists the aid of a young Professor... but he has his own agenda.

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It was soon apparent to Hermione that Lucius Malfoy, when he didn't know that one was a filthy Mudblood, was a charismatic playboy. If she didn't know better, she would think that he was trying to charm her out of her knickers. Oddly enough, his final goal seemed to be getting "Sev," whose irritation and hormones seemed to be battling for supremacy, into them. It was all very surreal, considering the circumstances of the situation.

Hermione sipped from the glass of mead she held. She had accepted it against her better judgment, but hadn't wanted to appear rude or suspicious; or, more than she already was, at any rate. Besides, she'd given it a surreptitious sniff, could detect no poison, and she really was quite thirsty.

They were seated in the parlor of Spinner's End. Malfoy had commandeered the single threadbare armchair, forcing Snape and Hermione to sit side-by-side on the uncomfortable sofa. To Hermione's dismay, the room had changed little from the state she found it when she'd opened the house earlier that month. The same ratty, clunky furniture sat in the same locations; the same grisly books lined the walls; the very air of the room pressed down on her with the same heavy weight. Try as she might, the only real difference she could discern was a lack of dust and old newspapers. Malfoy, in his sapphire blue frock coat with silver piping and lace-edged sleeves, looked as out of place as a peacock in a flock of pigeons.

He was now plying her with a fifth photograph of a pale, chubby toddler with a dusting of white hair, the other four scattered across the scratched surface of the coffee table. Oblivious to the camera, despite the young woman trying to direct his attention forward, he was yanking on the ear of a wincing house-elf. Humming in a fair approximation of admiration, she mused that she'd rather have perused the infamous photos of Mrs. Figg's cats. This thought led her to Harry, and how old he would be in this time period. Was he living at the Durselys' already? Or was he still a happy, burbling baby surrounded by his parents' love?

"A fine young wizard, is he not?" Malfoy asked rhetorically as he gazed proudly at the child. Snape sighed loudly and pointedly, tapping his thigh with an index finger. "Are we boring you, Sev?" Without bothering to wait for an answer (it was fairly obvious to Hermione what it would have been), he turned back to her and smiled slyly. "Don't let him fool you. He's really quite fond of children."

"He must be, to teach at a boarding school," she agreed earnestly, sneaking a peek at a fuming Professor Snape, who had crossed his legs with a huff. A grin tugged at her lips, and she squelched it ruthlessly. The knowledge that he was a professor, therefore loyal to Dumbledore, gave her a strong enough sense of relief to find humor in the situation. That he was dressed casually in faded denim and a charcoal gray tee shirt made him seem infinitely more approachable.

Tee shirt!

Hermione tried to stifle a gasp as her eyes snapped to his left forearm. No Dark Mark marred the smooth, pale skin. Immensely relieved to have fallen into the past *after* the Dark wizard had been vanquished, she refocused her attention on Malfoy.

"Yes, quite. In fact, he's Draco's *godfather*," he said, stressing the last word significantly as he pulled a sixth photograph from a pocket in his robes and extended it toward her. With a careless flick of his wrist, he sent it fluttering out of his hand to land at Snape's feet. "Oh, how clumsy of me! Would you be so kind as to retrieve that for me, Miss Greenglass?"

Hermione wasn't fooled: the first photo that he'd dropped had fluttered over the arm of the sofa, requiring her to leave her seat, then bend over to recover it. Snape's slight flush had clued her to the fact that he'd probably gotten an eyeful of her *arse*. The second photo ended up wedged between the cushions (she couldn't quite figure that one out). Giving Malfoy the benefit of the doubt, though why, she couldn't say, she'd leaned over to fish it out, presenting her sofa mate with a clear view down her top. This third demonstration of "clumsiness" seemed to have been orchestrated to bring her face perilously close to Snape's crotch.

Lucius raised an expectant eyebrow. Hermione darted a glance at Snape; his foot had begun to shake and it was jiggling the sofa. Sweat was beginning to bead on his upper lip, and the flush from earlier was creeping down his neck. Never had Hermione seen her former professor look so on tenterhooks, and yet so ill at ease. It was tempting, almost, to lean forward ever so innocently, just to see if he'd explode in a ball of flaming embarrassment and frustration. Almost, but not quite; Ron would have been furious with her.

"Professor," she said politely, and he jerked in his seat, the toe of his boot catching the bottom of the table with a thump. "I can't quite reach the photograph for Mr. Malfoy. Would you mind?"

"Lucius, if you please," Malfoy corrected her, his smile tightening slightly as Snape plucked the photo from the floor and handed it to her. With languid grace, Malfoy rose from the chair and glided to the sofa, seating himself at the end and forcing Hermione to scoot to her left. Her hand accidentally brushed Snape's thigh, and he leapt to his feet.

"Lucius, if we've concluded our business, then I really must ask you to leave. Both of you," he finished with a pointed glare at Hermione.

Malfoy stood as well, towering over Snape's smaller form. "Now, Severus," he said in a placating, condescending tone as he grasped Snape's elbow and led him to the parlor's doorway. "You really must learn to sit back and enjoy life. Good things come to those who wait."

Hermione followed them with her eyes while trying to stifle a yawn. The warm stillness of the room and the alcohol in her glass were fogging the crystalline clarity of her mind, burnishing everything with a hazy glow. Allowing her head to loll on the back of the sofa, she blinked slowly and tried to remember why the miserable young man before her had turned on the Dark Lord not so long ago. Her thoughts moved as if swimming through molasses, but the right one finally struggled free: love. Voldemort had killed someone he had loved, but who, Harry could not, or would not, say.

She blinked again; it was getting difficult to keep her eyes open. Her muscles were relaxing, and it felt wonderful, as if she were wrapped in a cozy down comforter and tucked into bed by her mother. It wasn't until her glass slipped from her fingers to splash cool mead across her shins, that she realized that something was horribly wrong.

Snape swore furiously at Malfoy, but she couldn't quite catch the words...

The world came back into focus with a thumping in her head, reminiscent of a pickup bed full of subwoofers set to eleven. Hermione groaned and pressed her palms to her eyes, imminently thankful for the cold, wet flannel that was resting on her forehead.

"If you think you can sit up, I have a headache potion."

Her eyes snapped open, struggling to focus on a vial of pale blue liquid hovering in front of her face. Over the edge of the vial, two black eyes watched her steadily. She jerked back into the sofa cushions, and he flinched, as if expecting a blow. Thin lips pursed and shoulders hunched, Snape leaned away from her until he was sitting up straight, perched on the edge of the coffee table near her knees. The flannel slithered off of her forehead and landed on the floor with a squelching plop.

Rising carefully onto her elbows, for she had been lying on her back sprawled across the sofa, she watched him warily as he set the potion on the table and retreated to the wingback armchair.

"It is illegal to drug one's guests," Hermione rasped through a parched throat, ignoring the potion and the throbbing of her temples. She licked her dry lips, longing for a glass of water, but more than hesitant to drink anything else she was handed in this house. Hurt and betrayal was blooming under her ribcage that this man that she had admired and defended had allowed her to come to harm under his roof, possibly by his hand.

His mouth twisted mockingly as he crossed his legs and rested his elbows on his knees, steepling his fingers in front of his face. The pose didn't fit his angular, gangly body, but she knew he would grow into it. "Lucius has always fancied himself above the law." At her look of distrust, he continued, "Believe you me, Miss Greenglass, I had no idea what he'd planned."

"And just what *did* he have planned?" she snapped, and then coughed to clear her throat.

"Does it matter? You are unharmed. Drink the potion; it's clean. And then you explain why you were sneaking about in my backyard."

"I wasn't in your backyard," she bit out, grimacing at the cottony taste of her mouth. His potion was tempting, not for just the relief it promised her head, but the liquid to wet her tongue. She *wanted* to believe that he'd been ignorant of Lucius spiking her drink. "And I certainly wasn't sneaking; don't you think I wouldn't have *yelled* had I been?"

He stared at her, hard, his eyes twin pools of crude oil and just as impossible to fathom. Refusing to meet the gaze of a known Legilimens, she focused on the dark lashes that framed each eye. They were mascara-commercial lashes: thick, long and curled at each tip. She realized that she'd never had the opportunity (or inclination) to study him so closely and decided that they were a striking feature. His nose, though big for his narrow face, had too much character to be considered ugly. She caught herself wondering if what they said about big noses was true and tucked that thought into the corner of her mind reserved for Things She Had No Business Thinking.

Snape broke the staring contest with a disgusted harrumph and an almost defeated twist to his lips. "What brings you to Manchester, Miss Greenglass?" he finally asked in a somewhat resigned, polite tone.

'He's used to being mistrusted,' she thought, finally deciding to take him on faith and drink his potion. Almost instantly, the pain in her head subsided with no odd side effects that she could determine. She breathed a faint sigh of relief, noting that he, too, had seemed to relax, his shoulders dropping and the crease between his eyebrows unfolding.

"Well, you see..." she hedged as she pulled her body into a sitting position, not really sure how to explain, since she had no real idea herself. "Cleaning out your house in order to build a memorial in your honor," was not going to cut it. She needed time to figure out how she had arrived here and how to get back, and thought it a strong possibility that she would need access to the dry well behind his house. A sharp object digging into her thigh gave her a flash of inspiration. She tossed her head to flick a curl out of her face and let her eyes roam the room, trying to look both casual and dodgy at once. "A late relative of mine left me a trinket, and I wanted someone to take a look at it. I'd heard that a Dark wizard lived in the area, specializing in potions and oddities."

His face seemed to fall, and a frown clouded his features. "Perhaps you should take it to a shop keeper that specializes in such... ah... trinkets."

"I didn't want to be seen going into one of those kinds of places, not with all the trouble with Vol.*You Know Who*," she corrected herself, glad that she'd read up on the social climate of wizarding England during Voldemort's first rise to power and hoping that her sources were good.

Snape looked at her askance, not having missed her almost-usage of the Dark Lord's name. "He's dead. And I imagine you wouldn't want to be seen *here*, either," he sneered mockingly as he gestured at his dismal little parlor.

"But it's a bit less observed than Borgin and Burkes," she pointed out reasonably, ignoring his lie about Voldemort's demise. He scowled, but said nothing. She wondered if he'd been looking for another response and whether she might have hurt his feelings, but remembered that she'd just been *drugged*, for Merlin's sake, and couldn't feel too badly about it. And now that they were discussing it, having Snape analyze the bottle and its contents seemed like as good a place to start as any for finding out what in bleeding hell was going on. "I can pay," she prodded, hoping that he wouldn't charge more than the few Galleons she had in her pockets.

That statement seemed to settle something in his mind, for he abruptly leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "Show me."

Flashing him a quick smile, she pulled it from her shorts pocket and set it on the table. No sooner than her fingertips had released it, the phial lifted, as if the stopper were strung on a wire, to stand on its sharp point, chiming almost inaudibly. As the quiet tinkling was absorbed into the padded walls of the parlor, it balanced there, the crystal facets winking softly in the dim light.

Snape reached for the bottle, a strange gleam of avarice in his dark eyes, and Hermione had an uncomfortable flash of trepidation that by sitting in this parlor with this man, handing over this object, she could somehow be altering the flow of events from their true course. She didn't know what the phial held or what it could do; she had no knowledge of whether Snape had met a Heidi Greenglass or how they had interacted. Was she blazing a new trail through time or was she playing through motions already carved into history? Tensing with sudden anxiety, she moved to snatch the bottle away, but Snape beat her to it.

"Do you want me to look at it or not?" he asked crossly, weighing the phial in the palm of his hand.

She retreated back into her seat, forcing her hands to fold neatly in her lap. She was here now, wasn't she? Blindfolded and treading on very thin ice, she would have to feel her way between the cracks. "Yes... yes, of course."

"Where can I contact you?"

"Contact me?" she repeated, drawing a blank. She hadn't even considered where she would be staying until she found her way home.

He released an impatient snort as he unstopped the bottle and fanned the air over the air over its lip, trying to catch the contents' scent. "For when I've finished my analysis." The implied *dunderhead* hung in the air between them.

"Oh, I can't leave it here," she said quickly, suddenly nervous to have it out of her sight. "I'll bring it over when you have time to study it. Perhaps I can help..."

"I shall not need the *help* of a silly little chit like *you*."

"Fine," she snapped sharply. Ron was right: he was a git. She could solve this mystery on her own and not have to suffer the insults of this manky young man. Rising from the sofa, she reached for the phial in Snape's hand. He recoiled, standing quickly and closing his hand over it, sending her a baleful glare. "Your services are no longer

required," she said, gesturing once again that he should give her the phial.

For several long minutes, measured by the soft ticking of the carriage clock sitting on the mantle, they stood at an impasse. The determination to which he clung to the small bottle intrigued and alarmed her, but she was not willing to back down until he had made some sort of concession: his help *would* make her situation easier. Again, she was careful to avoid eye contact and felt a perverse glee that it was frustrating him.

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he finally spoke politely, as if their last exchange had not occurred. "I am available for most of the day tomorrow."

Following his lead, she responded in a similar tone, "What time shall I drop by?"

"Ten o'clock would be acceptable. Do not be late." Winding his way around the coffee table, he grasped her elbow and led her to the front door, opening it for her with an awkward flourish that she was sure was mimicked, albeit poorly, from Malfoy. She was stepping over the threshold when she turned pointedly back to him.

"Professor, the phial."

He narrowed his eyes and slowly, reluctantly dropped the bottle into her outstretched hand.

A/N: Thanks for reading and I appreciate your feedback.

Cat House

Chapter 3 of 20

A moment of inattention transports Hermione to one year after the fall of the Dark Lord, but with no way back to her own time. Her only clue is a small object that she finds between worlds and she enlists the aid of a young Professor... but he has his own agenda.

Daylight slunk from Spinner's End like a beaten dog anxious to get away from its tormenter. The dilapidated houses crowded along the street seemed to swell in the twilight, their fronts morphing into angry, twisted faces. A single streetlamp flickered feebly, its half-hearted glow doing little to illuminate the walk and nothing to chase away persistent shadows.

Hermione shivered in her light camisole and shorts as she stood on Snape's porch, rubbing her arms to chase away the gooseflesh. Now that the sun had gone down, the air was cool and damp; her warm weather attire was wholly inappropriate. For lack of a better plan, or any plan at all, she turned on the spot and Apparated to Hogsmeade. Anything would be more desirable than lingering at Spinner's End.

Fortunately, luck was with her. She had wandered the village, which had changed little in the last twenty years, for all of an hour before spotting the cluster of bulletins tacked to a village message board. A local widow who had lost her family and right leg to Death Eaters was looking for a young lady to care for her cats, cook, and keep the house and garden tidy in exchange for room and board. Though the fact that all of those chores could be handled with domestic magic made Hermione suspicious of the widow's intentions, she followed the bulletin's directions to a rambling stone cottage at the edge of town. Within fifteen minutes of meeting the good widow, she was ensconced in a cozy little attic room, just large enough for a narrow bed and wardrobe, and her misgivings had been put to rest.

The Madam Beetlebump was lonely, if a tad bit barmy. And, she had *lots* of cats.

She also had trunks of old clothing that she had insisted Hermione "paw through" (the old crone didn't even acknowledge the pun) and keep what fit.

"Those trousers she's wearing aren't fit for a proper witch, eh, Bartholomew? No, they are not!" Madam Beetlebump had addressed a fat tortoiseshell lying stretched out across the table as Hermione had prepared a late evening meal. Madam had not wasted any time putting her to work. "And that... well, I wouldn't call it a shirt! She'll do well to wear Cassy's old robes. Merlin knows she won't be needing them anymore, rest her soul."

By the time Hermione had curled up under the bedclothes, she was housed, fed and clothed, though no closer to unraveling her current predicament than when she'd left Snape's house. Determined to review the facts and draw some preliminary conclusions, she stared thoughtfully at the slanted ceiling and was asleep within minutes.

The Beetlebump cats had a schedule. They also knew how to manipulate door handles. Hermione learned both of these particulars the hard way when she woke to a pink dawn under a blanket of meowing, purring, kneading cat flesh. One feline was nibbling her right big toe. As soon as her feet hit the floor, over two-dozen pairs of paws followed suit. Amidst winding bodies and plaintive meows, Hermione found herself padding toward the door, nodding earnestly at two cats that were darting forward, then stopping to look over their shoulders at her, tails held high, speaking in the universal cat language that meant Breakfast Time.

Whoever it was that had spoken derogatorily about herding cats had never been herded by cats.

Like the well-trained human that she was, she obediently followed the cats to the kitchen and opened the high cupboard under which they had clustered, twining around her legs and mewling. She had the cats fed (McTabby's Best Cat Chow, Hairball-be-Gone formula) and a pot of tea steeping when the Madam thumped down the stairs.

"Good morning, pets!" she exclaimed as she hobbled across the kitchen, her knobby cane and wooden leg working in tandem. "Has she fed you already? Wonderful, wonderful." She nodded approvingly as she surveyed the empty dishes that littered the floor and the sated felines lounging on counter tops, chairs and the kitchen table. Smiling fondly, she plucked a cat off the chair closest to the kitchen hearth and had a seat, plopping the cat back in her lap.

"Good morning, Madam," Hermione said finally when it was clear that she wasn't going to be acknowledged and poured the old witch a cup of tea.

"It's a good thing, too! I've got so much for her to do today." Madam Beetlebump continued as if Hermione hadn't spoken, instead pulling a wad of parchment out of her dressing gown pocket and brandishing it at the cat in her lap.

"Yes, well, I'm happy to help," she addressed the cat in Madam's lap as she pulled the list from her hand.

Madam grinned toothlessly and patted Hermione's cheek. "She's a good girl."

Sighing, Hermione wondered if all of her conversations with the Madam would be moderated by a pounce of cats. 'It's only temporary,' Hermione reminded herself as she smoothed out the list. She sighed again, realizing that if she wanted to get these chores done today and still make her appointment with Snape, then she would have to

start now and forgo the cuppa she had planned to drink while figuring out how to approach her mystery.

At ten o'clock, sharp, she rang the bell at Spinner's End. The neighborhood wasn't much more inviting in the morning than had it been the previous evening.

She was dressed in borrowed russet robes piped in copper, somewhat musty smelling but clean and well made. Wand and phial were tucked away in hidden inner pockets, and her hair was twisted into a long braid down her back. She'd caught herself wishing for a bit of mascara and lip-gloss, then dismissed it as silliness. It wasn't as if she were making a social call to a friend; she was embarking on a business deal and research project with a...

'Partner? Associate?' she asked herself as she waited at the door. He was certainly taking his time in answering. Had he forgotten? A moment later, the door swung open, revealing the unshaven, sleep-creased visage of a young Severus Snape. She blinked, taken aback.

"You didn't expect me to come back," she blurted when he simply continued to stand and stare at her with glassy, black eyes. At least he wasn't wearing a dressing gown; it looked like he hadn't bothered to change out of yesterday's clothes before going to sleep.

His lips turned down in a familiar frown. "Is that cat hair on your robes?"

She glanced down at her front, spying the scattering of white hairs across her chest and lap. Certainly, a gift left by Pumplenoose, a longhaired Persian. She'd had to shoo her out of the open trunk of hand-me-downs. Her robes must have been at the top. She opened her mouth to snap at him, for at least *she* had bothered to shower and change, but he'd already swung the door wide and slouched back into the gloom of the entry. 'Odious git,' she fumed as she followed him into the house, missing the surety and grace with which he had moved as a tenured Professor, not to mention his decorum, if in dress only.

That afternoon found them both buried in books, seated across from each other at the kitchen table, the phial standing improbably on its pointed end between them. A small sample of dust had been extracted from the bottle and now simmered in an agent designed to reveal its alchemical properties.

"*Must* you continue with that infernal noise?" Snape barked suddenly, and Hermione jumped, dropping her quill and almost upsetting her inkwell.

Retrieving her quill and glaring at the top of his greasy head, still bent over his book, she snapped, "What noise?"

"You mumble to yourself as you read," he spat as if it were the most disgusting thing he'd heard in a long time.

Hermione had heard complaints on this very subject from Ron and Harry. Then, her response had been to tell them to deal with it or they could do their homework by themselves. It had been an effective strategy to nip that argument in the bud, at least until they had forgotten. In this case, however, she was there somewhat at the mercy of Snape's humor. He had the potions lab and the library, whereas she had... cat-sitting duty. 'Breath, relax, it's only temporary,' she coached herself yet again that day, plastering an ersatz smile across her face. "Sorry about that. I'll try to keep quiet."

"See that you do."

He hardly seemed mollified, but since he didn't say anything more on the matter, she turned back to her book instead of trying to bore a hole through his head with her acid glower. She flipped through several pages of rather dry text in a tome entitled "Darke Vessels and Deadly Alembics, Volume I." Snape was perusing Volume II. The idea was to look for a reference to a crystal phial filled with dust (or not) that sometimes glowed (they hadn't been able to recreate the glowing, yet) while waiting for the results of the reduction. It was a long shot at best, but they had to start somewhere.

She'd found an interesting reference to the *Vie de Terre*, which was a fine, gray dust that one would sprinkle in the garden to ensure a bountiful harvest. Unfortunately, it was usually stored in terra cotta pots to let the dust breathe, but she thought it worth noting.

"Miss Greenglass," Snape snapped just as she had dipped her quill into the pot of ink. Her hand jerked violently, spilling the ink and sending her quill skittering across the table. Jumping to his feet, he hollered, "You incompetent twit! Can you do nothing right?"

'*Evanesco*,' she incanted silently, vanishing the small puddle of ink. Gritting her teeth, she forced a pleasant expression on her face and focused on the tattered shoulder seam of his tee shirt, stating mildly, "Perhaps if you wouldn't startle me when you had a complaint, then accidents like these wouldn't happen."

"Don't talk to me like a bloody child! I'm a Professor..."

Loosing all patience, Hermione slammed her balled fist against the table, cutting him off mid-tirade. "Listen, *Sev*," she growled in the voice that had earned her the title "Mean Ol' Aunt Hermione" from Harry's child, "I've had it with this nonsense. You will either treat me with respect or I will leave."

Snape gaped at her for a moment, then schooled his features to an expression of stiff politesse and sat back down, folding long fingers together on top of his book, the knuckles whitening with barely contained rage. It amused her, through her annoyance, to see him try to adopt Malfoy's mannerisms and wondered when he had abandoned them altogether, in favor of sharpening that anger on the most convenient subject. The Snape she knew would never have backed down and attempted reconciliation. Or, perhaps, was it her phial that was motivating his abrupt change in demeanor?

"You must be a nightmare of a professor." The words had tumbled out of her mouth before she'd even realized that they had been hiding behind her tongue.

He blinked, his face slackening in surprise. When his hands twitched, Hermione braced herself to duck his inkwell, which was sure to come hurtling toward her at any moment.

"I have my moments," he drawled in a fair approximation of Malfoy, his black eyes glinting in a manner wholly unfamiliar to her. She unsuccessfully stifled a snort that dissolved into giggles, which she held behind her hand. Though he didn't smile, Snape seemed to truly relax slightly instead of pretending, and with the loosening his shoulders, the tension in the air dissipated. When they returned to their books, the silence, though not amiable, was comfortable.

Several rather fruitless days of research and experimentation passed quickly, and as each day came to an exhausting close, Hermione became more anxious.

None of the twelve volumes of "Darke Vessels and Deadly Alembics" referenced her phial. Neither did "Artifacts Most Foul" or any of the other books itemizing Dark objects. Not that she was convinced that it was Dark, for she wasn't. It had simply fit her lie to Snape.

Their attempts to unravel the origins of the phial's contents were similarly discouraging. So far, Snape had been able to determine that the dust was neither plant nor animal and was moderately acidic, though it would not form a salt when a base was applied to it. It also resisted all attempts to break it down into its comprising elements, was flame retardant, and conducted and stored magical energy, though not for very long. It *still* would not glow.

"Perhaps it's like a battery," Hermione suggested one muggy afternoon as she leaned against the workbench in his laboratory, "and we just haven't figured out how to charge it."

Snape was glaring at the few grains of dust that floated undisturbed on the surface of a boiling potion, as if it had committed some foul crime against his person. And maybe it had: it was supposed to have steamed one of five different colors to indicate toxicity, but had yet to steam at all. Strange, that, considering it was boiling. "If that is what you call 'thinking aloud', then I dread to hear what you actually *intend* to say."

"If *you* have some enlightening observation, then by all means, do share," she replied sarcastically, knowing that he didn't. Between the lack of progress and the overabundance of bad attitude, she was almost ready to throw herself down the well, just to see what would happen. She might have already, had it not been for the...

well... she wasn't sure what it was. Luna Lovegood would probably have some thoughts on giant, sightless worms with rows of fangs that lived in time-holes. Not that she would ask her. Unfortunately, Snape watched her like a vulture stalked carrion, so she hadn't yet been able to approach the well unobserved during the day. Her evenings and mornings had been filled with a myriad number of chores ranging from running errands, to gardening, to reading aloud from the latest edition of "Kneazle Cross-breed Fancy."

"If you would leave it here overnight, I would make better progress." He unfolded his arms and vanished the contents of the cauldron. Hermione winced to see yet more dust lost to experimentation. They had been conservative in the sizes of their samples, but there hadn't been much in the bottle to start.

"I'm not discussing that again," she sighed tiredly and rubbed her eyes. "It stays with me." He was right, and she knew it: he *might* make better progress if she left the bottle with him. However, she didn't like the greedy gleam in his eye that shone whenever he thought she wasn't watching. He knew, or guessed, something about her object that he wasn't sharing with her.

"You are sabotaging this project!" he rounded on her, one long digit thrust in her face, his face twisted in a sneer.

Hermione batted the finger out of her face. "Don't be ridiculous! I *want* this project to succeed! I'm trying to *help*!"

"*Help!*" he mocked, tiny beads of spittle flying from his lips. "You are a *joke!* A *disgrace!* A bungling *dunderhead* who has no talent for the subtle art of potion making! Miss Evans was *brilliant*..." He cut himself off abruptly, poised frozen in the sudden, fragile silence.

Hermione took advantage of his momentary stillness to holler back, "If I'm so useless, then go call *her!*" Brushing past him and making sure to bump his shoulder, she floeused out of the basement laboratory, punishing each step with the heavy tread of her feet. It wasn't until she was stomping down Spinner's End to an out-of-order phone box that she'd been using as an Apparition point that she realized whom the esteemed Miss Evans actually was.

She paused as she was pushing the folding door inward to open it, her eyes scrunching as she contemplated his curtailed sentence. "Did Snape just compliment a *Potter?*"

Severus flinched as his front door slammed with enough force to be heard down in his basement laboratory. He had not meant to say that, even if he had meant it.

He had caught himself comparing Miss Greenglass (if that really was her name he wasn't quite convinced, as he couldn't remember a Greenglass on the Hogwarts roster in any of the years he had attended. There was a chance, albeit slim, that she had attended an out-of-country school, but that just didn't ring true.) to *her* many times over the last few days, each instance a dig in the already open wound that was her death: her death, which was *his* fault. The cold feeling that had burrowed into his gut a year ago squirmed restlessly.

Grimacing, he stowed the cauldron and burner below the worktable and retrieved a rag to wipe down the surfaces. He felt like a fool to have revealed so much in such a careless statement. Despite his frequent claims to the contrary, Miss Greenglass was not stupid (neither was *she*). His hand paused during its methodical wipe-down, stayed by his sudden concentration to push such comparisons away. His own thoughts, usually disciplined and under his strict control, had betrayed him, continuously dredging up *her* face and smile and casting it next to Miss Greenglass' since the day the annoying chit had showed up at his door.

She was prettier. *Her* smile hadn't been as brittle. *She* hadn't trusted him. He hadn't made *her* laugh.

The worm twisted again, coiling in his stomach. He welcomed it as his due.

It was an odd feeling, being treated as an equal by a decent person. Dumbledore was a master just as much as the Dark Lord had been and was as successful in keeping promises. They had failed *her* as surely as he had. His colleagues still had a tendency to treat him as a student. Lucius, one of the few "friends" from school with whom he continued to socialize, could hardly be called decent. He just could picture Miss Greenglass' incredulous expression if he were to suggest it.

His hand paused again as his eyes widened, and he began to wipe with renewed vigor, as if cleansing the table would similarly scrub the image from his mind. If any woman's face deserved to overtake his imagination, it was *hers*. He wished it wouldn't.

Though, in his more self-recriminating moments, he would pull her countenance to the forefront of his thoughts, tracing each treasured feature with fingers of his memory: the bright green eyes sparkling with intelligence; the cascade of shiny, auburn hair; the rosy lips, so flexible in their expressions. It was a deserved torture for what he had done.

Miss Greenglass was both an intrusion on his melancholic castigations and a window that looked out into a world where he was an acknowledged member of the human race. She was respectful most of the time, agreeable rather less of the time and far too noisy for a woman of her stature, but... she didn't ridicule him.

Things would have been easier if she had.

He could have taken the phial and Obliviated her, putting an end to the whole disturbing business. Then, he wouldn't have been reminded of what it was like to study in companionable silence or discuss Potions theory over tea. Of course, there was little chance that she was coming back, placing both the phial and pleasant afternoons out of his reach.

Pleasant afternoons could go stuff themselves.

The phial was another matter.

Slouching over to the lab sink, he rinsed the rag and wrung out the excess water, moving mechanically, absently, still lost in thought.

He would give her a couple of days to come back, and if she didn't, then he would seek her out and claim the phial. She wouldn't be too difficult to find for a man of his skills, nor would she be difficult to overpower. Compared to his betrayal of *her*, petty theft was nothing. He wasn't even positive that it was what he thought it might be, but if there was a chance, even the slightest, that it could...

A sharp rapping at an upstairs window shook him out of his stupor. Running quickly up the steps, he half expected to see Miss Greenglass' angry face peering at him through the kitchen window. To his disappointment (a feeling that thoroughly annoyed him), an irate barn owl had its claws dug into the sill and was hitting its beak against the glass. To its leg was tied a scroll with a familiar 'H' in red sealing wax.

Splendid. Nothing brightened his mood like a reminder that his indentured servitude was to resume in a few short weeks.

"Why isn't she off to see her young man?" Madam Beetlebump asked a fluffy, orange, squash-faced cat that resembled Crookshanks so much that it made Hermione's heart constrict. From Madam's lap, the cat gave Hermione an inquisitive look.

"He's not my young man," Hermione explained to Butterpaws, the cat. She no longer even felt silly doing it. And now, she was not only missing Crookshanks, she was missing Ron, as well.

Sighing, she slouched down into the garden chair and sipped morosely at her tea. Ten o'clock had come and gone, and she was starting to feel guilty for standing up Snape. It wasn't that he didn't deserve it; at best he treated her with irritation, but usually used her as a verbal punching bag. His demonstrations of a sense of humor were like rays of sunlight burning through storm clouds: few and far between, but glorious when they appeared. She had actually *enjoyed* his company for brief moments. Just the

same, having been compared unfavorably to Harry's late mother by a man she was sure had never spoken well of anyone left her with a leaden weight in her stomach. It brought back the feelings of inadequacy and the need to prove herself that had plagued her in her first years at Hogwarts, then later when she had started her social work job at the Ministry.

Madam had begun tut-tutting in the manner of meddling old busybodies the world over, so Hermione turned her attention back to the cat and clarified, "We were researching a problem, but it doesn't look like he was the right one to employ."

Oh, bother. She would have to go back to pay him, at the very least.

Madam Beetlebump chuckled throatily, stroking the cat in her lap. "Oh, the research Mr. Beetlebump and I used to get up to... we made quite the magic." She chuckled again at her double-entendres.

"Not that kind of research," Hermione groaned. Even Butterpaws looked uncomfortable, choosing to lave an unruly patch of his tail than to participate in the conversation. Unfortunately, Madam was undeterred.

"She should go back to her young man and make up," she stated firmly, prodding the cat when he ignored her. "We always did like to make up."

Hermione took another sip of tea and wished that *she* had a tail to clean.

A/N: I wanted to clarify one point I'm taking certain liberties regarding DH. One of them is that Harry did not share Snape's private memories with his friends because they were, well, private. Therefore, Hermione would not know that Snape held a torch for Lily these past 20 years. Just in case any of you were wondering. Thanks for sticking with me and I appreciate your feedback.

Meager Revenge

Chapter 4 of 20

A moment of inattention transports Hermione to one year after the fall of the Dark Lord, but with no way back to her own time. Her only clue is a small object that she finds between worlds and she enlists the aid of a young Professor... but he has his own agenda.

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Chapter 4 Meager Revenge

The next morning dawned on a braver, more resolute Hermione. She hadn't let Professor Snape get to her in the last years of her schooling, so there was no reason to let his younger self start now. She would go back to Spinner's End at the agreed-upon time, either to continue their research or pay him for his time.

She paused as she was setting down a dish of cat food. 'Maybe I'll get there early to take a look at that well,' she thought. She was finally well ahead in her chores, having stayed at Madam's house the entirety of yesterday, and Snape wouldn't necessarily be looking out for her, especially not early. A hungry feline yowled and stretched up on her hind legs, wrapping paws around Hermione's arm and nipping her wrist. Shaken out of her musings, she set down the dish and reached for the next.

When the cats had been fed and the garden watered, she showered and dressed in a set of pretty butter-yellow robes (not pastel) in lightweight cotton, edged with green piping that set off the highlights in her hair. The loveliness of the robes was not what concerned her. She needed *ease of movement*.

She had given herself an hour and a half to find and study the well. Apparating into the phone box on Spinner's End at half past eight that morning, she peered out of the cracked door as she slowly pushed it open and scanned the street for irate Potions masters. She would have to face him sooner or later, but at the moment, later would be preferable. The coast was clear, but for good measure, she cast a quick Disillusionment spell, shrugging off the cold, runny sensation trickling down her scalp.

Sidling out of the phone box, she darted into a narrow alley between two boarded-up houses, her breath coming in sharp pants, her heart racing far more quickly than the short sprint should require. After a quick glance around the corner of the house, assuring her that Spinner's End was deserted, she grinned to herself. This "sneaking around" was *exciting*.

The thrill of her little adventure made the upcoming ordeal of returning to Snape a bit more bearable. She had made up her mind the night before: she would have to apologize. Never mind that the ugly scene had been his doing. She knew from several years experience with Ron that it was simply easier, and a lot less time consuming, to be the Bigger Person and Admit Fault.

Post-adolescent males had little more sense than adolescent males and were more stubborn, due to, in Hermione's opinion, owning an Apparition License. This allowed a male to easily avoid his girlfriend and crash at a friend's pad. After several liberal applications of Firewhisky, partaken at said friend's pad, the male wouldn't have much memory of the incident, anyway, and would have convinced himself (and the friend) that the girlfriend was entirely to blame. Therefore, as much as it flew up her nose, Hermione had practice apologizing for fights she hadn't caused. She made him pay for it later, though.

Stepping carefully on the balls of her feet, she slunk along the fronts of the houses, her eyes fixed on Snape's porch except for the brief glances she threw down each tiny alley. She knew that the gate to the Industrial Graveyard was down one of those tiny passageways, but she couldn't quite recall which one. She'd been distracted by a young (handsome, charming) Lucius Malfoy chatting her up. Even Minerva McGonagall would have been distracted by *that*.

"Ah-ha!" Hermione hissed quietly to herself, beaming down the alley at the small wire gate at the end. With a quick look back to verify that Snape's front porch was as empty and dreary as ever, she walked briskly between the houses. The gate was closed with a simple hinged latch that protested noisily as she folded it back, but no more loudly than that gate, itself. She prodded the hinges with her wand and thought a lubricating charm, nodding when the gate glided silently outward.

Despite her Disillusionment, Hermione felt exposed as she trudged into the field along the path worn into the grass, her eyes darting around the grass for the first sign of the well cover and over her shoulder toward Snape's summer residence. The well wasn't visible from it, and as far as Hermione could tell, the only way he would know that she was "sneaking around his backyard" was if he'd set perimeter wards. She wouldn't put it past the paranoid prat; she would simply have to be on alert. Every few steps, she cast a quick Revelo in case the path had been warded, but found nothing. However, she couldn't shake the feeling that *someone* or *something* was watching her. It was silly; there was no living being in sight. Just the same, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and gooseflesh crawled down her arms.

Quite suddenly, the well emerged out of the grass, marked by a large, rectangular board covering the opening. Had she not been looking for it, she would have passed it by, assuming it to be a piece of rubbish. She stared at it apprehensively for several long minutes, sizing it up and trying to convince herself that the Well Creature would *not* come flying out to maul her the moment she removed the cover. After a disgusted sigh, Hermione decided that she had let herself go soft if time-portal bogeys could shake her determination.

A quick flick of her wand, and the cover scraped aside.

It was all rather anti-climactic, not to mention disappointing, Hermione decided as she wandered back up the path toward the gate. She'd cast diagnostic charms, Finite Incantatem, and several different flavors of revealing charms, only to find what she already knew: the well was used as a potions waste treatment facility. She supposed some potions and ingredients were too unstable to Vanish, requiring neutralizing, dumping and dissolving (there was quite a bit of lye down there), but none of that had shed any light on a solution to her little time-travel problem. As far as she could tell, after sending a bluebell flame into the well, it did, in fact, have a solid bottom and was not some strange black hole into the future. Several stones followed the flame and rested innocuously in the dirt.

She released the Disillusionment as she stepped out of the alley, brushing away any residual bits of detritus that might have attached itself to her person while she traipsed through the field. With a small moue of disapproval, she noted that Pumplenoose had deposited white hairs on *this* set of robes as well. She would have to have a word with that cat regarding appropriate napping locations.

With only a small quiver of trepidation, mainly right behind her sternum, she strode up Snape's porch steps and raised her hand to knock. Before her knuckles could make contact with wood, the door swung open, and Snape ground to an abrupt halt. His eyes widened momentarily before narrowing to slits and fixing on her right ear. Hermione tucked her hands behind her back and tried to look repentant.

"Yes?" he hissed resentfully, and the quiver in Hermione's chest became an outright wibble.

"Well, I thought... that is to say, *I hoped*... and I'm sorry that I... you look nice," she finished the last thought rather lamely, staring unabashedly at the man before her. He had cleaned up and done something with his hair that gave it more body than usual. It still hung in his face, and his expression was as unapproachable as ever, but combined with the tailored black robes that accentuated his shoulders and narrowed his hips, complete with forest green cravat, he looked less the surly teenager and more the man he was becoming. He could have given Victor Krum a run for his money. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Obviously."

"Oh." Clever, Hermione, very clever. "Look, I *am* sorry for storming off like that. I overreacted."

Any minute, she expected to be dismissed with a barked insult, but still he stood, staring impenetrably at her left shoulder. It was beginning to make her uncomfortable. Stepping backward off the porch and onto the top stair, she said, "I suppose I could come back later, or tomorrow..."

When he didn't respond, she sighed and, pushing aside her pride, asked, *May* I come back tomorrow?"

"I suppose." Those two words were spoken with less antipathy than his first responses, so Hermione congratulated herself on progress made.

"All right, then. Ten o'clock, and I won't be late." She flashed him an apologetic smile and turned to walk down the steps. Hearing the door shut behind her, she glanced over her shoulder to see him lock it behind them with a key attached to a small, leather fob. Curiosity got the better of her, and without pausing to think, she asked, "Where are you going?"

He stowed the keys in his robes and gazed pensively at the doorknob, seeming to wage some internal war. Hermione thought it a simple enough question, even if it wasn't her business. She winced. "Never mind. I'll see you tomorrow."

Sighing, he glanced up at her through a curtain of silky, black hair. "If you must know, I am going to Hogwarts. Teacher's meeting," he added as her eyebrows shot up.

"Really? Do you think the library would be open? Could I come?" Hermione blurted the questions in quick succession, wondering why on earth she hadn't thought of checking Hogwarts' library before. Granted, they probably wouldn't have admitted her without a staff member as chaperone, and none of her professors would know her yet, but it still seemed such an obvious oversight, especially since she was bunked up in Hogsmeade. The idea that those same professors might recognize her later gave her a moment's pause, but she decided that, even if she *were* to meet one of her former professors, it was highly unlikely that they would connect her face to one they would know twenty years later.

Except, perhaps, Dumbledore.

A desire to see the old wizard clenched at her heart, but she quashed it immediately. Of all of the Hogwarts staff, she was certain that Albus Dumbledore would see through her weak disguise and recognize that something was *wrong* about her. He might be able to help her, but she would seek him out only as a last resort.

"You want to go with me?" Snape asked slowly, carefully, his eyes partially hidden behind dark lashes that once again snared her attention.

"Well, if it wouldn't be too much of a bother..." Reflexively, she smoothed her hair, wishing she'd braided it back instead of letting it run rampant down her back. He seemed indecisive, so she continued, "I promise to stay out of your way; I just thought we might be able to find something useful there. In the Restricted Section, perhaps."

He drew himself up and straightened his robes. "I dare say being a 'bother' has not stopped you before," he said finally, and though the words were laced with disdain, Hermione recognized a capitulation when she heard one.

"Not when I can help it."

Severus was treated to a brilliant grin, and the last vestiges of his anger vanished like malodorous wisps of steam. Though he had expected the witch not to appear when ten o'clock had come and gone yesterday, his mood had blackened and spiraled into a heavy funk. He had spent a good portion of the afternoon reading up on Dark tracking spells, the kind that caused their subjects a variety of discomforts and some that bent the subject to the tracker's will. He'd cast a lesser spell on a couple of cat hairs that had been transferred from her robes to one of the kitchen chairs, but when the results had pointed to Hogsmeade instead of Canterbury, he'd chucked the spell book at the wall and had a light dinner of Ogden's Old, rounding off the evening by passing out on the couch.

All over a phial that only *might* be what he needed.

When he had opened the door to her contrite face, the urge to stun her and grab the phial warred with such an intense wash of relief and gratitude that he'd been thoroughly offended, and momentarily immobilized, that a witch he hardly knew could affect him so strongly.

And here she was, apologizing for a situation that he had created, asking to go with him on an errand. He had no illusions that it was remotely similar to a date or that she was interested in anything other than the Hogwarts Library. It made her suggestion safe; he could accept it with minimal guilt, even if he *did* enjoy her company.

She'd said he looked *nice*. No one, apart from his dearly departed mother, had said he looked *nice*. Not even *her*. He would have preferred to believe it flattery to get back into his good graces, if he thought her capable of guile.

If her earlier trek into the field behind his house was any indication, then she had all the subtlety of a troll. The wards that he'd placed around his potions dump were the same he'd used to guard his possessions at Hogwarts: relatively uncommon and hard to detect, unless one knew to look for them, but harmless to the witch blundering through them. They had alerted him to her presence, not that he had been able to take action from the shower.

When her tinkering had stopped, he'd fully expected her to disappear again. If it weren't for the blasted teacher's meeting, for which he was now threatening to be late, he would have followed her out there, either to collect the phial (she could get another good look at the well from its bottom) or samples for use in tracking spells the nastier kind for prying into his business and dangling the carrot of companionship in front of his nose.

He was standing there staring at her, he realized with a small jolt, and she was waiting for him to do something, a slight twitching together of her eyebrows signifying her growing concern. It irritated him irrationally. He looked away, scowling, and grunted, "Very well, then."

Without waiting for a reply or confirmation, he Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts.

After a brisk walk through the castle grounds, Severus dropped off Hermione at the library. She had seemed to know her way, furthering his suspicion that she wasn't who she'd said she was. She had had no trouble Apparating to Hogwarts, either. There was a chance that she was a Ravenclaw who had graduated several years his senior, in Lucius' class perhaps, and he had just not noticed. But Malfoy hadn't known her either. And her hair would have been hard to miss.

Nevertheless, the staff meeting was due to start in five minutes, and he still had to navigate the stairwell that sometimes wasn't. At the start of his first year as a professor, McGonagall had hinted that there was a trick to it, but as one of the new staff members, Severus had had to figure it out for himself. Now in his second year, he knew quite well that for staff members late for a meeting, the stairwell would become a corridor leading to a closet stuffed to the brim with clocks (all set to a slightly different time, and therefore guaranteed to be chiming whenever the hapless professor opened the door) instead of the teacher's lounge.

Severus arrived with a minute to spare, but was disappointed to find that all the chairs furthest from the head of the table had been taken. The closer to Dumbledore one sat, the more attention one had to pretend to pay. He wished he'd learned McNair's trick of sleeping with his eyes open. If the Dark Lord hadn't caught on, then surely Albus Dumbledore would be fooled.

Staff meetings reminded Severus nauseatingly of Death Eater gatherings. Though the topics were different, the tedium and seeming endlessness of them were strikingly similar. So was the fact that most of his fellow staff members wanted little to do with him. He kept his eyes on the table and his mind blank, resisting the urge to sigh when Sprout began her harangue on the decline of moral values, as seen by the number of older students caught in her greenhouse without their robes, or trying to grow "extra-credit" coca and cannabis plants. That would be Pomfrey's cue to comment on the rising number of alcohol-related accidents, and the new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor (whatever her name was, Severus hadn't been paying attention) would be sure to throw in her two Sickles about Death Eaters and What This World Was Coming To, dragging the meeting to twice its allotted length. At least Lucius had had the courtesy to serve aperitifs when he'd hosted.

As soon the meeting was adjourned, Severus was out like a shot and heading directly to the library. To his surprise, Miss Greenglass was waiting outside its doors, shifting restlessly from foot to foot. She caught sight of him and seemed to melt in relief. "There you are! I thought you were supposed to be done an hour ago!"

"I was."

"Severus! Severus, a word!" Professor McGonagall called out as she swooped toward them, long, burgundy robes fluttering behind her. Miss Greenglass hunched slightly in what he perceived to be guilt. "I wanted to remind you that you must submit your syllabi to me two weeks before the start of term so that I may review them."

"Of course, Professor," Severus said stiffly, wishing she could have said this somewhere other than right in front of Miss Greenglass. It wasn't that he was trying to impress her, but a professional *did* have his dignity.

"Please, call me Minerva. We are colleagues," she reminded him impatiently, though her tone was that of a professor speaking to a student. "And I also wanted your help this afternoon..."

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione interrupted Professor McGonagall as politely as she could, "but you see, Pr...Sev and I have made plans to have tea today."

"Sev! Tea!" McGonagall looked between the two young people, delighted and somewhat taken aback. "And here I thought... well, no matter. Good to see you getting back in the saddle, as they say." She winked at Snape and sent a mischievous, wholly un-McGonagall smirk to Hermione. "If that's the case, then by all means, away with you! I'll be happy to find someone else to do the job."

With one last smile that encompassed the both of them, she gathered her robes in her hands and sashayed down the corridor as quickly as she had come, her chuckles echoing off the stone walls long after she had disappeared around a corner.

"Tea?" Snape asked in a disbelieving drawl when McGonagall's mirth had finally died out.

"Tea," she repeated firmly, nodding her head. "I have something to show you." Hermione had been the Bigger Person early this morning, giving him ample time to apologize in return. He hadn't, so she had moved to Phase Two of Making Amends, namely, Payback. "Let's see if *he* can survive an afternoon at Madam Beetlebump's without getting cat hair on his robes," she thought, pleased with herself that her vengeance could be put to good use.

Hermione tried to keep a straight face as Snape stared down a fat tortoiseshell that had just stolen a biscuit off his plate.

Getting her former professor to Madam's for tea had been touch-and-go for a while. He had been quite reluctant to accept the invitation, going so far as to charge her with lying when she'd told him that they were going to a small house in Hogsmeade and not to Canterbury after all.

His countenance had darkened, and he'd stopped in his tracks, mere meters from the gates of Hogwarts. "You said you were from Canterbury," he had spat at her accusingly.

Hermione had blinked, nonplussed. "I said my family was from Canterbury. I never said that *I* lived there." A thunderstorm had begun to brew behind his eyes: one she had recognized from her school days that was usually followed by lots of shouting, loss of house points and detention with Filch. She'd sighed heavily. "If you must know, my parents and I have... difficulties understanding each other. I thought it best that I find my own place." It was, more or less, the truth, though not in the sense that he would invariably take it.

"I see," he'd said quietly, and the clouds had lifted from his face.

He hadn't so much as batted an eye when she'd explained about lodging with the Madam and helping around the house, though she'd left out the part about the cats until they had been walking down the tidy path from the low front gate to the doorstep, on which lounged a gray tabby cat.

"If I recall correctly," he'd drawled in a tone that held little doubt that he did not, "you usually have *white* cat hair on your clothes."

"Yes..." Hermione had stalled as she led him into the house and ushered him to the back garden where she and Madam usually took their tea. She had left him on his own to divine Madam Beetlebump's unique method of conversation, grinning wickedly as she hurried to the kitchen.

Now, Hermione, Snape and Madam Beetlebump sat at a black, wrought iron table with a mosaic-tiled top, placed at the center of an herb garden. Plots of thyme, rosemary, basil, sage, lavender, several different varieties of mint, asphodel, dittany, mallowsweet, puffapod and many different plants that Hermione couldn't name were planted in concentric rings broken by tidy gravel paths that emanated from the center of the garden like spokes on a wheel. A large patch of catnip, at that moment hosting a total of eight happy cats, grew along the garden fence at the back of the yard. Dark clouds were beginning to gather around the tops of the mountains, crowding out the white puffs that had scuttled across the sky all day and threatening rain in the near future, but doing little to dampen the warmth and peacefulness of the afternoon.

Bartholomew, biscuit thief extraordinaire, gave Snape a final, contemptuous glance and polished off his pinched treat in three large bites. He licked his whiskers in a

manner that dared Snape to retaliate.

"Bartholomew, that's a bad kitty!" Madam chastised the cat perfunctorily from her chair, then handed the cat the last bite of her sandwich.

"One would think I don't feed you," Hermione stated as Bartholomew began to wind around her legs and send her sandwich predatory glances. "Don't even think about it."

"You could lose a little weight," Madam said speculatively, brushing crumbs from her own protruding belly. "Unlike Heidi, here, who is much too scrawny." She sniffed in disapproval. "And her young man! All bones and no flesh!"

"But..." Hermione tried to interrupt unsuccessfully.

"I'm not saying that bone on a wizard isn't a good thing." She leered at the cat and winked broadly. "Heavens, no, Bartholomew! But he has to have some *meat* on him, some bits to hold on to!"

Snape choked on a sip of tea and had to set down his cup to tend to his coughing fit. Blushing fiercely, Hermione patted Snape on the back and wondered if her brilliant plan for payback was blowing up in her face. "Madam, *please...*"

Regaining control of his breathing, Snape sat up straight in his chair and glowered down his nose at Madam Beetlebump, who was still chattering at Bartholomew. He had no more than opened his mouth when Pumplenoose took that opportunity to leap into his lap. With fluffy tail held high, just beneath Snape's outraged nostrils, she began to knead the tops of his thighs, and from the pained look on his face, she was not sparing her claws.

"Oh, Pumplenoose!" Hermione was quick to pluck the purring feline off Snape's legs, noting with satisfaction that his black robes were now sprinkled liberally with long, white hair. "Not every one likes to have their laps perforated."

"That... that *beast*!" Snape sputtered ineffectually in his disgust as he pointed at the cat, which was unfazed and butting her cheek against Hermione's chin.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to irritate our guest," Hermione cooed, forestalling whatever awful thing Snape had been about to say. She gave her a quick cuddle, then set her back down on the ground.

"There's no accounting for taste." Madam sniffed her disapproval to Bartholomew, who ignored her in favor of watching Hermione's sandwich. "What young man *wouldn't* want a pretty lady in his lap?"

Deciding that vengeance had been won, and that she had better do something before Snape choked to death or hexed Madam Beetlebump, Hermione rose from her seat.

"Se..., ah, Professor Snape and I are going to go into the kitchen so that I can show him something important," she informed Pumplenoose and quickly gathered the tea things, leaving Madam's cup and the teapot still on the garden table. Snape followed closely on her heels.

"You are insane!" Snape snapped at her as they passed through the door and into the house.

"I'm insane?"

"To live here! And so is that woman. Exactly how many cats does she have?"

Hermione counted quickly in her head. "Fourteen, but that isn't important." She pulled a tiny book from her pocket and performed a silent Engorgio. It grew to a large tome with a cracked, leather binding and faded, gilt lettering. Grinning wildly and almost bursting with excitement, she brandished the book at him. "This is it!"

"Did you... *steal* a library book?" He tilted his head, eyes glittering oddly in the afternoon sunlight that streamed through the kitchen window.

"What? No!" She flushed guiltily and refused to meet his gaze. "I *borrowed* it. Unofficially." Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other, fidgeting with the book in her hands. As Snape's silence drew on, her shoulders began to hunch. "The librarian wouldn't let me check it out. Not even under your name. You can take it back when we're done; we'll need it for a while."

"Indeed."

Shoving a curly lock of hair behind her ear and doing her best to ignore his bemused, irate stare, she opened the book to the marked page and pointed to a small illustration of a faceted crystal bottle that was glowing from within.

"It's called the Starglass."

A/N:

Thanks for reading! The Starglass' name is from "The Lord of the Rings." However, this one is completely different.

A Walk About Town

Chapter 5 of 20

A moment of inattention transports Hermione to one year after the fall of the Dark Lord, but with no way back to her own time. Her only clue is a small object that she finds between worlds and she enlists the aid of a young Professor... but he has his own agenda.

The borrowed library book was once again the size of a matchbook and stowed away in a pocket in Hermione's robes. Two abreast and with brisk, determined steps, they walked through Hogsmeade to a Potions supply shop that Snape favored in order to purchase a couple of ingredients that he simply had to have "*Right now*, Miss Greenglass. *Do make haste.*"

"I suppose after all that," Hermione had said, gesturing toward the garden door as she swung her light summer cloak over her shoulders, "you could call me Heidi, if you

like."

He'd merely nodded and hustled her out of the house without a parting word to Madam Beetlebump.

Hermione couldn't imagine what could be so critical to their research, but she was heartily intrigued. According to the book, *Shades of Grey: An Itemization of Obscure Magical Curiosities of Unknown Orientation*, the Starglass was a unique artifact that amplified the bearer's intent. Certain rumors went as far as to suggest that it granted wishes, though they were discounted as exaggerations or falsifications, as no known bearer of the phial had met a happy end. No one was quite sure how it worked or to where it had disappeared. The last to own it, a witch by the name of Griselda Goldwater, had vanished with the phial in England at the turn of the century. The creator was also a mystery, as was the method of creation. The phial was said to contain a small amount of stardust (and at this, Hermione winced, for she had never seen stardust for sale *anywhere*, and they had used a bit during their experimentation) collected from a fallen star, but this had never been confirmed. Hermione wondered how Snape intended to determine astronomical properties and thought that they might make more progress if they were to find a book or three that did not deal in vague, unsubstantiated rumors. They would need to do more research to confirm whether or not her phial was, in fact, the Starglass.

'And what in bleeding hell does it have to do with my impromptu trip to the past?' Someone trod on her foot, and she yelped, her train of thought broken.

They were now in a part of town with which Hermione was unfamiliar. She hadn't wandered here as a student, and despite the fact that she had been staying Hogsmeade for over a week, she hadn't had much opportunity or desire to explore. The street was crammed with rambling structures that were wider on their upper stories than they were on the ground floor to the point that a witch could step from one rooftop to the other with relative ease, even though an alley separated each structure. The streets seemed narrower and darker here, the buildings crowding out the daylight and looming over pedestrians. Vendors had set up kiosks along each side of the road, and often in the middle, routing passersby into thin tributaries that were further constricted when a wizard or witch paused to shop.

The scents of fried dough, meats, cabbage and wood smoke hung heavy in the still air, tangling with more pleasant aromas of dried herbs and oncoming rain. The noise was not quite deafening, but certainly damaging to one's eardrums: incessant shouts of vendors, no matter how close one was to the stall; contained explosions as hawkers demonstrated their wares; shrieks of children as they tore between the robed legs of adults; the occasional bray of a beast and companions yelling at each other over the din, conveying much of the conversation with gestures as with words. It was all very medieval, and once Hermione had gotten used to the overwhelming racket, she was quite enchanted.

Snape sluiced through the crowd much like he had passed through the halls of Hogwarts: people naturally stepped out of his way under the force of his scowl, young man though he was. The glances cast his way were less fearful and more disgusted, but it got the job done. Due to the press of bodies, Hermione was forced to follow slightly behind.

"Cor, if it isn't Snively!" a man shouted over the din of the street.

"I do believe you're right. Hey! Hey, Snivellus!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione caught site of two men on the other side of the road just out of their teens, one waving a beefy hand in the air. Snape went rigid in front of her and stopped cold. She almost stepped on his heel, catching herself with a hand on his arm. "Who are those people?" she asked, affronted on his behalf.

"Idiots. Let's go." He started forward again, his glower more fierce than before. The young men were elbowing each other and laughing.

"Snively! Who's the poodle?"

"Ignore them," Severus growled, increasing his pace. Hermione latched onto the back of his sleeve in an attempt to not get separated by the crowd and tried to lighten the mood with a self-deprecating shrug.

"My hair *does* get frizzier in this weather."

He stopped walking again to give her an odd look. Beaming at him, she nudged him forward. "Come on, before they decide to share their wisdom and insight with us at close range."

He grimaced and, grabbing her elbow, propelled them through the throng to a side street. It was less crowded, for which Hermione was grateful, but smelled strongly of vinegar. She wrinkled her nose as she glanced around, finally spying a shadowed doorway above which hung a wooden sign that depicted an endlessly melting cauldron. Purple froth bubbled up to the sagging rim, spilling over and collecting at the bottom of the sign to vanish under more foam. It was into this shop that Snape led her.

Despite the fact that there were no windows that Hermione could see, the shop still seemed to be lit by cheerful, yellow sunlight. Dust motes danced in the light that streamed between tall shelves full to the brim with potions equipment. Cauldrons of all shapes, sizes and materials were stacked to the ceiling, from tiny golden ones that could have been strung on a chain as a pendant to an enormous pewter vessel on the bottom shelf that could have easily passed for a makeshift spa. Stirring rods, flasks, scales, knives, grates, cutting boards, burners, drying racks, and several implements that Hermione had never seen were meticulously arranged and labeled in a labyrinth of aisles. The urge to browse drew her toward a shelf displaying tongs, from the practical to the delicate and ornate, but Snape's hand on her elbow would have none of it. Past the equipment, he led her into the back of the store where a long counter had been erected in front of yet more shelves. These contained jarred, bottled, or open bushels of ingredients.

"Oh," Hermione breathed as she leaned her forearms against the counter to get a better look at the shelves behind. Was that a pickled harpy hatchling in that jar?

A copy of that day's *Daily Prophet* lay folded by her elbows, and she glanced briefly at the front page, noting the date. 'August 12, 1982. I'll be, what, three this year?'

Snape slapped his hand against a bell that sat on the edge of the counter, startling her, and scowled impatiently at a closed door at the side of the room.

"Do they sell pre-made potions?" Hermione asked curiously, breaking the quiet that had settled over the shop as they waited for the shopkeeper.

"Just supplies," Snape answered in that way of his that seemed pleased that he knew something she did not. It didn't bother her, but she had a strong suspicion that his accusations of her being a know-it-all might have been a case of the pot calling the kettle black. "They have a distributor in Diagon Alley and are famous in the profession as having the widest selection in stock."

The side door swung open on oiled hinges, and a large, pallid, burly man with an evident limp hobbled over to them behind the counter. His gaze brushed over Hermione dismissively, settling on Snape with a tight frown.

"Mr. Snape."

"You have me at a disadvantage," Snape said darkly, drawing himself up as tall as he could, which was only a half a head taller than Hermione. "Where is Mr. Simons?"

"He's not here. Ministry had a few questions for him, they did." The man smiled nastily. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" the man stated more than asked, narrowing hostile blue eyes.

"I wouldn't."

Hermione sidled closer to Snape, perplexed and unnerved by the antagonism thickening the air. The shopkeeper's eyes flicked to her, censure clouding his expression. He seemed to be judging her and finding her lacking, but for what, Hermione could only guess.

"Perhaps we should do our business elsewhere," she said coolly, staring him down. She didn't appreciate his attitude or his intimidation tactics, and she wanted to make it

clear that she supported Snape against his blatant mistrust.

Snape's eyes met hers and gleamed briefly, but he shrugged languidly. "If you insist, though it would be a shame if I were to move the Hogwarts account to another shop after we have... enjoyed," he laced the word with a hearty dose of sarcasm, "...such a long business relationship."

The shopkeeper shifted restlessly and drummed blunt fingertips on the polished wood of the countertop. "That's... that won't be necessary, sir. I didn't mean anything by it. Just making conversation, you know?"

Hermione, who had been serious about doing their shopping elsewhere, had to smother a grin at the shopkeeper's abrupt about-face. Sniffing haughtily, she tilted her chin up and gave him a glance askance before turning to Snape, saying, "I'll wait for you outside. I find I need some fresh air."

"I won't be long," Snape drawled in a tone that left very little doubt that any more lip from the shopkeeper would mean the loss of a great deal of revenue for his business. Hermione nodded and glided out of the store, chin still held high. As soon as she was on the street, she succumbed to a fit of giggles. Snape's thinly veiled threats had been a terror to her when she was a student, but as a co-conspirator they were quite a lot of fun.

True to his word, Snape stepped out of the shop only minutes later, tucking a small parcel into his robes. He raised his eyebrows at the sight of Hermione leaning against the building chuckling.

"That was brilliant, Severus," Hermione pronounced, beaming at him as she pushed off the wall to stand in front of him.

"You are an odd woman, Heidi." He turned to leave the side street and join the fray of the market, but not before she caught the twisting of his lips into a small smile.

Hoarse shouting and several loud bangs erupted from the crowd, and like a school of minnows, witches and wizards turned their heads and headed en masse toward the disturbance. Hermione and Snape shared a glance and joined the throng.

Severus Snape enjoyed a fight as much as the next wizard. Looney old widows, schoolmates and rude shopkeepers aside, this jaunt through Hogsmeade was shaping into one of the more pleasant outings he had had in a long time. A brawl between two drunken sods was just the thing to finish off the day, giving him a subject upon whom he could look down and whose idiocy he could later ridicule with Heidi.

His friend.

He unsuccessfully smothered a grin.

His sharp-tongued, impatient-with-stupidity friend.

The grin faded. He wouldn't think about his recent purchase or what it would mean to that friendship. That could be dealt with when the time came.

Grabbing her elbow, he nonverbally cast the spell he had developed to encourage people to get out of his way, his eyebrows drawing down into a habitual frown of concentration.

With no real effort, they were soon standing next to the fruit and vegetable carts near the front of the crowd, which had formed a semicircle around the front of a post office and a red-faced crone shouting at a young man sprawled in the street clutching a familiar looking bag.

"How dare you come in here? I should call the Aurors on you!" The witch shook a fist at the scruffy man who was trying to pick himself up off the ground and mollify the woman with placating gestures at the same time. The crowd jeered raucously, some shaking their fists in imitation of the woman.

"Please! I was just looking for a job!"

"We don't employ werewolves in this town!" The crone spat at his feet and stormed back into the office, slamming the door behind her. At that, the mob erupted in angry cries, derision morphing into fear and hatred.

"Death Eater!"

"Kill it, before it can find another Dark Lord to follow!"

A head of cabbage flew out of the crowd and burst against the side of the young man's head. He had risen to his feet, gazing at the door beseechingly, but now he was frantically searching the faces surrounding him for any sign of compassion.

"Oh my god..." Hermione whispered quietly. She now recognized his face and the bag he carried. She gasped as another vegetable flew toward the hapless young man. With a flick of her wand, she redirected it away from him. Several more sailed toward him, and Hermione struck them away with a nonverbal spell. "Stop!"

His eyes rolled toward her, meeting her own for a second of silent gratitude, and then he Apparated away.

The crowd let out a collective groan of disappointment, and several people glanced around, searching for the witch who had helped spoil their fun. A wizard on her right made a grab for the front of her robes, his face twisted in a furious sneer, but long, strong fingers had wrapped around her upper arm and were now dragging her forcibly through the crowd. He pulled her off the main street and into a narrow alley that smelled of stale beer and urine.

Snape dropped her arm with an angry shove and rounded on her, dropping something at his side. Her angry hiss cut off the invectives that were boiling on his tongue.

"What is this?" she pointed, disbelieving and horrified, to the apple that he'd cast to the ground. Tears were beginning to well in her eyes, but she blinked them away, disgusted with herself, Snape and the wizarding world in general. Snape glared at the tomato, then raised his eyes to hers. When no answer was forthcoming, she whispered, "What were you going to do?"

"He was a *werewolf*, Heidi. Didn't you hear?" His voice had developed a faintly pleading whine to it that dismayed him. Why did he feel the need to explain himself to this chit? It was none of her business.

"Yes, but that doesn't make him any less of a thinking, feeling human being." Snape opened his mouth to retort, but she cut him off with an impatient gesture. "Oh, don't be a smart-arse, you know what I mean. Do you think he *chose* to be a werewolf? It wasn't his fault he came to be like this, and he's obviously miserable. He probably doesn't have a friend in the world..."

Hermione trailed off, her heart constricting painfully in her chest. At this point in his life, Remus Lupin would have been alone: James and Lily dead, Peter Pettigrew presumed dead, Sirius locked in Azkaban for murder with the onus of betrayal weighing on his head. Hermione knew little about Lupin's life before he taught Defense Against the Dark Arts in her third year. If this were any example, then his life must have been difficult, indeed.

"How *could* you?" Her eyes were beginning to sting again, and she blinked rapidly.

"Heidi, I..." he stopped and sighed. "You don't know anything," he mumbled, his shoulders hunching in a defeated posture.

"No. I guess I don't," she agreed quietly. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, until she sighed and hugged her arms to her chest. "Thank you for getting me out of there. I think that wizard would have..."

"Yes, he would," he interrupted, his words clipped and harsh. He didn't want to think about what that lout would have done to her had he been given the chance.

"Well..."

Scuffing dirt over the apple with the toe of his shoe, he interrupted her again. "I'll walk you back to that madhouse."

"It's not a madhouse," she corrected him. "*Madam* is mad. The cats are quite sane."

Severus snorted in spite of himself. Heidi grinned at him, and he knew he was forgiven. Damn her. *She* hadn't forgiven him.

"Besides, I thought we might go back to your place and do a bit of research. To settle the stomach, as it were."

Severus almost declined. He *wanted* to; not because a spot of research didn't sound tempting, but because it would mean the end of all... this, whatever this was. Better not to name it. Really, it would be better to do what he had to do and put this whole, sordid affair behind him.

It was a pity that the thought didn't make him *feel* better.

They Apparated to Spinner's End directly onto his front porch. The house itself had anti-Apparition wards (it was a wise precaution considering some of the company he kept), and he had no neighbors worth speaking of. The last family, which had been Muggle, had deserted this street when he had been seventeen, due in no small part to the hazing that he and a couple of his buddies had inflicted upon them. He wasn't proud of what he'd done; he hadn't been when he was a teenager, either. But the sense of belonging to a group, even as his co-conspirators had heckled him for having a "filthy Muggle father," had beat the shite he'd dealt with in school. Besides, he'd managed to cast a few discreet hexes at the more obnoxious young Death Eaters without any retaliation. Dumbnuts, all of them.

This was his chance to make up for the worst of his mistakes, to right the thoughtless wrong that had cost him so dearly. He was almost positive that he had the key within his grasp: the moment Heidi had named it the Starglass, the planets had aligned in his head, and his vague impression that the phial was valuable to him had become an illuminated path so clear that it could be nothing short of destiny. One simple test would verify that her heirloom was the Starglass, and then...

And then...

That was the part that troubled him. He had never put much stock in Divination, but it was during ruminations like these that he wished that the future were mapped out in the soggy leaves of one's afternoon tea. Having been a tool of prophecy himself, he felt that he should be entitled to a quick peek at what fate had in store for him, much like the "Get Out of Jail Free" cards that had come with a board game he'd had as a child. Then again, perhaps he'd already used that particular card.

If these were the final few steps toward salvation, then why did his feet feel as if they were encased in lead? He shook off the idea as preposterous. Yes, he would lose something if he went through with this, but he was inured to sacrifice. This was worth it.

Heidi pulled the book from her pocket and enlarged it with a dexterous flick of her wand. Pushing a tangle of curls out of her face as she flipped through the pages, she asked, "Would you like to go through this one? I've marked all the passages..."

"You've bent the corners of the pages," he corrected harshly to distract himself from the slow rolling in his stomach. He wished, hopelessly, that it was the effects of an off bit of ham, but there was no point in fooling himself. In any case, he would never eat spoiled meat.

She shot him a half exasperated, half amused look and rolled her eyes. "Yes, *thank you* for pointing out that I have vandalized stolen school property. I wouldn't have figured it out on my own."

Smoothing a creased corner with an almost reverent press of her fingers, she inserted a sheaf of parchment to mark her place. He followed the motion with his eyes, observing the slightly thick first knuckles and ragged nails, though her fingers were long and slender. Ink stained the tips of the right index and thumb, and the faint lines of claw marks marred the backs of both hands. They were busy, scholarly hands, always in constant motion and beautiful for their imperfections. One of those hands reached up to wave in front of his face, and he snapped out of his fascination.

"I must run a test," he snapped more severely than he'd intended. Heidi winced as her eyebrows puckered in confusion. Dejected, and yet excitement tingling along his skin, he turned away from her questioning gaze and headed down into his basement laboratory.

"All right." She followed him down the basement stairs, drawing the phial from an inner pocket in her robes. "How do you suppose that woman knew he was a werewolf?" she asked suddenly. "It's not something one would put on a CV."

Severus, by now used to her abrupt change of subjects, just shrugged. "She probably has one of those Beastioscopes. Many people bought them when it became known that the D...You-Know-Who was recruiting magical creatures."

"I see."

He glanced sidelong at her; she was tilting the Starglass so that the light reflected through the facets and cast rainbows on the workbench. Why didn't she know that? She seemed to pride herself on knowing just about everything else. He shrugged the thought away, holding out his hand and saying with forced politeness, "Would you hand me the Starglass?"

There was no need to irritate her into uncooperativeness. He'd been watching Lucius charm his every desire out of humanity for far too long to dismiss the value of civility. A trickle of sweat crept from under his hairline, sliding down the back of his neck and into his collar, cooling as it traveled. He hoped that he didn't appear as nervous as he felt.

Acquiescing with a curious glance and a nod, she dropped the phial into his palm, and he breathed in silent relief. "We don't know for certain that it *is* the Starglass."

"In a moment, we will."

"How are you going to test it? With what you bought this afternoon? What *did* you buy? How much do I owe you, by the way?"

"Owe me?" he asked, momentarily baffled. He met her eyes for an instant, then glanced away, wishing that she hadn't brought up that particular facet of their arrangement. This was hard enough on him as is, though it shouldn't have been.

She flapped a hand at the phial, still clutched in his clammy palm. "You know, for all this."

"We shall discuss it later," he said dismissively, turning away. With hands that trembled very slightly, he weighed the phial in his hand, shifting it in his palm and staring absently at it as he considered how to unlock its magic. It appeared that it wasn't the contents alone that powered the object, but the sum of the parts. "Hm."

"What is it?" Heidi asked, her breath tickling his ear as she leaned over his shoulder.

"It seems to have..." he trailed off as he uncapped the bottle and peered into its depths. The fine, gray dust was now more of a large-grained substance that tended to clump together. Severus capped it and gave it an experimental shake.

"Let me see," Heidi demanded, reaching for it. Without thinking, he snatched it out of her reach, twisting his body so that she was further separated from it. "Hey, what are

you playing at?"

Backing around the workbench slowly, he surreptitiously let his wand drop from his sleeve and into his hand. "I haven't finished."

"I think you have," she said calmly as she followed him. He couldn't mistake the steely glint in her normally warm brown eyes; she meant business. Well, so did he.

His nonverbal Obliviate rebounded off of her Protego and skittered across the workbench. Wand flashing deftly in a hand that he could have sworn was empty, she reached forward, and the phial rocketed out of his clutches, slapping against her palm. With one final, distressed look back at him, she was pummeling up the stairs and out of the laboratory.

Hermione tore through the kitchen and out the back door, casting a barring charm as it slammed behind her. Snape bellowed in fury, and she thought fleetingly that a stunner would have been more effective, but she just couldn't bring herself to hurt him. She should have *known* that something was wrong when he'd gone all Lucius on her. But they had become *friends*...

She dove behind the giant tree by the fence just as the back door was blown open. Hoping that he expected her to Apparate away, she crouched down and silently Disillusioned herself. A sharp crack broke the air, and she huffed in relief. He had left.

To her immense gratitude, the fence still sported the hole through which she had crawled those many years in the future. Unwilling to cross his yard and tempt fate or proximity wards, she gathered her robes around her small form and squeezed through, cursing quietly as the voluminous fabric caught on sharp points of metal. Several snagged threads and colorful phrases later, she was standing in the field and brushing the dust off of her robes, pondering what to do next. He would probably go to Madam's first, to see if she were there. Hopefully, he would leave when he didn't find her and not cause the poor widow any grief. Would he next search for her in Hogsmeade? Canterbury? At any rate, he would probably be gone for a good while, and this might be her last chance in the near future to examine the well. Perhaps she had to toss a bit of dust from the Starglass into it to activate it? Or, the whole damn thing?

Hermione blinked, suddenly recalling his peculiar frown as he'd examined it. Opening her hand and rolling it to her fingertips, she held the phial up to one eye as she walked toward the well.

"Oh," she breathed. No wonder he had been perplexed. What once had been dust now resembled small shards of obsidian. Was it her imagination or had the phial gotten heavier since their altercation in his basement? What had possessed Snape to attack her in order to acquire it? The book had said that it "amplified the bearer's intent," but what did that *mean*?

"He had better return that library book," she grumbled to herself as she let the hand holding the phial drop to her side. She had *never* failed to return a library book. The well was now almost underfoot and with a peremptory flick of her wand, she had drug the cover off to the side.

"It is not my job to fix *your* mistakes," he sneered behind her. She gasped, whirling around to face him.

"How did you...?" Of course, he must have cast wards around this place, and she simply hadn't discovered them. It had been arrogant and foolish of her to assume that she could unravel all of his tricks. He seemed to read the realization from her expression and smiled unpleasantly.

"What *is* it about this place that has you so... enamored?" His wand was drawn and resting against his thigh, but she had no doubt that he could have it ready in instant.

"It doesn't have to be like this," she pleaded sadly. A cold drop of rain landed on the top of her head, then another on her cheek as thunder rumbled in the distance. She noted that he looked rather soggy; it must have started raining in Hogsmeade, as well. Head tilted forward and through lank and drippings clumps of hair, he was giving her a calculating glare. His robes were plastered against his spare frame, lending him the air of a drowned scarecrow. He advanced a step, and this time it was she who retreated.

"Indeed." He held out his hand, palm up. "Give it to me."

It had begun to rain in earnest; large drops pelted from the sky to seep through her robes and soaked into the ground, mixing with the earth around the well to form thick mud. Lightning streaked across the sky, a jagged blade that rent the bleeding clouds. Her shoes squelched as she shuffled backward, feeling with her feet for the edge of the well that she knew was behind her. Wrapping her fingers tightly around the phial, she shook her head. "Why do you want it?"

"That is none of your concern!" he shouted over a crescendoing growl of thunder that climaxed in a sharp crack.

"Severus, whatever is so important, we can do it together!" Hermione's heel hit the back of the well, and she stopped, waiting to see how he would respond. To her surprise, she meant what she had just said. He seemed desperate, driven, and she was sure that he had a reason behind his actions, bizarre and disturbing though they may be. Dumbledore had trusted the man; therefore, *she* would trust him. If he could only just put his faith in her, then she would put her plans on hold and prove to him that it was not misplaced.

He dashed his hair out of his eyes, and the sudden movement made her jump. Mud slid under her shoes, and swinging her arms out, she tried to catch her balance. In a move that would later remind her of her dear late friend and comrade-in-arms, Tonks, she stepped on the hem of her robe. Almost as if she were a player in a movie that had been filmed in slow motion, she felt her body tilt backwards, and the foot that wasn't holding down the edge of her robes slid out from under her and into the air. With detached amusement, she watched as Snape's eyes widened comically, his mouth gaping as he yelled and reached for her. 'I must look just as silly,' she thought as his face disappeared from view and cold, wet darkness, reverberating with the sound of her own scream, surrounded her. An instant later, she was blinded by light.

A/N: Thanks for reading and I appreciate your feedback.

Butterflies and Hurricanes

Chapter 6 of 20

See first chapter.

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Chapter 6 Butterflies and Hurricanes

It hardly surprised Hermione that when her back hit the bottom of the well, she landed softly, as if the ground had materialized under her. As she had dropped into darkness, a sudden, fierce longing had gripped her: an intense desire to *go home*. With the light had come an odd, familiar sense of floating, briefer than before but unmistakable to the time-traveler in training.

The air in the well was stifflingly warm, though she could tell from the periwinkle circle of sky that it was nearing twilight. The storm was gone. Snape was gone. Frowning, she glared up at the faintly twinkling stars. She couldn't *believe* that he had tried to Oblivate her and steal the phial.

Bastard.

But, he *had* tried to catch her before she fell, and he'd looked stricken as his face had flashed out of sight...

Poor, distrustful, pathetic bastard.

She sighed, irritated that her wholly justified anger was slipping away more quickly than it should. It appeared to be a moot point at the moment anyway, since the object of her anger was no longer there. With an effort of will, she forced her mind from Snape and to the situation at hand.

So, she was no longer where she had been (when, actually she was exactly *where* she'd been). It was interesting that it seemed to be the same time of day. That implied that *some* time had passed here after she had fallen into the well. Of course, she was assuming that she was in her own present, which was not necessarily the case. However, if she understood the passage on the Starglass correctly, and it was, in fact, the catalyst of movement through time (which she strongly suspected, not that it explained how she had begun time traveling in the first place she would have to revisit that thought), and her artifact was, indeed, the Starglass, then it would be her intent it would use to bring her here... and she had wanted to go *home*.

She climbed to her feet and levitated herself out of the well, deciding that it would be more productive to learn when she was than to sit at the bottom of a potions dump and speculate on it. She would have to ask Severus about the safety issues involved with throwing various and sundry wastes into a hole in the ground and leaving them to stew, even if their neutralizing agents had been added. Could any of them react with residues from other disposals or elements in the dirt itself? She was sure he had been careful, but were his friends just as conscientious? Perhaps they could set up a small experiment...

Oh.

No, they couldn't. He was dead.

Sighing and sniffing lightly, she rubbed the back of her hand against her forehead as melancholy settled on her shoulders, as heavy as her wet robes. The fabric clung to her skin uncomfortably, chilling her despite the warmth of the evening and increasing her misery. Two weeks ago, she had respected the man, even if she hadn't liked him. Now that she had gotten to know him better, she would have been pleased to count him among her friends. She felt blessed and cheated at the same time: to have had that short time as companions and yet to have wasted years on antipathy, watching him die with an unmoved heart.

She had watched him *die* and had done *nothing*.

Choking back a sob, she pushed open the chain link gate that led out of the Industrial Graveyard and trudged between the houses. She couldn't even regain her former snit at his attempted theft and subsequent chase for the phial to salve the lancing pain in her breast. What had been so important...?

She slipped the tiny phial out her pocket and held it up in the fading light. Tiny specs of fine, gray dust glittered faintly in the pointed bottom. Holding the stopper tightly closed, she upended it and then righted it, watching as the dust slid along the walls of crystal. There was no sign of the sharp obsidian shards. It was yet another mystery to add to her growing collection.

Hermione's train of thought abandoned her as she caught sight of Snape's house on Spinner's End, and she stopped in her tracks, staring in mute shock. The prison-gray grime that had coated the house had been scrubbed clean to reveal bright, red brick. A lush lawn had been sown in front, and colorful bunches of pansies bloomed on either side of the walk. The windows were clean, the porch swept, and a sleek cat, black as pitch without a flaw on him, napped on the top step. The rest of the neighborhood was no less dismal, but in comparison, his house shone like a polished ruby.

Gobsmacked, she meandered up the walk, noticing absently that the cracks in the cement had been repaired and the weeds pulled from between the seams. Great care had been taken to restore the house; it looked better than when he had been living in it as a young man. Then again, she couldn't imagine him on his knees gardening. The cat rose and stretched as she climbed the short set of stairs, twining around her legs in an affectionate, familiar manner. Bending at the waist, she let her fingers glide over the silky fur, smiling when the cat arched its back into her touch. She gave the base of its tail a good scratch, then let the tail slide through her fingers. When she straightened, the cat sent her a reproachful look and traced a figure eight between her legs as she raised her hand to the doorknob.

Before she could turn it, the door was flung open, yanking the knob out of her grasp and dragging her slightly off balance. Catching herself on the frame, she half-expected to stare up into the face of Snape, himself, but she only had a moment of disappointment before relief washed through her, and Ron swept her up in a crushing hug.

"Hermione! Gods, Hermione!" he moaned into her hair. Tears wet her neck as he pressed his face into her skin, planting frantic kisses on anything his lips touched. Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders and returned the embrace, melting into the security it offered.

Suddenly, he latched onto her shoulders and wrenched her away, holding her at arm's length. Giving her a little shake, he blurted, "Where were you? It's been over a week! We thought you'd been..." He shook her again, harder. "Where *were* you? Whose old robes are these?" He wrinkled his freckled nose. "And why are you all wet?"

"I... what?" Hermione's mind wobbled on its axis as if it had just hopped off a spinning merry-go-round. 'A week?' she thought, dumbfounded, and gestured to the tidy entry that sported newly waxed wooden floors, an ornate, wrought-iron coat rack, and freshly painted walls. "You did all this in a week?"

"All *what*, Hermione? *Where have you been?*"

She ignored the second question in favor of the first, not sure how to answer. "The paint, the gardening, the... the... everything!" She flung out her arms to encompass the house and grounds.

Ron let his arms slide from her shoulders, his face crumpling into alarmed concern. "Hermione... we've been working with your group to restore this place all summer. A.A.S.S., remember? But we haven't done anything since you disappeared. I'd only come back today because I thought maybe... We have to get you to St. Mungo's," he finished decisively.

Hermione winced internally, sure that her utter bewilderment must be plastered across her face. Not to mention the fact that she was muddy, bedraggled and looking like she'd been dragged through a hedge backward. But what could he mean about her *group* restoring this place? No one had been willing to help except Ron, and only because she'd wheedled and nagged and finally threatened to withhold nookie. She had a dreadful feeling that she was not the only thing to change after her little sojourn in the past.

Ron had taken hold of her elbow and was trying to lead her toward the door. Digging in her heels, she shook her head. "No, no, that isn't necessary. I'm perfectly fine. I just..."

"Fine? *Fine*? You have been gone for over a week! We contacted the Ministry when you didn't reappear! Aurors are out searching for you, Harry is pulling his hair out, your parents are on vacation so we couldn't reach them, but..."

"Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry!" She wrapped the shaking, crying man in her arms and held him close, her own tears leaving silvered tracks on her cheeks. She owed him an explanation for her absence and how she wished she'd known that the time spent in the past would also go by in the future! Opening her mouth to describe her adventure, she paused, suddenly unsure that telling him about the time portal in the well was a good idea. Would he want to destroy it? Use it? And once Ron knew, then word would leak to the Ministry through his conversations with his fellow Aurors in training. It would be wise to keep that information close so that she could study it without fear of interruption or interference. She was almost salivating at the opportunity for a bit of private research on such a unique phenomenon.

It wasn't that she didn't love her job at the Ministry. Bureaucratic nonsense and political idiots aside, she did important work and improved many lives that had been devastated during the war. She arranged for counseling and rehabilitation for those stripped of their wands and property during the Occupation, Voldemort's short reign. She placed orphans in foster care (one of those being young Teddy Lupin, who was being raised by Molly) and organized the funding and rebuilding of houses and businesses destroyed during the Occupation. It was Good and Noble Work, as Harry put it. But it wasn't nearly as exciting as catching the end of a mystery and pulling, watching it unravel like a colorful Weasley sweater until she found the final slipknot. This last week spent researching and experimenting with Snape had been more fun than she had had since her Hogwarts days shouting, fighting and the whole being trapped in the past thing notwithstanding.

So, when she opened her mouth a second time and drew a deep breath, she said, "I stumbled upon a Portkey in the field behind the house."

Ron stiffened, pulling away to gaze at her with wide, disbelieving eyes. "A Portkey?"

She nodded. "It was a bit of twisted metal. I tripped in a gopher hole and landed on it. I ended up on a beach in Thailand."

"Thailand?"

Nodding again, she warmed to her story and spun a tale of foreign wizards, language barriers, misdirected Portkeys, a run-in with a Sphinx, a bout of bad stomach, and a rainstorm on the coast of France. By the time she had finished, Ron had relaxed enough to laugh at her misadventures. They were now seated comfortably in the parlor, the walls of which had been stripped of their books to give the bookcases a good varnishing. The ceiling was waiting for a coat of paint over the primer, and sheets covered much of the furniture, including the sofa on which they sat. The black cat had come in with them and was now curled up on the sheet covering the wingback chair.

"Ron, whose cat is that?" she asked finally, when they were both slouched on the sofa, shoulders touching and cups of cooling tea in their hands. He craned his neck to give her a glance askance.

"That's Mewlip, Professor Snape's cat. A.A.S.S. takes care of him. Are you sure you're alright?"

No. "Yes, I'm fine."

Hermione spent the next several days in a whirlwind of frantic visits from friends in her tiny flat; annoyed Floo calls from coworkers who had thought her quite irresponsible for haring off for a week (even though she was technically on leave for the A.A.S.S. project); a full inquisition as to her whereabouts by an irritated old Auror and a stack of mail that was daunting in both its height and determination to tip over. The bag of owl treats that she kept by the mail window had been torn open and plundered, and little nuggets were scattered over the counter and across the floor.

Crookshanks wouldn't speak to her for two days. She was disappointed, but figured she had gotten off lightly until she'd slipped her feet into a new pair of flats and found the surprise waiting within. Swearing loudly, she'd Vanished the shoes and had scrubbed her tainted foot until it was raw. She decided then and there that it was time for Crookshank's biannual bath and grooming, something she'd been putting off for a couple of months. When both human and cat were dry, smelling fresh, and brushed until they shone, forgiveness was given and life settled back into routine.

Except, of course, for the fact that she missed Snape. No, *Severus* not Snape. Occasionally, she would catch herself mulling over an idea and making a mental note to tell him, only to remember why she couldn't. She realized that she would have put up with a few barbed insults if she could have dropped by Spinner's End to find him studying at his kitchen table.

All in all, few things had changed after her trip to the past and back again. She was still a Project Manager in the Office of Wizarding Services and Special Projects, Department of International Magical Cooperation. The office was as cobbled together as ever, having the same feeling of neglect. That was fine; as long as she got her funding, she didn't really care, and her infamy for long, dry, tedious, fact-laden grant proposals had long bullied money out of the Department head, just so that he wouldn't have to read them (or listen to her read them to him, as the case may be). Once, after two years of working in the Office of Wizarding Services, she had advanced on his office waving a thick, rolled parchment that was still blank, and he had drafted her a Gringott's credit slip without waiting to hear the title of the project. Hermione had actually gone to him about the quality of parchment (she'd punctured two with her quill while writing up her current proposal). She'd written the grant anyway and acquired all appropriate signatures, but only after a quiet revel in her power over a bottle or three of butterbeer with the boys.

The most noticeable change was with A.A.S.S and her friends' view of Snape. The organization numbered more than three times as many members as it had before she'd left, totaling nine, including seven volunteers besides herself and her secretary. Luna Lovegood was working on a biography of his life as a double agent for Dumbledore as well as volunteering for A.A.S.S., and Ron referred to him as "Professor Snape". Though Harry had shaped up his language soon after the war, Ron had never seen fit to give the man the respect that Hermione felt he was due. When she'd finally asked, burning with curiosity, he'd given her an odd look that was becoming entirely too familiar and replied, "Well, he was a right bastard in class, yeah, but he wasn't so bad at Headquarters. Almost civil. Well, except to Sirius, of course."

"Of course," she'd mumbled, wishing she had learned Legilimency so that she could pull the foreign memories from his brain. A civil, older Snape: now *that* would have been worth paying to see.

"Alright, Hermione?" he'd asked. He had been doing that a lot lately. She'd just nodded and waved away his concern.

A couple of days later, she'd discreetly (somewhat, anyway discretion wasn't exactly her thing) gathered from Ginny that while he'd still been a fearsomely strict professor and favored Slytherin, he hadn't been quite as cruel as she remembered, and he'd been civil, as Ron put it, to his peers and fellow Order members. Hermione wondered at the change and was tremendously glad that her unintentional meddling had had positive results rather than a disaster such as, oh, Snape deciding to betray Dumbledore and spy for Voldemort instead. She'd read about the Butterfly Effect.

Unfortunately, her relationships with Ginny and Ron had somehow suffered. Ginny held her at a distance and avoided being alone in the same room with her. She was polite, but behind her smiles festered an unknown resentment that Hermione could not draw out of her. When she'd asked Harry about it, he had simply shrugged noncommittally.

Ron had devolved into an obsequiousness that was almost as bad as in the year they had spent searching for Horcruxes. He handled her carefully, usually agreeing with her and only offering token resistance to things that he normally would have flat-out refused. He hadn't tried to sleep over once since she'd climbed out of the well, and she'd only seen him on three occasions over the past seven days. The Ron she knew would have had his hand in her pants the very night she had arrived and would have been attached to her at the hip (literally) for as long as he could manage it. Though still affectionate, he seemed reserved and distant at times, and she couldn't figure out whether it was a result of her absence or a change in the past. Either way, it wounded her, compounding her feeling of being off balance. He wouldn't tell her what was wrong, either.

So it was that when she finally found an afternoon to return to Spinner's End for a look around, she went alone. It was just as well, really, because Ron would have certainly gotten in her way, but she'd longingly hoped that he would take the initiative to get under foot a bit more. She missed being missed.

The house was as eerily well tended as she remembered. Someone had been by to water the pansies, as evidenced by the moist soil and perky blossoms. She was gratified that though the man was still not generally well liked, he had some of the respect that his memory deserved. It made her job a hell of a lot easier. Mewlip rose gracefully to greet her as she stepped onto the porch, trilling as he bumped his forehead against her leg, then darted into the house ahead of her when she pushed the

door open.

The air was redolent with the stinging odors of fresh paint and ammonia cleanser, and a cloak hung from one of the hooks by the door. 'Probably a member of A.A.S.S,' she thought, but just to be on the safe side, she shook her wand from her sleeve into her hand as she walked noiselessly into the little room.

A young witch with long, blond hair was enchanting books to fly out of boxes and organize themselves on the shelves. Even with her back turned, Hermione easily recognized Luna Lovegood. "Luna," she said happily in greeting, "I didn't know you were here today!"

With a glance over her shoulder, Luna smiled wistfully at Hermione as she flicked her wand to direct the books in midair to land on the shelves by her elbow, leaving several still sitting in the box at her feet. "Sometimes, when I hit a difficult point in my book and the words won't cooperate, I come here to be closer to him."

"I understand."

"I suppose you do."

Hermione glanced at her sharply, unnerved by Luna's unusually focused gaze fixed on her. It was disconcerting, to say the least, and she wondered what was going on behind her cornflower eyes. Clearing her throat and staring up at the rows of recently dusted leather-bound volumes, she asked, "They haven't been giving you any trouble, have they?"

"The books? No, they have behaved well enough."

"I suppose I should let you get back to it..." Hermione trailed off, her discomfort forgotten as her eye caught the title of a particular book. Her breath hissed through her teeth as she scowled. 'Shame on him! He *kept* it!'

"Shades of Gray" was shelved alphabetically with the twelve volumes of "Darke Vessels and Deadly Alembics" and the other books she and Severus had referenced in their quest to discover the origins of her phial. Whether he'd forgotten it or held onto it as a memento, she would likely never know, but to see this concrete evidence of their brief time together unexpectedly warmed her heart and tightened her throat with sorrow as she raised her fingertips to glide along its binding.

Luna's face suddenly appeared in her field of view, startling her. The witch covered Hermione's hand with her own, then pulled the volume from the shelf. "It's a Hogwarts library book. He didn't seem the kind to steal books, did he?"

Irritated, feeling the need to defend them both, she snapped, "Perhaps he only borrowed it with the intention of returning it, but events prevented him?"

"Perhaps. Have you ever felt like yourself, but not?"

"That doesn't make any sense, Luna," Hermione said warily, frustration coloring her tone.

"A week ago, I woke up at my desk. I had fallen asleep writing," she explained with a rueful smile that Hermione returned, having done that very thing many times in the past. Ink was not that easy to get off one's skin once it had dried. "But I couldn't remember what I had been writing."

"Your biography?" Hermione hazarded a guess, confused with where she was going with this, but having a feeling that she wouldn't like her point.

"Yes, my biography. But for an instant, I couldn't remember writing it," Luna repeated, blinking owlishly at her.

Shifted nervously, Hermione asked, "Maybe you need a memory potion?"

Luna sent her a long-suffering look, and Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, I don't think I do. Take a look at this." She opened the book to a passage that Hermione knew well, revealing the sheaf of parchment still resting between the pages she had marked.

Well, now.

It was *not* the parchment she had used. It was, in fact, a clipping from the *Daily Prophet*. Edges ragged as if they had been torn, it was dated August 22nd, 1982 and featured a moving black-and-white photograph of a plump, hysterical witch in an enormous feathered hat being comforted by a wizard in an Auror uniform. The front of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor framed the photo but the door was hanging awkwardly on its hinges. The title read: "Not So Sweet Treat: Robbery at Local Ice Cream Shop". Most of the story was missing, but she had a good idea that the woman in the photo was now minus one handbag and some jewelry. The woman blew her nose in a lacy handkerchief, then wailed at the sky as large tears rolled down her dimpled cheeks. The Auror patted her back sympathetically and gestured to another Auror, who left the frame of the picture. Revealed behind him, a couple suddenly turned toward the camera, and both faces were clearly visible before they darted into a crowd of milling wizards and witches. Hermione gasped and took a startled step backward, her eyes darting up to meet Luna's, which held a mild amusement.

"Yes, I was a bit shocked when I saw it, myself. I thought I had to be mistaken, at first..." Luna smiled as the photo repeated itself... the woman blew her nose... shook her fists at the sky... and two impossible faces stared out of the picture before dashing away.

Hermione's stomach roiled, and she swayed on her feet, swallowing against the moisture that suddenly flooded her mouth. Abruptly, she sat on the sheet-covered couch, her clammy palms pressing against cheeks that had become hot and dry, her heart thundering in her ears. Luna sat next to her, placing the book on the coffee table to rub Hermione's back soothingly.

"I'm not mistaken, am I?"

"But...but... that never happened!" Hermione wailed, too distraught to notice the panicked note to her voice.

"It *did* happen. Twenty years ago." She pointed to the date.

Hermione shook her head and scrubbed at her face. "Not for *me*."

"Ah, I see," said Luna suddenly, and surprisingly, Hermione believed that she did. If anyone could accept such a ridiculous, unreasonable situation, it was Luna Lovegood. "Maybe we could sit down together later, and I could interview you about what he was like as a young man." Hermione looked at her, aghast, through her fingers. "I wouldn't quote you as a source, of course."

With a final pat on Hermione's back, Luna stood, leaving the book open and the photograph lying on its pages. "I'm going to finish up with these books," she said, gesturing to the open box and its contents, "but I think you should go home and rest."

Nodding as she plucked the newspaper clipping from the book, Hermione took a deep breath and stood, shooting her a grateful look for not pelting her with questions and for taking the matter in stride. Now that the shock had begun to lessen, her muscles twitching with the surcease and dissipation of adrenaline, she was able to think clearly about what the newspaper clipping implied. It terrified her, and yet gave her hope.

Luna retrieved a darkly bound book on "Practical Applications of Thaumaturgy" from the box and opened it as she pulled the clipping from Hermione's nerveless fingers to lay it across a page. "I think this other one should go back to the library, don't you?" Luna asked casually as if she had not just seen evidence of a bizarre time paradox tucked into the pages of a stolen library book.

"Long overdue, I'm sure," Hermione managed with a shaky smile.

Placing the open book in Hermione's hands, Luna fixed her with a softly serious gaze, her pale eyes wide and slightly protruding. "Hermione, be careful. What you are doing can have consequences that reach further than you could ever know. And watch out for the Aevumexesoris."

"The Aevumexesoris?"

"Yes, they swim in the eddies between now and then and eat anyone that gets stranded. They are quite vicious."

"And ugly," Hermione added with a shudder.

Cocking her head, Luna lifted hopeful eyebrows. "If you could catch one..."

"Not bloody likely."

"What a shame." Luna shrugged and closed the book in Hermione's hands. She caught one last glimpse of two faces darting out of the frame of the photograph: Severus and herself.

A/N: The title of this chapter is from a song by Muse: "Butterflies and Hurricanes." In fact, the title of this fic is also inspired by a Muse song: "Unintended." The lyrics of "Unintended" go well with the theme of the story, as well. If you aren't familiar with the song, then I highly recommend it.

Where the Mewlips Dwell

Chapter 7 of 20

See Chapter 1

Up until a week ago, Hermione had thought of time as a highway, stretching infinitely far into the future and infinitely far into the past. One could backtrack, but one would always be following the same road. There probably was a terminus at both ends, but she couldn't quite wrap her brain around what might be past them, so hadn't given them more than a few minutes contemplation and usually only when she was in a departmental meeting. As her thoughts had often devolved into creative ways to stuff the department Head's socks down his throat and pull them out his arse, thus ending the meeting, she hadn't considered her reflections as anything meaningful.

Now, she sat on the sofa in her flat, picking at fraying threads in a throw pillow and wondering if time might be more of a snow-filled field where the driver makes her own tracks, and if she were to revisit that field, then she could make a different set of tracks than originally laid. That is what her meddling implied, anyway.

She hadn't *meant* to change anything. To be quite honest, the idea of altering the course of time had not been more than a passing worry that had been discarded for more pressing anxieties. Her experience with the Time-Turner, only used to go backward hours at a time, hadn't had much more effect than to allow her to take more than one class during a given period, successfully rescue Sirius Black and Buckbeak, and on the occasions when she had burned the wick at both ends until the flames met, take a much-needed nap. And to study, of course.

Yes, Hermione was intelligent. Yes, she was clever and had a well-organized, logical mind. However, the top marks she had earned had not come easily; no, she had scheduled her time wisely and had worked her *arse* off. It was that which had allowed her to ace her exams, not some innate sense like the one the Half-Blood Prince had exhibited for Potions.

'Poor Severus.' Hermione hugged the abused pillow to her chest. He really was such a strange, pathetic creature. She couldn't imagine how miserable she would have been if she had never become friends with Harry and Ron. There would have been far less rule breaking, but loads more tears and loneliness. Nevertheless, she doubted she would have ended up joining the Death Eaters or any such nonsense. She wondered if she would have made it to graduation at all, or if she would have given the magical world the two-finger salute and returned to Mundania.

Hermione paused her train of thought for a moment, staring blankly at the pillow. 'Probably not.'

But could she affect some change that would drastically alter the course of the life that she had already lived? Could she go back to the past, knowing that the possibility existed that she could come crawling out of the well into a world ruled by Voldemort or where her friends and family had died?

Could she *not* go back, knowing what she did now? Twisting her body to dig into her pocket, she pulled out the miniaturized tome that contained an impossible fragment of her future... and the past.

"Alright, not an impossibility," Hermione conceded to Crookshanks, who was making himself comfortable in the crook of her elbow against her side. The fact that the photo had been taken in Diagon Alley, a location that she and Severus had not visited, taken ten days after she had tumbled into the future, made the existence of the photograph *highly* improbable. However, it now rested between the pages of a book that she had just Engorged, as real as the cat purring with his nose tucked into the weave of her pajamas.

It logically followed that she would return to the past and lure Snape to Diagon Alley, just in time for a stick-up at the ice-cream shop, to ensure that the picture was taken or else risk changing time once again. She had three days in which to accomplish this.

Setting aside the issue that she wasn't quite sure how she was able to traverse time in the first place, how would she convince Severus Snape, notoriously mistrustful Potions master who had just recently watched her vanish into a dry well, that he wanted to have an ice-cream cone with her? If she were unsuccessful, what consequences would manifest, and would she be immune or swept along unknowing with the rest of the world?

More importantly, if she were caught fiddling with time, would she be sent to Azkaban?

She doubted that Luna would rat on her. Despite their differences on where to draw the line between fantasy and reality, they had gotten on fairly well since their school days. She wondered if Luna knew how incredibly grateful she was for her discretion in this matter. No, Luna was safe. But had anyone else felt the odd shifting in time? Would they discount it or attempt to investigate it? With a devious smirk, she considered sending Professor Trelawney an owl to see if she had sensed anything. The smirk dissolved as the seriousness of her situation once again settled heavily on her shoulders.

As far as Hermione could see, there was no helping it; she would have to try to go back, and it was quite likely that she would succeed. She held the proof in her hands, as much as it gave her a headache to ponder it. She could only hope that she would be doing the Right Thing. And that she would not meet any more Aevumexesoris.

Hermione glanced once more over her task list, pursing her lips as she confirmed that all of the items but one had been checked complete. Nodding to herself, she flung a pinch of Floo powder into the hearth.

"Harry?" she called into the fire. "Are you home?"

Ginny Potter's head appeared suspended in green flame. "Hallo, Hermione. Harry has just stepped out."

"Oh, well, not a problem. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to join my parents in New Zealand for a week or two. I've been feeling out of sorts, you know, and... what is it?"

Ginny's smile had tightened into a brittle grimace. "We need to talk, Hermione."

"About what?"

"I think you know what."

"Ginny, I assure you, I haven't a clue..."

Ginny sighed gustily and fixed her with a no-nonsense stare, one that had sent Harry scurrying out of the room and had turned Ron's ears red. It was disconcerting to have that look now boring into her. "About *Ron*, Hermione. I know that he can be a little thick and pushy at times... alright, a *lot* thick, but this... I don't think you are being very fair."

Hermione was at a loss, and her expression must have shown it because Ginny sighed again and rolled her eyes. "He asked you to go on vacation with him this summer, and you turned him down to work on your A.A.S.S. project."

He had done no such thing, at least *in her* time line. "I..."

"You know he wants to propose again! Do you have any idea how long he was planning that trip to make it special? And this, after you turned him down the first two times!"

Yes, Ron had brought up the subject of marriage almost a year ago. Hermione had suggested they wait until after he had finished his training. He'd pouted a bit, but had eventually seen the wisdom. "But we agreed to wait..."

Ginny gave her an incredulous grimace. "That's not how he tells it. I have to wonder if you're leading him on? Waiting for someone better to come along?"

Hermione gasped in outrage. "Ginny! I would never!"

Ginny hummed and shook her head. "I just don't know what to think, Hermione. Sometimes I wonder if this A.A.S.S. is more than it appears. All I know is that I don't like to see my brother hurt."

"It wasn't my intention to hurt him," Hermione responded softly. At least she knew now why Ron and Ginny had been so reticent toward her, but she couldn't imagine how she could have bugged up her relationship with him. True, she tended to get wrapped up in her work, but Ron had never felt neglected... that she knew. Perhaps the Hermione of this changed present was interested in someone else? If so, she couldn't imagine who it would be. It was more likely that she and Ron had had another blazing row and that he'd gone crying to Harry and Ginny. He could get smothering on occasions, and if he were pressuring her to get married, as it seemed from the conversation with Ginny, then she had probably told him to back off and give her space. Hermione nodded to herself in relief, feeling that she had solved that problem adequately. Besides, Ron hadn't seemed terribly upset when she had Flooed him about her vacation. He had taken it in stride, wished her fair weather and a safe trip, and had given her a good-bye snog.

Ginny was speaking again, and Hermione pushed her thoughts away to focus on what she was saying. "...owl me when you get back. Enjoy New Zealand with your parents."

Hermione promised and pulled her head from the fire, rubbing her nose absently to remove the soot that always collected there. It was an enlightening conversation, to say the least, but there was nothing she could do about it at this late hour. When she returned from the past, she and Ron would sit down and discuss things like adults and make up properly.

She was due at Fortescue's in two days, minus twenty years.

Early the next morning, Hermione stood at the edge of the well, a small pack containing clothes, money and toiletries slung over a shoulder and the phial in hand, lamenting the fact that she hadn't had a chance to do any more research on what could be the Starglass. She had been holding it on her prior two trips through time, so it seemed a good enough place to start. She had also been falling through space (and time), but she wasn't quite ready for that part, yet. For one thing, the bottle had been glowing, and it was currently rather stubbornly dull. The other reason she was staring into a pit as black and unfathomable as a particular pair of eyes, was that she was unduly excited to return to the past but uncertain of her reception. One mustn't forget chance encounters with Time Eaters, either.

There were too many unknowns for her taste, and without the persistent goading of two young men who wouldn't recognize a quadratic equation if it slapped their faces, she was letting those variables get to her. In fact, she would *rather* be solving equations than fretting over whether Severus would hex her, shout at her or do something equally unpleasant and demoralizing.

At least he would be alive.

That thought bolstered her courage, and she smiled as she leapt blindly into the darkness.

The bottom of the well met her feet with a jarring thud, and a sharp pain blossomed in her ankle. Staggering to favor the injured ankle, she howled in pain and clutched at the side of the wall to regain her balance. After letting loose a string of curses that would have made Harry proud (and perhaps check her for a fever), she lit her wand and gave the well a fierce glare. The earthen sides were solid as ever, the dirt dry and slightly crumbly. The floor was just as unyielding, as her ankle well knew. With a quickly cast spell and a tap on the swelling, she healed the sprain.

Hermione raised the hand still holding the phial and brought the illuminating tip of her wand close to the crystal. If anything, the dust was paler and finer than she had ever seen it, but it was *not* glowing. "Come, on," she encouraged, giving it a little shake, "let's go."

The dust seemed to darken slightly, the grains becoming coarser. Bearer's Intent, right. Hermione took a deep breath and focused on wanting to go back so that she wouldn't change the past. The phial remained decidedly dark. Frowning, she just focused on going back, in case a complicated intent would confuse it. Nothing.

For the next hour, Hermione concentrated systematically on each combination of wanting to go back and her reasons for it that she could think of, her frustration growing with each failure. Not long into it, she had settled on the floor, her legs splayed out in front of her. She felt ridiculous sprawled at the bottom of a well, wishing on a bottle. Time seemed to be slipping through her fingers like mist, and she was utterly failing to make any kind of progress.

"Think, Hermione," she chastised herself, bumping her fisted hand against her forehead. The back of her throat was beginning to burn with the telltale tingle of tears. She hated when she did that; it made her feel silly and childish to cry in frustration. Just the same, they began to prickle at her eyes no matter how hard she squeezed them shut. She clasped the bottle in both hands, her face clenching in concentration. His face rose in her mind, wearing a tiny smile as he called her an odd woman, and

affectionate compassion coursed through her. "Poor Severus. *Please*, I want to help him."

Brilliant light colored the world red from behind her eyelids, and it seemed that she had been borne away on a gentle ocean tide before being deposited on a new shore. With a sigh of relief, she relaxed her body and opened her eyes, unsurprised to see the morning sun obscured by gray clouds, swollen with rain, that hadn't existed on the horizon but two minutes ago. She wanted to rush out of the well and up to Spinner's End, just to verify with her own eyes that he was alive and well, but she caught herself just in time. "Proximity wards," she told herself firmly. "He can't know that I travel through the well..."

A plan forming in her mind, she Apparated to Hogsmeade outside Madam's little white gate. She was pushing it open with a smile for the cats lounging on the porch when she abruptly remembered that she had been gone a week (at least, she *hoped* it had been a week, but that was how this brand of time travel seemed to work) and had disappeared without saying goodbye. Butterpaws climbed to his feet and, with agility belied by his girth, darted around to the back garden. Then again, his plumpness could have been all orange fluff for all she knew.

"Oh, she's back, is she?" Madam's voice emanated from behind the house. Hermione blinked and shrugged, following Butterpaws' path to find Madam seated in her favorite chair sipping a cup of tea. Madam grinned and rested the cup on her paunch. "And how is her poor mother?"

Butterpaws trilled and bumped his head against the chair leg. Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably and stammered, "She's, um. She's doing better. Thank you."

Fixing her with a doubtful yellow eye, the cat arched his back as the old woman let her fingertips drag over his fur. "Wonderful, wonderful. Such a considerate young man, to carry the message. She is a lucky young lady."

"Erm, yes." Hermione reeled slightly as she put the pieces together. She could only be referring to Severus. Had he come back to Hogsmeade, looking for her after her fall? And when he hadn't found her, had he given her landlady an excuse for her absence? She could hardly imagine, but hadn't everyone said that the Snape of her time had been "civil"? This went beyond civility to something entirely different. What, she couldn't guess, but it was not the behavior of the Snape *she* had known. So, her Severus was changing...

"Oh, she must come see, Butterpaws!" Madam Beetlebump lumbered out of her chair and began to hobble to the back of the garden where the catnip grew lush and green. "Peridot has returned with her new litter!"

Butterpaws chose instead to leap onto the table and help himself to the pitcher of milk next to the teapot, but Hermione dutifully followed Madam to the fence line. A black cat Hermione had never met before, with white stockings and bib, was watching over five kittens that clumsily pounced on sprigs of catnip, each other, and their mama's tail. They ranged from solid black to marked like their mother, with one kitten a pale gray with black points. With great force of will, Hermione did not melt into a puddle of cooing mush and instead complimented the proud mother cat, "Oh, Peridot, they are so *cute*!"

Alright, perhaps a *bit* of mush.

"Ah, here we go," Madam said as she bent forward, scooping a black kitten from the group and handing it to Hermione. It was soft and squirmy, and Hermione couldn't help but cuddle it to her face and squeal. "You're going to a nice young man who needs a bit of company, he does." She shot Hermione a reproachful look but continued talking to the kitten. "Looked downright miserable the other day."

Guilt shot through Hermione and she winced, burying her nose in the kitten's soft fur. If she hadn't met Mewlip on Snape's porch, she would have handed it back to Madam with a protest, but since she had, she simply nodded and, with kitten in hand, left the garden to put away her bag in her room. After she had descended the stairs, Madam pushed a care package of kitten kibble into her hands and shooed her out the front door with a few words to the kitten, "Now, you make sure she takes good care of him, hear?"

Severus was deep in contemplation of his seventh year syllabus when a knock sounded on his door. The ruddy little bastards would know him from his days as a student, and some would have the temerity to give him a hard time. Those who did ended up building upper body strength by scrubbing cauldrons, but the thought of their mocking, superior faces and sneers of "Professor Snivellus" were enough to distract him from the slight tingle of his wards. Rising from the kitchen chair with a curse, he stomped toward the door, ready to give the intruder the tongue-lashing of a lifetime, perhaps a hex to boot, especially if he were trying to sell something.

Flinging the door open, he shouted, "What in the name of all that is holy..." and stopped abruptly, staring with mouth agape. Impossibly, Heidi stood on his doorstep. She smiled almost shyly at him, and her arms fluttered from her sides as if reaching for him, then changed direction to clasp behind her back, her cheeks pinkening becomingly. In apple green robes with her wild hair pulled away from her face by two combs, she as far from the avenging angels he had seen in his father's church as he could imagine.

If anyone had deserved to be struck down by a fiery sword wielded by the heavenly host, it was Severus Snape. Her startled eyes and shrill scream had been branded into his brain and had looped through his dreams, replaying his frantic grasping at the empty air as she had disappeared into darkness and light. Some nights, the white light that had enveloped her body had flared acid green, and on others, she had had auburn hair and accusing green eyes. He had woken with the bitter taste of remorse and failure coating his tongue more than once.

She had thoroughly vanished. No tracking charm could locate her. He had had a couple of curly hairs to work with this time, and two of his spells had erringly led him to a quiet Muggle neighborhood in London, directing him to an unremarkable Muggle family. When he had cast Spiritus Oratos, a charm that required the caster to build a clear vision and impression of the person being pursued and could foil all protections except a Secret-Kept location, and even then would lead the caster to a position within a mile of the target, had returned nothing at all.

Likewise, no amount of lurking around her home in Hogsmeade had evidenced her presence, magically protected or not. The ridiculous Madame Beetlebump had caught him one morning and had inquired after her, indirectly through one of her beasts, and Severus had mumbled something about an ill mother.

What could he have said? That he'd chased her through the rain and let her fall down a well over the possession of a trinket to which he had no rightful claim? Obviously not. He could have said nothing at all, would have, if the old bat had looked less pitifully worried. When she'd grinned and petted his head, singing his praises to Pumpnickel or whatever she called the blasted white ball of fur, he'd stifled the urge to retch the guilt from his gut.

He could have sworn on Veritas serum that she was as gone as if she had been banished bodily beyond the Veil. It had occurred to him that the flash of light could have been some sort of ascension, the gods deeming him unworthy and snatching away his last chance at happiness and the woman who carried it. He'd discounted the idea as absurd and the result of too much Firewhisky on an empty stomach, but the small boy who had quailed at the sight of bleeding martyrs shuddered at the back of his mind.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked timidly, derailing his musings as her hands darted around to the front of her body to twist together. Squinting up at him, the sheepish hunch of her shoulders betraying her nervousness, she prompted him again. "Severus?"

He closed his mouth with a snap, realizing that he must look like an asphyxiating guppy. A foreign warmth had begun creeping from behind his ribcage and up into his esophagus. His first attempt at speech was a hoarse cough that he tried to play off as something other than his Adam's apple trying to strangle him. Heidi's sympathetic smile indicated that he was not terribly successful.

Clearing his throat, he gave it another shot, but was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. "Heidi..."

"I'm sorry that I haven't come by sooner. You see, when I... fell... I Apparated and, erm, splinched myself. Badly." Her gaze darted across his face, but never quite met his eyes. Just the same, he could almost smell the falsity behind her words. He gave her an incredulous look. It hurt to be lied to, but not as much as believing her gone.

"Is that so," he drawled, careful to let the scornful skepticism smother the pain. "I looked for you," he couldn't help but add, and she paled, the unspoken accusation striking her hard.

"Yes, well, there were wards, you know..."

She was lying to him. But she didn't *like* lying to him. Lying or not, she hadn't died as a result of his actions. He would overlook the former only because of the latter for the time being. He could be patient when the need arose, and he had little doubt that she could keep her secrets for long. It occurred to him that he was rarely this forgiving, but he was willing to overlook that, as well. These were extenuating circumstances: incredibly, she had rematerialized from... elsewhere. He doubted that her return was solely for his benefit, but here she was.

He swallowed convulsively and blinked back a sudden watering of his eyes.

Her next words stunned him, both by their generosity and naïveté. "My offer still stands. Do you want my help with your... project?" She waved her hand jerkily, tucked a curl behind her ear and then began wringing her hands again, all the while sending him a hopeful, hesitant smile.

His project. What an understated way to classify his intentions. If she knew what it was, would she still agree to help? He regarded her steadily and tried to not be affected by her sincere earnestness. It was inconceivable that she was offering her help without any knowledge of his plans. If he accepted, she would be honor-bound to help, whether she liked it or not; it was utter foolishness that he could use to his advantage.

He hadn't really considered, or desired, an assistant for his "project," but he had also planned to have the Starglass in hand. He wasn't about to attempt theft again. Perhaps she was *meant* to help him, the way *that boy* was meant to destroy the Dark Lord?

"Do you still have it?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the doorway. He was such a cad to have not yet invited her in. Lucius would have been ashamed of him. Not quite smothering a grin, as the warmth had now spread throughout his body and was tugging insistently at the corners of his lips, he raised an expectant eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes and planted her hands on her hips. "*Of course* I do. Honestly, do you think I would bother to offer help if I didn't?" Her stance and tone were brusque and irritated, but he recognized the playful tilt of her mouth. When he simply stood there and stared at her, she huffed and reached into a large pocket of her robes. The pocket bulged oddly and uttered a muffled squeak.

"What is that?"

"Oh, this?" Heidi glanced down at the pocket that still contained her hand. For some reason, she seemed reluctant to withdraw it. She hummed nervously.

"Yes, *that*." The pocket mewled and distended outward.

"Oh, erm." He could almost see her pluck courage out of the air as she drew herself up to her full five and a half feet, pulling from the pocket a handful of black fur. Without warning, she thrust it toward him, catching him off guard enough that he held out his hands in reflex. A second later, he was holding a sleepy kitten. "From Madam Beetlebump, with her compliments to a nice, considerate young man. Thank you for covering for me, by the way. That was very... decent... of you."

Once again, he was rendered speechless. Snape glanced from the cat to Heidi's determined expression and back to the cat again. The only thing going for it was that it was black. It was also nudging the palm of his hand with its cold, wet nose, a sensation that should have revolted him but instead sent chills darting up his spine and the warmth in his chest inflating like a balloon. He found it quite impossible to shove the creature back into the hands of a woman who had miraculously returned from the ether to offer her help and who had just paid him three compliments (two of which were on behalf of another, but he wasn't going to quibble) in one breath. Quite frankly, he didn't know what to do with himself.

He had never wanted a familiar, and except for a lizard he had found when he was six and kept in a box until it died of malnutrition, he hadn't had any pets. Later, he would blame his acquisition of the kitten on an ambush by a pretty girl, an explanation Lucius would accept wholeheartedly with a sage nod and a comment on the clouding effects of pussy on a man's brain. Blushing, Severus would pretend that he meant the cat.

"So if that is settled," Heidi said bossily as she tossed her hair, "I will stop by tomorrow, and we can go have a spot of lunch in Diagon Alley while we discuss your project and develop a strategy."

He opened his mouth to deliver a scathing comment on her presumption, but to his horror, he said, "A quarter to noon would be acceptable."

She flashed him another bright smile and pulled a sack of little brown bits from another pocket, plopping it into his hand next to the kitten. "Right, then! See you tomorrow." Twirling gracefully, she disappeared with a sharp pop, and he was left alone on his porch, a quietly purring kitten in his hand the only proof that she hadn't been a dream.

A/N: Snape's cat's name, Mewlip, is from "The Mewlips," a poem written by J.R.R. Tolkien and found in *The Tolkien Reader*. It was one of my favorite poems when I was young. If you aren't familiar with it, then I recommend you Google it. Even those who aren't that fond of poetry might appreciate the mood and descriptions.

With a Cherry On Top

Chapter 8 of 20

See Chapter 1

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Chapter 8 With a Cherry On Top

Hermione collapsed across her bed and stared blankly at the ceiling, her limbs splayed where they fell. That had been one of the most disquieting encounters with Severus that she could ever remember, and not only because of the tightly reined emotions that had still somehow managed to crawl across his face had his eyes gotten *teary*? This young Severus did not have the control that his older self so masterfully employed; his struggle to project indifference against the shock, guilt, hope and (here was the kicker) tenderness that twisted at his features was staggering in its aberrancy. It had never occurred to her that he could feel all of that at once, much less display it for an observer. No wonder he had been such a schoolyard target: not only was he odd-looking and awkward, he was unusually sensitive. However, it wasn't Severus' reaction to her appearance that had her bullying her way through kitten gifting and lunch dates. It was her own.

She had almost hugged him.

Yes, she hugged her friends, but those friends weren't Professor Snape. Just the same, the urge to wrap him in her arms and hold him to her was instinctual and in her opinion, wholly inappropriate. The very thought filled her with a vague sense of guilt. She didn't know why hugging Severus would be different than hugging Harry, but she felt in her bones and the tingling under her skin that it definitely was. The more she tried to analyze it, the more uncomfortable she felt, so she chose to abandon that line of thinking for later and instead concentrate on her many victories of the day.

She was now positive that she could fulfill the mandate set forth by the newspaper photo, and she had introduced Severus to Mewlip. And, he didn't hate her. The joy suffusing her heart at that thought was enough to make her feel guilty all over again.

She *shouldn't* be looking forward to their errand to Diagon Alley as much as she was. It was supposed to be a *chore*. It certainly should not leave her twitching with excitement and wishing she had brought nicer shoes.

Sighing in exasperation, Hermione peeled herself off the comforter and sulked to the bathroom, internally debating whether she should cast the depilatory charm on just her lower legs or do the full Monty.

Half past noon the next afternoon found Hermione (hairless from the knees down) and Severus (wearing freshly cleaned robes and his hair styled as close as he could manage to the day they'd gone to Hogwarts) strolling down Diagon Alley, trying to share a cone of chips without actually touching each other. It was trickier than she had expected when she'd made the suggestion (neither of them were terribly hungry), because they both seemed to reach for a chip at the same time.

Severus was manfully ignoring the third such brushing of fingertips by asking the same question twice. Just as nervous and wishing that they would arrive at Fortescue's already, Hermione chose to answer the question as if it were the first time she'd heard it.

"Yes, I am quite sure that it is the Starglass. I did some experimentation while I was... recovering."

"Which experiment could *you* possibly perform on your own?" he asked in a supercilious tone that was uniquely his. Hermione sent him a quelling glance, and his eyes skittered away.

"On the Bearer's Intent," she replied unhelpfully.

"And?"

"You have to *mean* it, *feel* it."

"How dreadfully impractical." He cleared his throat and snagged another chip after checking that Hermione's hand was not already in the cone. "So, what did you... *intend*?"

Hermione blinked and almost tripped over an uneven cobblestone in the road. "That's rather personal, don't you think?" Severus shrugged, a gracefully casual gesture that accentuated the breadth of his shoulders. She disguised the fact that she had been watching by grabbing the last chip from the cone in his hand. Vanishing the empty paper non-verbally, he quickly clasped his hands behind his back. "What do you need it for, anyway?"

"It's a little late to be asking that, *don't you think*?" he asked slyly, studying her carefully from the corners of his eyes. "You've already agreed to help."

"Yes, but I can't help unless I know what it is we are to accomplish," Hermione said earnestly with a punctuating bob of her head. At his silence, she glanced up at him, noting his tiny smirk with dismay. "It isn't anything bad, is it?"

Severus stopped walking, his expression suddenly thunderous. "Just what are you implying?"

"Nothing, that came out wrong! Honestly, you are so *prickly*." She spotted the sign for Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor just up the street and nearly wilted in relief. "Come on, let's get some ice cream."

It wouldn't be until much later that she realized she had dropped the subject of his project without a further word.

Grabbing his arm, she all but dragged him toward the cheerful storefront, its outside tables crowded with Hogwarts students in crested robes taking a breather from shopping with sundaes, malts, and dripping ice cream cones. A group of younger students blanched and put their heads together, hissing, then vacated their table with ice cream cones in tow. An older boy, who was trying to grow a mustache, and his date, both in Gryffindor cloaks, glanced at them scornfully and shook their heads. The boy leaned over to whisper something in the girl's ear, and she giggled, her eyes dancing across both Severus and Hermione. Shooting her a lofty glare, Hermione tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow and steered him into the shop, belatedly noticing that he was in glowering contest with a handsome, solid looking, vaguely familiar man in burgundy robes.

After glancing around the shop checking for burglars, Hermione perused the menu and tried to ignore the looks that were prickling the hair on the back of her neck. Jostling Severus with her elbow, she tried to direct his attention forward. "Hm. I don't suppose they have any sugar-free soy-cream..."

Severus glanced at her askance and said, "I don't usually eat this stuff."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't *agree* with me."

"Then why didn't you *say* something?"

"I just did," he pointed out petulantly, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

She ended up ordering a strawberry sorbet garnished with fresh berries and two spoons. They secreted themselves at a corner table that had a good view of the entire shop, the doorway and the wide picture windows. She spent the next half-hour casing the store, wondering if she had the timing of the robbery all wrong and bullying Severus to "Try it. It hasn't got any milk and is made with natural fruit juices!"

Making a show of resistance, Severus finally helped her polish off the sorbet in between bouts of glaring at the man in burgundy robes, who had followed them into the shop and taken a seat at the counter. Hermione was about to inquire after him when the man rose from his seat and walked purposefully to their table. Without sparing a glance for her tablemate, he leaned onto one elbow and smiled winningly at Hermione.

"Hey, doll, is this guy boring you? Why don't you talk to me instead? *I'm* from a different planet."

Caught off guard, Hermione choked. "What?"

"Piss off, Diggory," Severus snarled from the other side of the table.

The man simply smiled wider and winked at Hermione. "Andrew Diggory, at your service. So, what do you say? Want to see my flying saucer?" He waggled his eyebrows lasciviously.

Fighting down a giggle at the ridiculousness of the man in her face, Hermione couldn't help but quip scornfully, "You've hardly got two heads."

"Come back to my place and I'll show you my second head..."

Hermione groaned and was mid eye-roll when Severus jumped to his feet and slammed his hands against the table. For all the racket that his blows made, his voice was deadly soft. "I said, piss off."

Both wizards whipped out their wands and stood stiff legged, facing each other and all but baring their teeth. Sighing heavily, she steeled herself to break up a prick-waving match and thus missed the entrance of a man, hooded and cloaked, and was taken completely by surprise when the entire shop fell under a Freezing Charm. Her robes fluttered about her body as if stirred by an invasive breeze, and she sucked in a breath of dismay through immobile nostrils as her purse and the Starglass flew up and out of her pockets. There was a slight tug on her neck as the chain on which she had strung a silver pendant that Ron had given her broke and followed her other valuables. Bright flashes of gold and silver and the jangling of coins filled the room, and Hermione strained to see their destination, raging at the fact that even her eyeballs were locked in place.

It was over in less than a minute, and the cheerful chiming of the bells over Florean's door was the last they heard from the thief. The shop remained Frozen for several more long minutes until the door banged open, and a voice shouted, "Finite Incantatem!"

Pandemonium broke out as bereft wizards and witches made a rush for the door, shouting and pushing as they clustered at the exit. Florean was hollering for order from behind the counter and was largely ignored. Severus and Hermione lingered by the table watching the chaos, once again alone since Diggory had joined the throng at the door.

"The Starglass?" Severus hissed at Hermione, barely audible over the commotion. Eyes wide and distressed, she nodded slowly, not liking the rage coiled behind his black eyes. He swore explosively, pounding the table again with his fist, and Hermione jumped. Grabbing her forearm with more force than Hermione deemed necessary, he said, "Clear your mind," and without further warning, Apparated them to just outside the front of the shop. Craning his neck to see over the rapidly increasing crowd of distraught witches and wizards, Severus scanned the street and alleys for a glimpse of culprit. Hermione clung to his arm, her eyes fixed on a knot of Aurors surrounding a plump, wailing witch with a lace handkerchief.

"This is all my fault," she whispered. "I should have known."

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus snapped as one Auror strode away from the woman, revealing the flashing of cameras. "Let's move," he added and then began dragging her through the crowd, one hand thrust forward to push through the bodies that weren't scattering before his black scowl.

Hermione let herself be carried along, numb to the disgruntled yelps of people who were pushed aside. Over and over, the feeling of the phial slipping up and out of her pocket, carrying with it her only way home, played through her mind. How could she have been so *stupid* to have brought the thing with her, *knowing* that there would be a robbery? It had simply never occurred to her that she would be among the victims. She had certainly left most of her *money* behind, and in the grand scheme of things, it was much less important. She spared a fleeting thought for the pendant Ron had given her, a dainty silver butterfly that had a tendency to tickle her neck when its wings fluttered, but her mind kept spiraling back to the Starglass: her ticket home.

So caught up in self-castigation, she hardly noticed when they stopped walking and only stared blankly at Severus when he called her repeatedly by her assumed name.

"Heidi!" He punctuated her name with a shake of her shoulders.

"What?" Blinking, she glanced around the empty alley, located not far from the entrance of Nocturne Alley. "Wait, shouldn't we have itemized what was stolen to the Aurors?"

Severus eyed her scornfully, dropping his hands from her shoulders. "You want to tell the *Ministry* that we have... *had*... a rare and powerful Dark object?"

"It wasn't necessarily Dark..." she trailed off lamely and pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut. "No, you're right."

"Of course." She opened her eyes to glare at him over her hand, just in time to see his eyes narrow and his face close. "And what was that back there?" he asked accusingly.

"What was *what*?" she asked, a trifle exasperated, as she increased pressure on her sinuses. Odd, how applying pressure seemed to relieve it.

"A different planet? Two heads?" Bright spots of color blossomed on his cheeks as he leaned forward to hiss in her face.

For a long moment, she stared at him, agape, her hand dropping forgotten to her side. Finally, she strung her wits together and said, "It was a joke! From a *book*! It's not like anyone actually *falls* for that old pick-up line!"

"It didn't *sound* like a joke."

Hermione sighed and wondered if men the world over were just as impossible. Certainly, the ones *she* chose to spend time with were the pick of the litter. Perhaps she had come off as a bit flirtatious, though she hadn't meant it and was often oblivious to that kind of thing. Not that it should concern Severus, since she wasn't his girlfriend, but she supposed it could be a hit on the omnipresent male pride that another man intruded on his... well, *turf* wasn't really the right word. It looked like yet another apology was in order, if Severus' mutinous expression and hunched shoulders were any indication. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, meeting his eyes squarely. "I really didn't mean anything by it."

Severus searched her eyes for a long moment and then glanced away to study the brickwork of the building next to them, shoving his hands into his pockets. "It's not like I care, anyway."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione moved the subject to safer, saner ground. "So, what are we doing here?"

Severus seemed grateful to take her lead, clearing his throat and straightening his shoulders as he said, "I take it you didn't see the thief?" At Hermione's chagrined shake of the head, he continued, "I have a friend who might... hear... something about this incident, but in the meantime, I want to make sure that our item doesn't... surface... in any of the local shops."

"Oh," Hermione said, reading between the lines and not sure how she felt about it. It shouldn't have surprised her that he would have connections to nefarious characters, and it might come in handy in this instance, but the part of her that read the rules and restrictions of candy bar sweepstakes shuddered at the thought. However, it was absolutely imperative that they find the Starglass; it was the only artifact of which she knew that could transport one through time twenty years. The longest documented journey using a Time Turner had been two months, and the wizard involved had been admitted to St. Mungo's for an extended stay.

With a covert glance back the way they had come, Severus headed down Knockturn Alley, gesturing impatiently for her to follow. The Alley's denizens either hadn't heard about the robbery or didn't care, for they skulked along the narrow road as they had on Hermione's prior visits. She followed closely behind, squelching her curiosity to peer into dusty windows or gaze at the witches and wizards who passed them by, many of whom had their hoods pulled closely about their faces.

Severus led them into Borgin and Burkes without incident and strode confidently up to the counter, rapping loudly on it with his knuckles. They didn't have long to wait before a crotchety old man with rheumy eyes shuffled out of the back room to the counter, his back slightly stooped and his hair a veritable rat's nest of gray wire. He eyed them briefly and then nodded with a respectful air. Hermione had tensed herself for another display of scorn similar to that of the Potions shop and deflated a bit at the deference with which they were treated.

"Buying or selling?" the man asked as he retrieved a pair of glasses with lenses as thick and round as the bottoms of coke bottles and settled them on his nose.

"I have a message for your nephew," Severus said. The codger snorted and pulled a slip of yellowed parchment from below the counter, sliding it toward Severus along with a ragged quill. Bending low over the counter, his nose almost touching the parchment, he quickly jotted down a short message (Hermione couldn't quite read it over his shoulder, though not for lack of trying) and then folded the note, sealing it with a quick tap of this wand. "Please see that he gets this today. If these instructions are not followed, certain wizards will be quite... *put out*."

He slid the sealed parchment back over the counter, and the old man picked it up gingerly, stashing it in a charcoal gray waistcoat pocket with a grimace. "I'll see that he gets it."

Severus nodded curtly, and the old man grunted, shuffling into the back room and firmly closing the door. Grasping her elbow as she drifted to a display of ornately carved boxes, Severus led her back out of the shop. They strode purposefully out of Knockturn Alley, Hermione breathing a sigh of relief as they entered the welcoming streets of Diagon Alley. She didn't notice the silence between them until he broke it with a terse question.

"Which book?"

"What?" she asked, glancing up at him to see his eyebrows knit and his hard, black eyes trained straight ahead. "Oh! *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It's a Muggle work of fiction."

He gave her a curious glance. "You don't spurn things of Muggle origin."

"Why should I?"

He shrugged languidly, and Hermione wrenched her eyes away to notice that he was now holding the door of the Post Office open for her. *Ron* didn't do things like that for her. She stuffed that thought away and shot him an inquisitive look, only to receive a raised eyebrow, and huffed, dragging her feet in irritation that he would leave her in the dark *again*. Pointedly ignoring her display, he gathered a blank piece of parchment from a wall of cubbies that held everything from parchment to quills to small columns of sealing wax in every color of the rainbow and many in between. At the far edge of the cubbies, near the wide archway leading to the Owlery, was a small office separated from the main room by an open window. A young clerk sat behind the window, flipping through a brightly illustrated magazine. The Post Office patrons generally ignored him, though once in a while, a witch or wizard would approach to inquire about postage rates (to which the clerk would point to a large chart of destinations and rates), delivery times (to which he would point to the same chart), or packaging materials (to which he would point to the wall of cubbies).

As Severus scribbled a short message on the parchment he'd selected, he kept a keen eye on Heidi. She was staring around the Post Office as if she'd never been there before, smiling wryly as she squinted at the rate chart. She probably didn't realize how much her expressions and careless phrases gave her away. It was almost a certainty that she wasn't whom she said she was; the Greenglasses were a purebred family, and though not as respected or well known as the Malfoys, or even the Greengrasses, they still held their purity in high regard. There was little chance that a proper Greenglass would read Muggle science fiction. Her flippant comment about "that old pick-up line" was peculiar and jangled at his suspicious nature. The book had been published only recently, and while it was popular in the Muggle world, it was relatively unknown among wizards. By no stretch of the imagination could the line be described as "old".

The style of her robes was odd, as well. If he wasn't mistaken, he had caught sight of a *zipper* at the back, a decidedly Muggle device, though the dress itself was clearly a witch's garment. A pureblood matriarch would have been scandalized. She was fortunate that her hair covered it most of the time.

And now she was staring pensively at a cubby of parchment, dragging the end of a quill across her lips. He was distracted for a moment, pausing just before he signed his initials to the bottom of his missive to watch the path of the feather. Her lips were slightly parted, twitching slightly as the feather tickled the sensitive skin that still bore a light stain of tinted gloss. With an abrupt movement, she stuffed the quill back into the cubby and turned in a swirl of green fabric, striding toward him with a vaguely dismayed expression. His breath rushed out of him in a hiss, and he hurriedly glanced away, signing his initials with a flourish and tapping it with his wand to dry it. Keeping his eyes down and his warming cheeks hidden, he rolled it into a tight tube and sealed it with a dot of wax.

He was more comfortable analyzing her behavior than his own. Some of the simplest things she did were disturbingly fascinating, drawing him in and distracting him. Each instance felt like a betrayal of *her*, flushing him with shame that he could look at another woman after what he'd done. He didn't deserve it, and neither did *she*. However, knowing this had not tempered his urge to hex that bastard Diggory when he'd approached the table and hit on Heidi just to spite him, nor the clenching pain in his chest when she'd responded. Her apology, though...

"What are you doing?" Heidi asked waspishly, her arms crossed tightly under her breasts. Severus snapped his eyes up to her face and frowned.

"Sending a letter. What does it look like?" Turning away from her, he stalked through the wide archway that led into the Owlery. Even over the din of hooting owls, rustling wings and a number of conversations that echoed through the lofty, dome-ceilinged room, he could hear her light footsteps behind him. He increased his pace, irritated at his hyper-awareness of her. Perhaps he should not have taken her up on her offer of help, though he had seen no way around it at the time. Now that the Starglass had been stolen, the person to steal it back would be the rightful owner...

Severus' train of thought was broken as his heel hit a slippery puddle under one of the owls' watering dishes, and his foot shot out in front of him.

"Oof!" Hermione said as she caught him gracelessly under the armpits, staggering under his weight. Her long fingers curled against his ribs, gathering handfuls of his robes, and in an oddly lucid vision, he saw her ragged, ink-stained fingernails snagging threads in the fabric. Pushing away his imaginings and her hands, he found his balance, straightening his jacket with jerky tugs. She was glowering at the puddle and muttering under her breath, something about posting signs, so he had a moment to school his expression from wistfully mortified to annoyed. It didn't take much effort.

He should send her away. She was dangerous.

"Come on," she said as she deliberately stepped around the puddle and toward the first tier of perched owls, which hooted in greeting. "Let's send that thing. Are you going to tell me to *whom* we are sending it?"

He sighed. The trouble was that he didn't *want* to send her away, and he so rarely got what he wanted. Unfortunately, she wouldn't like what he had in mind, considering what the wizard had done at their last meeting. "As I told you before, I have a friend who might have heard something. He'll be expecting us tomorrow."

Pulling a length of ribbon from the dispenser that was mounted underneath the long owl perch, Severus wound it around the scroll and then tied it firmly to the bird's outstretched leg. "Lucius Malfoy," he said to the owl and watched it launch into the air to circle the ceiling once, then fly out one of the many portal windows set high in the dome.

"I'm sorry, Severus, and correct me if I'm wrong, but am I to understand that we are calling on *Lucius Malfoy*?" Heidi planted her fists on her hip, her wild hair wreathing her face and her eyes crackling with anger like a vengeful Fury.

"Yes." He silently congratulated himself for his steady voice. "For afternoon tea."

A/N: Yes, that quote is right out of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. I love the book and the radio show, and when I needed a cheesy pick-up line, it popped into my head. It implies that this Diggory has at least one Muggle parent, but like I said: I take liberties with canon.

Opportunities for Blackmail

Chapter 9 of 20

See chapter 1

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Heidi had been quiet, unusually so, on their trip from Diagon Alley back to Spinner's End, where she now sat on his parlor couch sipping a steaming cup of tea. It was like watching a botched potion roil and seethe, knowing that at any moment, it would explode and splatter the observer with some foul, potentially poisonous substance. Severus nibbled his shortbread biscuit and gazed at her through his eyelashes with both morbid curiosity and a resigned air, knowing that he would probably deserve whatever noisome words were brewing behind her lips. He *had* just set them up to call on a man who had drugged her with the intention that Severus take advantage of her. Unfortunately, Lucius was their best source of information and had to be approached in just the right way.

Her cup rattled on its saucer as she set it on the low coffee table. Fixing him with a determined eye, she opened her mouth to speak.

'This is it,' he thought. 'This is when she will finally rake me across the coals, and I will drive her away with belittling insults. She'll leave ...'

"Does it really have to be *Lucius Malfoy*?"

Severus blinked at her. "What?"

"He *drugged* me, you know. *In this very room.*" She stabbed her finger at the floor for emphasis.

"He won't hurt you again," Severus assured her automatically, surprising himself. Her resulting smile was unexpectedly warming, and he wouldn't have taken it back if he could. Clearing his throat, he attempted a sneering drawl to cover his small lapse. "Your presence isn't required if you are *frightened.*"

"I'm not afraid," she said quickly. "I just don't like him. He's a conceited, presumptuous bigot."

"Perhaps."

She shot him a mutinous glare. "He *is*, and you know it. But I'm bloody well going with you." Shooting to her feet, she paced across the parlor and then whirled on him. "Honestly, Severus, is Malfoy our only option?"

"He is if you would like to find the burglar before he disposes of the Starglass."

"Malfoy wouldn't have..."

Severus snorted before she could finish the thought. "Don't be stupid. Lucius has much better things to do than to organize the petty theft of ice cream shop patrons. However, he knows people who know people..."

A shadow streaked across the room between Heidi's legs and made a flying leap into his lap, braking on his thigh with ten needle-sharp claws. Severus gasped in pained surprise, his biscuit taking an unexpected flight into the pot of a withered fern.

"Damn cat!" he yelled, but made no move to dislodge the kitten from his trousers. He had already learned that the damage inflicted on his clothes was not worth the brief respite before the kitten would jump back into his lap.

"What have you decided to call him?" Heidi asked, her shoulders shaking with suppressed mirth. She wondered if Severus realized that he was now stroking the kitten's back.

Severus glared at her. "Exactly *what* makes you think this beast deserves a name?"

"Don't be a berk, Severus." Heidi regarded him speculatively, one long finger gliding over her bottom lip. When she spoke again, he'd almost forgotten what they were discussing. "How about Mewlip?" At his blank expression, she rolled her eyes and said, "J.R.R. Tolkien, look it up. Honestly, for such a brilliant man, you are woefully under-read."

"Thank you for your observation," he snapped sarcastically, not bothering to correct her on the fact that *he* did know the author. Let her underestimate him; it gave him an advantage over her. "I shall surely keep it in mind and make plans to rectify it, seeing as I have nothing better to do."

Heidi shook her head, smiling at him somewhat indulgently, and patted his shoulder as she walked past him to the parlor's exit. "Collect me at Madam Beetlebump's tomorrow," she called from the entry. "Half past three should give us plenty of time to prepare and arrive on time."

He heard the front door close and sighed, letting his dark head fall back against the chair. That had gone much better than he had expected. Then again, she was constantly surprising him. What was it about her that she was so determined to ignore his dark reputation, cruel words and ugly face to treat him so decently? They didn't have the commonality of being wizards in a Muggle world and the resulting childhood friendship that he and Lily had shared...

He had just thought her name. Her given name hadn't crossed his thoughts or lips in many, many months. He hadn't felt worthy to speak it. But now, he felt stronger, lighter than he had in years. In Heidi, he had a friend who seemed to like him for, or in spite of, himself; the truth was un-Occluded in her eyes. He had snapped at her, offended her, *attacked* her, for Merlin's sake, and yet she had forgiven him. Perhaps he wasn't such a disgusting waste of magic, after all.

The question was: would she forgive him when she found out what he planned to do with her precious Starglass? His intentions weren't exactly Dark, but few wizards would consider it, let alone attempt it. And then would come his *reasons* behind it, and no one as deeply good as Heidi could forgive him for that.

Was it worth it, to lose his one good friendship? How could he *not* try?

"Lily," he tasted the word on the air, whispering it into the stillness of the room. The sound was absorbed as if it had never been spoken, vanishing into cracks between the tomes that lined the walls. All at once, his parlor seemed claustrophobic and stuffy, closing in on him like the padded walls of a holding cell in St. Mungo's for the dangerously insane. Invisible belts wrap around his chest, squeezing and constricting until he gasped for breath, clutching at his heart.

A quiet trill broke through the haze of pain and panic, and a sandpaper tongue traced a wet path up his cheek. Opening eyes he hadn't known he'd clenched shut, he was met with two gleaming yellow irises split by slitted pupils regarding him with compassionate curiosity. The kitten stretched his neck and lapped gently at Severus' cheek.

The moisture wasn't from his tongue.

Severus batted the kitten out of his face, but he simply dug in his claws, his back feet perched on the top of his stomach, and the front latched firmly into the collar of his shirt, and leapt onto his shoulder, pushing his cold kitten nose into his ear. Despite his torment, Severus chuckled weakly, but the vocalization and the fondness accompanying it seemed to be the final crack in the dam that finally let loose a floodgate of pent up emotion. Burying his face in the kitten's soft fur, he curled up on himself and sobbed.

Hermione glanced furtively at the kitchen wall clock and said, "Really, this isn't necessary. It was *fine*..."

She was cut off by a particularly firm tug on her scalp as Madam Beetlebump wrangled her hair into a... well, Hermione wasn't sure what. She *did* know that her hair wasn't cooperating (if Madam's colorful phrases were any indication), that she was nervous as hell to visit Malfoy in his lair and that Severus was due to arrive in three minutes.

"Bartholomew, you come back with that pin!" Madam called out to the tail that disappeared around the kitchen doorjamb. "Bugger," she swore, giving Hermione's hair another tug, then fished a pin out of the collection she had clamped between her lips.

"He'll be here any minute!" Hermione said and winced as the tips of the pin scraped against her scalp. Pumplenoose was giving her a smug cat grin from the kitchen table, flipping the tip of her freshly bathed and groomed (in Madam's bathtub, with specially scented cat shampoo Pumplenoose had protested most furiously) tail, and Hermione narrowed her eyes meaningfully, darting a glance at the cupboard where the shampoo was stored. Unimpressed, the fluffy, white Persian continued to stare.

Madam broke the hostilities with an insistent nudge to the cat's side. "Budge up, dear," she mumbled between the pins and pulled a length of gray-blue ribbon from under the unmoving cat's arse. Hermione was about to protest this new injustice when a drawing voice, tinged slightly with incredulity, preceded a young man clad in rich, black velvet.

"Excuse me, but when I knocked, one of the cats opened the door."

The cut of his suit was similar to the ones he had worn as a professor; the jacket had a row of tiny buttons from his throat to his groin, and the bottom hem reached to his knees, but instead of white, the undershirt was shimmering silver edged in ornate lace, both at the neck and cuffs. A large, silver brooch with an intertwining snake motif rested at the hollow of his throat, and his hair was tied back in a matching silver bow. For a long moment, Hermione simply stared up at him, immensely glad that she had let Madam convince her to change into the satin blue dress that she was now wearing and that she hadn't run screaming from the kitchen when she had sat her down to untie the plait in her hair. The next moment she spent blushing furiously that this handsome (granted, untraditionally so) man had found her seated in a kitchen chair with a crazy old cat woman fixing her hair. She still had no idea what Madam Beetlebump was doing up there.

Pale pink dusted his cheekbones as he met her gaze, but his eyes, disconcertingly open, glittered with amusement. Bartholomew slipped between his legs and leapt up on the table, stealing another hairpin from the pile and breaking the spell.

"I'll be ready in a moment," Hermione said with as much dignity as she could muster, hoping that it was true. His lips twitching, Severus nodded solemnly to the cats on the table and Madam Beetlebump, mumbling a respectful, "Good day, Madam."

She ignored him, muttering under her breath and occasionally making comments to her cats, until she dropped her hands to her sides with a great exhalation of breath and a wide grin. "Isn't she lovely, my pets?"

All eyes seemed to gaze critically at Hermione, who squirmed under the scrutiny. Bartholomew and Pumplenoose glanced away shortly after, but it was Severus' dark eyes, which roamed her face and hair, that brought another bright flush to her cheeks. Hermione stood and smoothed her hands down her heavy skirts, straightening nonexistent wrinkles with fidgeting fingers.

Clearing his throat, Severus offered her his arm, and she stilled the motion of her hands. "I really need to find a mirror," she said, now gingerly touching her hair. It felt like Madam had twisted the hair at her temples back to form a knot on the top of her head, leaving the length of her hair and several ribbons to cascade down.

"There is no need," he said, and the look he sent her tingled straight to her toes. She glanced away, thoughts of Ron and how he would feel if he knew how much a glance from Severus could affect her sending a chill of guilt through the heady rush of being admired, but took his arm nonetheless.

The gates of Malfoy Manor were designed to impress and did their job effectively. Tall yew hedges stretched for what seemed like acres to either side and through the heavy, wrought iron filigree, Hermione could see the stately manor house perched at the end of the straight drive. The lawn was verdant, lush and evenly clipped short, and the faint cry of peacocks broke the warm, summer air. Lovely and imposing it might have been, but all Hermione could focus on was the horrible trek up this very drive that she had made one terrifying night in the clutches of Fenrir Greyback and his cronies. She was unprepared for the dread that shot through her veins like a paralyzing potion.

Over the last day or so, ever since their visit to the Post Office, she'd been assaulted by vivid memories of her school years. It had struck her, as she stood staring at the tidy cubbies of parchment and quills in the Diagon Alley Post Office, that a few simple notes sent to key people could solve most of the Horcrux problem in a matter of days, preventing Voldemort's overthrow of the Ministry, maybe even his return to power, and saving the lives of many witches and wizards. Merlin, how she had been tempted!

Dear Dumbledore,

Regarding Tom Riddle's soul:

Riddle's school diary, in possession of Lucius Malfoy

Ravenclaw's Diadem, Room of Requirement

Slytherin's Locket, curio shelf, House of Black

Peeverell Ring, Gaunt House...

...and so on. She could have told him that Hagrid hadn't really set the monster of the Chamber of Secrets on Hogwarts (though he probably knew that already) and that Ginny would be the one to open it again, under the influence of Riddle's diary, that Peter Pettigrew was alive and living as a pet rat, and to verify that old Mad Eye Moody really *was* Moody when he hired him as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts. There were so many bits of foreknowledge that she could impart... but with what consequences?

It had taken a Herculean effort to resist, but she had done it. "Horrible things happen to wizards who mess with time," Professor McGonagall had once told her, and she was already tempting fate with her current exploits. She could only hope that she was not further changing the time line as she knew it.

Severus gave her hand that was tucked into his elbow a reassuring little pat, startling her to the fact that all of her muscles had gone rigid as she stared straight ahead so hard that she could almost hear her eyeballs creak when she raised them to his. Gazing intently down at her, he said, "I told you he wouldn't hurt you."

"Yes, you did," she replied and tried to smile, forcing her muscles to relax. She must not have been very successful because he patted her hand again. "I trust you," she added, "but I don't trust *him*."

"That's probably just as well," he said as he tapped his wand twice on the gate. It swung open on silent hinges, and they stepped through together, Hermione's hand still

on his arm. Neither attempted to remove it as they strolled up the drive, and Severus seemed to exude a smug, pleased air through his concern of earlier. Hermione hardly noticed; her attention was fixed to the grand front door that was being swung open, a house-elf's head peering out anxiously. Flashes of the Malfoy drawing room, of Harry and Ron being dragged down into the dungeon, of Bellatrix raising her wand and the nerve-rending pain that followed, rolled through her mind's eye like a reel of horror shorts. Regardless, she drew her back up straight and thrust out her chin. She had successfully not thought of that horrible night in years, and she wasn't about to let those memories overwhelm her now. Just the same, she clutched Severus' arm as if it were a life preserver.

The house-elf, a skittish creature wearing a pillowcase with holes cut for the arms and neck that instantly gained her pity, led them through the sumptuous entry hall with hand gestures and fearful squeaks. It was as lavish as Hermione remembered, with gilt friezes and taffeta wallpaper, but it only twisted the coils of apprehension in her stomach. She could feel her pulse throbbing against Severus' velvet sleeve and her cold hands becoming moist with sweat. As she had feared, the elf took them through a side door into the drawing room that had played a starring role in many of her old nightmares. It was only with the greatest of efforts that she stepped into the room and drug her eyes away from Oriental rug on which she had been tortured to greet their host.

"Well, well, Sev!" Malfoy rose from a velvet armchair that had been placed by an enormous marble hearth. "When you said you were bringing a lady, I hardly dared to believe it." She felt his arm tense under her fingers, and she gave him a reassuring squeeze, now quite glad that she hadn't skived on this engagement.

Malfoy snapped his fingers, and a house-elf draped in what might have been an old window dressing appeared with an extensive tea. Cakes, biscuits, scones, and delicate finger sandwiches were stacked high on a golden, tiered stand, an obvious match to the bone china tea service in white with golden filigree designs decorating the edges. They were led to a low couch that had been designed for looks more than comfort; the green velvet cushions were hard and unyielding, forcing one to sit ramrod straight. A ridge of carved ebony trimmed the back and bottom edges of the couch, ending in four clawed feet. Woodenly, Hermione sank into her seat, desperately glad to have Severus' cool confidence next to her.

The house-elf served them, and Hermione gingerly held her cup and saucer, almost able to see her fingers silhouetted through the porcelain. A warm summer breeze washed through the large French doors that stood slightly ajar, opening onto a veranda that overlooked a carefully manicured hedge maze. Sunlight caught in the crystals hanging from the wall sconces, casting dancing rainbows on the furniture and Severus' hair.

She tried to pay attention to the conversation, which at the moment seemed to be small talk and thinly veiled, condescending comments about Severus' lifestyle, career and choice of clothing, but her eyes were inexorably drawn to the carpet. There: that particular whorl of blue and silver by the fringe is where her nose had rested between bouts of Cruciatius. And that trailing vine of wisteria was where she had planted her palms as she panted for pained breath.

"Do have a sandwich, Miss Greenglass," Malfoy said, breaking her morbid thoughts and forcing her to glance back up at her tea companions. "And you haven't touched your tea!"

She gave him an arch look, forcing away the lingering horror of the room. "I am not particularly in need of refreshment, thank you, Mr. Malfoy," she said, placing her cup and saucer on the round table at her elbow. Folding her hands on her crossed knees, she stared challengingly into his gray eyes with much more bravado than she actually felt.

Malfoy glanced quickly between her and Severus, then seemed to start in sudden remembrance. "Oh! That. You must understand, Miss Greenglass, that I only had dear Sev's best interests at heart. And here you are! So it must have worked out."

He shot her a winning smile, and Hermione resisted the urge to stuff his expensive teacup down his throat.

Through clenched teeth, Severus redirected the conversation. "And we're all quite grateful, I'm sure. However, we did not come to discuss your matchmaking skills. I trust you heard about the recent robbery at Diagon Alley?"

Flicking an imaginary crumb from his immaculate trousers, Malfoy said, "Robberies, you mean. Nine different shops, none carrying an inventory worth mentioning, were hit. The main victims were the patrons themselves." He didn't sound very sympathetic. On the contrary, he reminded her of a spinster Aunt who had relished repeating the death count of natural disasters at family gatherings.

Severus leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and eying Malfoy interestedly. "All of them occurred yesterday?"

"Yes, at different times of the day in completely different locations of the Alley."

Silent for a moment, Severus tapped the tips of his fingers together as he stared appraisingly at Malfoy. "We stopped by Fortescue's that afternoon," he said casually.

"He does make a delicious elderberry parfait."

Hermione shifted restlessly, wishing she could simply come out and ask if Malfoy knew who had committed the robberies. This beating about the bush was tedious.

"We had the sorbet, but it left much to be desired. Lacking something important, I'd say." Hermione bristled, for he hadn't complained at the parlor, but Severus shot her a quelling glance, and she subsided mulishly.

Lucius took an elegant sip of tea, pinky properly extended, then set his cup back in its saucer. "That *is* a pity. Perhaps it was the cream."

"Undoubtedly."

Sighing, Hermione was about to explain that sorbet wasn't made with cream; that had been the point of ordering it, to accommodate Severus' lactose intolerance. Before she could speak, a door crashed open (*not* the door to the dungeons, thank Merlin), and a chubby, towheaded toddler wearing nothing but a nappy pranced in, followed by a frantic house-elf. Squealing in glee with a smile that reached from ear to ear, he waved in one pudgy fist a dingy tea cozy that could only have served as a house-elf's hat.

"Master, please! He mustn't..." the house-elf cut herself off with a sharp, self-inflicted blow to the head, hard enough to knock herself to the ground. Hermione winced, but knew better than to bring up the plight of the house-elf in present company. Obviously enjoying the game, the toddler giggled and turned to the house-elf, brandishing the cozy, and then made a waddling dash for Malfoy as fast as his legs could carry him, though much encumbered by the nappy. He tumbled into Malfoy's legs, leaving a shiny trail of spittle or snot (Hermione couldn't tell) on his trousers.

Wrinkling his nose but patting the toddler on the head, Malfoy said, "Now, Draco, your father is entertaining guests." He shot the house-elf a look that promised pain, and the creature cringed, wringing her hands.

"Mine," the toddler informed him, waving the cozy.

"Of course it is, though why you would want such a thing is beyond me." He gave baby Draco a final pat on the head and then a nudge toward the elf. "Glompy, handle it."

"Yes, master. Of course, master. Glompy will get right on it!"

With agility born of practice, the toddler dodged Glompy's long fingers and ran to Severus, similarly marking his knees and displaying his prize. Severus dabbed at the wet, slightly slimy track now adorning the velvet.

"Sev'wus," Draco lisped and began whacking his trouser leg with the cozy. Behind him, the elf groveled and twisted her fingers, muttering a litany of apologies.

Snatching half-heartedly at the cozy that Draco somehow managed to keep just out of the man's reach, Severus carefully pronounced, *Severus*."

Draco ignored him, choosing instead to repeat, "Sev'wus" and "mine" as he thwapped Severus' leg. He had a decent sense of rhythm for such a young child, Hermione

thought absently. Of course, the posturing arse with whom she had gone to school would have been absolutely horrified to know that Hermione had seen him in nothing but a nappy and mispronouncing his godfather's name. It didn't surprise her that he was already a terror and that none of the authority figures in the room were doing anything to correct his behavior. His father seemed to view him more like a puppy than a human, the poor elf was obviously terrified, and perhaps forbidden, to implement any kind of punitive measures, and Severus had never looked further out of his league. Where was his mother in all of this?

Through it all, Severus repeated, "Now, Draco," and swatted at the cozy. It was all very ineffective and silly, and Hermione would have expected better of him if she had ever considered this situation before.

"Glompy!" Malfoy snapped, startling the elf so badly that she jumped several inches off the ground, then threw herself at Draco's bare feet.

"Master, *please!*"

"Draco!" Hermione said with enough force to catch the toddler's attention. "Enough of this!" He stopped his abuse of Severus' legs, staring at Hermione as if she were some sort of fascinating new creature, his gray eyes wide. Taking advantage of his distraction, she plucked the cozy out of his fingers and leaned forward until they were at the same eye level. One pudgy fist crept into his mouth, and he chewed on it as he regarded her solemnly. "You shouldn't be teasing the house-elves or your godfather."

Glompy whimpered piteously from the floor but Hermione ignored her. Listing against Severus' legs, Draco tried to bury his face in the small gap between his knees, but still keep a curious watch on Hermione. A small line of drool was beginning to creep down the fist that was still firmly planted in his mouth.

If only she had a camera! Years of torment could have been avoided with one shot of Draco at such an embarrassing, vulnerable moment. However, despite her dislike for the man Draco Malfoy would become and the blackmail opportunities such a photograph would provide, she couldn't help but admit that he was rather cute. Baby fat hid the sharpness into which his features would develop, and his gray eyes were large, guileless and alert. With the proper guidance, he could have been so much more than he would become.

She shot a glance at Severus, who was watching her as curiously as Draco. Neither of these two men really knew what to do with a baby, she realized, even less than *she* did. Tossing the cozy to the elf, who groveled with profuse thanks, she smiled sadly at the toddler and said, "I'm sure you have your own toys to play with."

Draco seemed to come to some sort of decision because he gave her a gap-toothed grin and pushed away from Severus, winding his hands into her skirts until he had the hold he needed to climb into her lap. Stunned and unsure of herself, Hermione simply let him, reaching out a helping hand when he teetered precariously on her knees.

"I do apologize, Miss Greenglass. Glompy will take him off yours hands," Malfoy said, waving peremptorily at the elf. She sprang up, reaching for the toddler, but Hermione just shook her head. Draco had curled up against her chest and was fiddling quietly with the trim on one of her long bell sleeves.

"He's fine, Mr. Malfoy."

Shrugging noncommittally, Malfoy said, "As you like. But do please call me Lucius." Severus was still staring at her in rapt fascination, and she cleared her throat uncomfortably. A rustle of paper brought both of their attention forward as Malfoy extended a copy of the *Daily Prophet* folded to display a photograph that was now quite thoroughly etched into Hermione's mind. Severus eyed it disinterestedly until his and Hermione's faces appeared in the frame. Malfoy smirked as Severus took it from his outstretched hand.

"There is a bakery in Crawley, in the old market town, that might interest you," he said conversationally. Merely nodding, Severus continued to watch the photograph. Suppressing a shiver, Hermione wondered if she were indeed seeing the very photograph Luna had found among Severus' books. Had he kept it because he was in it? Because *they* were in it? The idea filled her with a hopeful, fluttery feeling that was swiftly followed by giggling shame. But why should she feel ashamed? She had not done anything inappropriate, and there was nothing wrong with being pleased that a friend would want to keep a memento of their time together. After all, how many photos of Harry had she collected over the years?

The baby in her lap shifted suddenly, grasping clumsily at the tea stand and drawing her out of her thoughts. "Draco," she hissed quietly, trying not to interrupt the men's conversation about cream-filled pastries or whatever that translated to in Death Eater. Catching his fingers before they could upset one of the delicate china platters, she said, "Tell me what you would like."

"Cake," he said, pointing to the fancy variety of Battenberg that sported four colors instead of two.

"And what do you say?" He gave her a blank look. "*Please,*" she prompted. Draco stuffed his fist in his mouth and blinked coyly. Raising an eyebrow, she elaborated, "Polite boys say please."

He mumbled something that may have started with a 'p' around his fingers, and Hermione capitulated. It wasn't really her problem, and he *had* given it an effort. Plucking a small slice of the cake off of the platter, she handed it to the baby who was now reaching for it with both hands outstretched. He crammed it into his mouth in one go and grinned at her with a mouth smeared liberally with marzipan. "Cake, please," he said clearly and pointed to the cake, bouncing a little on her lap.

Hermione was about to suggest something a little more nutritious, like a sandwich, when she caught the odor of something foul. Next to her, Severus was sniffing the air with large nostrils, giving the baby a suspicious, black look. Draco began to bounce again, and Hermione caught him under the arms, just in case whatever was beginning to flavor the air should leak out his nappy.

"Please, Miss, let Glompy handle it," the house-elf blinked lamp-like eyes at her and reached for Draco. He squirmed and protested as he was handed from human to elf, but the moment Glompy had a firm grasp, they both disappeared from the room with a quiet pop.

"Miss Greenglass and I should also take our leave," Severus said as he stood, tucking the newspaper into his jacket. Extending a hand, he helped her to her feet, and she took a brief moment to examine her robes for signs of baby deposit. Malfoy also rose gracefully to his feet.

"It was delightful, Sev, as always. Do bring Miss Greenglass by again. Perhaps in a more... delicate... condition?"

"As I have said before, Lucius, just because *you* find fatherhood rewarding, doesn't mean we should *all* rush out and do it."

"Nonsense! Every man should have an heir! Even those with unfortunate parentage."

Hermione bit back an angry retort, but refused to join Lucius' laugh or Severus' strained chuckle. Stretching her lips in a tight smile, she tucked her hand into the crook of Severus' elbow and gently nudged him toward the door. Eagerly, he obliged, leading them both out of the room. Within minutes, they were out of the house and striding up the drive, and Hermione released her breath in one relieved gust. The heavy atmosphere of stress and pain evaporated in the late afternoon sun.

"How can you let him treat you like that?" she asked him as the front gate swung shut behind them.

"He treats everyone like that." He searched her eyes, tossing his head when the breeze blew lank black locks of hair that had escaped his ribbon into his face.

'More importantly,' she thought as she stared up at him, unaware of the sad, affectionate expression that had settled on her face, 'he *is* used to being treated like that.' Running her hand down his arm, she grasped his fingers in her own and squeezed gently. "It's not right, you know."

He shrugged but didn't let go of her hand. Realizing that she still held it, she dropped it quickly and glanced away, flustered, her eyes roaming absently over the gates, the hedge, and the lane beyond the grounds. "And another thing," she said to distract herself, "that poor baby needs some guidance in his life. Left to that household, he will be spoiled rotten." He was still gazing at her intently, so she added, "As his godfather, you could help him become a contributing member of society."

"He will contribute, I'm sure," he drawled in what Hermione thought of as his best Malfoy impression.

Hermione glared at him and changed the subject. "Where to next?"

"Crawley, of course," he said as he raised a black eyebrow. "I suddenly find that I have a craving for jam-filled doughnuts."

At Odds

Chapter 10 of 20

Our heroes follow Malfoy's advice and set out on a hunt.

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

They didn't go directly to Crawley.

Apparently, one could not calculate the exact coordinates of the burglar using the letters of "jam-filled doughnuts," as Hermione had initially expected, though Severus had found the idea somewhat amusing. Hermione had been much less amused when, after he had Apparated them back to Spinner's End, he had pulled two battered broomsticks out of a cluttered closet.

"I don't think so," she told him unequivocally.

"Would you rather walk?"

"Yes." She sounded petulant to her own ears, but that did not change the fact that she did not relish the prospect of riding a broom all the way to Crawley. Few things were less comfortable to ride. When she wore jeans, she spent the first five post-flight minutes fishing her knickers out of her arse; when she wore a skirt, her legs froze, and she was quite certain that unscrupulous wizards were getting an eyeful. "Couldn't we Floo or Portkey or something?"

"We *could* Floo if we wanted to broadcast our arrival," he said, eyeing her with amused disdain. "However, Crawley does not have many hearths connected to the network, and none of them open to a place you want to go."

Hermione scowled at him and took the broom from his hand.

The flight was as miserable as she had expected, made bearable only by Severus. Instead of teasing her as he flew circles around her, as Ron and Harry were wont to do, Severus stayed abreast of her. Occasionally, he would gripe about her relatively sedate pace, as he was clearly used to moving more quickly, and Hermione would oblige him by accelerating. She supposed it was in her best interest, anyway; her legs felt as if they had been dipped in ice water, despite the warming charm she had cast, and her knickers were literally in a twist. There was no way she would let go with either of her hands to right them, even if Severus *weren't* there to witness it. The sooner they arrived, the sooner she would be comfortable.

They touched down on the roof of a building in the old district of Crawley, a cobbled market town surrounded by industrial sprawl, just as the first few stars of evening struggled to shine through the persistent haze of a modern city. Their landing pad looked to be a recent addition to the building: a tarred, flat surface annexed to an ancient, shingled, slanted roofline. The peak of the old roof hid them from the street, and the rickety aluminum lawn chair and plastic table gave evidence to the fact that they were not the first to hide behind it. On the alley side of the building, a pair of iron bars arched over the low wall at the edge of the roof: an emergency ladder of sorts.

Stiff-legged and cold, Hermione dismounted carefully, trying not to stagger as her legs wobbled under her. Severus seemed none the worse for wear, flexing his knees athletically and tossing his hair out of eyes that shone with a rare glee. Apparently, he appreciated flying more than she did. Returning his grin with a half playful, half irritated grimace, she placed her hands in the small of her back and stretched, groaning as her back popped loudly. Oh, what she wouldn't do for a hot bath and soaking salts!

His eyes widened momentarily, then he glanced away to study his broomstick, his cheeks becoming inexplicably rosier. Too sore to think about what could have embarrassed him, she took that moment of his distraction to straighten her clothes and undergarments.

"Perhaps we can go warm up a bit?" she finally suggested when he began pressing crescents into his broom handle with his thumbnail. He wouldn't look at her, but his nodded agreement was sharp and perfunctory. With a practiced swish of his wand and a non-verbal spell, the two brooms shrunk to the size of matchsticks. Hermione handed hers to him, almost dropping it when, as their fingers touched, he jerked slightly as if he had been shocked. If she had to guess, she would have said he was flustered, but the reason was conspicuously absent. He would not have been able to see up her skirt as she landed, for she had been careful to land first. Shrugging away the morass that was a young man's thought process, she walked to the edge of the roof and leaned over the short wall to peer up the alley, searching for a likely spot to have a nice, hot cup of tea. Nothing immediately presented itself, and since Snape was staring fixedly at the ground by the hem of her robes, she took matters into her own hands.

"I'm going to find a place to recuperate. Are you coming?" He glared at her, jerking his head "yes," and Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Fine, then."

Using a nonverbal Hover Charm, she levitated herself into the alley. It was cloaked in shadows impenetrable by the feeble flicker of the old-fashioned gas lamp on the street beyond. By the time they both had landed, Severus had gotten over whatever had bothered him up on the roof and was ready to take the lead, picking his way through the rubbish ahead of her by the faint glow of his wand. She was a trifle disappointed that he hadn't offered her his arm, but pushed the thought away. There were more important things to worry her at the moment, such as...

"Severus, hold on!" She grabbed the back of his cloak before he could step out of the velvet shadows and into the small circle of light. Whipping his head around, he glared down at her, small points of light reflecting in eyes blacker than the darkness of the alley. With lank strands of hair hanging before his eyes, he seemed curtained off and distant, and Hermione had the sudden urge to push his hair out of his face, hoping to find the camaraderie that they had so recently shared. Instead, she said, "We must Transfigure our clothes or we'll be conspicuous."

He blinked in understanding and stepped back into deeper shadows before performing a nonverbal spell to Transfigure his cloak and suit into a long coat, black jumper and jeans. Simultaneously, Hermione enchanted her lovely blue robes into a sensible jacket, blouse and slacks, warm enough for the cooling evening but still flattering. She didn't bother to consider why that was important to her. Disguises in place (and Hermione *did* consider how ironic it was to think of Muggle clothes as a disguise), they stepped out of the alley to the sidewalk that was nearly vacant of pedestrians. Cars trundled by on the cobbled road, headlights blindingly bright, but traffic was relatively light for such a lovely summer evening. Granted, if Hermione had her choice, then they wouldn't have been in this particular spot. The buildings had a shabby, neglected air

to them, and spray-painted graffiti decorated the boarded-up doors and windows of several storefronts. Only one in three streetlamps actually worked, stretching the darkness between pools of light. The red tips of cigarettes flared in the shadows of an alley down the street, reflecting in the eyes of young toughs loitering in a loose cluster. Occasionally, Hermione could hear a harsh laugh, devoid of humor, and see a shower of sparks as a cigarette met its end.

Missing the comforting glow of her wand, Hermione sidled as close to Severus as propriety allowed. Of its own accord, her hand curled into his, and she was so distracted by the unnerving sense of displacement in this rough, Muggle neighborhood that she didn't notice him stiffening. He didn't let go, though, for several blocks, until he opened a door and gestured that she enter a grungy pub with one small, dirty window and the strains of a tired rock song filtering through a haze of cigarette smoke. Hermione wrinkled her nose as she hesitated on the threshold. "I thought we were going to a bakery."

Severus gave her a long look as he held the door open and allowed thin fingers of smoke to escape. "Was that a joke?" he asked, the doubt in his voice indicating that he might think her that stupid.

"Obviously not a very good one," she mumbled as she entered the pub, resisting the urge to mince her steps and examine the floor before placing her feet. Their shoes made a slightly sticky sound as they walked, and she wondered if she could get away with a quick disinfecting charm on their chairs and table before they sat down. To be very honest, she had been looking forward to a pastry and hot cup of tea after that long flight, especially since she hadn't been able to eat a thing at Malfoy Manor.

Severus deposited her at a corner booth along the wall, one of many high-backed wooden constructs with hard seats and a knotty, uneven table. The lighting in the pub was as bad as in the streets, obfuscating the booths and their occupants with a haze of smog and gloom. He was gone an inordinately long time for simply procuring two drinks, so she peered around the edge of the booth at the bar. To the untrained eye, it would have appeared that he was having a close discussion with the bartender. However, Hermione recognized the use of Legilimency when she saw it. The gritty, balding man's eyes were wide and glassy, staring directly into Severus'. Sighing, she hunched back into the booth and hoped that no other wizards were around to see.

He returned a moment later carrying two tumblers of amber liquid, setting one in front of her as he slid behind the table on the opposite side of the booth. Frowning in censure, she said, "You know that was a violation of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy."

His eyes widening slightly in surprise, he took a long sip from his drink as he gazed at her appraisingly, his early disease with her gone. "He'll survive, I'm sure," he said finally. "And I accomplished my purpose." At this, he looked a trifle smug.

Instead of taking his bait, she lifted the tumbler to her nose and sniffed. It was scotch or whisky; she couldn't tell which and was fond of neither. Her father had tried to explain once, having her sample several brands of each and describing the alternating peaty or oak-matured flavors. By the sixth taste (and the "tastes" had gotten more generous each time), she was having trouble counting the bottles, let alone appreciating the nuances of grain alcohol matured in charred oak barrels. It wasn't until he pulled out and lit a long, pungent cigar that her mother had bustled in, putting a stop to the impromptu lesson and encouraging Hermione to drink several tall glasses of water and a tablet of B vitamins before tucking her into bed. Except for a strained bladder the next morning, she had woken feeling fine, if a bit groggy.

She took a small sip, rolling the sharp liquid across her tongue and grimacing as she swallowed. No, she still couldn't tell what it was, but its effect was rather warming. Severus was watching her expectantly, and she sighed, letting him off the hook. "And your purpose was..."

He smirked, preening a little as he steepled his fingers over his glass. "I know where our burglar will appear. Muggles notice much more than they realize."

"That seems awfully easy."

"This *is* The Nut and Berry Pub."

Blinking, she stared at him in slight bewilderment until the answer flashed into her mind.

'Oh,' she thought. '*Jam-filled doughnuts.*' Hermione answered his wicked grin with a slow smile of her own. She had always respected Snape's intelligence, even as she railed against his cruelty and unfairness. Her recent interactions with this younger Severus, as a peer and a friend, had been some of the more difficult and personally rewarding experiences of her adulthood. She doubted she would ever be able to think of Professor Snape and not remember him as a poorly adjusted, socially inept, but thoroughly engaging young man. Again, she wondered whom he had loved and wished she had been more persistent in getting the information out of Harry. Severus had never spoken of her, leading Hermione to believe that things had not gone well between them. Perhaps it was unrequited? But how could a woman in her right mind not take the time to get to know him?

Hermione paused a moment, an odd memory bubbling to the surface of her thoughts: a comment of his spoken during the fight in which she'd walked out on him. He had complimented *Lily Potter*. Miss Evans, he had called her. Perhaps he'd not complimented her outright, but had compared the woman to her, casting Lily in a favorable light. What could that mean? Snape's hatred for Harry's dad had been legendary, but he had never said anything against his mother. Could she be...? But no, it was ridiculous. There must have been someone else.

As horrible as it was that he had lost his love, Hermione couldn't help but feel *atad* envious of the woman who had so captured this man's heart.

Three hours later, as they sat side-by-side on a length of cardboard Transfigured into a cushion, Severus wondered if perhaps Heidi had jinxed them with her proclamation of ease. The cold from the stone building at their backs had long since seeped through his coat and jumper, chilling his skin and permeating his flesh. The stakeout had seemed like a good idea in the relative warmth of the bar, his belly coated in fiery drink and the bright eyes of a woman regarding him appreciatively. He'd felt invincible for a moment, as if he'd just downed a dose of Felix Felicis. The reality was that the summer night had quickly cooled, and a low mist prowled the street, settling in their hair and dampening their clothes. Not even reapplied Warming Charms could drive away the chill for long.

They were sitting in a shop's entrance, the backset door providing a private vantage point from which to watch the pawnshop across the street. Though their lookout was cloaked in inky-black shadows, they had Disillusioned themselves and cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm before settling down to wait.

Heidi was sitting uncomfortably close, attempting to absorb as much of his body heat as she could through the thick layers of their clothes. It would have been quite pleasant if he weren't piercingly aware of each breath, each tiny movement, and the very touch of her aura in the surging of his blood. The blame for this awareness, and his resulting discomfort, lay squarely on her shoulders.

Somehow, after she had awoken on his couch to recover from the potion slipped into her drink by Lucius, and during their evolution from reluctant business associates to amicable friends, he had forgotten that she was female. Yes, at the back of his mind, he had academically acknowledged that she was of the gender opposite his own, and a rather unconventionally pretty one at that. He had noted features of hers that had pleased him, sometimes fascinated him, but not in an overtly sexual manner. However, with one uncalculated (at least, he *assumed* it was uncalculated, because she just wasn't that subtle) move, the knowledge of her femininity had dropped from his brain straight down into the parts of him that were distinctly masculine.

She had stretched.

After dismounting her broom, she had fitted her hands into the small of her back and stretched, thrusting her breasts forward to press against the bodice of her dress, outlining tightly puckered nipples and baring the long, creamy column of her throat in a genetically programmed gesture of surrender. And then she had *groaned*.

Quite without his permission, his body had lit like an engine, warming and humming and chugging to life. His traitorous brain had then supplied a barrage of inappropriate impressions, combining images, sounds and scents that should have had nothing to do with Heidi, but most certainly *did*. Be that as it may, they were now indelibly scored onto the backs of his eyelids, brought to front and center by the merest flash of her eyes as she smiled at him. This condition had brought him to a low-grade state of panic, not only because it was completely and utterly out of his control, but because he *respected* Heidi, and such thoughts showed a serious disregard for her... and *forher*. For Lily.

She shifted against him, their shoulders lightly touching, and he fought against the compulsion to jump out of his skin. He was strung more tightly than piano wire, afraid that the slightest plucking would break him. He had hoped that the whiskey would have mellowed him, but it had only served to blur the line between admiration and idolatry, the possible and the ridiculous. For several bleary moments, when she had taken his arm after they had left the bar to walk to the pawnshop, he had entertained the fantasy that they were a contented couple on their way home from a quiet drink. Almost as soon as the fantasy had bloomed, he had squashed it under the heel of reality. The fact of the matter was that she was probably *not* Heidi of Canterbury; she had no idea of his true aims with the Starglass and wouldn't approve when she did; that a decent person like her would never consider a relationship with a reprobate like him; and that his heart wasn't even his own in the first place. It was impossible.

If only he could convince the rest of his body.

"Severus," Heidi said conversationally, breaking into his thoughts. She shifted again, shivering a little as she hugged her arms to her body. "How long do you plan to sit here?"

He moved to scoot away, then realized that he would be giving up the little warmth that had collected behind his back for unrelieved cold stone. Buzzer. "For as long as it takes."

"That's rather vague," she said as she hunched her shoulders and tucked her hands under her arms. Severus harrumphed and tried not to notice that her crossed arms were forcing her breasts to press against her Transfigured jacket. "What if he doesn't come tonight?"

"How do you know it's a he?" he asked, just to be argumentative.

She ignored him. "Are we just going to sit here in the cold?"

"It will get warmer after daybreak."

She jabbed him sharply in the ribs with her elbow and then attempted to give him the cold shoulder. Inevitably, for he had noticed that she rarely stayed silent for long unless she was absorbed in a book, she huffed, then began to speak again. "When I was younger, this kind of thing was a lot more fun. Now, my arse just hurts." Choking, he tried to smother the sudden noise in his arm sleeve without seeming too obviously shocked by what she had just said. "I'm sorry, but it does," she added with a small sniff. "Even with the cushion."

Since Heidi's backside was the last thing he wanted to think about, and therefore the first thing to wriggle through his mind's eye, he decided to address her earlier questions. As he did so, he wondered if she were perhaps more cunning than he had previously thought. "I have it on good authority," he smirked at her chastising scowl, "that certain *unusual* characters frequent this establishment at very odd hours. He'll want to unload his... merchandise... as quickly as he is able."

"We might have missed him already," Hermione pointed out.

Severus scowled at her. He wasn't used to having his plans questioned, let alone explaining them. "Then we'll get information out of the next bloke that drops by."

"So we might be here a couple of days." She pursed her lips, staring absently at the pawnshop door, unaffected by his forbidding expression. "We can sleep during the day, perhaps leave a proximity ward, like you have at the..."

"Yes."

"But we'll not want to be too far away," she added quickly. She seemed as reluctant to discuss the well as he was. He didn't want to be reminded of the ugly scene that had played out between them, nor dream again of her shocked eyes as she vanished into its depths. But to where had she disappeared?

He decided to change the subject again to something that had piqued his interest. "You used to stakeout pawnshops when you were a child? How very *illicit* of you."

Glaring at him, she raised her cupped hands to her mouth and blew into them. "*No*. Not *exactly*. And it was rarely my idea. *Usually* not. Well, *sometimes*." He raised a questioning eyebrow, knowing that she would be compelled to explain further by her rather strict moral code. "It always seemed necessary at the time, though looking back... but we meant well." Her eyes darkened with sorrow, and she stared up almost pleadingly. "I'm so sorry. Things could have gone differently..."

He was thoroughly confused. It was as if she were talking to someone else. His face must have reflected his bewilderment because her eyes widened and she flushed, glancing away and rubbing her hands together a bit too vigorously. Tiny tremors vibrated through his clothes, and he realized that she had begun to shiver in earnest.

Cringing inwardly, he supposed that he could share some of his warmth. He didn't want to drape his arm across her slender shoulders or feel her trim lines against his side. Well, to be honest, he *wished* he didn't want to hold her, which was an entirely different matter. But it wouldn't be as if he were *truly* holding her, because he was doing it for her own good. It would be a *considerate* gesture to protect her from the cold. She would appreciate his thoughtfulness and consider herself in his debt. Yes, this was *strategic positioning*, not cuddling.

Motives firmly rationalized into the shape he desired them, he Transfigured his coat back into a cloak and pulled open the edges, wrapping his left arm around her shoulders and enveloping both of them in warmth. She stiffened momentarily, shooting him a surprised glance, then huddled against his side, humming gratefully. She was, indeed, shivering; he allowed himself to draw her close against him. With the mental dexterity that would serve him well for a twenty-year stint as a spy, he convinced himself that the warmth that suffused his limbs was from body heat alone.

Dawn broke, peachy and pale, and sent tiny tendrils of light over the roofline of the buildings. Ensnared in warmth, Hermione twitched and gasped, jerking out of a disturbing dream. A blurred, soft-focus swirl of disjointed images and sensations had crept into her sleep that was usually heavy and dreamless. Hands had worshipped her reverently, the palms smooth and slightly damp, instead of with the calloused energy with which she was familiar. She had run her fingers through hair: fine, straight and slick at the roots. They had both been whispering... something, as they had twined together, seeming to defy most laws of physics in an acrobatic tumble through buoyant space, velvet gray and redolent with aroma of *man*. Her partner had been pale, tactile smoke with nimble fingers. Her own hands had traced ridges and valleys of anatomy she could not name. She remembered being suffused with a tender sorrow and deep joy, but could explain neither. Even as the last wisps of the dream faded, she kept her eyes closed and clung to her dream lover, searching vainly for distinct blue eyes or an impression of red hair. That she couldn't find any sent a frisson of embarrassment and abating arousal down her spine.

Ron had been her first and, due to their long-lasting relationship, her only. Sex was comfortable, if routine, and she considered herself content. It made Ron happy, and she usually enjoyed herself, so she took their frequent (except for her last trip back to the future) couplings in stride. She was absolutely positive that *no one* had sex as it was written in romance novels. This dream had been so unlike any of their encounters that she knew it wasn't some half-remembered night that her mind had dredged up to taunt her. She only knew that she wanted to sink back into sleep and continue on where they had left off, no matter that she was wrapped in Ron's arms and dreaming of another.

She had another war with her conscience and decided to let the last dregs of the dream wash away. It wasn't fair to Ron. Opening her eyes and inhaling deeply, she realized two important things at the same time. The first was that the man in whose arms she slept was *not* Ron and that the slightly pungent masculine scent that had played a rather heady part in her dream was still strong in her nostrils. Startled, she attempted to push out of the iron bars of his arms, but he made a hissed, quelling sound between his teeth, and she immediately stilled. Immensely glad that his attention was elsewhere, namely the door of the pawnshop, and therefore couldn't see her embarrassed flush, she followed his line of sight.

A man in a long, brown, shabby coat was striding up the sidewalk toward the store. His head was lowered and hunched between the upturned collars of his coat, the only

thing visible a thatch of poorly trimmed brown hair and the tip of his nose; his hands were thrust deeply in his pockets. Despite the quickness of his stride, his worn leather boots made no sound on the pavement. Hermione forgot her dream in favor of staring intently at the man, trying to figure out where she had seen him before. The answer came to her as Severus rose silently to his feet, a shimmering haze against the stonework of the building.

It couldn't be, though, could it? Maybe she was mistaken. He would never stoop to...

By the time Hermione had decided that an unemployed, ostracized werewolf, no matter how good he was, might have to take desperate measures in desperate times, the blur that was a Disillusioned Severus was halfway across the street. She had little doubt that his wand was in his hand. Clambering stiffly to her feet and unwilling to acknowledge how much she missed his warmth and smell, she rushed after him.

The man froze mid-step and then spun to face the street, his eyes wide and his nose raised as if scenting the wind, but his body slightly crouched. Gasping, Hermione's doubts as to the man's identity were laid to rest: there was no mistaking Remus Lupin. His face drawn and pinched with misery, he looked far older than he should have.

Hermione hadn't seen him draw his wand, but recognized the flare of a Protection Charm as it rebounded the red streak of a Stunner.

"No, Severus!" she shouted as her friend's Disillusionment wavered and dropped, and her own spell dribble off her like viscous ice water. His face was twisted with loathing, and his black eyes shone with a righteous hatred.

"Stay back, Heidi. It's that wretched beast from Hogsmeade." He threw his left arm out to the side in a protective gesture meant to keep her out of the fray and slashed the air with his wand. Again, Lupin blocked, glancing between them with a frantic, bewildered expression. Ducking under Severus' arm, Hermione darted between the dueling wizards.

"Stop this!"

Unfortunately, she hadn't counted on years of pent up hostility and rampant testosterone to override the mental faculties of two very bright men. Lupin's Expelliarmus took her by as much surprise as it did him when her wand flew into his left hand. She didn't even have time to brace herself before Severus' Sectumsempra gouged a deep slice into her shoulder. Both men looked comically horrified an instant later, and Hermione would have laughed if her right shoulder didn't hurt so terribly.

Lupin dropped both wands he was holding and took a shaky step backward, his hands clutching at his hair. Eyes round and wild, he stared at the shallow pool of blood that was beginning to collect under Hermione's fingertips. Severus had paled to the color of bleached parchment and worked his mouth soundlessly for several long moments until Hermione could no longer smother her groan of pain. It felt as if her shoulder and forearm had been flayed to the bone, and she considered it a distinct possibility if she remembered this curse correctly.

"Well, don't just stand there," she snapped through rapidly numbing lips as she tried to hold the edges of the wound closed. "Fix it!"

That seemed to break them out of their daze because both rushed forward. Severus reached her first, for which she was quite grateful, as standing was beginning to get difficult.

"Why did you *do* that?" Severus raged at her, even as he wrapped an arm around her waist and eased her to the curb. "I *told* you to stay back, you stupid, stupid..." He suddenly leaned over her and pointed his wand at Lupin, hissing, "Back off, Lupin. This is your fault."

"My fault? It was *your* hex!" Lupin replied shakily, still running his hands through his hair and looking deeply guilty.

"It was *my* fault for stepping in the middle of a duel," Hermione ground between clenched teeth and tried to ignore the feather-light caress of the back of Severus' hand against her breast as he carefully tore away her arm sleeve.

"Which begs the question..." Severus all but growled. His black eyes flicked to her face, and she was startled to see as much panic simmering in their depths that Lupin outwardly displayed. The next moment, he was trailing the tip of his wand over the gash, singing the counter curse.

Hermione bit her bottom lip, trying to decide what to do. She couldn't have allowed Severus to hex Lupin, even if he had had to result to theft to support himself. Neither of them would understand why she would even care, and if they were to find out, she would have more issues to deal with than a missing magical artifact. Both men were staring at her expectantly, waiting for her to satisfy their curiosity. She settled on a diversionary tactic. "I take it you two know each other."

They both looked startled, glancing at each other with mutual dislike, but it was Lupin who answered. "We went to Hogwarts together. Same year."

"You don't seem very friendly," she said, stating the obvious as she tried to figure out how to get the Starglass from Lupin, and at the same time, keep him from harm.

Severus sneered after running his thumb down the long, fading line that stretched from the top of her shoulder to the middle of her lower arm. A trail of goose bumps followed, tempting him to smooth them. Folly lay down that path, and he had an important matter that required his attention. Casting a *Reparo* on her sleeve, he said, "Lupin and his friends found their entertainment by ganging up on solitary students. Now," he said as he stood to his full height, which was unfortunately even with Lupin, and pointed his wand at his chest, "you will return what you stole from us."

A/N: Did you see? *The Devil is in the Details* got February Featured Story on The Petulant Poetess! I did a happy dance when I got the email.

Oh! And house points to the TPP readers/reviewers for being the first group to top 100 reviews! That kind of thing also makes me very happy.

I've also finished writing this fic. I'm in the review and edit stage, which I must admit is not much fun. At least you can rest assured that I will not leave you hanging with a WIP.

Tea for Three

Chapter 11 of 20

In which Lupin is grilled.

Hermione had once heard insanity defined as, "performing the same actions over and over again while expecting different results." If she remembered correctly, it had been Ginny describing another one of Ron's run-ins with too much Firewhisky. No matter how spectacularly sick he got after a drinking game with the boys, he still accepted the next invitation with unrestrained enthusiasm and ended up wondering why he was purging his stomach in the wee hours of the next morning. Hermione liked to think that she learned from her mistakes, so when Severus and Lupin again squared off again, she remained safely seated on the ground and out of the line of fire. She didn't, however, curb her tongue.

"Severus, for Merlin's sake..."

Lupin interrupted her. "I never stole anything!"

"Liar!"

"Severus!" Hermione dragged herself over to where her wand had fallen and snatched it off the sidewalk, but remained seated on the concrete. Still a bit woozy from shock and blood loss, she nevertheless noticed that Lupin's wand was lying on the sidewalk several paces away from him. "He's not even armed!"

"Heidi, *he is a werewolf!*" Severus spat, his wand point never wavering from Lupin's heart.

"Yes, you've mentioned that. So what?" Hermione asked, thoroughly exasperated. She'd never really understood what the big deal was, even in school. He'd been an excellent teacher, a valuable member of the Order, a loving husband, and she was certain that he would have been a devoted father, if given a chance. A bubble of grief suddenly burst in her chest as an unbidden memory of him rose in her mind: Lupin lying side by side in the Great Hall of Hogwarts with Tonks, his wife, both peaceful in death. It was so easy to become wrapped up in the past and to forget that neither of these men would survive that day.

She could feel their eyes on the top of her head as she stared at the stone gully. Now was not the time to indulge in a good cry, no matter how insistently the tears pricked at the backs of her eyes. When she glanced up, Severus was staring at her with furious incredulity, and Lupin was gazing at her in wonderment.

"It was you..." the werewolf whispered softly, his eyes wandering her face almost adoringly. "You tried to stop them..."

"Shut up!" Severus shrieked at him, small drops of spit flying from his lips. His face was twisted, and his eyes were fierce and narrow. "He *stole* the..." He cut himself off and stood stock still for a moment, panting slightly as he visibly tried to reign in his temper. "He is a thief and a dangerous beast."

Disregarding Severus' trained wand, Lupin dropped to his hands and knees in a fluid, graceful motion and stared earnestly into Hermione's eyes.

"I swear to you, I didn't steal anything! I just move new items from one location to the other. But I might know..."

"*Liar!* Get away from her!" Severus screamed, his voice cracking, and before Hermione could react, Lupin was hit squarely in the chest by a jet of red light. Arms splayed wide, he flew backward across the sidewalk and landed with a thump against the side of the pawnshop. Bonelessly, he slid down the wall into a crumpled heap of ragged, brown coat.

"*No!*" Hermione climbed unsteadily to her feet and staggered over to the fallen man. The street tilted under her feet, and gray lights were beginning to dance at the edges of her vision. 'Lost too much blood,' she thought absently as her fingertips finally found the cold, stone wall of the pawnshop. She stood there for a long moment wondering if she sat back down, would she be able to get back up again under her own power? "Best not to chance it," she muttered under her breath. Louder, she said accusingly, "He looks unconscious."

"Good."

"You're being unreasonable. He's our only lead..."

"You mean he is our *culprit*," he said nastily as he approached them, wand still drawn and trained on Lupin's inert form. "We'll turn him over to the Aurors and let the Dementors drag the information out of him."

"We'll do no such thing."

"You'd rather get the information out of him yourself?" he asked, giving her a calculating, surprised look.

Even in her lightheaded state, Hermione could read torture between his words, but the connection between lucid thought and her mouth was beginning to shut down. "Yes! I mean, no. Not that way. But I'm sure if we just talked to him..." she trailed off and tried to blink away the spots that were encroaching on her vision. The stone building was cold against her shoulder, but she gave it all of her weight. "He's not a bad man..."

"You are insane, woman! He's a murderous beast... Heidi?"

The ground was getting inexorably closer, and Hermione watched it with distracted fascination. She registered that Severus was calling her name, but it didn't occur to her to respond. The ground was getting closer. Amazing.

And then it wasn't; a strong arm under her breasts stopped her descent. She blinked lazily as she was tilted backward against something hard but remarkably unlike stone. Severus. He did smell good. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but a foul concoction washed over her tongue and down her throat, and she swallowed reflexively, coughing at the taste. More followed, and the terrible taste and her insistent coughing chased away the light-headedness.

"Gods, that's *awful*," she panted, leaning her weight against the man behind her and shuddering. They were still standing, astonishingly enough, though if he had let go earlier, then she would surely have fallen. Tentatively, she tested putting her weight on her feet and found them steady enough, though the warmth against her back was profoundly comforting. She let herself indulge for a moment, breathing him in. 'Merlin, I almost told him he smelled good. How embarrassing.'

Abashed, she pulled away and began tugging at her clothes, straightening them in fidgeting movements. This was bad. Disastrous. She recognized these signs from the beginnings of her crush on Ron: the comforting touches, the awareness of his body, the watering of her mouth when she inhaled his scent. But this was *not happening* because it *could not* happen. She had a long-term relationship, Severus was dead, and she was the mistress of her own heart and destiny. These feelings were all the result of closely working together; sexual tension, it was called. Happened all the time and was as fleeting as it was fickle.

The small rush of adrenaline that had accompanied her quiet panic had helped clear the last of the cobwebs from her brain. Wrapping her arms around her chest, she smiled up at him, pushing everything but her gratitude the to back of her mind. "Thank you. Do you usually have Blood-Replenishing Potion on hand?"

His arms were similarly crossed, as if shielding himself from attack. He nodded, his eyes glittering from behind a curtain of greasy hair. He'd lost his hair ribbon, she suddenly noticed, and he was in sore need of a shampooing.

"Lucky for me," she said, feeling awkward. Dropping her gaze to the werewolf, she wondered where to go from here. She believed that he hadn't stolen it; she might be too trusting in general, but Lupin just wasn't the type to commit robbery. However, if he was running goods, then he might know who had the Starglass. He might have even delivered it himself. It was altogether possible that they had already missed the thief.

The trickiest part of the whole affair would be to not alienate Severus. Resentment and loathing radiated from his body and crackled along the roots of her hair. Though the enmity between Snape and Lupin had never been as vitriolic as that between he and Sirius Black, the two men had never been friends, and Snape had seen to it that Lupin had lost his position as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at the end of her third year. She assumed that showing too much sympathy for the werewolf would be

perceived as a betrayal. For all that he was as prickly as a defensive porcupine, he had a soft, tender underbelly that was easily damaged. If anyone had "Handle Carefully" stamped across his forehead, it was Severus Snape.

She pursed her lips and then tested the water. "I think we should find out what he knows before we do anything like hand him to the authorities. You can," she swallowed against the horrid taste that this suggestion left in her mouth, "you can, erm, pull the information from his mind. If he's uncooperative," she finished in a rush. "I'm sure he won't be."

Severus snorted in disgust, but he didn't hex anyone, so Hermione counted that as a victory. She felt slightly less victorious when he said, "I'll see that he isn't."

Hermione sipped from her mug of poorly brewed tea and grimaced at the bitterness, setting it back down on the chipped Formica table in front of her. Just the fact that they were drinking tea in relatively civilized accommodations and not applying Unforgivables (or whatever had lit that dark light behind Severus' eyes) to Lupin in a dark alley had been a delicate bit of diplomacy and negotiation.

Their conversation had been quick and whispered, Lupin floating Disillusioned and still unconscious behind them. Severus had been ready to steer them into the darker shadows of a narrow alley, but Hermione had been adamant: she *needed* a cup of tea. She was cold. She was still feeling woozy (and she was not above playing up her disability for the greater good). She was *absolutely positive* that everyone would behave if they went someplace public and talked it over. Two promises had then been extracted from her: that she would let him do all the talking, and if that didn't work, then they would do it *his* way. It was as much as she could have hoped for, so she had capitulated with good grace, except for the first issue.

"I had assumed you'd be doing *most* of the talking, since you are the Legilimens. But I want to..."

"I'm not entering that beast's mind. We will use Veritaserum to get the information we need."

"That is a *Ministry controlled substance!* Where would we get any?"

Severus had given her a condescending smirk and patted the pocket from which he'd produced the Blood-Replenishing Potion.

Hermione had then wondered what *else* he carried under his robes, leading her trail of thought down thoroughly inappropriate paths, and she hadn't asked for the sake of her own sanity. His next comment had distracted her, for which she was grateful and then rather annoyed.

"You *will not talk* during that creature's interrogation. I mean it, Heidi."

"Until you're done questioning him."

"Until I deem it safe."

She couldn't have told him that she knew Lupin, and that he was a gentle, caring werewolf who wouldn't hurt anyone unless he had forgotten to take his Wolfsbane Potion. She had also remembered that Severus had good reason to be wary of this particular werewolf, having almost been killed by him only a few years prior. Therefore, she once again had given her acceptance of his terms, albeit with much less grace than earlier. Hermione was a woman who understood her limitations, and not talking to Lupin would be a serious challenge. By Severus' heavily lidded eyes and pleased smirk, she was sure that he knew it.

So it was that Remus Lupin had been un-Disillusioned, Rennervated and hustled into a tiny diner harshly lit with florescent lamps and redolent with the scent of hot grease and burnt coffee. The tables were Formica squares of pink with yellow flecks and had obviously seen better days, sporting burns, chips and the occasionally gouged phrase. The chairs had apparently been purchased without the diner's current décor in mind: each was upholstered in red plastic. Strips of dingy white paint were peeling from the otherwise undecorated walls, and a woman of indeterminate age with stiff, bleach blonde hair, too much makeup and an apron tied around her waist was leaning against the counter sipping from a mug of something. She had nodded familiarly to Lupin as they had taken a table at the back of the diner. Severus had corralled Hermione into the chair closest to the wall and then had sat next to her, drawing his wand under the table and pointing it at Lupin, who had sat across from them.

Hermione wrapped her hands around the mug and sighed quietly in pleasure. The tea may have been terrible, but at least the cup was warm. Next to her, Severus was pulling a small vial, which she assumed to be Veritaserum, out of a hidden pocket in his overcoat, his hard, black eyes fixed unblinkingly on Lupin. The werewolf simply sat docilely in his seat, alternating between staring vacantly at the mug of tea in front of him and shooting Hermione covert, wistful glances. From the ramrod straightness of Severus' back and the clenched muscles of his jaw, she could tell that he'd noticed.

Severus had, indeed, noticed the looks that the beast was sending Heidi's way and was wondering if Heidi would be very upset if he took the initiative to pluck those roving eyes out of his many head. Probably, because she was a good person, and her opinion of him mattered. It shouldn't, but it did, and it was a disturbing feeling because, of the few he counted friends, it was hers that was becoming the most important. Scary thought, that. He wondered if she had any clue.

That damn werewolf was looking at her again... and *she* was looking at *him*... so, gritting his teeth, Severus jerked the vial free of his robes and grabbed the beast's tea. Both the beast and Heidi startled, fixing their attention on the tea in his hands. Very deliberately, he added three drops from the tiny vial of clear liquid, then slid the mug back across the table.

Lupin turned earnest eyes onto Heidi and said, "This really isn't necessary..."

"Drink it," Severus hissed, cutting him off. Heidi was shifting at his side, surely bursting with chastisements, but she remained quiet, as she had promised. He missed the apologetic look she shot Lupin; if he hadn't, then he would have been much less smug when, without further ado, the werewolf lifted the drugged tea to his lips and took a long swallow. It only took a moment for Lupin's eyes to acquire a blank, glassy sheen and his face to go lax. Propping his elbows on the table and steeping his fingers, Severus regarded the werewolf through hanks of oily, black hair.

"State your name," he said flatly, warming up with the typical opener.

"Remus John Lupin." His response was as level and monotonic as Severus' question had been.

"State your occupation."

"Merchandise runner."

That hadn't been what Severus was expecting; he thought "unemployed" or "thief" would have been the answer. However, he could taste the truth on Lupin breath and moved onto the next question, delving into the meat of his purpose.

"Did you commit robbery on August the 22nd, 1982?"

"No."

Severus frowned. "Did you assist in a robbery perpetrated on August the 22nd, 1982?"

"No."

Bugger. This was not what he wanted to hear. As much as Heidi's esteem for him was important, so was her scorn for the werewolf. So far, she hadn't shown anything but sympathy for the bleeding creature. In fact, she was smiling at Lupin, obviously pleased that he wasn't the one to steal from her.

"Do you associate with thieves or their assistants?"

"No."

Severus dropped his hands to the table with a loud smack, leaning forward and scowling into Lupin's unresponsive face. Heidi gasped at his side. "Then what were you doing at that pawnshop?"

"Picking up a shipment of goods."

"What kind of goods?" he growled lowly. Heidi jostled his foot, and he glanced at her in irritation. Frowning, she jerked her head at the woman still leaning against the counter, who was watching them with undisguised interest. Severus leaned back into his seat and resumed his former pose of propped elbows and steepled fingers.

"Jewelry, wands, brooms, clothing, magical artifacts, books..."

"Stop, that's enough." Severus was silent a moment. "Does your employer associate with thieves or their assistants?"

"Yes."

Severus hissed with triumph, his eyes gleaming behind his hair. He felt Heidi stiffen next to him, inhaling in a rush of breathy expectancy. "Did you pick up a shipment of goods the night of August the 22nd, 1982?"

"Yes."

Nearly twitching in excitement, Severus asked very clearly and precisely, "Did that shipment contain a small, faceted crystal phial filled with fine, gray dust?"

"Yes."

Heidi wrapped her fingers around his bicep and seemed to be bouncing in her seat. He flashed her a quick smile before asking the next question. "To where did you deliver it?"

"I cannot say."

"What?" The word exploded out of him, and Heidi sagged against his side.

"I cannot say."

"Then you've little use for that tongue..." A tugging on his arm dragged his attention from the vacant-eyed werewolf to the woman at his side. She was gazing up at him intently, her eyes wide and only inches from his face. Pursing her lips, she held up two fingers pointing to his eyes and then gestured to her own. He blinked at her, bewildered, then remembered the promise of silence that he'd extracted from her. Touched that she would hold to it when she so obviously wanted to tell him something, he concentrated on figuring out what she meant.

She gestured again, from his eyes to hers, and blinked determinedly. In sudden understanding, his face pinched into a frown. "I'm not entering that beast's mind. If he can't tell us under Veritaserum, then I won't be able to pull it out of his thoughts, either." She shook her head and made the gesture again, pointing definitively at her eyes. "Oh," he said, shocked beyond words.

She was inviting him to enter her mind.

Since he had learned the arts of Legilimency and Occlumency, he had often performed Legilimency on subjects unwilling and unknowing and had, once or twice, encountered willing participants, but *none* had initiated it. Her doing so was an expression of trust that took his breath away and sent his heart beating frantically in his throat. "You want me to perform Legilimency on you?" he asked, needing her to confirm, unequivocally, that his suspicion was accurate. He supposed that he could simply give her permission to speak, but this gift she was willing to give him was too precious to waste. When she nodded emphatically, he released a breath that he had trapped unknowingly in his lungs.

"Legilimens," he murmured quietly, staring into her wide, honeyed eyes and slipping into only the most shallow of her surface thoughts. To go any deeper would be a betrayal of her trust, and even the promise of access to her secrets, her true identity, was not even enough to tempt him. Well, perhaps a little, but he resisted with surprising ease.

The message that she wanted to communicate floated unexpectedly clearly at the forefront of her mind: "*He could show us where it is.*"

Of course she was right. Sheepishly, he withdrew from her thoughts, blinking down into her upturned face. She was smiling brilliantly at him, aware that he'd understood what she had wanted to convey. His eyes traveled to the curve of her lips, which were reddened and slightly chapped from their night in the cold. They parted slightly, as if she meant to speak, then pursed closed, relaxing into a wrier smile than before. He leaned slightly forward without realizing it and then jumped at the sound of a mug clattering against Formica and Heidi's yelp of surprise as she dived for the napkin dispenser.

"Sorry, sorry!" Lupin said as he dropped napkins on the quickly spreading puddle of tea. Turning to glare at him, Severus saw that the werewolf had surfaced out of his Veritaserum-induced stupor and had managed to spill his tea. As he and Heidi mopped up the tea, Lupin shot him looks akin to horror. Severus sneered back, hiding both his relief and disappointment for the interruption.

'What was I thinking?' Severus thought as the images of her lips rose in his imagination. He didn't know, and it was deeply unsettling. If he analyzed it for a moment, he could probably figure it out, but he had a feeling that it would be even more disturbing than not knowing. He pushed it away and turned to the matter at hand.

Once the tea crisis had been averted, soggy napkins piled neatly at the edge of the table, Severus fixed the werewolf with a heavy scowl. "You'll take us to where you delivered the phial."

Lupin frowned and leaned backward in his chair, glancing at Heidi before settling his gaze on him. "I'll take *her*." He jutted his chin toward Heidi, who was smiling softly at him. "It belongs to her, doesn't it? You'd have handled this differently if it were yours."

The last couple of sentences were lost as Severus focused on the beast's first statement, and the irrational rage that always seemed to accompany dealing with the Marauders began to boil away his reason. Face twisting into a rictus of anger, he hissed, "You'll do no such bloody thing...!"

A firm kick to his shin under the table knocked him back to his senses, though the anger was just as potent. "You'll take us both," he ground between clenched teeth. He could see Heidi nodding earnestly out of the corner of his eyes and Lupin's stance relaxing as he stared at her, stupid as a moon-struck calf. He wanted to punch that trite expression right through the other man's face and watch it burst out the back of his head.

"Very well," Lupin said quietly, still gazing at Heidi. Leaning forward, he directed his next statement to her alone. "I'll take you both. But I'm doing it for *you*."

A/N: Did you really think that Lupin stole it? Naw...

Mediation at its Finest

Chapter 12 of 20

Lupin joins the hunt, and Hermione's patience is tried.

Hermione had always been under the impression that few could sulk more moodily than Ron Weasley. It hadn't taken much: a lost Quidditch bet or getting trounced at Auror training, and he would meld with the sofa cushions and drink tepid tea, staring at the ceiling as if he expected some gross insult from above. Hermione usually made herself scarce lest he pull her down into his spiral of dejection or she smack him upside the head (and increase the length of his sulk by a factor of four). It should have been no surprise that Severus had him beat, hands down. He seemed to darken the very air around him with gloom, despite the obstinately cheery sunshine that morning had delivered. Even the watery smudge that distinguished his Disillusioned form had a hint of pollution. She was sure that if he were presented with a sofa and tea, Severus would throw the tea against the wall and light the sofa on fire.

Once it had been decided that Lupin would guide them to the warehouse and that they would fly by broomstick, Severus had descended into a silence so churlish that Hermione had been uncomfortably reminded of Ron and Harry's fight during the lead-up to the first task of the Triwizard Tournament in their fourth year. She had been relegated as go-between while the two had refused to talk to each other. She supposed that she should be grateful that Severus seemed disinclined to speak to either Lupin or her while in this foul mood. Her request of Severus to be allowed to speak again after Lupin's interrogation had been met with a caustic comment on her inability to keep her "prattling mouth shut", which she chose to interpret as agreement. Oh, how she had wanted to slap him.

Severus' behavior irked her to no end. Though it had been difficult, she had made an effort to not show Lupin too much sympathy, simply to spare Severus' feelings and to avoid the territorial behavior she had seen him display before. It didn't seem to be helping the matter, though neither did Lupin's deferential manner toward her and tendency to exclude Severus from any conversation that didn't include insults. The fact was that Lupin didn't *have* to help them, and she would have thought that Severus would have made an effort to be civil to the person who would assist them in finding the Starglass. At the moment, he was patently unwilling. She didn't blame him for his attitude toward Lupin, considering their history, but it was making her morning trying indeed.

The fact that she was now going to spend what might constitute a significant amount of time with another person who would know her as a child was also making her nervous. She wracked her memories of Lupin and, for good measure, Snape, for any indication that they might have recognized her. She found none, but that meant nothing in a fluid, changeable timeline. She could only hope that twenty years would blur the contours of her face into relative obscurity in the minds of these men. That and guard the secret of her identity and origins to her dying breath.

Invisible and with charms to muffle the sounds of their footsteps, they followed Lupin at a discreet distance back to the pawnshop. He had explained (mostly to her, trying to ignore Severus as much as possible) that he had to pick up his next shipment to know where to deliver it; that was how it worked. Neither Portkey nor Apparition could access the site, and Runners chose their own method of transit. Usually, Lupin took the train, being able to blend seamlessly into both the wizarding and Muggle worlds. And, it was fairly inexpensive.

Lupin disappeared into the shop for no more than a quarter of an hour and came out bearing a plain, brown leather satchel. With a quick glance up and down the street, he walked briskly down the block and into the alley where he had suggested they meet. As he had described, the buildings framing it were taller than any others on the block, and it did not open onto the next street, providing them protection from prying eyes during their preparation and takeoff.

'Shite,' Hermione cursed silently. She fervently hoped that Lupin had a broomstick hidden about his person. Severus only had the two.

Severus and Hermione sidled into the alleyway behind him like specters, resembling nothing so much as columns of heat radiance. Hermione trailed behind by a couple of steps, alternately seething at Severus and lamenting the easy camaraderie that they had lost. Only hours ago, they had walked this street arm in arm. Now, the man exuded toxic radiation like nuclear fallout, and his inattention hurt.

Glaring through what she thought was Severus' head when she wasn't stepping around piles of rubbish, she followed both men around a sharp turn in the alley where it had become a tee intersection at a third building. A tall, wooden fence that had seen better days barred the left branch. Spray-painted graffiti coated the wood in intricate, tangling chaos and sections of the bottom slats had been broken. To the right, the branch down which Lupin led them, the alley stretched between the two buildings before ending at a heavy, iron door.

Out of sight of the street, Lupin turned and searched the empty air expectantly. Hermione released the Disillusionment spell and was instantly graced with a warm smile. There was a disgusted snort beside her as Severus reappeared, arms crossed defensively across his chest. Lupin's eyes flicked between them, and Hermione could practically read the question in his eyes, though he was too polite to ask it out loud. Yet. In front of Severus.

'Probably the latter.' Hermione sighed and decided to study the alley, hoping to discourage the question that any adversary of the Potions master would ask sooner or later: what was she doing with Severus Snape? Besides the obvious, trying to retrieve stolen property, she still didn't know what he had planned or her role in it. She had yet to glean that information from him and had allowed herself to be uncharacteristically distracted by other things. She sincerely hoped that whatever it was that he had planned for the Starglass would not impinge on her principles any more than her attraction to the man, let alone the entire exploit, had done already. She wondered if he'd noticed her... she hated to call it an infatuation, but crush seemed so juvenile. Regard. Her *regard* for him, as it stemmed from respect and admiration for his noble deeds, past and future, and from her genuine appreciation for his character. She was glad to have *that* sorted out.

Sneaking a glance at his rigid posture and consummate glower directed at their new traveling companion, she had decided that he probably hadn't noticed. If he had, then he would be more inclined to gloat, even if he didn't return the sentiment. And he probably didn't. She sighed again. Just as well, really.

Still glaring suspiciously at Lupin, Severus withdrew his wand from his sleeve. Both Lupin and Hermione instinctively cringed, Lupin for a hex and Hermione to break up another fight, but the dark wizard simply tapped his own shoulder and spoke the incantation out loud to revert his clothes back to their original form. She couldn't help but stare a moment, indulging in a gander at the grandly dressed wizard in silver silks and black velvet, even if his hair was mussed and oily. He did cut an impressive figure. She followed suit, transfiguring her Muggle slacks, blouse and jacket into the blue robes she had worn to Malfoy Manor. When she was finished, Severus pressed a broom, once again full-sized, into her hands.

He looked disdainfully down his nose at Lupin, which was a feat since both men were approximately of the same height. "Well?" he drawled, and Hermione wanted to groan.

Lupin did not have a broom, which he confirmed with his next sentence.

"I assumed you had a spare since you were the one who insisted on flying." An embarrassed flush was beginning to stain the werewolf's cheeks.

"I do not make it a habit to carry extra brooms on the off-chance that miscreant freeloaders might need a ride."

"Then why the bloody hell did you demand that we fly?" Lupin asked, exasperated and mortified, which Hermione suspected was Severus' plan all along.

"It's fine, Severus. He can share my broom," Hermione interrupted before Severus could lash him again with his barbed tongue.

He rounded on her, and for a brief instant, he was all terrifying Potions master with suspicious, black eyes and a week of detentions backing up behind his teeth. Then, he drew himself up, fixing her with a shrewd, calculating eye. "Eager to sit behind him? Or, perhaps, in front?"

"What? No!" Hermione denied what he had been implying more than the words themselves.

Severus' smile did not reach his eyes, which glinted darkly as he glanced at the brooding werewolf. "Of course not. Who would?"

"Severus!" Hermione gasped, appalled at the purposefully brutal words. "What is he playing at?" Hermione thought frantically, wondering how to salvage this situation. With Severus at his most defensive, and therefore cruel, and the ghost of years of adolescent torment biting at the pair's heels, Hermione wasn't sure that they would make it to their destination without serious bloodshed. Their track record so far this morning hadn't been what one would call stellar.

"Better an unwilling beast than a willing Death Eater," Lupin said quietly, glancing between her and his opponent.

Severus didn't look pleased to be outed. His face stilled and paled, eyes narrowing to slits hidden by long, black lashes. The knuckles of his wand hand whitened, and the air around his body became almost stifling with static electricity.

Of course, Hermione had already known, but Severus didn't *know* she'd known, and she hadn't felt the need to share. It was his own business, and he'd more than made up for it during his years of spying and sacrifice for the Order of the Phoenix. That didn't mean she didn't have a question or thirty about his motives, but she hadn't really wanted to ask. She wasn't sure that she'd like the answers. Neither did she appreciate Lupin's inclination to continue the argument by pulling Severus' skeletons from the closet, though she supposed he was owed a dig or two. And Lupin did have a point.

Deciding that the best way to deal with the five-ton elephant parading through the conversation in a silver mask and black robes was to pretend it didn't exist, she said reasonably, "There are two brooms and three people." Both men flinched and looked at her with varying degrees of incredulity. She fought against the wholly inappropriate grin that tried to claim her mouth. If these men thought that they could turn her against the other by airing each other's dirty laundry, then they had another thing coming. Not that she doubted they'd stop trying. "Two of us will have to share."

"I don't mind sharing a broom with you," Lupin said politely, but his implication was clear that he *would* mind sharing with Severus.

Severus' outburst was anything but polite. "That cur will *not* share your bloody broom! He can ride it himself!"

"Severus..."

"You will ride with *me*."

"Alright," she agreed amicably in the face of his fury. It had the effect of a bucket of water on a campfire, dousing his anger and leaving him impotent. Oh, damn, she *would* have to think that kind of word. And blush about it.

At least it stopped the argument cold, and without further ado, she handed her broomstick to Lupin, who seemed to have contracted the sulks from Severus. With a bit of fussing with her robes to make sure they kept her legs covered and an idle thought that going commando might solve the issue with her underwear, she was ready to mount behind Severus. Placing steadying hands on his shoulders and trying not to remember how much she liked their breadth, she settled herself against his back and wished that broomsticks had passenger handles like Muggle motorcycles. As it was, she grasped handfuls of his cloak and robes at his sides.

The abrupt launch and acceleration was much swifter than Hermione would have preferred, and she didn't blame herself for relinquishing her hold on his robes to wrap her arms around his chest and lock her hands together. The fact that he was keeping her warm, solving one of her main complaints about broom travel, and that his unique brand of male muskiness was rapidly becoming her favorite scent, made the ride more pleasant than any other she could remember, even if they were traveling at a speed that she wouldn't normally have attempted by herself.

She wondered what it said about her relationship with Ron that she could be so easily and thoroughly distracted by another man. She really didn't want to think about that, but found that it was the only thought now circling her mind.

For his part, Severus also had a number of things going through his head that he didn't want to think about. He could only assume that he was the worst kind of masochist for placing Heidi behind him. Her thighs cradled his hips and legs; her breasts pressed against his back; her breath tickled the fine hairs at the back of his neck. It was torment knowing that though he was in danger of melting on the inside due to her sheer proximity, he would in no way be able to act on his instincts and that he had put himself in this position in the first place. One thing was for certain: if she were going to ride double on a broomstick, it would be with *him*, no matter how sweetly miserable it made him.

This flight was much shorter than the previous one, lasting no more than an hour and a half. Decelerating to circle high above a small village, Lupin nodded purposefully at it, then pointed to a dense copse of trees demarcating its border. A thin, shining ribbon of water arched gently on the other side of the village, and Severus could just make out an archaic stone bridge connecting what appeared to be the main street of the village to the lane leading away through neatly squared pastures. Heidi was humming her appreciation against his back, tempting him to think of strolls they might have taken through those pastures and moments stolen at the apex of that bridge, if only they had been different people. Not that he particularly liked nature; it was better pickled and jarred or finely shredded and added to potions, but Heidi seemed to like it well enough. He might brave a few bug bites and rocks in his shoes if there were something in it for him.

And that was one of the many problems, wasn't it? He was inherently selfish and self-serving (and Dumbledore didn't hesitate to remind him of that), whereas she, while bossy, was altruistic and forgiving. The Death Eaters would have never been able to recruit Heidi.

He could kill that blasted werewolf for mentioning that sordid morsel of his past. The berk *knew* that he had changed sides and spied for the Order of the Phoenix. He had paid for the mistake of joining the Dark Lord with more than blood and would never stop paying. It had been a cowardly, underhanded attempt to turn Heidi against him and entirely different from him pointing out Lupin's condition. For one, Lupin was still a werewolf, whereas he was no longer a loyal Death Eater. Furthermore, he was looking out for Heidi's safety. She had to know her enemy.

Shockingly enough, Heidi had barely batted an eye at Lupin's misleading revelation. *She... Lily* had turned him away before he had even taken the Mark. He was to blame, of course. He had insulted her and had thrown her aid back in her face. He hadn't meant it and had tried to apologize later, but she would have none of it. But Heidi... *Heidi* had forgiven him for worse offenses than an insult. She also publicly showed her preference for his company over the werewolves; it was slight, but he had noticed. Lily had always doted on that creature. Heidi's loyalty stirred in him a quiet longing for something he couldn't quite name.

It was as if him being a Death Eater didn't bother her, which was highly improbable given her good nature, or that she already knew that he was reformed, which was nigh on impossible. His had been a closed, secret trial, and his status as a spy was dearly guarded outside the Order. Due to his reputation for proficiency in the Dark Arts and some of the company he kept, many people suspected his involvement with the Dark Lord, but the people who knew for sure were all known to him and did not include a Heidi Greenglass.

"Who is she?" he thought, suddenly angry. "How can she know?" She had shown him more trust than any other human, except with this. Did she have a secret more terrifying than his? It seemed impossible; she wasn't the sort of person to *have* a Dark Secret. Shifting against his back, she silently sighed, warming the tip of his ear with her breath. He clenched his teeth against the delicate sensation, biting back demands that she confide in him. He would keep her secrets! Nothing she could say could

repulse him!

Lupin interrupted his black mood, tarnishing it further by angling his broom to fly close to them, gesturing that they both stop and hover.

Directing his words to Heidi and making every attempt to ignore him, he said, "I'm going to go straight to the warehouse. Follow me, but make sure you aren't seen."

Severus felt Heidi nod against his back, and he could picture her solemn look of agreement. It irritated him that neither of them was thinking this through. Heidi, at least, was smarter than that. "Have you given thought to the wards that will surely be triggered by two unknown parties breaching their barriers, or were you simply going to beat down the door like an... animal?" he rolled the last word around his mouth, coating it with disgust.

Lupin paled, and Severus sneered, "So like a Gryffindor to rush in headfirst with no plan of attack or defense." Heidi squeezed him around the middle, and he wondered if it was meant to discourage him.

Flushing, Lupin snapped, "It would take a Slytherin Death..."

"Do you suppose," Heidi spoke from behind him, her voice hard and impatient, "that we could leave the house rivalries at school where they belong and get on with this like grown-up witches and wizards?" Both wizards squirmed a bit and remained silent, which seemed to be the right answer. "Thank you. What do you suggest, Severus?"

He shot the werewolf a smug look and said, "You and I will Disillusion, land in the trees by the lane and wait out of sight. Lupin," he spat the name as if he had just sucked a fly into his mouth, "will drop off his shipment or do whatever Gophers do and either retrieve our item or information as to its whereabouts. When we see him leave, we'll follow for a short distance until it is no longer dangerous to reconvene." It was a safe (for him and Heidi), simple plan that required little or no effort on his part. It would have been perfect, if the blasted werewolf hadn't been inclined to a selective conscience.

"I can't steal from my employer!"

"And yet you work for thieves."

"Your employer has something that was stolen from us!" Heidi protested, giving him a squeeze that he was now sure was meant to be chastising.

Lupin gave her a forlorn look, reminiscent of a puppy that had just been caught chewing on a lady's favorite pair of pumps. Unfortunately for Lupin, Severus thought with satisfaction, Heidi was a cat person.

"We didn't come all this way to just stare at the building and hope it would eject our phial," Heidi said, softening the harshness of her words with what must have been a (thoroughly unnecessary, if one asked Severus) smile, because the werewolf perked up a bit. "I understand; really, I do. If there is any... retrieving... required, then I'll be the one to do it. However," she said, squeezing Severus as he drew a breath to protest (which had only been an experiment to see if she *would* squeeze him), "we still need to know if it is here, or has been moved to another location."

Though Hermione had to admit that sending Lupin off on his own and hiding in the woods was probably the wisest thing to do in terms of reacquiring the Starglass, it was *not* the most comfortable. Under the canopy of long, green needles and whip-like branches, the air was stuffy and strongly scented with pine and earthy decay. There was very little undergrowth; only a few brave seedlings stretched their stalks through the thick bed of brown needles that covered the forest floor, and those that did had the wan look of a plant kept in a darkened room. Rustling overhead announced the movement of small rodents and birds through the trees, but Hermione wasn't able to catch sight of them.

They hadn't known how long Lupin would take, so they had claimed a decomposing log as their seat. It must have lain on the forest floor for years, insects and weather taking turns wearing the bark away until the inner wood, softened and splintering, was revealed. Not wanting to attract attention with blatant uses of magic, they had left it a log instead of Transfiguring it into something more comfortable.

After several months of camping during what should have been her seventh year at Hogwarts, Hermione had vowed to not spend a significant amount of time in a forest until her fiftieth birthday. She wouldn't sleep on a bed that was any smaller than a double if she were alone or a queen if she had company. No less than four pillows were required: two for her head (not stacked, but laid side by side so that she could roll around properly), one for between her knees and one just because. Picnics were right out, though she would eat in a garden provided there was a suitable patio table and chairs. She liked to take her morning constitutional through a park a few blocks from her flat, but she carefully kept to the tidy gravel paths and sat at the conveniently placed wrought iron benches instead of wandering onto the grass. It was a testament to her fascination with Severus that she had forgotten her aversion to forested areas long enough to find herself waiting in one.

She shifted restlessly, trying to relieve the growing discomfort from something hard and pointy digging into her bum. Rising slightly, she removed the object: a small, green pinecone riddled with ants. Clamping down on a girly squeal of disgust, she tossed the thing away and stood up, frantically smacking at the back of her robes. Frowning at the log, she gave it a thorough examination and decided that she would rather stand for a moment. Or find another cold sidewalk. And Severus' warm shoulder.

'Ugh, back on track, Hermione.' She stared at the man for a long moment. He was sitting a little further down the log, giving the forest floor a comprehensive scowl. His expression was pinched and clouded, his eyebrows drawn together and lips pursed. There was no doubt that something was bothering him, and it likely had something to do with Lupin and his comments about him being a Death Eater. Or, it could just as likely be another fit of the sulks at which he seemed to be so adept. She wondered if Professor Snape had been this inclined to brood and if the deduction of house points had been his way of coping. Be that as it may, they were quite possibly very close to reacquiring the Starglass, and now seemed an opportune time to discuss what it was they were going to be doing with it.

"Severus," she said quietly, waving away an insect that was buzzing persistently around her nose.

He jumped and glanced at her, plucking at the lace spilling out of his jacket sleeves. Right, he was thinking, then, and not sulking. Pinning his scowl on her, he said, "You already knew; don't deny it."

Taken aback, she stood up straight and gave him her full attention. "Come again?"

"I'll know if you lie to me."

He was eyeing her narrowly, almost daring her to look directly into those suspicious shards of obsidian. Slowly, he rose to his feet and closed the distance between them. As much as she trusted him to not purposefully enter her mind uninvited, Hermione was no fool. Harry had always said that he thought Snape could read his mind, and she had a suspicion that Severus could, indeed, read one's thoughts without invoking Legilimency. He might not even realize what he was doing. Regardless, she had too many secrets to hide.

Now, he was trying to intimidate her, looming over her as if she were some recalcitrant student up to no good. It might have terrified her as a child, but it certainly didn't have the same effect today. It struck her, suddenly, how young he was, though only a couple of years younger than she, and how miserably lonely the short number of years he had left would be.

It was that thought that helped her curb her temper. Unwilling to rise to his bait, she leaned slightly toward him and smiled, letting her eyes roam his face instead of sinking into those black pits of tar. The position required her to tilt her head at a sharper angle, but showed that he did not frighten or intimidate her. "Perhaps if you were to tell me what I'm not to deny knowing?"

It was a dangerous game she was playing; she felt it in the rapid beat of her heart and the tiny beads of sweat that prickled her forehead. His lips were tightly pressed together, and his jaw muscles moved under pale skin just beginning to show a shadow of a beard. He spoke again, entrancing her with the movements of his lips and the flash of crooked teeth, not yet stained the yellow that she remembered.

"Stop trying to distract me! You *knew*, and I want to know*how!*"

"Severus..."

"*Who are you?*" he hissed, inches from her face. It was difficult to remain fixed on his lips, he was so close. Reflexively, she raised her eyes to meet his. They pleaded with her, even though his words demanded, but he remained locked behind them, safely within his own mind. He was not intentionally prying into her mind, and his courtesy touched her. But she couldn't tell him.

A discreet cough sounded to her right, and she glanced toward it, breaking out of the enchantment that he had woven around her. Lupin stood several feet away from them, the broom clutched tightly in a white-knuckled hand and his eyes hard as he stared at Severus.

"The phial was moved to a shop in Canterbury," he said without preamble, still glaring. "I've been circling for several minutes, and you didn't show up." An unspoken accusation hung silently between them, and Hermione fidgeted with her hands. She startled when Severus abruptly stepped away from her.

"Canterbury. How fortunate for us that we have a native of Canterbury with us now," he drawled, looking pointedly at Hermione with false expectancy. "Apparating will save us *much* travel time."

Worrying her fingers and feeling a flush rise in her face, Hermione wanted to slink into the forest. Heidi Greenglass of Canterbury, she had called herself those weeks prior when she had first met a young Severus Snape. Her mother had always told her lies had an unpleasant way of coming back to haunt one.

She had *never* been to Canterbury.

A/N: Can you smell the shit as it hurtles toward the fan? Hermione can.

A Rose by Any Other Name

Chapter 13 of 20

Things go from bad to worse.

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Edited by thyme_is_a_cat

Hermione cleared her throat and waited for brilliance to strike. His eyes shining with a greedy light, Severus watched her without blinking, as if she would vanish at his slightest inattention. He was clearly waiting for something. An unpleasant realization struck her: he didn't think she could Side-Along-Apparate them to Canterbury. Not because she couldn't Side-Along-Apparate, but because she wasn't familiar with Canterbury enough to Apparate there. And he would be correct.

In hindsight, she thought it would have been smarter to lie about coming from a city that she had actually visited. Greenglass of Canterbury had been chosen off the cuff and for the simple reason that a coworker in the Ministry had the surname Greenglass and had been born and bred in Canterbury. Granted, she had had the charm of a matchmaking Malfoy directed at her person and would have had no reason to suspect that she would be spending an extended amount of time with Severus, but she certainly could have come up with a better false identity.

And the longer she stood there fidgeting, the more suspicious Severus would get. If his outburst before Lupin's arrival was any indicator, then he had suspected that she had been lying about herself for a while now; she wondered when he had first begun to speculate. She cleared her throat again and hoped that she would think of something once she started talking.

"It's such a nice day; wouldn't flying be more pleasant?" she asked hopefully. It wouldn't pass for brilliance, but it might get her through the afternoon.

Severus crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her down his hooked nose. "No, I don't think it would."

"I wouldn't mind flying," Lupin interjected, his glare becoming speculative as he watched Severus work himself into a fit of pique.

Without bothering to look at him, Severus said, "Give us the name of the shop and be off. You aren't needed anymore, werewolf."

"Severus!" Hermione gasped, outraged at his words. He shouldn't take his anger with her out on Lupin. "That was uncalled for! Mr. Lupin, we really are grateful for what you've done for us."

"For you," he corrected her adamantly. "I told you that I would bring you to your phial, and I will, even if it means flying to Canterbury." He gave her a somewhat sappy smile that she returned hesitantly. If she didn't know better, she would suspect that Lupin had brought up flying to Canterbury again just because he knew it would anger Severus. The angered man in question had retreated behind a curtain of black hair and was frowning so hard that she almost expected his face to freeze that way. In a way, it would: his knotted eyebrows and curved lips foretold the heavy lines that would be carved into his face when he became her professor.

"Going to hump her leg while you're at it?" he snapped, smashing Hermione's illusion of the matured Potions master that had hovered over his younger self.

Lupin had opened his mouth to retort when Hermione grabbed Severus' elbow, still firmly folded against his chest, and hustled him deeper into the woods and out of sight of their companion. With a flick of her wand, she cast a quick Muffliato. She didn't realize her mistake until he hissed, "Where did you learn that?"

'*Shite*,' she thought. She had forgotten that it had been one of the spells penned into the Half-Blood Prince's sixth-year Potions book. Oh well, nothing to be done about it now.

"Where I learned it doesn't matter."

"I beg to differ, *Heidi*, or whatever your name is." He was holding himself rigid, his arms still crossed, and his face set in tense, angry lines.

"That will do. I know you are angry, and you have every right to be, but I have very good reasons..."

"I don't want to hear *reasons*, I want the truth!" Whirling away from her, he stalked away several steps, then paced back toward her, stopping only inches from her. "I want to know who you are. I want to know how you knew I was a Death Eater. And I want to know where you learned that spell!" With each clipped sentence, his eyes had gotten wider and wilder, and his normally resonant voice had gotten harsher and louder until he was shrieking furiously into her face. He seemed to loom around her, his presence pressing in on all sides. Needing space, she took a step backward, and his hands shot from his sides to wrap tightly around her forearms, preventing her retreat.

"I can't tell you that," she said quietly. He wasn't hurting her, so she did not object to his grip. Yet. "Not because I don't want to," she quickly added as he opened his mouth to speak, "but because I *cannot*. For your own protection."

"You think I can't protect myself?" he growled, his face twisted into a feral snarl. "You think I can't protect *you*?"

"Not from this," she said, grasping his arms in a movement mirroring his. Staring directly into his eyes, she tried to convey her earnestness through her hands and surface thoughts, hoping that he would recognize the gesture for what it was and not take liberties. She was telling him the truth, just not what he wanted to hear.

For a moment, she was afraid that he would actually use Legilimency to extract the information from her mind, but he simply stared into her eyes searchingly. When he spoke again, his voice was low, soft as velvet and subtly poisonous, and she couldn't help the shudder that rippled down her spine. "Tell me."

"I..." she started, almost submitting to an odd compulsion to confess all. It wasn't Imperius, but it was insistent, intensified by her own desire to keep his trust and give him the reassurance that she trusted him. She wanted to fold him into her arms and spill her heart out on his shoulder, whisper the secrets of the future into his ear, give him the key to his own continued existence. So what if her life as she knew it changed irrevocably? She could live a new one, on this timeline, with him. Who would notice two Hermione Grangers aged forty years apart? The lives she could save! The suffering she could prevent! All she would have to do is *tell him*..

She tightened her fingers, drawing him closer until his breath washed her face and she could see the faint circle of his iris where it delineated his pupil. Her yearning was a physical force, pulling her into him as surely as if she had been netted and dragged ashore. Only yielding to the simplest of things, this most basic of her desires, would ease the pain of gasping breathless on the beach. "I..."

A rushing of wings and an angry squawk broke the still of the forest, and a shower of pine needles dusted their hair and clothes. Hermione blinked, and the spell was broken. She was standing on her tiptoes, much closer to him than decency would allow; their arms were locked together in a reciprocal knot. Shaking her head, she tried to pull herself together. What had she been thinking? She had been about to tell him everything and, *gods*, how she had wanted to. Glancing up, she caught a glimpse of his raw, hungry expression and wet, parted lips before his face settled back into his typical scowl.

She was struck with fondness wholly at odds with the situation, and she smiled sadly, wanting to ease the crease between his eyebrows with her thumb and comb the black strands of hair, now peppered with pine needles, out of his face. Instead, she squeezed his arms and then released him, stepping backward. He let her go and dropped his arms to his sides.

"If I told you, you would understand the danger, but then the damage would be inevitable."

He stared at her inscrutably for a long moment, and the forest sighed around them. Straightening his spine, he gave her a final, closed look before moving his gaze to the trees beyond and stepping determinedly around her, carefully keeping his distance.

"Severus," she called after him, turning to watch him walk back the way they had come. He made no indication that he had heard her. Sighing, she trailed after him morosely and more than a little shaken. She was disturbed by the strength of her emotions concerning the furious, reticent man and her desire to toss everything to the wind and start a new life. That he had ensorcelled her earlier, she had no doubt, and that it had been a Dark spell was a given, but it had only amplified what she had wanted in the first place. She couldn't even work up a good snit in the face of her weakness. And where, in all that roiling morass of longings, was Ron?

She was a fickle, disloyal, despicable creature, and she had failed. She had failed Severus, she had failed Ron, and she had failed herself. With leaden feet and a heavy heart, she plodded slowly behind him and blinked away her tears.

Severus gripped the handle of his broom tightly, angling down toward the city of Canterbury while keeping the shabby figure of Lupin on his spare broom in his peripheral vision. He wouldn't fly behind him; he flew to the side and matched his movements, presenting the illusion that he knew where he was going, that Lupin was *not* leading. No one was fooled: the werewolf had refused to discuss the details of the shop's location, insisting that he would bring Heidi to her possession like a fucking knight-errant. He *hated* Gryffindor chivalry.

He was also flying much too close for Severus' comfort. Every few minutes, the werewolf would shoot the woman behind him a concerned glance and then glare meaningfully at Severus. He would return his glare two-fold and put distance between the brooms, but Lupin would eventually close the gap. She seemed oblivious, her head turned away from them both instead of resting comfortably on his back, as she had done on the ride over. Scanning the sky as he flew and catching glimpses of her out of the corner of his eye, he tried not notice that the wind was whipping tears off of her cheeks.

She had been crying, off and on, since they had argued. He hadn't noticed until the werewolf had asked her what was wrong. She had denied being upset, despite her red-rimmed eyes, and had smiled, explaining that she'd gotten dust in her eyes. Though he'd been too angry at that moment to care, he was now beginning to get concerned. Never had he seen her quite so downtrodden.

'Serves her right for lying to me,' he thought, unclenching his teeth and willing himself not to miss her warmth against his back. Riding two up as they were, she was trying to touch him as little as possible, sitting ramrod straight and holding her knees taut to the side instead of letting them rest against his thighs. Somehow, she had found a grip on the broom's shaft between them. That was fine with him. He preferred it that way. He had almost told her to ride with Lupin, but when she had mounted behind himself and he had seen Lupin's stricken expression, he'd bit his tongue.

The thing was, he didn't understand why she was so wretched. She had gotten what she had wanted: she had kept her secrets. Even his modification of the Entrancement Charm, which would encourage its victim to do the will of the caster if that person already had the inclination, had failed to draw them out of her, though it had been a close thing. Perhaps he should simply enter her mind and be done with it. He didn't owe her anything, and her friendship was obviously a sham. She was using him, though for what he didn't know, just as he was using her. These were terms he knew, though they tore at his insides like tiny, barbed hooks.

It didn't matter. Let her be unhappy. People the world over were unhappy and yet it still kept turning. He had a purpose to fulfill and she was a tool, to be discarded when no longer useful.

Her face rose in his mind, pupils dilated as she slipped under his Entrancement. She had risen to her toes as she had pulled him down toward her, her long, delicate fingers kneading his arms and her breaths quick and shallow against his cheeks. She'd smelled of tea and rye toast, and he'd wondered if she had somehow reflected his spell back onto him. For one brilliant instant, he'd wanted nothing more than to close the tiny gap between their lips and taste her, her secrets be damned, but the spell had broken. She'd pawned off some half-baked riddle in lieu of explanation, and he had walked away before he'd hexed her. Now she had the gall to be miserable.

It had been a ridiculous fantasy to think that a woman like her would be interested in him, anyway. He didn't even *want* her interest. No, he *craved* her interest, which was much more dangerous. He wouldn't have her, though, not that lying harpy. He had other plans.

The inside of her thigh brushed against him as she shifted, but was instantly snatched away. A pang of regret poked his gut with an almost physical presence, and he had to stop himself from reaching behind him to touch her, to pull her closer.

He suddenly wished with a desperate intensity that she would put her head on his shoulder.

Just as suddenly, he wanted to hex himself. When had he become such a sentimental sop?

"Snape!" Lupin's shout cut through his thoughts. "It's somewhere in those six blocks!" He drew in a wide circle with a sweep of his arm over the rapidly approaching city. Severus nodded and aimed his broom at an adjacent park.

A couple of block's worth of rich, green grass and tall shade trees, the park had a flat, circular area with a large, red rune, the symbol for safe havens, painted in the middle. Four wooden racks, one at the end of each leg of the rune, ringed the circle. Three were empty, but the other one held several brooms attached to the wooden structure with curls of wood that, upon close inspection, seemed to have grown from the rack itself. Once they had landed, they relinquished their brooms to an empty rack and watched as two slender twigs pushed through the braces to wrap snugly around the brooms' shafts.

As he tried to ease the stiffness out of muscles that had spent too many hours on a broom and not enough resting in a decent bed, Severus stared determinedly away from Heidi. He had no desire to make himself more miserable than he already was by ogling a woman he wouldn't have. He was rather successful, too, until he heard Lupin's rough, anxious voice speaking quietly.

"Alright, Miss Greenglass?"

"It's Heidi. And yes, I'm fine. Thank you." She sounded as miserable as he felt. For some reason, it didn't make him feel any better.

At least she was maintaining the charade with the werewolf, though it irked him that she had asked him to address her informally, even if it was a false name. Positioning his body so that he could watch them surreptitiously out of the corner of his eye, he affected a pose of bored indifference and rolled his shoulders. Her eyes, slightly bloodshot, darted toward him, and she blushed. Lupin laid a hand on one of her shoulders, drawing her attention back to him. Severus wanted to wrench that hand off of its wrist.

"You just seem upset. If he hurt you..."

"It isn't his fault."

"You don't have to protect him."

"I'm not." She smiled wryly, more of a grimace, really, and shrugged dejectedly. "Don't worry about it, Pro... Mr. Lupin."

"Remus."

"...Remus. We really should be moving on." She stepped away from his hand, and Severus breathed a small sigh of relief when Lupin let it fall to his side. What had she been about to call him, though? She smiled again, a brittle curve of her mouth that he recognized from the first few days of her acquaintance; the smile she used when she was getting annoyed but was trying to be polite. "Where to now?"

When he offered his arm to her before answering, Severus decided it was time to intervene. Spinning sharply, he stalked toward them, a sneer curling his lip. Lupin met his stare challengingly. "If you two don't mind," he said, all artificial conciliation, "I would like to wrap up this business as quickly as possible. Or did you fancy a twilight stroll?"

Heidi gave him a sad, long-suffering stare, so he scowled at Lupin, unwilling to meet her eyes and, perhaps, betray his own unhappiness. "Severus is right," she said finally, "the shops will be closing soon. Let's go."

A sheer, shimmering curtain hung through the middle of the park, seemingly suspended from the fiery sunset to be absorbed into lawn. On the other side of the translucent veil, a Muggle family ambled by, sporting light jackets and a mop of a little dog, oblivious to the oddly dressed group that gave them little more than a passing glance. A small child wearing a bright red baseball cap suddenly tugged out of his mother's grip, darting toward the veil with a fascinated, gape-mouthed expression, his arms stretched forward and fingers reaching. The woman, pink-cheeked from the slight chill in the air, ran after him, snatching him off the ground before he could touch the barrier. His mother cast a slightly anxious glance toward the veil, her eyes roving but unseeing and then carried him bodily back to his father, who was still walking the dog.

The magical side of the park was empty except for a solitary witch wearing snug-fitting riding leathers. She was carrying a bag slung over her shoulders and gave the threesome as little attention as had the Muggle family as she strode purposefully toward the broom rack. Beyond the park, darkening streets too narrow for autos, but straighter and wider than those of Diagon Alley, were lined with storefronts as dark and deserted as the streets. One kiosk was still open. Manned by a sour-faced witch and shining a small puddle of cheery light on a roughly cobbled street, it emanated the odor of hot grease and pork. It wasn't very many minutes before she doused the light and shrunk the entire contraption down to the size of a small box, giving the three a suspicious glare as they walked by.

Wizards of Canterbury was closing up for the night, and it seemed that *good* folk didn't wander the town at this hour.

The short search for the shop might have been considered a stroll for three friends to the casual observer, had there been any, but Hermione wanted to scream through the tension that threatened to smother her. She had finally managed to shore her tears, though they were backing up against her eyes like floodwater behind a dam. It was as if she was grieving, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what it was she had lost. Or, perhaps, there were too many things to name and confront.

Severus' trust, for one thing. He wouldn't even look at her. Lifting her gaze, she caressed the hard line of his shoulders with her eyes, willing him to glance back at her as they walked along the sidewalk. Already, his inky hair was blending with the shadows of the evening, shining softly only when their steps led them through the pale glow of a streetlamp. In a scant few minutes, his black-clad figure would be indistinguishable in the darkness except for the flash of silver lace at his wrists. In a scant few years, he would be beyond her reach: untouchable behind the Veil.

'So, I have lost the trust of a dead man,' she forced the thought through the pain it derived. 'And, I have developed *feelings* for a dead man.' She couldn't say which was more tragic. Biting the tip of her tongue against the surge of tears, she felt a desperate need to talk through this with another woman over a big bowl of mint-chocolate-chip ice cream. Ginny wouldn't understand; she would be defensive of Ron, but Luna... she would have some odd insight or other to share. At the very least, she wouldn't attempt to have her committed.

Oh, what to do about Ron? She squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself to think analytically. Had she been happy with him before her first trip down the well or was she simply comfortable in a safe, familiar relationship? Were her drifting feelings a result of close proximity with an interesting, forbidden man or a natural tendency to move from a sputtering relationship to the next male that fascinated her? Despite her efforts to shut her emotions out of her musings, they pounded against her heart, tangling her carefully considered questions into a knotted mess.

"I think this is it," Lupin said, and Hermione surfaced from her thoughts to stare at a dowdy storefront with dusty picture windows that were crowded with so much junk that one could hardly see into the store itself. A domed, red awning with a scalloped border stretched over the door and declared the name of the shop, "Curiouser and Curiouser."

"You *think*?" Severus drawled next to her, on the side opposite of Lupin. "I do hope it doesn't cause any irreparable damage."

Hermione wanted to elbow him, but didn't think that their strained relationship could handle that now, despite the fact that all logic concluded that she shouldn't care what a dead man thought of her. But she *did* care, very much.

"It's closed," she said, pointing out the obvious in lieu of screaming or crying, which was what she really wanted to do. She waved a hand at the little sign hanging from the door's grimy little window.

"No matter. It will have a back door," Severus said as he eyed the lock and darkened interior beyond the clutter in the windows.

Lupin frowned at him and then turned to Hermione. "We can come back tomorrow when they're open."

"I doubt that this is the shop we want," Severus said, just to be contradictory. "You're just stalling, leading us on."

Lupin crossed his arms over his chest. "I wouldn't do that. I am not a deceitful, miserable, little sod who betrays his friends."

"No, that would be your *friends*, if I recall correctly." Lupin blanched, and Hermione thought suddenly of Peter Pettigrew, a revolting rat of a sycophant who had handed the Potters to the Dark Lord. Lupin would believe it was Sirius, however, and she wanted nothing more than to tell him that he had been wrongfully imprisoned.

She was so tired of it: the false identity and foreknowledge that she couldn't use; the mean-spirited bickering and dark glances; the broom riding and relationship, doomed before it could even begin; the crazy cat woman and her innuendos. She had been gone for over a day, now, and if Madam Beetlebump didn't believe she was sleeping with Severus before, then she certainly would now. With an aching desperation that compressed her stomach into a leaden pit, she wanted to get the whole fucking affair over with and go home. She would retrieve her Starglass, help Severus with whatever it was he had planned (gods, she didn't even care what it was, anymore), and then try to pick up the threads of her life and make *sense* of it. Perhaps there wasn't anything wrong with Ron and her except *her*, and perhaps she would fix it or move on. Perhaps she would have to relearn the course of history. Whatever, it would be *her life*, and the people she loved would call her by her own name.

Later, she would lay the blame of her next decision on lack of sleep, hunger, and this all-consuming exhaustion with her situation. She hadn't been thinking clearly. Who would be? She would also think, ironically, that for someone who knew the future, she had made some terrible decisions.

Rubbing her hands over her face, she made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. "Maybe we could just take a quick look to see if they have it."

"You want to steal it?" Lupin asked incredulously.

She dropped her hands to her sides and gave him a weary stare. She wasn't comfortable with breaking and entering; it was against the law, after all. However, this wouldn't be the first time she had done something illegal, and, as she had many times in the past, she decided that the end would justify the means. "It's *mine*. I just want to get it and go home."

"But..."

"Not the shy violet you were expecting, Lupin?" Severus asked snidely. She resisted the temptation to smack him. He could be nasty when he wanted to be, and yet here she was, suffering at his lack of attention.

"I never claimed to be," she snapped at him.

"You aren't what you *claimed* to be, either," he said silkily, looking directly at her for the first time since their fight in the woods. Beneath the sneer, she could see a thin veneer of hurt glazing his eyes, could almost taste it on his words. Could she give him something harmless, a small morsel of truth that might salve his wounded trust? Would the benefit of regaining his regard outweigh the possible cost of revealing some small truth about herself? Probably not, but she did it anyway.

"The initials are the same."

"And you presume that I care."

'Never mind, then,' she thought tiredly, turning away from the two men to walk back the way they had come, scanning the row of shops for the alley that would take her between the shops to their back entrances. Even magical shops had backdoors that led to the rubbish bins.

Maybe she wouldn't even stick around to help him with his project; he might not want it. Though, she had promised... He could borrow the damn thing and get on with it, leaving her in relative peace. She could have tea with Madam and pretend she had read about this adventure in a book, distancing herself from his accusing, black eyes and sharp tongue.

"Heidi!" Lupin's voice sounded unnaturally loud in the empty street, and her fake name ringing against the stones spurred her to walk faster. Two sets of footsteps slapped on the cobble behind her, one booted and the other the whisper-soft tread of worn, leather soles. Biting the inside of her lips, she resisted the irrational urge to dash forward and leave them behind. She could break into the shop by herself; hadn't she snuck into the Ministry at eighteen? She didn't run, however, and they caught up quickly, following her into the narrow passage between two shops.

"Heidi, you can't let him get to you. He's a..."

"Leave it alone, Mr. Lupin. He's right. I just want to get this over with," she said, not slowing her pace or sparing him a glance. He was dead, too.

She spotted the backdoor to the shop easily; it was painted red, and the name was lettered in white. Pulling her wand from her sleeve, she began to cast the diagnostic spells that would reveal wards placed against intruders. She had barely finished three when Severus cleared his throat and said, "Allow me. Your Detection Spells are mediocre at best."

In five minutes, he had dismantled the last ward and sprung the lock on the door, which had been, oddly, a Muggle tumbler and bolt. She had chalked that strangeness up to the eccentricities of an owner who had named his shop after a quote from *Alice in Wonderland* and thought nothing more of it.

Until, that is, she took five cautious steps into the store and lit the tip of her wand to investigate a tiny, blinking, red light that had caught her attention.

"Put that light out!" Severus snapped as he closed the door behind him, just before Hermione gasped and whirled on him.

"Don't close the d..."

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by a shrieking claxon that rattled her eardrums. Severus seemed to have realized his mistake instantly, for he was already tugging at the door handle and swearing. It was shut fast, however, and no amount of physical force, opening charms or blasting hexes would budge it. Lupin was hunched over with his hands pressed to his ears and his face a rictus of pain.

Abandoning the door, Severus reached her in two long strides and shouted something at her.

"What?" she tried to yell over the din, wanting to plug her ears with her fingers.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her close enough to see the flaring of his long nostrils. "Apparate!"

Nodding, she gave it a frantic attempt and was approaching panic when she realized that she was still in the store. Severus swore again, the words lost in the noise, but the meaning clear, and dragged her after him deeper into the shop. Clinging to his arm, she was glad that in their current crisis, he felt compelled to overlook their quarrel and keep her close.

"Lupin, come on!" she yelled back at the man who looked like he might drop to the floor at any moment. He must have heard her, somehow, because he staggered after them, hands still clutching his ears.

The back room was a veritable obstacle course. It was littered with boxes, some opened and some stacked to the ceiling, with packaging strewn across the floor. She had only just realized that they were making a beeline for the door to the front of the shop when Severus veered sharply to the right and snatched an object off of a bed of thick, opalescent packaging bubbles. He hustled them forward again before she saw what it was, secreting it somewhere in his robes.

Severus' hand was on the doorknob when several loud cracks sounded in the shop on the other side of the door. Many voices, too muffled by the wall and the continuous wail of the siren to be understood, called out to each other. A moment later, the door blew against them, and they were knocked backward. Hermione landed hard on the floor, a sharp pain exploding through her skull as it bounced off the crate on her way down. Severus landed hard on top of her, knocking the wind from her lungs, and everything went abruptly dark.

A/N: Yes, another cliffhanger. Sorry about that.

No Time Like the Present

Chapter 14 of 20

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Again.

Disclaimer: Don't own it

Edited (and much, much more) by [thyme_is_a_cat](#)

Hermione drifted slowly through a dream. She had known it to be a dream from the start in that way a dreamer does when the situation is simply too ridiculous to be real. However, she passively let it flow around her, acknowledging the dream-state and letting that thought drift away.

She was lying on a table or gurney; whatever, it was hard and smelled of stale sweat. Luna sat at her side, holding up photo after photo of Draco Malfoy: as a baby drooling on a bib with ducks dancing around the trim; as a toddler smearing powder blue frosting on the bald head of a house-elf; as a child posing proudly in a miniature version of the dress robes that Severus, who was standing awkwardly next to him, also wore. Dream Hermione commented that they both looked quite dashing, and Luna nodded, smiling wistfully. Photo Severus blushed but stood up straighter, and Draco beamed, spinning to give his audience a full view. The next few photos were of an adolescent Draco she could tell by his ever-increasing height. However, they were blurred, and the color was off, like underdeveloped Polaroids.

"Nothing happens that isn't meant to happen," Luna said as she shook one of the photos that was particularly indistinct. "It will work itself out."

And then Ron wrapped his arms around Luna's waist and pecked her gently on the cheek, pulling her back and out of the dream with kisses that became more passionate and insistent as they faded away. She had enough time to think, 'Ron and Luna? Never,' before Lupin leaned over her, an earnest smile on his face and two brown, furry dog ears rising out of his hair. Reaching out, she rubbed one ear and marveled at its softness.

"Could I please hump your leg?" he asked politely. "I promise I won't..."

He cut off with a yelp of pain as Severus bit down on the unoccupied ear, tearing thin skin. The men tumbled onto her, growling and snapping with long, sharp fangs. They weren't as heavy as they should have been, and she easily pushed them off her and into a twisting, snarling heap. Severus pulled the Starglass out of a pocket and then grabbed Lupin's jaw, forcing his head back and his mouth open. Just before he tipped the black tar slopping around at the bottom of the phial into Lupin's mouth, Hermione snatched it out of his hands. It became an old, yellowing, rolled up copy of the *Daily Prophet*, and she used it to whack each man sharply on the nose, snapping, "Knock it off!"

And abruptly woke up.

Then immediately wished she hadn't.

Her head throbbed, the pain emanating from a point in the back of her skull that was presently pressed against a hard bed that smelled of stale sweat. Severus and Lupin were bickering in the background, adding an unpleasant soundtrack to the pounding of her pulse in her ears.

"Knock it off," she groaned, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyeballs. Amazingly, the two men silenced, but a shuffling sound approached her.

"Heidi, are you alright?" Lupin voice asked tentatively. Metal clanked against metal, and the rustling sound ceased.

"Of course she's not alright. The draught that they gave her was probably brewed by some Ministry dunderhead that barely passed Potions," Severus drawled, but his voice didn't have the bite that it usually did.

"She might not have needed it if you hadn't fallen on her."

"And I suppose that whimpering in a ball on the floor was your idea of help?"

Lupin's voice took on a plaintive note. "That alarm was deafening me! My ears are sensitive, especially..." He trailed off into silence.

Hermione cracked an eye open just to be sure that his ears weren't still fuzzy and pointed. She felt a faint disappointment that they weren't, but that was immediately crushed by the rush of panic inspired by the sight of Lupin's face pressed against thick, steel bars as he stared anxiously at her. Haggard and pale, he was squatting on the floor of a poorly lit stone room, separated from her by bars that ran from floor to ceiling. Severus was standing next to him with one shoulder propped against the bars, his face lost in shadows and black hair. A tiny window near the ceiling let in the wan light of a bloated moon. Each cell had one cot, a jug and a shallow basin. There were no doors Hermione could see; just two stone rooms separated by bars. It didn't take much effort to gather that they were in jail.

"Fuck." She seldom used the word aloud, but felt it was warranted in this situation.

"That about sums it up," Severus said without sarcasm for a change.

"How long have I been out?" she asked as she eased herself in to a sitting position. Her head ached, but she was tired of smelling rank sweat every time she inhaled.

"Several hours," Lupin said, flexing his fingers around the bars. "You hit your head pretty badly, and they gave you a potion to help with the concussion."

She winced as she fingered the knot on the back of her head. It was wet, crusty, and her hair was matted into it. It also hurt like a bastard, and she had the feeling that Severus was correct in his assessment of the brewer's skills. There was also a tender spot over her ribs, but she couldn't evaluate the damage without lifting her robes. She gave it a tentative prod and gasped in pain.

"That was Snape's elbow," Lupin supplied helpfully. Severus snorted, but the sound had an odd, whistling quality and was immediately followed by a pained grunt and a snuffle.

"But, Severus," Hermione said before he felt the need to inflict his elbow on Lupin, "how did we get caught? Aren't you," she searched for the right word for a moment, "*prepared* for things like this?"

"If you are referring to my brief tenure with the Death Eaters," he drawled the word with distaste, and Hermione cringed, "then let me remind you that I would have had a proper team instead of a woman intent on splashing the floor with her brains and a pathetic excuse for werewolf!" He sniffed again wetly.

"When he tripped over you, his hex went wide," Lupin explained. "Several Aurors came through the door and Bound us before we could regroup."

"What's wrong with your nose, Severus?" Hermione asked when he snuffed again. His face was still hidden, even though her eyes had adjusted somewhat to the dim light.

"One of the Aurors *accidentally* found my face in the way of his foot. Repeatedly."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that, so she let her eyes travel up the wall to the tiny window. The fat, yellow moon filled her with a sense of wrongness, though she couldn't quite pin it down. Her head was throbbing hard enough to liquefy her thoughts.

"So, we're in London, then?"

"No, Canterbury has its own little holding tank."

"But they can't leave us in here for long, can they? We should get a trial, and then we can explain about the stolen property... What?"

Lupin had slumped down as if trying to curl in on himself. Severus sighed harshly and sniffed, then took a seat in front of the bars, crossing his legs. Finally, she could see his face. He had a black eye, a bruised and swollen lip crusted with blood, and his hooked nose was slightly crooked. Thin trickles of blood were leaking from both nostrils, and he sniffed, dabbing at it with his sleeve. She rose from the cot and staggered over to the bars, using them as leverage against the rising dizziness. Careful to not upset her precarious balance, she eased onto the floor to sit across from Severus.

"We won't get a trial," he said calmly, staring at her with deep, black eyes.

"But, we *have* to get a trial..." she began to protest until something clicked into place. She glanced at Lupin's huddled figure. With rising horror, she looked back out the window at the moon, one night from full. "But..."

"They know."

"They can't do this," she whispered.

"They will."

In the manner of a penny-dreadful villain, their jailor had explained the whole rotten affair only an hour after they had been locked up. Hermione wished she had been awake, if only to have made witty ripostes as a proper heroine should (she thought with a slightly hysterical giggle that earned her a foul look from Severus). Apparently, not only did the chief of the Canterbury Auror division know about the stolen goods sold at "Curiouser and Curiouser," he got kickbacks for looking the other way and providing the occasional strong arm when things went pear-shaped. It hadn't taken them long to identify Lupin as one of the supplier's Runners (there was only one werewolf working for them, after all), and they didn't care to know whom Severus or Hermione were. Plausible deniability, she supposed.

Their plan was simple: lock the undesirables in a fortified cell with a werewolf just before the full moon, and let nature take its course. She had been horrified to learn that she would have to watch one friend eat the other, but upon mentioning this to Severus, he assured her that the bars were removable. They would both get eaten, and Lupin would be put down as a menace to society.

As daylight crept in through the tiny window, halfheartedly trying to chase the shadows out of their cells and giving it up as a lost cause, Severus sat leaning against the bars and thought of death. His death and Heidi's death, at the jaws of one of his schoolmates. He had escaped that fate once before at school, acquiring a life-debt to a shit of a boy and learning, once again, that authority figures had their favorites, and he wasn't one of them.

Running his fingers through Heidi's hair, he watched as one springy curl twisted around his fingers, stopping his progress. She was leaning against the bars dozing again, her head very nearly touching his shoulder. Her hair was dirty and snarled, but this particular lock he had combed through until it was a frizzy mass... except for the one curl. Patiently, he unwound it and separated the strands, working his fingers through it until there was no further resistance.

They had spent the final hours before dawn hashing and rehashing methods of escape. He and Lupin had done this very thing as she had slept, and though she had several new ideas, none of them were feasible. The room was tightly sealed; not even the window was a true egress. It had repelled the boot that he had thrown at it, leaving it singed and smoking. The Aurors had opened doorways in the stone cell walls to toss them in, but the doors had vanished into the walls after they had left. His collection of potions had been confiscated along with their wands and personal effects. No one would miss them until term started in a week, and by then it would be much too late. Their jailors could not be roused by any amount of yelling and hadn't even seen fit to feed them. The bottom line was that they were wandless, trapped, and waiting to die.

Severus had always thought that he would die at the hands of the Dark Lord or a Death Eater at the very least. Executed as a spy or the like. He might have welcomed it a year ago, but now... he was more than a little reluctant.

Heidi had been insistent that they would figure something out.

"Severus, you can't give up! You're going to do great things, I know it! We'll get out of this alive."

He had scoffed, but when she had reached for him through the bars, he had shifted closer until they sat shoulder to shoulder with her hand clutching one of his. For all her bravado, he knew that she was terrified. So was he.

Her hand still rested in his, the slender fingers relaxed and the skin cool. Pulling his other hand out of her hair, he traced the ridge of her knuckles with his thumb, noting the slightly chapped texture. Too much broom riding without gloves, he supposed. He should have thought of that earlier, when it would have made a difference.

Surprisingly for a man who tended to hold grudges with the tenacity of a bulldog, he was no longer angry with her for her deceit. From the moment the alarm had sounded in that accursed shop, concern for her well-being had overridden everything else. Not that it would do her any good in the long run, but he certainly felt better about it. His cruel words and harsh treatment of her now seemed like a foolish waste of time. To think that his last flight could have been spent with a warm, caring woman snuggled against him, but he had wasted it by pushing her away. Idiocy.

"Snape!" Lupin hissed at him from a corner in the cell. He was sitting with his back against the wall, his knees drawn to his chest.

Severus grunted in reply, still caressing her roughened knuckles. He didn't care that Lupin was watching him. His tolerance of Lupin had seen a drastic change in the past few hours as well. The enmity and old wounds that had lasted through their school years and into adulthood seemed to pale in importance when compared to imminent murder and death. Their quarrel had been all but abandoned while they had tested the limits of their cage and discussed means of escape, and they had struck an uneasy truce. He refused to call it *bonding*.

The werewolf sighed heavily, pulling Severus from his thoughts. "Look, Snape... I just wanted to say..."

"Spit it out, Lupin," he said resignedly, not really in the mood for an argument. Maybe in a few minutes, but not now.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry."

"How touching. The werewolf is *sorry*. Save your breath; apologizing *certainly* won't help." Bitterness crept into his voice. This was the man who would be attempting to *eat* them in a few hours, whether he felt bad about it now or not.

"Not that, though I'm sorry about that too..." He trailed off and then shook his head, a determined expression settling on his face. "I meant about our behavior in school. I knew that it was wrong, how they ganged up on you, but I never did anything to stop them. I was a lousy Prefect. And I would never have guessed that they would have led you to me in my changed form." He shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry."

A silence fell over the cell until Severus barked a short, humorless laugh and smiled wryly, threading his fingers between Heidi's. "Ah, but it was hatred at first sight, wasn't it?"

Lupin grinned lopsidedly. "That it was. And you were a right bastard with a mean hex."

"I still am." It was as much of an apology or forgiveness as he was inclined to give, and Lupin seemed to understand that.

"It's odd how we all turned out," Lupin said finally, running his hand against the sharp, brown stubble on his cheeks. "The darlings of Gryffindor: two murdered at the hands of their friends and two imprisoned. Who would have thought? Your path made much more sense..."

"Which part, becoming a Death Eater or betraying the Dark Lord?" He had to admit that it was an odd conversation. At any other time, he would have long since given Lupin a verbal lashing and perhaps a hexing to boot. It was surreal, oddly cathartic and helped keep the panic at bay.

"Both, I suppose. You really loved her, didn't you?"

Severus caught his breath a moment, shocked into speechlessness. He'd guarded that secret for years; as far as he knew, only Dumbledore had been aware... and the Dark Lord. It could only have been speculation on the werewolf's part, but at the moment, he felt little reluctance to admit it. What would it matter now? "Yes."

Lupin nodded. "I don't blame you. She was something else." It was Severus' turn to nod. "What about *her*?"

Severus gazed down at the curly head of hair pressed against the bars. Her head wound had left a flat spot where the hair had stuck to the scab. Sometime during their trip, she had taken out the elaborately coifed style that Madam had coaxed it into and let it run rampant down her back. It was impossible hair, really, and if his nose wasn't broken and aching, then he would have buried it in that matted rat's nest of curls and breathed her in.

What about her? In the spirit of being brutally honest, he had to consciously admit that his feelings for Heidi had transcended friendship and lust, though he hesitated to label them for what they might be. That she had become so very precious to him in so short a time was frightening.

"I'm fucked," he said, in lieu of an answer, but Lupin seemed to understand that, too.

"There could be worse things," he sighed.

They were silent for a long while. Morning had come, and it was fast approaching noon when Lupin spoke again.

"Snape!"

"What?" he snapped.

"If you kill me before the moon rises, then it will buy you more time."

They had discussed this option already, and Severus had to admit to being tempted, though not as much as he had expected. He wasn't denying that he wouldn't mind seeing the wolf suffer a bit at his hands, but he had never had the stomach for murder. Unfortunately, if Lupin wasn't killed, then there was a high probability that he would kill them instead. Then there were the Aurors, who fully intended that he and Hermione not leave the Canterbury station alive. So, it was kill and be killed... but he quailed at the thought of cutting down a man on his knees, pleading for death. Though it would be much more difficult, he would rather face Lupin in a fair fight, even if he were in his wolf form. His honor, something Dumbledore had mentioned he lacked, prevented it. However, he wasn't about to explain this to Lupin.

"So that they can starve us to death?" As if to make a point, Severus' stomach growled audibly.

"It might attract their attention, bring them into the cells. You could ambush them."

Severus eyed him narrowly. The only other time they had caught a glimpse of their jailor was when he had come in to gloat about their fate. Though caught off guard, he and Lupin had lunged for him, only to be repulsed by an invisible, magically charged barrier before they got too close. They had both dropped to the floor, twitching violently from the jolt. The barrier had dissipated after the Auror had left. "Yes, because we were so *very* successful last time."

"Are you just going to give up and die?" Lupin yelled suddenly, shooting to his feet. "I don't want to eat her! And, though I would happily *punch* you right now, I don't want to eat you, either!"

"Who is going to eat whom?" Heidi asked mussily, shifting her shoulders against the bars and squeezing his hand.

Severus directed a nasty smile at the werewolf, who was pacing the small room and tearing at his hair. "Lupin is going to eat us, my dear."

Rounding on them, Lupin shouted, "Not if you kill me first!" He started pacing again at Heidi's horrified gasp.

"No one is going to kill or eat anyone!" She tried to pull away, but he held her fast, unwilling to let her go. Leaning back against him, she reached through the bars for his other hand and held them both on one of his thighs. "We are *going* to get through this. Come on, now. What haven't we thought of yet?"

Daylight bled out of the little window, creeping up the wall and trailing darkness like a thick, black cloak. Hermione sat against the wall with her legs stretched out in front of her, watching it with unbelieving eyes. She couldn't understand how it had come to this and was still waiting for someone to jump out and yell, "Surprise!" Where was Dumbledore, or the Order, or *Lucius Malfoy*, for heaven's sake? Weren't they always showing up at unexpected times, wreaking havoc or pulling their asses out of the fire? One would think that Dumbledore would keep an eye on Severus, at the very least, because of his amazing capacity for mixing with the wrong crowd. How ironic that she could now be considered the "wrong crowd."

They couldn't die. *Couldn't*. How would the world change without the influence of these two men? Was everything lost? Hermione refused to believe it.

Laying flat on his back with the top of his head pressed against the bars by her hip, his hands folded on his chest and his ankles crossed, Severus resignedly watch the day wan, musing that he had never gotten to kiss the woman next to him. He didn't deserve to, but he couldn't bring himself to care. This wasn't the time and place to think about it, however. He should be gearing himself up for hand-to-hand combat with a werewolf. It was just a pity he couldn't do those mental exercises with his head in her

lap. Then again, if he could put his head in her lap, then he wouldn't just lay there.

He let several rather lascivious fantasies play behind his eyes, indulging in a way he hadn't allowed himself before. He did *not* permit himself to feel guilty. Lily would understand or wouldn't *care* (to be perfectly honest, for she had chosen another), and she wasn't here. *That* guilt he did feel, more as a dull ache than a withering heat, and he hadn't even gotten a chance to...

Ah, well. It was pointless to dwell on it; the shadows had enveloped the cells, and the lonely patch of sky through the window was now an ominous shade of indigo. He was bone-weary, aching, and although he would put up a good fight when Lupin finally transformed, he was somewhat resigned to dying. Heidi he would protect with tooth and nail, but he was pragmatic, if not downright pessimistic, and he held no real hope for escape. And, Heidi's fingers felt delicious against his prickly jaw line, one ragged nail scratching absently at his five o'clock shadow. It tickled, but not enough to bother him. In fact, it would bother him much more if she stopped. He was shamefully glad that Lupin had chosen to sit as far away from them as possible, on the off chance that she wanted to pet him as well.

Huddled in the darkest corner, Lupin sat with his arms wrapped around his knees and his head buried, as if he could hide away from the rising moon. Severus felt a momentary pang of pity for the man; he was well familiar with the despair of knowing that one is the cause of the harm that would befall a friend. At least he had had the opportunity to undo his mistake, for all the good it had done her.

'Fancy that,' he thought with a self-deprecating smile. 'I've got something in common with the beast.' The epithet had lost much of its rancor, and he was even more amazed that they seemed to have come to some sort of understanding. 'Wouldn't Dumbledore be proud?'

He sighed and sent the old man a long, conflicted thought. A thank you for accepting him back into the Light and a curse for failing to keep Lily safe; a regret he wouldn't be able to fulfill his debt to the Potter brat and gladness that he would not have to see the Dark Lord rise again. Most of all, he wished that he could have had the chance to prove that he wasn't the hopeless lowlife that Dumbledore believed him to be.

"*You disgust me*," he'd said that harrowing night on the hilltop when he'd begged for Lily's protection. It still rang harshly in his ears.

"Erm, Severus?" More than her voice, Heidi's hand leaving his cheek drew him out of his thoughts. "Your jacket is glowing." Reaching until her shoulder was wedged between the bars, she gingerly touched a spot on his chest that glowed faintly luminescent through his sable jacket.

In his corner, Lupin whimpered softly.

A/N: Sorry for the wait the holiday weekend stepped on my posting schedule. Thanks to all of you for your feedback.

Full Moon Risen

Chapter 15 of 20

The full moon rises and the fun begins.

Disclaimer: Don't own it

Edited by thyme_is_a_cat

A/N: Just a note, in case you didn't see the warnings: this chapter gets a tad violent.

Severus stared at the front of his jacket in confusion. It was, indeed, glowing. His brow furrowed for a moment, and then he sat up, scrabbling at his buttons, clumsy in his haste to undo them.

"Severus, what are you..." Heidi was watching him with her face pressed against the bars.

The suit he was wearing had been his grandfather's on his mother's side. Pericles Prince had been a crafty, distrustful man who had woven secrets into everyday life just for the sake of being devious. The old man had gone barking mad by the time Severus had turned seven, but not before drilling into him the importance of keeping one's secrets close to the chest literally. After his death, he had been honored and slightly uneasy to receive many of the nutter's personal effects, including most of his wardrobe. It hadn't fit him as an adolescent, but he had worn it anyway, delighting in the numerous secret pockets, Do-Not-Notice-Me spells and anti-theft traps worked into the garments. He had grown into most of them since, making alterations as necessary and hoping that he wasn't damaging any of the mysteries he had yet to reveal. It didn't especially surprise him that this jacket would have a hidden pocket that he had missed when he had first inspected it. Apparently, the Aurors had missed it, as well.

Leaving the bottom buttons closed, he thrust his hand into his jacket, delving through the myriad little slits in the fabric. There was the one that had held his potions bag empty of course though this was where he had intended to put the blasted thing... and there was the one where he had stored his money, also empty... He swore colorfully, pushing his fingers into each opening and finding nothing, not even a telltale bulge. But if he had gotten the damned thing *in*, then he could get it *out*.

"Severus?" Heidi asked again, gripping his shoulder.

"The Starglass," he hissed at her quietly, smiling when she gasped. "I saw it in the storeroom just before we were captured. I was sure they had confiscated it... Bloody secret pocket..."

Her response was lost in the sudden, deafening screeching of metal on stone. Rising from holes in the floor, the bars retracted into the ceiling. Heidi released his shoulder and scuttled away from the bars, watching their rapid progress with naked terror. As one, they turned their faces toward the tiny window, eyes straining for a glimpse of pallid light on the dark velvet curtain of the sky. With a heavy *clunk*, the bars vanished into the ceiling, and the screeching ceased. Silence, except for Lupin's quiet whimpering, gripped the cell.

Abandoning his search for the Starglass, which had stopped glowing anyway, Severus scrambled to his feet, searching for Heidi's dark shape in the now combined cell. He found her rising to her feet, holding the chipped ceramic jug and metal basin from her side of the cell. Her face was set with grim determination, and she stood with her legs slightly splayed, balanced on the balls of her feet. Disheveled, filthy and braced for battle, she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

"Stay behind me," Severus said as he covered the distance in several long strides, snatching his own bedpan from the floor of the cell. The jug he left behind, wanting one

hand free.

Heidi pursed her lips. "What if we knocked him out now, before he's changed?"

Shaking his head, Severus replied, "It would trigger the transformation faster, and then we would have an enraged werewolf on our hands instead of just a hungry one."

"You aren't an Animagus by any chance, are you?" she asked him under her breath as she sidled up to his side and, to his pleasure and relief, slightly behind him.

"No, why, are you?" he replied, just as quietly. They both watched the huddled form of their companion unwaveringly, readying themselves for the moment that he would begin transforming.

She sighed in his ear, and he was sorely tempted to turn his face toward her and capture those lips in a kiss. "Unfortunately not. He wouldn't pay so much attention to you if you weren't human."

"And might I ask how that would help you?" he asked as she stepped around him, turning to face him. His heart clenched painfully in his chest as he darted glances between her and the man on the floor, resisting a powerful urge to yank her back behind him.

"Listen to me, Severus," she said quickly, earnestly, her dark eyes wide in her pale, dirt-smudged face. "You can't die tonight; too much depends upon you. No, listen," she repeated when he started to protest. "I know this for the same reason that I can't tell you my real name."

Lupin's whimpers became harsher, lowering and roughening into growls. His body jerked suddenly, his feet scraping against the stone floor.

Severus scowled at her, not liking what she was implying. She confirmed his unease by continuing with, "If it comes down to it, you must save *yourself*. Now, look again!" She gestured at the front of his jacket, but he was forestalled by a loud, pained moan that was punctuated by sharp cracking and visceral popping of joints.

"Oh, no," Hermione whispered, whirling toward the commotion in time to watch Lupin's form rise and elongate in one long, wet, ripping sound. His face lengthened and narrowed as sharp incisors sprang from upper and lower jaws. Shreds of clothing fell away as thick, brown fur grew into a shaggy pelt. Arms and legs twisted into haunches and forelegs, the joints realigning to resemble that of a wolf's. With a shudder that shook his lupine form, a thin tail grew from his spine, ending in a damp tuft. Throwing his head back, the beast that had been Lupin let loose a howl that ricocheted off the stone walls enclosing them, vibrating the very marrow of their bones.

He shook his head and sneezed, then shook the rest of his body, discarding the few pieces of clothing that still remained. Flexing his shoulders, he lifted his body until he was standing on his haunches and sniffed the air, then swiveled his head to fix the humans in the cell with a feral snarl.

Hermione stood as if transfixed, still in disbelief that she was trapped in a jail cell with a werewolf. 'It isn't supposed to happen this way!' she protested silently to any being that might be listening. Anything she might have added to that was lost as Severus' hand twisted in the back of her dress and yanked her backward and behind him.

Growling deep in his chest, an almost phlegmy rumble, Lupin snapped his jaws at them, ribbons of saliva leaking between his sharp incisors and splattering on the stone floor. Wide eyes, bloodshot and almost human-shaped, stared balefully at them, though nothing of Lupin shone through. Still standing in his corner, he flexed his clawed fingers, the joints cracking in diminished homage to the transformation they had just endured.

Hardly daring to breathe, Hermione watched him without blinking, afraid that if she so much as twitched an eyelid, then she would miss Lupin's inevitable attack. Blood pounded in her ears, tension hummed in her limbs, yet she felt oddly disassociated, as if she were standing an inch out of her skin. Severus was as taut as a bowstring in front of her, his formidable attention focused on their adversary. His sallow knuckles were white as they clenched around the rim of the basin. For a timeless moment, they stood still as stone, eyes transfixed on the werewolf that stretched and flexed only a few good strides away from them. Dark, wet lips stretching back in a toothy leer, his hairy body bunched onto all four limbs... and uncoiled in a smooth, effortless leap toward them.

Severus reacted instantly, flinging an arm to the side to coral her behind him as he raised the basin to defend them. Only a fraction of a second slower, Hermione ducked under his arm and darted for another corner, howling like a wolf as she ran hunchbacked with the basin held over her head. In the moments she had spent watching him, Hermione had decided that Severus would have a much better shot at disabling the werewolf if he could attack from the back which left her as bait. She was only somewhat relieved that her diversion had worked when Lupin's elongated muzzle snapped toward her, and he twisted at the apex of his jump, landing in a crouch in the center of the cell, his eyes rolling to follow her progress.

"Get him!" she shrieked at Severus, whom she could see no longer. Her voice sounded shrill and brittle in her own ears, and Lupin sniffed the air, salivating at the scent of her fear.

She didn't have time to explain further, for with a sloppy swipe of his long tongue over his lips, Lupin lunged for her, jaws open and outstretched. Swinging her arm with force born of adrenaline, she smashed the jug into his nose, wincing at the thick crunch of pottery breaking against bone. Rearing back on his hind limbs, he shook his head wildly, sneezing mucus and blood into the air in great, noisy bursts. A metallic tone punctuated the air when Severus finally took her advice, braining their companion with his basin. Lupin howled with fury and spun toward this new attacker, wobbling slightly on his axis. Wasting no time, Hermione hefted her own basin, and though it was a reach, she managed to bash it into the base of his skull. She didn't bother to wait for the werewolf's attention to turn back to her; forcing out a breathless howl, she sprinted for another corner, hoping that his disorientation would buy them a few more moments. Claws caught in the back of her dress, scraping the skin and drawing jagged lines of pain down her back. Her howl contorted into a scream as another set of claws tangled in her hair, and a spray of hot saliva wet the back of her neck. The gong of metal on skull reverberated through the cell, and the claws retracted, taking with them several buttons and a good many strands of hair. Panting with fright, Hermione twirled where she stood, striking out with her basin at the teeth that were snapping far too close to her face. He snarled and lunged again, ignoring Severus' repetitive bell-toned whacks from behind.

In the din of metal on werewolf skull, screaming and growling, a voice shouted, "Stupefy!"

Red light engulfed Lupin, and he swung toward this new source of pain, howling in rage. Hermione hardly had a moment to process this new development before a lean, hard body slammed into hers, dragging her off of her feet and toward a door-sized hole that had opened in the cell wall. A wash of sweaty, masculine musk that had become one of her favorite scents engulfed her, and she clung tightly, winding her arms around his neck and trying to ignore the pain in her back where his sleeve chafed against her wounds.

Two young Aurors stood in the antechamber beyond, wands pointed steadily at them as they stumbled out of the cell, closely followed by the wizard that had been attempting to stun Lupin into submission. A furious howl shook the small chamber, startling the Aurors, as the doorway solidified into stone blocks.

"E's cheesed off," one Auror, just out of his teens with a smattering of spots on his chin, joked nervously to the man on his right.

A scant few years older and dough-faced to his coworker's sharp angles, the other Auror said, "You'd be too, if you missed a bite 'o that crumpet." He leered at Hermione, who still held fast to Severus as he panted harshly. He didn't seem ready to let go of Hermione, either.

"Shut it, you two." The third Auror, grim-faced and well into middle age, raised his wand to point directly at his captives. "We have business to take care of before we hand them over."

Hermione didn't like the sound of that, and apparently, neither did Severus, for he spun his body to shield her away from the eyes of the Aurors and flung his basin directly at the eldest Auror. The ridged rim hit him squarely in the forehead, knocking him out cold. Wasting no time, Hermione pulled out of his arms and with a warrior yell, ran at the Auror who had eyed her. Obviously unprepared for a full frontal attack from a wild-haired madwoman, the man was too slow in casting his spell and was slammed backward as Hermione tackled him. His back struck a heavy wooden door, and it swung open under their combined weight. Landing straddled on the man's chest and soaring on a brittle, jittery adrenaline high, she raised the basin high over her head and brought it down with a satisfying crunch.

The man below her screamed shrilly and flailed at her with empty hands, his wand having fallen and skittered out of reach. A second pair of hands hooked under her armpits, hauling her up, and she twisted her torso away, swinging her basin at the unseen attacker. Immediately, she was released.

"For fuck's sake, Heidi, it's me!" Severus exclaimed, dodging out of reach and into sight. Scrambling off the Auror, Hermione gave him a slightly maniacal grin, toothy and wide, and took his outstretched hand.

"Severus, my boy." A deceptively mild voice spoke, one that Hermione had never thought to hear again in her lifetime. "You missed a mandatory staff meeting. I'm sure that you have a good explanation."

Finally taking stock of this new room, Severus and Hermione turned as one toward the owner of the voice: a tall, wizened wizard with a long, white beard and clear, blue eyes. His royal blue robes had bright, red phoenixes embroidered in sparkly thread, and he was giving them both a stern look from his seat on a comfortably padded bench. Pale and visibly sweating, another young Auror was standing next to him, glancing nervously between the old wizard, his former captives, and three Aurors lying in groaning heaps on the floor.

"Sir, these people are dangerous thieves. We caught them..." He broke off mid-sentence when the old wizard raised a wrinkled hand.

"Headmaster," Severus said politely, as if he hadn't just been brawling with law enforcement in what must have appeared to be attempted escape from jail.

On the polished wood floor, Hermione's victim wailed and rolled to his side as he held his gushing nose.

"I think, my dear, that you have broken that young man's nose," Dumbledore directed this next comment to Hermione.

She swallowed thickly and blinked, trying not to betray her utter joy and sudden heartbreak to see the old wizard alive and well, making wholly inappropriate understatement. He was one of the last wizards she had wanted to see in the past, only for the fact that it wouldn't take him much effort to glean what she would rather keep hidden, though she fervently hoped that he would respect her privacy. It wouldn't be the first time he had deliberately ignored a person's secrets. Clearing her throat and pleading with her eyes for him to take her at face value, she replied, "I was simply returning a favor."

Severus snorted wetly next to her and then wiped a trickle of blood from one long nostril. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her to his side. Hermione sagged against him, but one of his buttons dug into the gouges in her back and she winced, hissing in pain and arching her back.

His hand flying to the torn fabric at her back, Severus frowned deeply. "Heidi, these scratches..."

"It's alright," she said quickly. "It's only the *bite* of the werewolf that can cause infection."

"Perhaps," he said as he gently prodded the sundered flesh. "But he drooled all over you." With his sleeve, he wiped carefully at the back of her neck and shoulder blades. "If enough saliva gets into these wounds..."

The Auror cleared his throat and attempted to speak again. "Sir, I really must protest..."

Dumbledore held up another quelling hand, watching the interplay between Severus and Hermione with thinly veiled interest, his blue eyes following the motions of Severus' hands with something akin to wonderment. "I did not realize that it was the policy of law enforcement to jail alleged thieves in the same cell as a werewolf on the full moon."

"Sir, we didn't know..."

This time, it was Severus who cut him off. "You might reconsider your words. If the intention of that dunderhead," he said as he gestured through the door at the eldest Auror, still groaning and barely conscious on the floor, "was to Obliviate us, then he has failed."

The young Auror snapped his mouth shut and looked ready to flee. Hermione supposed that the only thing stopping him was Dumbledore, though by enchantment or force of presence, she wasn't sure. She *did* know, however, that Dumbledore knew more than he was letting on, simply by the fact that the injured Aurors were still lying on the floor, and no reinforcements had arrived. As usual, Dumbledore seemed to have the situation under control, though he seemed to be waiting for something. The Professor Dumbledore that she had known would have whisked them off to a Healer by now, but she was neither his student, nor he her Headmaster, and he clearly wanted answers.

"Sir," she said, deciding now was as good a time as any to try to explain their circumstances. "There really is a good reason for all of this." She winced again as Severus pulled a scrap of material from one of the wounds on her back. "You see, something was stolen from me, and Professor Snape and Mr. Lupin were helping me get it back. We had tracked it down to a particular store, but it was closed by the time we arrived. I, erm. I wanted to take a look, just to confirm, you see, and Professor Snape tried to deter me, but I insisted. I accidentally tripped the alarm..."

Severus took over the story from there, cutting her off. "They locked us together, knowing that Lupin would change tonight, intending to rid themselves of the lot of us. They are protecting a ring of thieves and distributors of stolen goods. Lupin can give you names and places."

"That is good news." The old wizard stroked his long beard and gave Hermione, who was desperately trying not to fidget, an appraising stare. "And I see that you are in want of medical attention, Miss..."

"Greenglass," Hermione supplied, carefully not making eye contact. Severus' breath on the back of her neck was raising a rash of gooseflesh across her shoulders and down her arms, and she wasn't sure if it was his fingers on her bare skin or the adrenaline leeching from her blood that was turning her knees to jelly. "Professor Snape does, as well."

"Of course," he agreed urbanely. "And poor Mr. Lupin and these Aurors. Though I suspect they will be faced with a change of occupation." His eyes finally regained their familiar twinkle. It broke something deep inside of Hermione, and tiny hysterical bubbles rose from the pit of her stomach to pop in her throat, releasing giggles that even she did not recognize. Severus slanted her an odd look, but what had been single bubbles was now an effervescent expulsion of tension and panic, and what had been giggles were now great belly laughs, loud and raucous. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she clutched her stomach, leaning against Severus for support. She couldn't have said what was so funny; it was ridiculous, her laughter, and that made her laugh until she wheezed. Abandoning her back, Severus wrapped an arm around her shoulders and curled her into his chest as if to hide her imminent breakdown from Dumbledore. And breaking down she was: her laughter dissolved into sobs, and she twisted her fingers into his velvet jacket, uncaring that several of his many buttons were denting her forehead and cheeks. Who could care about such trivial things when the world as she knew it had survived by such a monumental coincidence as Albus Dumbledore showing up at the nick of time?

As if following her train of thought, Severus asked Dumbledore over the top of her head, "How did you know to come, Headmaster?"

"It is as I said: you missed a staff meeting yesterday morning. You didn't answer your Floo or urgent post, either." He sent a stern look over the rim of half-moon spectacles at the young man before him, and then his face softened, becoming thoughtful. "And then this evening I had the most startling notion..."

"What is it that was stolen from Miss Greenglass, Severus?"

The abrupt change of subject almost put him off guard, but he recovered quickly. "Merely a family heirloom."

"I see," said the old wizard. Severus had the uncomfortable feeling that he probably did straight through him. "I suppose we should get Miss Greenglass to a Healer to assess her condition. The moon is still full tonight."

"What about Lupin? We cannot simply leave him here," he said, surprising himself. It seemed that he managed to surprise Dumbledore, as well, for he found himself the recipient of a long, searching stare.

"I will worry about poor Mr. Lupin, my boy. See to your friend."

Severus took a sip of scalding tea and relished its aromatic burn across his tongue. With the fingers of his other hand, he scratched behind the ears of a fluffy, orange cat with a squashed face and bottlebrush tail. She would leave a mess of orange cat hair on his black robes, but he was much too contented to shove the cat away, sprawled as he was in one of Madam Beetlebump's iron garden chairs. It was a foreign feeling, contentment, and it had crept up on him as the warm, late summer sun soaked into his robes, and Heidi's warmer smile caressed his soul. She wasn't a werewolf, and though he wouldn't have thought less of her had she been infected, he was mightily glad. His nose had been set straight. It had seemed silly to him that he had been afraid that it would be crooked, considering its ugliness before it had been broken, but there it was: another thing for which he was glad.

All charges of robbery against them had been dropped, and a large-scale bust of a ring of thieves and stolen goods distributors, not to mention several crooked Aurors, had earned the three of them Orders of Merlin, third class. Heidi had tried to decline, and the Ministry had attempted to exclude Lupin, but Dumbledore would hear none of it. All three of them had received their medals in the Minister's office from the Minister, himself, followed by a handshake from the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was immensely pleased with himself, even if he had to share the honor with Lupin.

He had spent the last week in semi-productive leisure. Heidi had accompanied him on several errands both in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, some in preparation for the school year and some (he wasn't ashamed to admit, but only to himself) completely contrived. His Plan was always simmering at the back of his mind, but it was on a low flame and was easy to leave off for later when there were streets to stroll, tea to sip, or quiet park benches on which to sit. Not even the looming start of term could put much of a dent in his equanimity when he imagined peaceful weekends spent with Heidi.

And to top it all off, Dumbledore had begun to treat him with a newfound gentleness and respect. He didn't understand what had precipitated the change, and the suspicious, untrusting side of his nature wanted to analyze it until he found Dumbledore's true motives, but he wasn't going to complain.

The only true dark cloud on the moment was the werewolf sitting to his left, pale and haggard after his confinement during the full moon, although his dislike for the man was more habit than anything of substance. He attributed the lessening of hostility to the bit of comeuppance that the werewolf had received at his own hands and the fact that he was now reticent towards Heidi, maintaining a careful distance and treating her as if his very presence would somehow break her, and left it at that.

"I have already said that I would," Severus said irritably to yet another of Lupin's protests, setting his teacup carefully in its saucer. "There are few enough entertainments during the school year that brewing Wolfsbane will be a diversion."

Heidi beamed at him, and he nibbled a biscuit to disguise his own smile. Lupin mumbled his thanks into his tea, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the tabletop.

"I daresay it will be a relief to Heidi that you won't be about menacing the locals," he couldn't help but add, smirking at the lady of topic when she kicked his shin.

"What Severus *means* is that I'll be happy that you'll have some control over it; some peace of mind," Hermione said gently to the fringe of brown hair that was hiding most of Lupin's face.

He looked like he was more inclined to believe Severus' words, but he nodded anyway. "Your, um. The scratches. Are they healing well?" he finally asked haltingly.

"They're healing fine, Remus. I'll suffer no ill effects." She was lying, Severus knew. Though her wounds had not put her in danger of contracting lycanthropy, they had resisted healing and would most definitely scar. When the Healer at St. Mungo's had broken this news to them, she had simply shrugged and named them the most recent of many. He'd wanted to kiss her.

An awkward silence fell over the group, disturbed only by the soft susurrus of the wind through the trees, lazy birdcalls and the quiet muttering of Madam Beetlebump to her cats as she pattered along the garden path.

"What are you going to do now?" Heidi finally asked, spinning her teacup slowly in place in its saucer. Severus thought that she probably felt guilty for losing Lupin his job, even if she hadn't approved of him running stolen merchandise.

Raising his head, Lupin met her eyes briefly and then glanced away to stare at the garden fence. "The Headmaster is looking into it. He said that his brother might need help at his inn."

She nodded, looking pleased. "Madam will need help soon, too. I won't be staying here much longer. Perhaps..." Both Heidi and Lupin jumped and snapped their heads toward Severus. He fumbled with the teacup that he had just upset, mopping at the puddle of tea that was rapidly seeping into the cracks between the tiles and spreading toward the table's edge. The cat on his lap flattened her ears and glared up at him, digging her claws into his thighs against his sudden flurry of movement. Whisking her serviette from her lap, Heidi sopped up the last of the tea and, retrieving his soggy serviette, dropped them both in a pile on the tea tray. Severus tried to keep his face neutral as his contentment leaked out of him as if he had sprung a gasket in the pit of his stomach. He quickly realized that he was fooling no one, for Heidi was giving him a miserable look, and Lupin stood suddenly, almost spilling his own tea in the process.

"I had better get going," he said as they stood with him, Severus brushing the cat off his lap impatiently. "Thank you so much for the tea." He nodded to both of them, shooting Severus a sympathetic glance that he met with a sneer, and then nodded to Madam's rounded posterior, which was swaying in the midst of a patch of lavender. "Madam," he said respectfully and hurried out the garden gate.

Severus stared at the top of the table, his gaze wandering absently over the mosaic design. It was a cat, of course: a sleek, exotic breed with a fawn colored body and dark points, and it held mysticism in its slitted, blue eyes. Almost unmoving, it sat regally on a golden tufted cushion and regarded him with an air of haughty derision. After all, he had just spilt tea on it.

"I shall be going, as well," he said, still staring at the tabletop. She was leaving soon. The knowledge was a hot blade in his gut, lancing out that last bit of happiness that might have tarried. He should have known not to get too comfortable with her. How could he have forgotten, even for a moment, her assumed identity that she refused to discard? Her mysterious ability to disappear as if she had never existed? She would leave, and she wouldn't be coming back.

He was a fool.

"Severus..."

"I have a staff meeting to attend," he snapped, cutting her off. He did have one, more's the pity. How he was going to sit through one of those exercises in tedium with his heart bleeding out was beyond him. He would manage; he always did, but not with anything that resembled good grace.

"Severus, don't be like this. You must have known." He spared her a glance and was met with her entreaty brown eyes.

Immediately on the defensive, he drew himself up and stared her down, twisting his face into a mask of bored indifference. "Don't flatter yourself. Whether you come or go has little bearing on me. In fact, I look forward to that happy day when you no longer darken my door."

Her eyes widened and began to shimmer with moisture. Briefly, her lips, shining with a tinted gloss that she favored, pursed together, and he found his gaze drawn hungrily to them. Her hurt was a palpable thing, and he forced himself to relish it; that had been his intent, after all, to hurt her as she was hurting him. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, then. I've appreciated your help and... if you'll still let me, I want to help with your project."

"Indeed," he said coldly, crossing his arms over his chest in a futile attempt to trap the residual warmth of the summer in his body. "We must pay our debts, mustn't we?"

"Don't twist my words around!" she hissed at him and stepped close to him, leaning forward with her hands planted on her hips. "I don't *want* to go; I don't have a *choice*."

"Ah, but everyone has a choice," he said at his most silky. 'And I'm not hers,' he added silently, though from the gathering pools of liquid on her bottom lashes, he suspected that she had somehow understood it. Suddenly, like a punch to his gut, he was struck with a thought: there was someone else.

"It's complicated," she whispered.

Her words seemed to confirm his suspicion. Of course there was: a witch like her would be bound to have a wizard of her own. He had been an idiot to hope, to dream... and yet, she cared for him. He could read it in her eyes, taste it on her words. Just not enough.

Steeling his will, he distanced himself, stepping away from her and locking down the pathetic flights of fancy that had centered on this woman for too long. He had allowed himself to become distracted, had lost sight of his goal.

"You will bring the Starglass to Spinner's End in three day's time. That is all of your... *help*... that I require," he sneered. No more afternoon teas, no more strolls through Hogsmeade. He would purge himself of his regard for her and begin preparations. He had almost everything he needed except the Starglass, and she would deliver it to him. Without waiting for her agreement, he swept past her and left through the garden gate.

Hermione sniffled and blinked away the tears that were threatening to fall. Gathering the tea things mechanically, she said to the cat, which was lapping at a small puddle of tea that had escaped the table to dribble onto the ground, "Please tell Madam that I'll be gone for a couple of days. There is something at home that I need to take care of."

The cat gave her an arch look and returned to the tea. Sighing, she carried the service into the kitchen and made short work of the washing up. Once all of the dishes had been dried and put away, she trudged up the narrow staircase to her room to retrieve the Starglass. Severus' meeting had given her the perfect opportunity to make a trip home without him aware that she was using his well.

For the past several days since their near-disastrous imprisonment, she had felt a rising urge to go home to the present and verify that all was well... or not. She had changed things; she knew it. Never, in all of her years attending Hogwarts, chatting with members of the Order of the Phoenix, or researching the life of Severus Snape for A.A.S.S., had she ever learned that Snape had earned an Order of Merlin in his twenties. It may have been a factor of not asking the right questions, but she doubted it. The information would have been unearthed before now, had it existed. She was terrified, at a primal level, of what her world might have become. Would she, possibly having a different set of memories than the rest of the population, even have a place in it anymore?

And then there was Ron. She had assumed that they would get married eventually. Have a child or two. But now she was wondering if that was the best thing for her. If she loved Ron, then how could she want Severus? *Did* she still love Ron romantically? Would it be fair to Ron to tie him to her when her attention strayed so easily to another man? Not that she had done anything, per se, but her heart had cheated in a thousand tiny ways. Would it be fair to *herself* to continue with a relationship to which she obviously wasn't committed and wasn't even sure that she wanted? What if... what if she had already married Ron in this new future? The idea filled her with dread, and she trembled at the thought of so many possibilities, of not knowing into what she would be throwing herself.

So, she had dawdled in the past with Severus, spinning borrowed time into a succession of pleasant moments that she had wished would never end. Closing her eyes against reality, she had pretended that his life stretched long and happily before him and that she had a place in it, all the while trying to convince herself that to kiss him now would certainly be considered cheating, even if the kiss were to take place almost twenty years before her relationship with Ron.

It was time to face the music. She didn't belong here. Ron or no Ron, she couldn't have a relationship with Severus because he was dead. The only thing to do was to be true to herself and face her fears. She had a few days before she had to return to deliver the Starglass into Severus' hands. It would give her time to assess the damage she had caused and analyze her heart.

Hopefully, Severus would have cooled off in the intervening three days and gotten over this latest snit so that she could enjoy the last precious minutes she had with him. She didn't, for an instant, believe that his behavior had been anything other than that of a wounded animal striking out at the closest thing in reach. He couldn't have expected her to stay indefinitely. Just the same, she could have handled that much better; had intended to, in fact. The news of her immanent departure had just... slipped out. She didn't blame him for being angry.

A quick search under her pillow revealed the Starglass. The crystal phial sparkled cheerfully in the bright, summer sunlight streaming in through her window. Fine and pale, the dust at the bottom shifted with gravity as she held it to the light and watched as rainbows danced across the hardwood floor.

It had been in his jacket during their imprisonment. She thought it funny now, but they certainly could have used its help at the time. As she had done many times since that day, she pulled the memory of him lying in the cell, a large spot on his chest glowing with a muted white light. Perhaps, it *had* helped them by bringing Dumbledore, somehow. Severus couldn't explain it, and since she hadn't been in his head when the glowing had occurred, neither could she.

It had taken them almost an hour to find the hidden pocket in which he had stashed it. Heavily ensorcelled, the jacket hadn't given up its secret easily. Only after threatening to tear out its lining did Severus finally find the tiny compartment behind one of the more used pockets.

Clutching the little bottle in her hand, she fixed Severus' well firmly in mind, gathering her determination. It was time to go home.

A/N: No cliffhanger this week! Aren't I a good girl? No? Ah well...

Not My Life

Chapter 16 of 20

Hermione returns to the future and finds things different than how she left them.

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Edited by thyme_is_a_cat.

Crookshanks was waiting at the door when Hermione let herself into her flat in London. The familiarity of his squashed, orange face was enough to send a current of relief through her limbs; maybe things hadn't changed as much as she had feared.

After tumbling forward through time, she had come straight home, her eyes determinedly fixed away from Severus' house. She would deal with it later. Her explorations of this potentially altered present had to begin from a safe haven where she could ground herself and hide away if need be. Home.

Her flat was as she had left it: comfortably furnished without too much attention to style, not exactly cluttered, but having a lived-in feel. Large windows looked over a wide, tree-lined boulevard. Books were crammed into several different bookcases dispersed about the domicile, and numerous photographs decorated the mantle above the fireplace. Smiling, she wandered over to the photographs.

"This is my real life, isn't it, Crookshanks?" She scooped his limp, furry body into her arms and cuddled him to her face, breathing in his slightly musky kitty scent. Though unresisting, he did give her an eye as he allowed the indignity, putting a paw on her shoulder and sniffing her mouth delicately. She kissed him lightly on the nose, to his apparent disgust, as he licked it clean a moment later. Cuddling him happily, she smiled, comparing this homecoming to her last one when he wouldn't speak to her. She was glad that she had had the neighbor come by to give him some company, and fortunately, that neighbor expected her to be gone for another week and would continue to check in on him. Finally tired of his stint as a plushie, Crookshanks squirmed, and Hermione let him leap from her arms. She watched him trot from the living room into the kitchen before turning her attention back to the photographs.

Several seconds later, she wished she had followed him into the kitchen for a drop of something bracing first.

The photos taken during their years at Hogwarts seemed about the same, the three of them laughing with their arms around each other's shoulders, until she found the one of the summer before their fourth year. Harry stood between them. Ron had that splotchy, guilty look he got when he had been caught doing something wrong and was shooting unhappy glances at her photographed self. In turn, she would glare at him, her arms crossed over her chest before turning to smile falsely at the camera. What on earth? And why had she framed such an unpleasant photograph?

It took her a few incredulous moments to place the next photo. She and Victor Krum were standing in a loose embrace in front of the Durmstrang ship as its sails unfurled, and a small line of black clad people trundled up a long gangplank. He pulled her close, and she grinned, turning her face toward him so that he could plant a kiss on her lips. She seemed to enjoy it thoroughly.

She almost sighed in relief when she saw the shot of her fifth-year Christmas until she noticed Professor Snape and Lupin lurking in the background under a thick garland of fir branches sharing words over a cup of something. In the foreground, Sirius repeatedly ruffled Harry's messy black hair and jostled his shoulders, his beaming smile slightly frantic at the edges, but it was Snape and Lupin chatting companionably that stayed her eyes.

"Impossible," she whispered to the empty room, wiping clammy palms on her thighs. Her heart fluttered in her throat, and a dense coil of fear was tightening in her chest. Snape had never stayed at Grimmauld Place for longer than he had to, and certainly not to spend time with Lupin. What had she done?

The next photo was of Bill and Fleur's wedding, but instead of just the three of them, there were six: Lavender clung to Ron's arm like a painted lamprey, Ginny and Harry stood close together, hands clasped discreetly and almost hidden by her skirts, and she stood arm-in-arm with... She closed her eyes a moment, trying to place the boy's name to his face. Ah, yes. Anthony Goldstein. Scrubbing her face with her hands, she let out a deep breath, trying to still the rising panic. They didn't seem to be an item, for they stood rather stiffly, but who knew what had happened between them later? Everyone but her, apparently.

The next two photos were also of weddings: Harry and Ginny's and Ron and Lavender's. Placing a hand on her chest, she staggered back to the couch, not wanting to peruse them closely. The rest of the pictures could wait until the roaring in her ears had quieted to a manageable level. She collapsed into the cushions, flopping onto her side to curl into a ball. She had attempted to prepare herself for this very thing, but still, the shock to her system was something like trying to take a seat in a chair that had just been removed.

Crookshanks' head and forepaws appeared over the seat of the cushion, and he stretched his neck to give her face another gentle sniffing. It wasn't until he licked at her cheek that she realized she had begun to cry. "At least you're still the same, Crooks," she said shakily. He shifted his weight back slightly and then hopped onto the cushion in the alcove made by her curled body. Circling once, he laid down against her chest, tucking his hairy head underneath her chin. Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on the warmth of his little body to stave off the cold dread that was threatening to anchor her to the couch.

'Hiding, indeed,' she thought with black humor. She felt like a stranger in her own life, the captured images of her on the mantle a cruel joke. *That* Hermione was someone she didn't know, whose life had taken a different path than her own. How could she possibly pick up where this other person had left off? What kinds of horrible mistakes would she make, mentioning events that had never occurred or reacting out of character? She would end up in Azkaban or St. Mungo's in no time. At any moment, she expected another Hermione to come waltzing through her front door and raise the alarm.

Maybe she *belonged* in St. Mungo's.

Luna.

Hermione sat up quickly, and Crookshanks shot her an irritated glance, jumping huffily off the couch. Luna had felt something the last time, had known that things were off. What had she said?

"Have you ever felt like yourself, but not?"

'Yes, yes I have,' Hermione agreed silently with the memory. She would Floo Luna.

Scrambling off the couch to the hearth, keeping her eyes determinedly away from the photos, she pulled a pinch of Floo powder from the pot on the corner of the mantle.

"Luna Lovegood!" she said and stuck her head in the flames when they flared green.

"Hallo, Hermione," Luna said immediately, as if she had been expecting her. Perhaps she had. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that she was even home.

"Luna, could you come through?" she asked, hoping that her voice didn't quaver too much.

Luna held up a hand dusted with gray powder and smiled. "I was just about to drop by."

"Oh," Hermione said, somehow surprised, but yet not very. "I'll just step back, then, shall I?" Luna nodded and reached above Hermione's line of sight, pulling a thin stack of papers into view. Smiling again, Luna stared at Hermione's disembodied head. Hermione blinked up at her, then startled. "Oh, right," she mumbled and pulled her head out of the fire, backing up to give Luna some room to come through.

She stepped through a moment later and then headed straight for Hermione's kitchen, pulling out the tea things. Trailing after her like a bewildered ghost, Hermione plopped into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and wondered how Luna knew where everything was. Once the water was boiling and the leaves were in the teapot, Luna fetched a packet of biscuits from the cupboard and took the chair across from her.

"How was your trip?" she asked, pulling the papers out of a pocket in her robes and setting them on the table. Hermione stared at them blankly.

"My trip?" It took her a moment to remember the cover story she had told everyone to explain her absence. "With my parents?"

Luna laughed lightly, as if they shared a joke. "No, to the past. To see the late Headmaster Snape."

Hermione's eyes immediately welled with tears, and she turned her head away so that Luna wouldn't see. For all the changes she had caused, Severus was still dead. Now, she wished that she hadn't called Luna and could go take a long, hot bath and cry until she was spent.

"Hermione," Luna said, her voice soft with sympathy as she touched the back of her hand. "Did you and Draco have a row already?"

That question jolted her out of her sorrow as if she had been doused with ice water. She even *felt* cold. "What?" she asked, no longer concerned about the tears that had rolled down her cheeks. "Me and... *Draco? Malfoy?*"

Luna sat back and eyed her speculatively. "I told you not to pay attention to those ridiculous articles in the *Daily Prophet*. He's not dating you for your status as a war hero. Well, not *just* that."

Hermione was overwhelmed with a memory of Draco at two years old, his grinning, gap-toothed mouth smeared with marzipan as he bounced in her lap. So, now *she* was bouncing on *his* lap? She dropped her head to the table and groaned loudly.

"Hermione?"

"I wasn't dating Draco before my trip to the past," Hermione informed her, her voice muffled by the tabletop.

"I see," Luna said casually as if they were discussing some mundanity instead of alterations to the space-time continuum. "Who *were* you dating, then?"

"Ron."

Luna was silent long enough that Hermione picked her head up off the table. The teakettle chose that moment to start whistling, and Luna rose unhurriedly out of her chair to take it off the fire. Again, Hermione was struck with how comfortable Luna was in her kitchen. Pouring hot water over the tealeaves, Luna said, "That *is* interesting. He always did have a thing for you, but after the incident at the end of your third year, it was a doomed thing."

There were *lots* of incidents in third year. "Which one?" Hermione asked in the same casual tone that Luna had used. She supposed the grief she should feel for the relationship that had never been (and never would, if the pictures on the mantle were any indication) would hit her when she had time to process it all, but all she felt now was a sense of relief and dull sorrow.

Buttoning the pot into its cozy, Luna carried the tea and cups to the table. "While Ron was in the hospital recovering from a dog bite, he let it slip that Professor Lupin was a werewolf, and the wrong students heard. I think he was still heavily medicated, but it got Lupin sacked, and you were quite put out. It took you a while to forgive him. Then you met Victor the next year..."

"*Ron* got Lupin sacked? Before, it was Professor Snape..."

Luna's eyebrows shot into her hairline, and she blinked owlishly. "I can't imagine. Lupin and Snape were always... well, if not friends, then certainly on amicable terms."

"How do you know all this?" Hermione asked her as she fidgeted with a loose bit of yarn in the tea cozy.

"You told me," Luna said matter-of-factly. "We have had tea regularly for the past couple of years, after all."

"Oh. And Draco?" she asked, not even sure how to word the question.

Luna smiled impishly and poured two cups of tea. "He dropped by your office a few months ago to deliver an artifact for A.A.S.S. You hit it off." She shrugged with one shoulder and blew the steam from the surface of her tea.

"He came by *personally*?" Hermione asked, skeptical, and snagged a biscuit from the package.

"It *is* a rather high-profile project. And he and his godfather were close. He wanted to make sure that it would be well-protected; his godfather had treasured it."

"What was it?" Hermione nibbled on the edge of her biscuit, warming up to the conversation. If she pretended that it wasn't *her* life they were discussing, a life that she had lived, but yet hadn't, then it was a pleasant bit of gossip.

"An old Order of Merlin, third class." Luna grinned widely when Hermione choked, spraying the table with crumbs. "I thought so."

She wiped the crumbs off the table with a serviette and slid the stack of papers toward Hermione. Taking a settling sip of tea, Hermione eyed the papers nervously. They appeared to be newspaper clippings.

"Do you still have yours... Heidi?" Luna asked with the wickedest glee that Hermione had ever seen in the woman. She didn't; it was stuffed in a sock in her drawer at Madam Beettlebump's. Hermione just shook her head and picked up the top sheet. It was an article about the crime ring they had busted and the awarding of their Orders. Below it, folded back, was a small photo of her and Severus strolling hand in hand through Diagon Alley. It had been taken yesterday, on their way to Florean's, but she hadn't seen the photographer at the time.

"Where did you get these?" Hermione asked, staring at the photo in wonderment. They could easily be mistaken for a happy couple.

"Headmaster Snape had placed them between the pages of that library book. I had been about to return it when that one you're holding slipped out. I must have missed them when I found the first. Or they weren't there before," Luna said thoughtfully.

"Luna," Hermione said, setting down the clipping, "I don't know if I can do this. So much has changed... and I've been left behind." Her heart was creeping up into her esophagus, threatening to strangle her. Shivering, she wrapped her hands around her warm teacup.

"Do what?" Luna cocked her head to the side, a pale wisp of hair falling over one shoulder. "Continue on or go back?" She gazed at Hermione for a moment, her face softening into a faraway expression. "Or are you considering going back to stay?"

Hermione looked up sharply, her fears momentarily forgotten. It was an option, wasn't it? She hadn't considered it, not seriously, but now it was sorely tempting. It would be foolish in the extreme, and not even Merlin could know how much it would alter the timeline, but... but she could start a new life, one that she could *live*, instead of hear about over tea with a friend. A life that Severus might consider sharing with her. A tiny spark of hope flared in her chest, one that must have shown on her face, for Luna sighed and touched the back of her hand.

"Nothing happens that isn't meant to happen," Luna said cryptically and then sifted through the pile of clippings, pulling one to the forefront. "It will work itself out."

Giving her a hard stare, Hermione tried to remember where she had heard those words before. They rang with a precise familiarity, but it was such a Luna thing to say... She shook her head when the memory refused to surface and glanced down at the piece of paper that Luna had extracted from the stack. It was a small article on Heidi Greenglass, recipient of a recent Order of Merlin, third class, of whom a record could not be found anywhere in the Ministry. Above it was another photograph of she and Severus sharing a cone of chips on a park bench in Hogsmeade. She would laugh and toss a nibble of chip to the birds at their feet, and he would roll his eyes, but drape an arm behind her on the backrest of the bench. The article was dated in October, but the photo had been taken three days ago.

She smiled fondly, wistfully, and gently touched the captured image of Severus. Funny that even in a black and white photo he looked much the same as in real life. Those few days after their adventure had been blissful; she couldn't remember a time when she had enjoyed another's company quite so much. She could see herself sitting on that bench with him, year after year, the two of them growing older, wrinkled, stooped, but always side-by-side. "Would it be so terrible?"

"Quite possibly," Luna said thoughtfully. "But there are no guarantees."

Staring at the picture, Hermione frowned. She wasn't sure if she wanted Luna to talk her into staying in the past or tell her that the world would end if she did. Black or white, good or bad, those were simple, clear-cut choices. But this decision carried the weight of infinite possibilities.

Severus sat on his ratty little couch and tried to affect an air of bored apathy as he stared into the amber depths of his tumbler of Firewhisky. Nattering on in a smoothly disbelieving tone, Lucius had been plying him with expensive drink and probing questions since he had arrived an hour ago. His excuse for dropping by was that congratulations were due, and not just for acquiring an Order of Merlin. He had wanted to toast to the future Mrs. Snape, for which woman in her right mind wouldn't accept such an honor with a man she had been dating and not turn straight around and marry him? Severus didn't bother to correct his friend's misconception that he and Heidi had been dating (Lucius would believe what he wanted, regardless), though he still failed to see the logic. Wondering if fatherhood had somehow rotted his brain, he accepted the drink anyway.

If truth were told (and with Lucius, it was a rare thing), he was grateful for Lucius' arrival. He had been in his laboratory preparing... things. He suppressed a shudder and turned his thoughts away from the... things... he had been preparing. These were the final steps before the culmination of his Plan, but now it felt dirty, *wrong*. It didn't make sense to him: it would get him what he had wanted for years. Just the same, he couldn't help but hear Heidi telling him which laws he was breaking in this endeavor and how very *disappointed* she was in him. Taking a large sip of Firewhisky, he tried unsuccessfully to burn her dear, bossy voice out of his head.

Lucius, displaying impeccable timing, unknowingly twisted the knife. "And I hear that she *broke* an Auror's nose with a *bedpan* because they had broken yours. That, dear Sev, is devotion."

Staring gloomily into his drink, Severus wondered where it was Lucius could have heard that. And if nothing else could make him feel worse, that comment could: a reminder of how she had defended him, attempted to protect him, lied to *Dumbledore*, of all wizards, for him. And how had he repaid her? By insulting and belittling her when she had mentioned her departure: his *modus operandi* for dealing with uncomfortable situations. Why couldn't he have simply told her how he felt? He was a cad of the worst sort. Gods, but he missed her.

"Severus," Lucius said as he swirled his drink around his glass in an easy, graceful motion, eyeing him knowingly. "You didn't do something to drive her away, did you?"

He had to smother a start that would have betrayed the truth of Lucius' words. He had returned to Madam's after his staff meeting, already feeling the sour taste of guilt at his words, but she had left. The crazy old bat had confirmed with the orange monstrosity that she had gone home, and he hadn't had to cast a locator spell to know that she had mysteriously, untraceably disappeared. However, he refused to start worrying until *after* she hadn't shown up at their scheduled time tomorrow.

"She is plainly not here," he snapped, scowling at Lucius' moue of disappointment. "Don't give me that look. I think... I think she is seeing someone else." Saying the words left a bitter taste at the back of his mouth, and he took a large gulp of Firewhisky to clear his palate. Right, *that* was the reason he hadn't said anything.

Lucius tossed back the last of his drink and stood in one fluid motion. Setting his glass on the coffee table, he smoothed the wrinkles in his robes, which had creased while he sat. "I fail to see the bearing that has on your situation. She is smitten with you. If she is seeing someone, then steal her away. You know the spells..." Leering and trailing off meaningfully, Lucius paused for effect, and then his tone became serious. "Few enough women will accept your attentions. You should not take this one for granted."

Saying nothing, Severus slouched further into the couch and glowered at his drink. With a final pleasantry, Lucius saw himself out, leaving the bottle of Firewhisky behind.

"Good evening, my dear," Malfoy... no, *Draco* (she was now dating him, after all) greeted her as he rose from his chair and pecked her cheek. The waiter pulled her chair from the table, and Draco waited until she was seated before sitting again himself. "I didn't expect you back until late next week."

"Disappointed?" Hermione asked, trying to gauge his reactions. Tall, handsome and pale, he was the spitting image of his father twenty years prior. He had let his hair grow long and gloriously shiny, and it was tied back into a neat queue with a navy blue ribbon. His robes were a complimentary shade of blue, and though clearly expensive and well made, they were not ostentatious. Usually gray, his eyes had acquired a blue cast and now resembled the ocean during a storm. He cut a fine figure; she had to wonder what he was doing with *her*. Even cleaned up and dressed nicely, she felt dull and drab in comparison. Not to mention the fact that he had despised her through their school years.

The small restaurant was just as tasteful and understated as her date. Small and moodily lit with beeswax candles, its walls were lined with private tables separated from each other and partially obscured from the main floor by rich, red, velvet drapes. The seats were padded and lined with soft leather, and the cherry tabletops shone with polish. In one corner, a piano played light classical music somehow in tune with the quiet ringing of silver on bone china. None of the menus listed prices.

"Quite the contrary," he said, smiling at her and reaching across the table to clasp her hand. It was a true smile and transformed his normally sneering, pointy features into a rather effeminate beauty that she found appealing. And immediately after silently admitting her attraction, she felt a pang of guilt. Here she was, holding hands and finding other men attractive when who she really wanted was Severus. But this was a test, wasn't it: to dive into the waters of her new life to see if she could swim? She would simply have to pretend that she wasn't in love with a man now four years dead. Oh, bugger, she had admitted that, too.

She forced a smile, praying that it appeared genuine as she tangled their fingers together. "Glad to hear it."

"And to what do I owe the honor of an early visit?" he asked teasingly, but she sensed an undercurrent of suspicious curiosity. Then again, perhaps she was imagining it. She decided to answer with as much truth as she possibly could.

"I had a run-in with a werewolf in New Zealand and wanted to have St. Mungo's check the wound. No, everything is fine," she added quickly as his eyes widened to saucers, and he began to rise out of his chair. "He simply scratched my back. I didn't want my parents to worry, so I popped back here for a couple of days on the pretense of checking on Crookshanks."

"Hermione," Draco said lowly, his gaze intense as he raised her knuckles to his lips. Ah, but it was nice for an attentive man to say her name. Her *real* name. Maybe... maybe she could give it to Severus, just to hear him say it... "You must be more careful. I know that you are a brave, resourceful woman, but even you have your limits. I'll have the beast hunted down and slaughtered."

"He is in New Zealand," she said sharply. Draco Malfoy knew jack all about her limits.

"There isn't a place on this globe that he could hide from me." Draco's eyes snapped dangerously.

"Leave it alone, I'm fine," she said tiredly. The only reason she had used the werewolf story as an excuse in the first place was because the scratches were still barely healed, and if he were truly her boyfriend, then he would find out about them sooner rather than later. She hadn't meant to start a blood hunt. "I'd rather not talk about it. I came to see *you*."

It was the truth, but not quite the truth that Draco believed. However, it seemed to mollify him because, after kissing her hand again, he settled back in his chair with a smug smile, looking so much like his father that she had to resist the urge to bolt from the table.

"Your dress has arrived," he said, changing the subject abruptly.

Hermione had been about to take a sip of the deep burgundy wine in the glass next to her plate and paused with the rim touching her bottom lip. Draco's eyes seemed

fixed there. "My dress?"

"For my parents' Halloween party. Surely you have not forgotten?" He raised one blond eyebrow questioningly.

"Of course not," Hermione denied. "You just caught me off guard."

Draco smirked and leaned toward her. "I'll have to write that down for posterity: Hermione Granger, caught off guard."

The comment struck her funny, and she laughed. "You do that," she told him, finally sipping her wine. He grinned at her and then proceeded to launch into the details of his parents' party. It wasn't a one-way conversation, however. He engaged her, asked her opinion, and made snide comments about the guests. Somehow, they got on the topic of the history of wizarding balls and the significance of masks worn by the guests until midnight and chatted right on through dinner. Hermione found his company delightful and his personality similar to Severus'. Though prickly and sarcastic, he had the self-confidence that Severus lacked. If she weren't already head over heels for someone else, then she could have seen this relationship possibly working for her. However, a particular question forced its way through her enjoyment of the evening, beating about her brain and poking holes into his affectionate gestures and adoring glances.

'Why does Draco Malfoy, blood purist, first person to call me "Mudblood" and hellion throughout my schooldays, want to date me?' she asked herself as Draco insisted that she choose a dessert.

Luna had mentioned him dating her partially for her fame as a war hero. She had to wonder what this Draco had done during that final confrontation, and if it was any different than the actions of the other Draco Malfoy. It must have been; otherwise, she doubted that she would have ever considered dating him, but the lack of knowledge irked her. It wasn't that she could ask, either, for that would clue him in that something was wrong. She should *know* that kind of thing. The strain of guessing at his new past while trying to maintain an intelligent conversation finally got to her, and a headache blossomed behind her temples. Draco noticed the moment that she raised her fingertips to rub them and called immediately for the check.

"Headache?" he asked sympathetically, helping her into her cloak. "I didn't realize that you were sensitive to red wines. You haven't been before." He pulled her mass of curls out of her collar and arranged them to tumble down the back of her cloak, fingering them with a distant, absorbed expression. His hand brushed one of her healing wounds, and she hissed. Snatching his hand away, he stared at her clothed back in horror. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe that I..."

"It's fine, Draco," she assured him. "And I'm not usually prone to headaches from wine. It must be a reaction with the potions I've been taking for my back."

He merely nodded, escorting her from the restaurant with his hand hovering protectively at her lower back, but not quite touching. "I wish you would allow me to destroy that beast."

"Honestly, Draco, you'd never find him. Besides, it wasn't his fault; he couldn't have controlled his actions."

He smiled fondly and teased, "That's my Hermione, always looking out for the underdog." Before she knew it, he had drawn her in for a brief kiss. It was chaste and sweet, tasting of the rich chocolate cake that they had shared earlier. He pulled away before it could become more intense, but his stormy eyes held a promise of deeds dark and sensual. She shivered, wishing those eyes were black, but smiling up at him just the same.

"Go take care of your headache, and I will see you in a week, after you finish your trip," he said as he caressed her cheek. With a courtly, old-fashioned bow, he Apparated away.

Hermione Apparated back to her apartment, her mind whirling with the strange, enjoyable evening she had had... with *Draco Malfoy*. She still couldn't quite believe it. As she keyed open the lock, she made an oath to herself that she *would* kiss Severus on this final trip to the past, no matter what his attitude might be. She had to know how his lips felt pressed against hers, if his eyes would light up with a similar carnal desire for her. Yes, she was now dating Draco, but there was no guarantee that she would *still* be dating him when she came back. *If she came back.*

Hermione frowned as she peered underneath her sofa. It never ceased to amaze her how quickly Crookshanks could confiscate a dropped earring and knock it underneath some heavy piece of furniture. And where did it go under that piece of furniture? It was as if there were several small black holes in the floor of her flat, and Crookshanks knew exactly where each one resided.

"You were lying in wait, weren't you?" she accused the cat that was on his belly reaching under the sofa with an orange paw.

The fire on her hearth suddenly leapt with a *whoosh*, bathing her living room with bright, green light. Sighing, Hermione sat back on her knees, aware that her visitor had just had an indelicate view of her bum. She had a moment to wish that she had worn her nice bathrobe before he spoke.

"So it is true, then."

Clambering to her feet, she met a pair of emerald-green eyes gazing woundedly at her.

"Harry!" she exclaimed and hurried around her coffee table to give him a hug. Feeling a fair amount of shame for not making a greater effort to see him before her previous trip and not bothering to contact him during this brief respite, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and squeezed tightly. He stiffened momentarily and then patted her shoulder like an awkward teenager, fortunately missing the wounds on her back. She released him immediately and stepped back, unnerved by his reticence. Since when had Harry not welcomed one of her hugs? A sense of loss swept through her as she smiled up at her best friend who had changed so much and yet so little.

He was still her height: short for a man, no doubt due to the neglect he had experienced as a child. His eyes still put gemstones to shame, glittering a clear, verdant green. He was thinner than she remembered and more fashionably dressed than she had ever seen him. Before she could stop herself, she asked, "What have you done with your hair?"

He looked at her askance and then smoothed a hand over the long black mop that was tied back with a simple elastic. "I tied it back," he said. "Ginny was complaining that I was shedding hair into her cooking."

"Oh, erm." She was saved from further possible blunders when he gestured at the large vase of purple hyacinths, which had appeared on her doorstep that morning and were now sitting on the coffee table. The accompanying note had been short, sweet and smug, leaving her little doubt as to the sender even without the florid *DM* at the bottom.

"You tell *him* you're in town, but you don't bother to contact your friends? I had to read it in the *Prophet*."

Hermione frowned at him. His comment struck home, but she didn't appreciate being scolded. "Honestly, Harry, I was only here for a couple of days. I was getting ready to leave again, in fact. The *Prophet*?" she asked incredulously. That was awfully fast; she had just gone to dinner with Draco last night.

"Has he got you on such a tight leash that you have to check in with him every other day?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's enough to make a bloke sick," he said petulantly as he flopped onto her sofa, giving the flowers a death glare. "I know you've been lonely since Ron and I got married... but *Malfoy*?"

"Why do you assume that my dating Draco has anything to do with either of you?" she asked him, placing her hands on her hips and cocking her head. She realized that she couldn't look very intimidating in a faded yellow bathrobe with a fraying hem, but she was too irritated to care.

He stopped eyeing the flowers to give her a long, appraising stare that made her want to fidget. Harry might not have been the most perceptive of men, but he had a strong intuition that he trusted almost to a fault. The thought of him discovering her trips to the past to help Severus made her acutely nervous, for she was sure that he wouldn't approve... would he? It occurred to her that she had no point of reference for Harry's opinion of their ex-Professor besides a couple of photographs on her mantle. Though he had gained respect for the man and an appreciation of his efforts, Harry had little positive to say about Snape as a person. His eyes narrowed as if he were following her train of thought, and she clenched her hands to prevent them from wandering off by themselves to tug on the loose threads on the ends of her sleeves.

"Alright, Hermione?" he asked, sitting forward and propping his elbows on his knees as he gazed intently into her face. She got the uncomfortable impression that she was now being interrogated. Abruptly, she wondered if he were still in the Auror training program and if he were now applying some technique to know whether or not she was telling the truth. Luna hadn't mentioned it, and she had forgotten to ask. It seemed a gross oversight at that moment, not to mention the fact that she felt like a heel for having ignored her friends. Had she truly considered staying in the past without saying some sort of goodbye to her friends and family?

On the other hand, Harry obviously sensed that something was amiss, and knowing Harry, he wouldn't leave her alone until he figured it out.

"Yes, Harry, I'm perfectly fine. I'm simply in a hurry. I told my parents that I would only be gone a couple of days, and my father wants to sneak onto the set of *The Two Towers*. You know how much he loved the first one. They'll likely toss us off the set if we even manage to get close to it, but that won't stop him from trying." She smiled winningly and hoped that he hadn't noticed her babbling.

"Right," Harry said, standing up slowly as if she were a timid creature likely to bolt. "I hope you know that you can tell me anything."

"Of course, I do..."

He held up a hand, cutting her off. "We've grown distant over the years, with Ron and I settling down and starting families. And you've been wrapped up in your work, saving the world one project at a time." He grinned wryly, and Hermione finally succumbed to temptation and began to fiddle with her cuffs. "You kept Draco a secret for a month, and I've forgiven you, even if I still think he's a poncy arse and not nearly good enough for you."

Hermione had no idea what to say to that. She couldn't imagine herself hiding a boyfriend from any of her friends. Excluding Severus, of course, who wasn't her *boyfriend*, per se.

"I just wish we could get past all the secrets and you would tell me what is really going on."

Breaking eye contact with the man that she had considered her best friend for the past eleven years, Hermione felt a yawning chasm open between them, filled with the distance of ages. He wasn't the Harry she knew, nor was she the Hermione that he knew, and though she had managed to fool Draco, a close acquaintance of only a few months, she would be hard pressed to pull the wool over Harry's eyes. Or Ron's, for that matter. Just the same, he was her best friend, and she felt that she owed him something, some small jot of truth. There was no need to bring Severus' name into it. Her mind racing, she spoke slowly to allow her story to form. "Do you promise not to tell anyone? And I mean, *anyone*?"

Harry's face lit up but he nodded hesitantly, as if afraid of what her secret might entail.

"I... I *might* have met someone. A foreigner."

"Who?" he asked a trifle too eagerly. Hermione wanted to roll her eyes; Draco wasn't that bad. She could hardly believe she had just thought that.

"I'd rather not say at the moment. I don't know if he feels the same."

Harry eyed her shrewdly though a smile had started to stretch his lips. "So what's the catch?"

"If and this is a big 'if' he does, then I might... stay with him," Hermione said, bracing herself for the inevitable explosion. When Harry simply stared at her silently, mouth slightly agape, she questioned whether this Harry might have learned a bit of self-restraint.

"Not the Ferret?" he asked finally after a few unsuccessful attempts. She shook her head. "I, erm. Well. What do you mean, 'stay with him'?"

"He's foreign," she evaded.

"Ah. Right." He scrubbed a hand over his face and then ran it over his ponytail, blinking distractedly into the fire.

"It really has got nothing to do with you or Ron," she assured him, just in case he was trying to blame himself in some way.

He nodded absently, still not looking at her. "How long would you be gone?"

Shrugging, she said, "I don't really know. And it might not even happen. I just... wanted you to know."

He nodded again, fingering the ends of his hair, then glanced up at her. "Just like that, then? We'd miss you. A lot. But," he shrugged one shoulder, a gesture reminiscent of a young Severus Snape, though Hermione would never have told him that, "you have to do what makes you happy." Looking at her intently, he said, "He *will* make you happy, right?"

"He could."

Shrugging again, this time with a resigned helplessness, he gave her a sad smile. "You'll keep in touch?"

"Of course," she lied unhappily. Denying him that would have led to a much less understanding Harry Potter. "I'm a witch, you know. I can operate the Floo Network."

"That's all I ask." Giving her an awkward, one-armed hug, he patted her shoulder and stepped toward the Floo. "I'll tell Ginny you said hi. Maybe you'll stop by for supper next weekend?"

"We'll see."

He nodded shortly and strode toward the Floo, grabbing a small handful of powder from the jar on the mantle. With a final wave, he tossed it into the fire and stepped into the column of green flame.

A/N: Before you start howling for my blood over the whole Draco thing, remember that I started in the Potterverse as a DM/HG shipper, and that there is a bit of story left. Don't give up on me!

I'm sorry that I'm so far behind on review responses. Thanks to all of you who have left a note I read and treasure all of them. :)

The Best of Intentions

Chapter 17 of 20

Hermione returns to the past and learns what Severus has been planning.

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Edited by thyme_is_a_cat

A/N: Heed the chapter warning violence and gore in this chapter, plus a bit of horror.

Chapter 17 The Best of Intentions

Immediately upon materializing at the bottom of Severus' well, Hermione Apparated to the phone box on Spinner's End, which had come to be her Apparition point. Thanks to Harry's impromptu visit, she had a scant ten minutes to deliver the Starglass.

Conjuring a Muggle hand mirror, she gave her hair a careful inspection. She had pulled it off her face with two combs, the most she could do without a second pair of hands that actually knew what they were doing. The robes she had chosen carefully: a deep plum that Luna swore complimented her eyes (but this was coming from a woman who had worn radish earrings for years, so who knew) and was cut in a pseudo-traditional fashion that clung very untraditionally. Stuffed down her bodice was a note that had taken almost two hours to pen. She hoped that it would do. She *almost* hoped that she wouldn't need it, but refused to think about that right now.

First, she had to feel up Severus... *feelout* Severus. Had he gotten over his sulk? Would he mind her company or simply take the Starglass and toss her out? Would he object too much if she were to kiss him? She couldn't quite recall the last time she had wanted so desperately for the touch of another human being. With Ron, it had been expected and welcome, but in all honesty, towards the end, she could have taken or left it. She was surprised that she had not noticed it before. Not that there *had* been a she-and-Ron now...

She pushed that thought aside, too. The grief over her lost relationship, which she had expected to overwhelm her at some point, had failed to make an appearance, and that spoke volumes to her. That phase of her life was over, never to be reclaimed. The change in her relationship with Harry was much more difficult to bear, and she feared for the other relationships with friends and family on which she had relied for comfort and support, Ron's included. However, she had not done much investigating during her short stay: her final trip to the past might change yet more events, and if she happened to stay, then it really would be a moot issue. Now, she had to focus on moving forward with her life and determine whether the man inside the grotty little house down the street, in all likelihood still sulking, would be a part of it.

Banishing the mirror and slipping her wand into her sleeve, she gave the street a quick glance and then stepped out of the phone booth. With an even gait, she strolled toward the house, trying to appear nonchalant while a whole host of butterflies beat themselves against the lining of her stomach. Finally, she clasped her hands behind her back, the Starglass held firmly in one clammy palm in order to resist the temptation to wipe them both down her dress. She should *not* be this nervous. If nothing else, Severus was her friend.

The steps up to his door seemed insurmountable as she stood at the bottom, though in truth, there were only five. Basking at the top in a puddle of warm, morning sunlight lay Mewlip, his paws stretched over his head as if to expose every possible inch of stomach that he could. Hermione envied him for a long moment: blissfully uncaring of human drama, his daily agenda consisted of a nap in the sun, a bite of kibble, perhaps a go at the mice nesting under the porch, then another nap in Severus' lap as he read. Would she be a part of that cozy scene?

'Oh, damn, I forgot about Crookshanks,' Hermione groused silently and sighed. She would deal with that one when she got to it. She was doing that a lot, lately delaying unpleasantness for later. In the meantime, there were stairs to climb.

The stairs passed more quickly than she had anticipated, and before she knew it, her hand was raised to knock on the door. She paused just before her knuckles hit wood, listening for any sign of life within the house. It was silent, hushed even, as if waiting for something. Though perhaps that was her imagination, and she was projecting her own nervous restlessness upon her environment. Mewlip didn't seem disturbed. Feeling silly, she chided herself for acting like a twit with a crush and knocked firmly. Composing her features into a confident smile, she hoped that he wouldn't be able to see her heart pounding its way through her bodice.

Sharp rapping sounded on the front door, loud even in his basement laboratory, and Severus' hand jerked, almost spilling the beaker of fluid that he was carrying. He had been expecting her at this time, had been watching the minutes tick slowly by on the clock mounted on the wall, in turns dreading and anticipating her arrival. And yet, he was startled by her knock.

Walking briskly to a complicated setup of many flexible tubes, all connected to a central chamber that held a translucent, brown-green liquid, he consulted the book propped open to "La Mort Fraiche." It was a relatively simple potion that he had stumbled across while flipping through one of Grandfather Pericles' many strange books. Few wizards were familiar with the discipline of Thaumaturgy, and those that were considered it a charlatan's pursuit at best and Blood Magic at worst. Most wizards, even Dark Wizards, generally steered clear of the art. It was unsavory, usually dealing with dead or decaying things as subjects or requiring a blood sacrifice of some kind, and as far as Severus could tell, it was not very practical, for all that the book was titled *Practical Applications of Thaumaturgy*. Most of the rituals and potions listed in the book were long, drawn-out, tiresome things and could be accomplished with other spells or potions and much less hassle. Others required the application of some sort of catalyst to actually achieve anything.

'It is plain why this discipline is ignored,' he had scoffed to himself those four years ago as he had pushed the book back into its place on the shelves. The catalyst required would have been well nigh impossible to find. This potion in particular had popped into his mind several months ago as he was giving his books a much-needed dusting. He had even taken the book down to give the potion a quick perusal, the tiny ember of hope that had flared feebly being unceremoniously smothered by the need of a catalyst that would implement the intent of its bearer. A catalyst that had been roughly doodled into the margin of the book as a small phial filled with an unnamed substance. A catalyst that been noted as "disappeared" in a scrawling, spidery hand next to the scribble. A catalyst that he now knew was called the Starglass.

The Plan had rattled around in his brain since that day, refusing to lie at peace with its intended subject. It was the one thing he could do to set things right, to find happiness. She would understand, wouldn't she? That he had tried to save her, that it was Dumbledore and her own friends who had failed her. They could start fresh build a new life together. It was a perfect Plan, except for the fact that the catalyst in question had been lost... until a pretty woman delivered it into his hands one late summer afternoon.

He had had to research it, of course. There had been no telling what Heidi's little bottle could have actually been; even she had not known. And somehow, amidst the reading and running around, he had lost sight of his Plan. He had begun to wonder if this path was truly the way to happiness or if he might want to reconsider it. Perhaps he should let things stand as they were?

Another knock, as insistent and bossy as the woman behind it, broke through his thoughts and brought him back to the matter at hand. The central chamber of the apparatus was almost empty; it was time to add the next potion. Carefully, he raised the beaker in his hand, tilting it slowly so that the liquid poured sedately through the funnel that he had placed on the narrow mouth of the chamber. This potion was a deep burgundy and slightly thick, chasing the first potion through the meters of tubing in a macabre race. Severus let his eyes trail one of the long, winding tubes, following the seam between the brown-green Refreshener and the claret Replenisher until they disappeared into a hollow needle wedged into the main artery in Lily's throat.

He had tried not to look too closely at her for the two days she had been here, had pretended that her limp, dead weight was nothing more than a sack of earth as he Disappeared her from her grave in Godric's Hollow. Even as he had laid her on the workbench and placed the needles, one at her throat, one in each arm and one in each artery at the junction of thighs and torso, he had distanced himself from the reality of what he was doing. It was a subject, nothing more. With... it... swaddled in a funerary shroud, dark with decay, and the visible flesh black and spongy, he had partially succeeded.

That first night, he had retched until he thought his stomach would turn inside out.

Now, she was Lily. Locks of hair trailed out of the shroud in silken, auburn waves and draped over the edge of the workbench. The peaks and valleys of a woman's body now pushed against the fabric, though still much too thin. Surrounding the needles, her creamy skin had already obtaining a warm, living glow. He wanted to pull the horrible shroud away from her, but was hesitant to invade her privacy. He was even more hesitant to look upon her face so seemingly alive, but yet still dead. He left her covered.

This was what he wanted, wasn't it? He couldn't have Heidi, but he could have Lily. But suppose Lily didn't want him? She hadn't in the first place. Should he do as Lucius said and convince Heidi to stay with him?

This time, the front door rattled on its hinges under a furious pounding. Severus shook his head and climbed the basement steps, shutting the door tightly behind him. No, Heidi had made her intentions clear and was now waiting for him, Starglass in hand. There was no going back. He owed it to Lily to try.

The front door swung open just as Hermione was about to flounce back down the front steps. Her initial nervousness had dissolved into a caustic annoyance that he would demand her presence and then leave her waiting on the stoop. Arsehole.

"Did you bring it?" he asked abruptly by way of greeting. His hair was greasier and more unkempt than normal, and he was in dire need of a shave. Eyes like two empty pits stared out at her, hollow and bruised with lack of sleep. His white lab coat was smudged and splattered with what looked like blood and bile, and he smelled as if he had just had a roll in a charnel house.

"Gods, Severus, you smell awful!" she said, reflexively covering her nose with her sleeve and taking a step back. No wonder Mewlip had chosen to nap outside.

"Then you won't mind if I don't ask you in." He extended his hand palm up and eyed her expectantly.

She wanted to slap him. "I *do* mind you behaving like a beastly pig!" This was not how she had imagined this conversation proceeding. She had to get a hold of herself and be the more mature person; it wouldn't be that hard considering the competition. "May I *please* come in?"

He scowled and stepped back, leaving just enough room for her to squeeze by. "Severus, I need to talk to you. I've been doing some thinking and left certain things unsaid..."

"You surely don't believe that I care one way or the other," he sneered down at her. "I am busy. Hand it over."

A seed of doubt sprouted and began to push through the soil of her heart. Maybe the Starglass was all he had really wanted in the first place. Was his camaraderie all an act for this final goal? She didn't want to believe that. This had to be his deep-rooted defense mechanisms trying to push away anyone that had hurt him. Nevertheless, the vine was winding its way around her chest, constricting it as his eyes regarded her coldly. She had expected some residual anger, but this... "I will if you promise to talk to me after you have finished."

"If? IF? It was *you* who pledged your help to me. And now, when it is finally requested, you seek to place conditions on it?" His eyes had gone wide and crazed, and flecks of spittle were collecting on his lips. "I owe you *nothing!* Now give me the Starglass and GET OUT!"

Hermione flinched, raising her hands protectively to her chest. Well, she had her answer, didn't she? What had she been thinking, anyway, to run off and follow some guy like a lovesick little girl? She would have had to leave her parents, her friends, and her job... could they have forgiven her for disappearing? She had gotten swept up in a romance before it had even bloomed, and the drastic changes in her life had confused and frightened her. It was insanity and not at all like the practical woman she strove to be.

Despite her resolve, tears began to well in her eyes, and she bent her head, wishing that her hair could hide her face.

"Fine," she said to the floor, blinking rapidly and biting the inside of her cheek. When she raised her face again, she had mastered herself and knew that though her eyes might be red-rimmed, she was not going to cry. "If that is how you want it. Give it back when you are done."

She held out her hand and uncurled her fingers, displaying the Starglass. It was dull and unspectacular in the dim entryway light, the dust inside now coarse and dark, the grains melding slowly to form tiny black shards. Neither noticed, for their eyes were locked together.

Severus wanted to know what she meant. Something weighty and final in the tone of her voice had pushed through the fog of his anger, and he could now see the sad resignation in her eyes. He wasn't even sure how he had become so furious in the first place. She had just been standing there, lovely in her temper and resembling everything that he couldn't have. All at once, his frustration had exploded, and his only conscious thought was that if he couldn't have her, then he wanted her gone, as if she were a bandage that he could remove with one excruciating rip. He stared hard into her warm, brown eyes, suspiciously bright even in his gloomy house.

Was she asking him what he wanted? He couldn't tell, and he was sorely tempted to slip quietly into her mind and pilfer through her thoughts until he found her true intentions. It wouldn't matter if he did, at this point. She was leaving, regardless. Even as the incantation began to form in his mind, he broke eye contact to stare blankly at the bottle in her hand.

"It makes little difference what I want," he said bitterly, scooping the Starglass out of her hand. If the contents seemed darker or the object heavier than the last time he had held it, he ignored it. He had his catalyst, and it was time to apply it.

Just before he closed the basement door, he heard Heidi's voice quaver the tiniest bit as she called to him from the entry. "Remember, Severus, you have to *mean* it."

Hermione loitered in his entryway for several minutes after she heard the basement door close. Twice, she had considered moving to the parlor to wait; at least there would be a place for her to sit. She didn't feel welcome, however, and the idea of wandering through his house after he had unequivocally told her to "get out" made her distinctly uncomfortable. She toyed with the idea of sitting on the front steps and moping (she wasn't too proud to admit it, unlike *some* wizards she could mention) with Mewlip, but something held her back: an uneasy, foreboding restlessness that refused to let her walk out of earshot of the basement laboratory. She wished she had simply followed him to see what had had him preoccupied for the last couple of weeks. She trusted him, true, but that included trusting his propensity for making poor judgment calls.

She had to wonder if it was that same proclivity that had prompted his parting statement. It was almost as if he felt *obliged* to something, but since he had never even hinted at the nature of his project, she had no idea what it could be. As she paced the small entry, shooting nervous glances through the doorway to the basement, she had the nagging feeling that she should have applied herself to discovering his secret. Just the same, her heart ached with disappointment that he would carry a grudge against

her without letting her explain that perhaps there would be no need for it. He had shot her down, used her, and then discarded her, all without any sign of regret. Perhaps... perhaps there was someone else. She couldn't imagine whom; he had given no indication that he was seeing anyone. Even Malfoy had assumed that they were together. However, he had kept the secret of his plan close to his chest; there was no reason that he couldn't be hiding his beloved.

Sniffing, she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of one cuff. 'Get a hold of yourself,' she scolded herself silently, frowning at the dark smudge of mascara on her sleeve. She was the very picture of pathetic, crying in the entryway of a man who had made it plain that he wanted nothing else to do with her over a romance that had never been confirmed. A half-hearted, mocking laugh choked into a sob as she leaned against the door and tried to save what little makeup she could.

She had finally decided to go to Madam Beetlebump's to mope to a sympathetic ear when a loud crash sounded beneath her feet. Terrified shouting and the sound of breaking glass were followed by a heavy tread pounding up the basement steps. Forgetting her misery for the moment, she ran from the entry through the narrow hall and into the kitchen just as the basement door was flung open. Pale and haunted with a splattering of what appeared to be blood across his face, Severus staggered through the door and slammed it behind him, sagging against it with a shudder.

"Severus! Alright?" she cried as she wiped at the largest splotch of blood on his forehead to ascertain whether or not he was injured. He simply shook his head, mutely allowing her ministrations with blank eyes and an oddly slack posture. Finding no obvious wounds, she pursed her lips and tried to catch his eye. He remained seemingly unaware of her until she cupped his face in her hands and leaned forward until they were nose to nose. Whispering quietly, she asked, "What have you done?"

Blinking several times, he finally met her gaze squarely. Abruptly, she fell headlong into those black pools, losing herself in their depths as flashes of the last couple of days played through her memory: Harry glaring at the hyacinths on her coffee table as she, clad only in an old bathrobe, glared at him in turn; dinner at the restaurant in London with Draco holding her hand and smiling at her as she wished he were Severus; Luna teasing her about winning an Order of Merlin while showing her the yellowing photograph of them ambling through Diagon Alley. Burning through the memories was her love for him, shapeless, but fiercely red with passion, and it consumed them both.

And then, the connection was broken, and he was wrapped in her arms, still shuddering as his hands grasped at the back of her dress. A sharp sting where his fingers dug into her skin signified that one of her wounds had probably reopened, but she couldn't have cared less at the moment. He was gasping on her shoulder, and his forehead was clammy against her cheek. It was a long moment before she could discern words.

"I didn't know... didn't *mean*... she was gone, but I thought I could..."

Another crash of breaking glass erupted from the basement, and he startled, pulling her against him so tightly that she struggled to breathe.

"What did you do, Severus?" she said harshly against his hair, guiding them away from the door and the ominous thumps that were getting steadily closer. He was wrapped around her like a constrictor, leaning on her now that he no longer had the support of the door, and she was shaking with dread. What could possibly have scared Severus, a man who had faced down werewolves, Death Eaters and lied to a Dark Lord, to the point of gibbering panic? Drawing her wand, her eyes wide and fixed on the door that was now rattling on its hinges, she backed slowly through the kitchen. Something heavy and solid hit the door, and it strained in its frame.

Snapping out of his terror, Severus spun them around, putting her back to whatever was trying to force its way out of the basement. He *knew* what was down there and didn't want Heidi to see *her*, see his failure and betrayal. But that thing wasn't *her*. He had fouled up somehow.

"Remember, Severus, you have to *mean* it."

Severus slammed the door behind him and stomped down into the basement, resenting the phial clutched in his hand. His mother would have told him that he had brewed his potion, so now he had to drink it, and he had every intention of following this through to the end, despite his knotted, tumultuous desires. He *wanted* to set things right with Lily, but he *didn't* want Heidi to leave. Heidi would probably leave anyway, and there would be no hope of "stealing her away", as Lucius had put it, when Lily came back. Besides, he loved Lily. And Heidi?

Severus cursed and sat on the step halfway down the flight, rubbing the heels of his hands against his eyes. What possible magic had that woman worked on him to draw his affections from one deserving to one disguised? He didn't even know Heidi's true name, but he had managed to fall in love with her as surely as he had fallen for Lily all those years ago. It seemed that he was doomed to love women who would then up and leave him.

Pushing off the stairs with a sneer at his own maudlin sentimentalism, he stalked down the final few stairs to his workbench. The chamber of Replenisher was almost empty, and the subject had filled out under the shroud, finally resembling a healthy female. He knew that he should have felt joy, but instead, a cold, hard lump settled in the pit of his stomach, and a heavy, tingly sensation was spreading through his chest. He stood at the table, willing his feet to stay where they were, even though his body leaned toward the stairs. His arms were wooden as he raised the hand holding the Starglass above her chest. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on calling her soul back to this plane, ignoring the wailing of his own heart.

'Bring her back,' he whispered in his mind, a mantra to focus his intent. 'Lily, come back.' Unbidden, a memory of her body as he had pulled it out of the ground rose in his mind, accompanied by an earnest, 'You shouldn't be doing this!' but he thrust it away.

Concentrate.

'Come back, Lily.' He forced an image of her face as a teenager, laughing and happy, to the forefront, only to have her eyes widen in fear under a bolt of green light. 'No, bring her back as she *was*.' Again, her shrouded body, ripe with decay, forced all other memories aside, and before he could refocus his intent, his vision was lit with a brilliant light filtered red through the thin flesh that protected his eyes. He cracked one eye open and was almost blinded by the white light that shone through his fingers for a long moment and then extinguished, leaving him blinking dumbfoundedly in a false darkness.

Once his vision had adjusted to the comparatively dim lighting, he gazed down at Lily, still immobile and covered with the shroud. The flush of life that he had coaxed into her flesh was fading, leaving graying tissue where the fabric had been pulled away. Long strands of auburn hair lost their sheen and drifted, limp and brittle, to the floor. Conflicted, he staggered backward, tottering on weak knees. He had failed, and the disappointment was bitter on his tongue, but he wanted to sigh with relief that he could put this all behind him. No one would have to know. He could tell Heidi that he had changed his mind about his project, and maybe she would...

The shroud shifted over a jerky movement on the workbench, and then, with a squelching series of pops, the body sat up.

"Lily?" he asked hesitantly, his heart suddenly pounding in his throat. He had taken two steps backward without realizing it. The thing on the workbench turned toward his voice, and great chunks of dry hair slithered to the floor. Slowly, it dragged its swaddled legs over the surface of the workbench, leaving a dark smudge across the wood. The apparatus containing the now empty chamber and tangle of tubing swayed as the tubes were tugged taut. One shrouded hand rose to its face, still hidden behind the moldering fabric. Clumsy fingers prodded at the material, but only managed to shift the shroud slightly and free the needles that had been inserted into its arm and neck.

Severus felt the bottom stair press against his calves, and the mind-numbing horror that had gripped him lifted long enough for him to grope for his wand. Fumbling at his sleeve, he finally spotted it laying on the counter behind the workbench... behind *her*.

The creature slid off the workbench, pulling the apparatus off balance until it landed on the floor with a deafening crash. A stray snake of tubing whipped through the air, spraying him with Replenisher and catching his wand in a glancing blow, sending it skittering off the counter and onto the floor. The sharp snap of the length of ebony as the creature unsteadily trod on it was almost lost amidst the shattering of glass and hoarse, panicked shouting.

Severus wasn't aware of the sounds issuing from his mouth, nor was he aware of stumbling up the stairs in a frantic retreat *from* her. Nothing pierced the fog of his terror until two brown eyes captured him, drawing him into a place that felt like home.

With a splintering crack, the door broke free of its lock to swing wide and bang against the kitchen wall. Hermione jumped, shrieking shrilly as Severus dragged her into the short hallway. Panting hard, his body tense and quivering against her, Severus pulled her wand from her sleeve and pointed it through the kitchen door. She only had a moment to wonder where his wand was before the sound of wood clattering against tile focused her thoughts back onto whatever was making its way out of the basement.

Oh, Merlin, what had he *done*?

Hearing it was far worse than seeing it, she decided as she twisted in his arms. He protested, clamping down on her back, but she insisted, wincing as her wounds bunched and pulled in their struggle. She would have to go back to the Healer after this, she was certain.

Catching her first glimpse of their pursuer, she wondered if perhaps she had been better off just hearing it.

Human-shaped, it walked toward them with a lurching, drunken sway, bumping against the doorway without bothering to protect itself with its hands. Sticky, black footprints trailed in its wake, smudged and uneven on the tile floor. Finely woven cloth swaddled it loosely and sagged where the creature's legs had stretched it, but it was a splotchy, dark gray and had several large, frayed holes that revealed doughy, gray matter underneath. Hermione swallowed thickly against the bile that crept up her throat, flinching against the man behind her when it raised one arm beseechingly, the wrappings falling away. Shriveled and gnarled, the blackening, mottled hand stretched its fingers toward them as if pleading for assistance.

Fighting against the urge to retch, Hermione choked out, "Who..."

"Lily," Severus whispered against her hair.

The blood drained from her head, leaving her faint and disoriented as several bits of information clicked into place.

"Voldemort killed the woman he loved, Hermione."

"Miss Evans was brilliant!"

"Did Snape just compliment a Potter?"

"Oh," she breathed, sagging against him as his arm tightened under her breasts. So it was *Lily* who had held Severus' affections... and still did, if he was trying to raise her from the dead. She could feel her heart breaking, almost hear the fleshy rending as the muscle tore itself apart. "I see," she rasped around the lump in her throat.

"No, you don't," he hissed at her, somehow managing to strengthen his grip. It infuriated her suddenly, that he would hold her like this while loving another woman, and the anger cleared her mind and leant power to the fingers that she used to pry his arm free. He fought her, his arm crushing the air out of her lungs as he refused to release her even when she stomped hard on his booted foot. "Heidi, stop!"

"Give me back my wand, Severus!" she wheezed furiously, unsure at the moment who, exactly, would end up on the receiving end first.

"I have to fix this," he said lowly, but the tip of her wand was shaking, and he was still retreating under the Lily-thing's advance.

"Fix this? I think you've done enough already!" Bending her elbow, she aimed it into his gut and struck hard. His arm loosened long enough for her to wrench free, then he grabbed the back of her dress and yanked her backward and behind him.

Hermione had seen many zombie movies. It had been a tradition between her and her father on Friday nights during the summer to rent science fiction, fantasy and horror movies, crunch on vegetables, and poke holes in the ridiculous, contrived, and illogical plots until the very small hours of the morning. Just this summer, they had had a zombie movie mini-marathon (brought on by a thoroughly insensitive comment of Ron's, prompting Hermione to wonder if he'd lost his brain somewhere and her father to suggest that perhaps it had been eaten). Whether they were shambling, moaning corpses or sprinting, howling rage monsters, almost all zombies had the common goal of feasting on living flesh. Even the all-too-real Inferi would attack a human if ordered to do so. This creature, however, did not seem intent on eating their brains. She more resembled a supplicant (albeit with structural integrity issues) than a dark creature with an appetite for flesh.

This line of thought did not lessen her unadulterated horror for the thing approaching them; it simply allowed her to stay behind Severus with a clear conscience, since it didn't appear eager to hurt them. She was of half a mind to go home and let the bastard deal with his creation by himself, for the thought that Severus preferred a dead woman to her, to the point that he would reanimate her, was a piercing blow to her ego. The other half of her was inclined to knock the infuriating man on his arse, take back her wand and deal with the creature herself.

She did neither, choosing instead to sock him in the shoulder and hiss furiously, "She's suffering! Do something!"

Severus shook his head, slowly backing into her and forcing her to step back with him. "I never meant for this to happen. I've failed her again..."

"Then give me my wand..."

"No. *Petrificus Totalus!*" He flicked her wand, but the resultant spell seemed to dissolve on contact with the creature's body. She simply took another lurching step forward, her hand still raised in entreaty. Severus cast several more bindings spells, only to have magical ropes fall limply at her feet or for the magic to bead and cascade like water off her shroud. Standing behind him, now clutching at the back of his lab coat, Hermione whispered progressively frantic suggestions into his ear while wondering how many steps it would take for the creature to drive them into the front door.

Hermione didn't have long to wonder, for all too quickly, her tailbone bumped against the rounded knob on the front door. Shrieking in frightened surprise, she staggered against Severus, who yelped in turn and completely missed with his next spell. It struck a black, woolen cloak that promptly tied itself into a granny knot on the entryway floor. Lily shuffled into it, dragging it along with her slow, methodical steps.

"The door! Move, so I can open it," Hermione gasped when she had caught her breath. He shot her a panicked glance and then sidled to the right, just enough for her to open it a crack and them both to slide through. Slamming the door behind her, Hermione leaned against it and panted in terror, hardly feeling the smarting of her wounds.

The sunlight was harsh, bright and so far removed from the horror in the house that Hermione experienced a dizzying sense of unreality. The street was deserted except for a small dog that trotted along the gully, its nose to the cement. A cool breeze wafted across the porch, blowing a lock of hair across her neck to stick to her sweaty skin. It was as if they had just pushed pause to stop a particularly scary movie and were now in the kitchen refreshing their drinks. If it were not for the disheveled man pacing on the porch, his hands clawing at greasy hanks of black hair, she might have considered it her imagination... until something heavy thumped against a wall in the house and the clattering of umbrellas scattering on a wood floor startled her back to the present.

"What in Merlin's name were you thinking?!" she shouted into the quiet of the afternoon.

"I don't know!" He rounded on her, his face as open and expressive as she had ever seen it. "It wasn't supposed to be like this!"

"Well that's obvious, isn't it? I *told* you that you had to mean it! I *told* you that I would help!"

"If I had told you what I meant to do, then you would have left!" he hissed, jabbing one long, pale finger into her face.

She grabbed the finger and yanked it to the side. "I would have tried to talk some sense into you! This..." she waved her free hand at the door against which she was still leaning, "this is totally barbaric!"

"I had to try! It was my fault that she died..." He trailed off and seemed to wilt, his finger going slack in her grip. "I thought that maybe we could have a second chance." Hermione released his finger, and it fell to his side as he tilted his head to stare at the ground. Staring at the curtain of lank hair, Hermione felt the familiar tears well in her eyes as the last bits of her heart were mashed into pulp.

"Of course," she mumbled, blinking wetly as the fight drained out of her and dragged her eyes away from his hair. It was too painful to look at it. "Because you love her."

Raising his head slowly, distracted out of his self-castigation by the broken tone of her voice, Severus was met with the sight of a messy mop of brown curls. He wished she would raise her face so that he could see her eyes. He had understood little from his brief brush with her mind; it had been a jumble of people and places that he didn't know, bombarding him when he was only semi-coherent, but the love with which she had enveloped him had filled him with hope. Heidi *loved* him. She loved *him*. But that was before Lily had emerged from the basement like some pulp fiction nightmare.

He raked a hand through his hair, dragging his fingers between the oily strands. A deep, integral part of him had broken open when Lily had risen from the table, not as the woman he remembered, but as a dead *thing*, a mockery of the vibrant being she had been. He was a fool to have attempted this, to put Lily through more suffering after what she had endured. She was in that rotting carcass of a body; he could almost sense her presence. It was a tenuous, strained feeling, as if she were a butterfly tied to this world by a hair, and his soul recoiled from what he had done. He loved Lily... but he should have let her go. She had never wanted him in the first place. Not like the woman before him did.

He was certain that he would have gone mad if she had not been waiting for him at the top of the stairs. She was the Spellotape holding him together. Could she *still* love him after this? Had he just destroyed any and all chance at happiness with not one, but two women he had come to love? It would only be as much as he deserved, but he refused to let go of Heidi without a fight. He could convince her to stay. He could make her forget about that *other man*, the blond with whom she had dined and whom she didn't want.

"Yes," he admitted quietly to the top of her head, deciding that honesty would be the best policy with Heidi. She turned her head away, further obscuring her face with tangles of hair. Why wouldn't she look at him? Desperation pushed its fingers into his brain. "Heidi, listen to me," he said and grabbed her shoulders with his hands, giving her a small shake for emphasis.

Heidi brushed his hands away from her shoulders and made a sound suspiciously close to a snuffle, but her voice was steady, if slightly husky. "There is nothing more to say. And we still have a slight *problem*."

The pain of the reminder and her denial lanced him to the quick with an almost physical rending. He had to *explain*, make her understand how he felt. And, if need be, there were always those *ways* that Lucius had mentioned...

A heavy thud against the door startled them both, and he pulled her into his arms, the only salve that could sooth his wounded soul. Wide eyed, she shuddered against him and wiped absently at her face. "Normal spells aren't working," she said quickly and sniffed. "But I'll try barring the door."

Reluctantly, Severus relinquished her wand and his embrace, but used the opportunity to wrap his hand around her left arm. If he held her, then she couldn't leave. It made a certain amount of sense that he refused to examine for flaws.

Twirling her wand in a complicated spiral, she mumbled, "Obfirmobolto." The door glowed mutedly, and when the next blow thumped against the wood, it rattled against several thick deadbolts imbedded in the door and frame.

"That won't stop... her... for long," he said, stumbling over referring to the creature as Lily as another heavy blow hit the door. Heidi scowled at him, but didn't move away, for which he was dreadfully grateful. Something must have shown in his face because her scowl softened slightly.

"You know we'll have to..." She trailed off and looked away uncomfortably.

"... Destroy her," he choked out. But they wouldn't be destroying her; they would be setting her free. He had to focus on that.

"How did you...?"

"Thaumaturgy." She glanced up at him, curiosity brightening her eyes, and he almost laughed. "Potions revived the flesh, and the Starglass was the catalyst to call and bind the soul."

She nodded, still watching him carefully, the wheels of her mind whirring almost audibly behind her eyes. "I've read about Thaumaturgy, but it said that the art is largely unpracticed. But if you were to wish back her soul, then what went wrong?"

The door rattled again, and a dim golden glow edged the frame, crackling slightly as it strained against the bolts. Heidi jumped, pressing against him as she glanced nervously at the door, and he snaked an arm around her waist. If he *held* her...

"Severus? What went wrong?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. What *had* gone wrong? He had been so distracted and conflicted, so guilty and angry that he couldn't quite remember. However, she was waiting for an answer, and he would give her one: one that was true, and yet designed to further his own agenda. Opening his eyes and staring intently into hers, he said, "I suppose... I didn't *mean* it."

Blood infused her cheeks, and her brown eyes lightened with a hope so warm that they almost glowed. He had her. He would keep her and survive Lily. When her lips parted, he was almost positive that she would kiss him, but she spoke instead. Of course she did.

"Well," she said and swallowed thickly, "perhaps we should use it to put things right."

Under the next blow, the door cracked and shuddered, the glow flaring brightly before extinguishing. Heidi swore colorfully and glared at the door, nudging him backward a few steps and training her wand at its center.

"Surely you don't use that spell for personal safety," he asked her, knowing full well that she had created that spell. Otherwise, he would have known it already.

She turned that black glare onto him. "*Usually*, it is quite resilient. Get ready," she snapped. "And remember, you have to..."

"*Mean* it, so you've said. Repeatedly." Hefting the small bottle in his hand, he cleared his mind and stilled his thoughts, grounding himself with the feel of her warm body pressed against his. For a moment, he felt invincible and ready to move mountains. Or at least, move *on*. And then Heidi stepped away from him, flicking her wand, and the door swung open.

Hermione felt him seize up, his tense energy surrounding him, crackling like static electricity and raising the fine hairs on the back of her neck. The creature now had both arms raised and outstretched, leaning toward them in supplication. Quietly, she said, "Severus, concentrate. Send her back."

He was simply staring at Lily, the bottle held almost forgotten in his hand. Wanting to groan in frustration, she grabbed his hand and squeezed, reinforcing her instructions. "She's suffering; send her *back*."

His wide, black eyes skittered over to her and then back to Lily, who had begun to advance. He seemed to shake himself and, stiffening his resolve, pointed the top of the

Starglass at her like a wand. To Hermione's dismay, the crystal phial was inert.

"You're not concentrating!" she snapped unhelpfully. He bared his teeth in a grimace, but remained focused on the creature even as he took a step backward in retreat. Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Hermione glanced behind them. They had maybe two more steps before they ran out of porch and tumbled down the stairs. Besides the injuries they would sustain, they would also be leading a magical creature into a Muggle neighborhood. And the Starglass was still not glowing.

One step backward.

Pursing her lips, Hermione cast about in her mind for a suitable spell and came up with one that had given her a bit of trouble as a student. She hadn't had occasion to use it since and wasn't too sure that it would actually do any good, but as they were taking that final step that would bring them to the edge of the stairs...

Gripping Severus' hand tightly and focusing on the first happy thought that came to mind: Severus admitting that he hadn't really *meant* to bring Lily back with that hungry, yearning expression on his face, she shouted, "Expecto Patronum!"

This silvery light that shot out of her wand was a shimmering, amorphous cloud, partially obscuring the creature behind it. Frowning, Hermione prepared to recast it when the cloud surged and split, one section coalescing into a larger animal than she had expected. Graceful and long-legged, a doe slowly strode toward Lily, its neck outstretched to sniff her hands. Beside her, Severus gasped, and the phial finally burst into pure, white light. Hardly visible, Lily wrapped her decaying arms around the doe's neck, and where she touched the Patronus, she became as incorporeal and opalescent as the embodiment of happy thoughts. As the doe nuzzled Lily's neck, another Patronus bounded up to them, its long body flowing in a silvered sine wave as it circled around their feet. The Starglass flared again, and Hermione closed her eyes in pain, turning her head away from the light. Even so, colored spots danced behind her eyelids, and the negative of a doe resting her head on a beautiful woman's shoulder burned into her retinas.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she and Severus were alone on the porch, and the Starglass was once again quiescent.

His knees buckled abruptly, and connected as they were, she sunk to the porch with him. Drawing his knees up under his chin, he wrapped his free arm around his knees and buried his head in the crook of his elbow. Silent and still, he sat; his fingers entangled with hers the only acknowledgment she had that he knew she was there.

Hermione took a deep, cleansing breath, unsure of her next move. She felt shut out and removed from the pain that Severus was clearly suffering; she wanted desperately to help, but an awkward shyness had settled over her. Hesitant to reach out to him, she wasn't even certain that she could bear it if he rejected her. After all, he had just sent the woman he loved back through the Veil. She must have misread him when he'd said he hadn't meant it. He had said that he still loved Lily, after all.

Heartsick or not, Hermione loved him, and the urge to comfort finally tore down her uncharacteristic timidity. Carefully, as if she were approaching a wounded rabbit, she leaned gently against his side, finally resting her head on his shoulder. A moment of disappointed fear shot through her when he released her hand and was instantly quelled when he wrapped that arm around her shoulders and drew her close. His other arm reached for her, and she was quickly enfolded in his embrace with his hot, shuddering breaths saturating her hair. The wounds on her back twinged, pulled and oozed, but she ignored them, clinging to him like a lifeline.

For long minutes they sat, Hermione treasuring each one until something cold and wet touched the back of her hand, startling her. Instantly, Severus was alert, tugging on her sharply as he tried to at once assess the danger and shield her from it. Unable to stifle her hiss of pain, Hermione winced and tried to alleviate the strain on her back.

"Blasted cat," Severus growled hoarsely through her hair at the kitten that was now stroking his cheek against Hermione's hand and rubbing up against Severus' side. Squirming more insistently, Hermione eased out of his embrace and reached around to touch her back. Curtains of greasy, foul-smelling hair swung forward to hide his face as he asked, "What's wrong?"

"My back. I think I've reopened the wounds."

With cautious, gentle hands, he guided her to turn in place, supporting her as she moved. He lifted her hair and settled it on her shoulder, prodding delicately at her back. "They're bleeding," he confirmed as his long, pale fingers slid slowly down her ribs to her waist. They didn't come to rest, however. With brushing strokes, they drew intricate patterns that permeated fabric and skin to burn into muscle. His touches soothed her and yet intensified the sorrow that was crawling up her throat and threatening to spill from her eyes. She didn't dare hope. That she wasn't crying now was a small miracle.

"I should go back to St. Mungo's," she whispered finally around the knot in her throat when his fingers didn't seem to be stopping anytime soon. It wasn't that his hands were unwelcome, but to have this now when she knew he loved another was simply too much... and not enough.

"I have salve in the bathroom," he said quietly behind her.

Shivering, she tried to push her longing for more of his touch away and answered, "I can't reach. I really think that I should see a Healer."

"I'll put it on you."

"Severus..."

"Please, let me put it on."

His quiet plea struck a chord within her, and she found that she couldn't deny him. "Alright."

He helped her to her feet and guided her to the bathroom with a hand still touching her waist. Quietly sitting on the rim of the bathtub with her feet braced against cold, white porcelain, she watched over her shoulder as he rummaged through the medicine chest above the sink, finally pulling a small pot from one of the upper shelves. Uncapping it, he set it on the sink and with hands that shook slightly, began to undo the buttons at her back. His face was still partially obscured by lank, black hair, and without stopping to think, she raised a hand to brush it out of his face and tuck it behind his ear. He eyed her warily, his hands freezing over one button; then he turned his face slowly, still watching her, until his lips touched her fingers. Hermione held her breath, silently daring him to continue, but frightened that he would. When those thin, slightly chapped lips stirred against her skin to place a tender kiss, Hermione was certain that she would melt in place and flow down the drain.

Dark eyes never straying from her face, he kissed another finger, lingering there with lips slightly parted and his hot, damp breath curling over her skin. Tension thrummed through his flesh to hers, and uncertainty flickered in the deep pits of his eyes, but so did a tenuous hope that seemed to swell the longer she allowed his touch. Unable to stop herself and unwilling if she could, her stomach swooping with giddy glee, she slid her fingers into his matted hair and pulled his head toward her. Closing her eyes, she pressed a kiss on lips opened in surprise. His hands abandoned her buttons and slipped around her waist as he leaned in to devour her. He was thorough, if unpolished, smashing her lips in his haste to explore her mouth, but she was just as eager, scraping her teeth against his tongue and suckling it to draw it further into her mouth. His fingers splayed and clenched against her stomach, and she wished that he would move them higher or lower; anything to sooth the ache that was coiling deep below his hands.

Dropping to his knees on the bathroom floor, he pressed his chest against her back, grinding a hard knot against her bum. Despite the promise of that friction and the frisson of want that exploded in her belly, she hissed in pain and arched her back away from the sting of her wounds, breaking their kiss.

Severus stumbled back quickly, an almost panicked expression on his face, and she felt the loss of his warmth acutely. "Maybe you could finish up back there," Hermione said huskily, "so that we could continue somewhere more comfortable?"

Staring blankly at her for a long moment, he nodded, a lopsided smile tugging at one corner of his lips. "Yes, indeed, we shouldn't let a fragile flower sit overlong on such a hard seat."

Rolling her eyes and giggling at the absurdity of the statement, Hermione watched him unfasten the rest of her buttons with fingers steadier and warmer than before.

Though concentrating on his task, he would shoot her glances, both heated and hesitant, and with more difficulty than she could possibly imagine, she resisted the temptation to pull him back into a kiss. With a carefully warmed and wetted flannel, he blotted her back clean, frowning at the damage. After applying liberal amounts of a minty, blue salve that she recognized from fourth year Potions, he taped down several strips of white gauze. The wounds tingled and itched, but no longer hurt as he carefully refastened the buttons up the back of her dress.

Flexing her shoulders experimentally, she stood and turned to face him. He was bent slightly over the sink as he rinsed the flannel clean of blood, his hair once again hiding his face. "You're very good at that, you know. Did you ever consider becoming a Healer?"

"No," he said shortly.

She sighed, wondering if their kiss had been some fevered figment of her imagination. Deciding to test it, she stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his chest, leaning her head against his shoulder blades. He stiffened, the bones under her cheeks shifting beneath the skin; then he relaxed, resting an arm over hers. Pressing her nose against his shirt, she smiled. She had always like his shoulders: broad, but lean and stronger than they appeared. The arse pressed against her stomach didn't feel too shabby either, and she happily snuggled against him... until she inhaled.

"Ugh. You need a shower," she said, pulling away reluctantly. "And maybe burn these clothes."

Turning to face her, he scowled down at her as he leaned against the sink. "You aren't the picture of cleanliness either, my dear."

"You first." She wrinkled her nose and moved to step out of the bathroom when he caught her arm and tugged her back.

"You'll be here when I get out." It wasn't so much of a question as a confirmation. She nodded, dropping her eyes to the floor as the reminder of her imminent departure... and the reasons for it... sucked the happiness out of the moment.

"Heidi..." Severus ducked down until he could peer into her face. He felt her withdrawal, and it sent a sharp stab of fear through him. She couldn't leave him. He had things to *explain*, and Heidi would listen to him, forgive him, where Lily hadn't.

"I'll make some tea and take it to the parlor." She patted his hand and flashed him what she must have meant to be a smile. Gently pulling from his grasp, she left the bathroom and shut the door behind her. Severus was of half a mind to go after her, but spotted his stained, torn lab coat and disheveled, greasy hair. 'She kissed me like this?' he thought in bemused wonderment and then stripped out of his clothes. Heidi was right: he should burn them. Eradicate all trace of his misguided attempt to right the mistakes of his past. An image of the thing that had once been Lily threatened to overwhelm him, chilling his blood despite the warm spray of water cascading over his body. Pushing it away, he focused on Heidi's face just before she had kissed him, her eyes half lidded and her cheeks flushed. Lily had been lost to him years ago, even before she had died. And as much as it felt as if a piece of him were missing, he felt that he could accept that and move on. *She* was his future now; he would see to it.

Though it probably ranked as one of his fastest showers to date, it was also his most thorough. He washed in all of those places about which his mother had harped, including behind his ears, just in case Heidi... just in case. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he stuck his head out of the bathroom to listen for movement, his heart pounding until he heard the quiet clatter of his cheap ceramic tea setting. He breathed a sigh of relief and slunk into his bedroom to change. Choosing a set of robes at random, he pulled them on over his undergarments and sped down the stairs and into the parlor. She glanced up at him over the rim of her teacup and gave him that smile-that-wasn't.

Sitting on the sofa closer to her than he would normally have dared, he pulled the Starglass from the pocket in which he had stowed it, setting it on the coffee table as he stared earnestly into her eyes. He opened his mouth, but the words he meant to convince her to stay refused to come. Setting the cup and saucer on the table, she asked, "Tea?"

"No, I don't want tea," he said impatiently. "Heidi..."

She looked at him questioningly, and his articulate tongue tied itself into a knot. Shutting his mouth with a snap, he stared at his knees. He didn't even know how to go about explaining his loneliness and desolation after Lily's death, nor the spark of hope that the Starglass had given him for finding some small bit of happiness. He couldn't put into words how much Heidi's arrival had seemed like a gift from the gods or how crushed he had been to realize that her friendship was transient. He could hardly admit to himself that his heart now beat for her alone.

"Severus?" she asked doubtfully.

"You said you were leaving. I didn't want..." he mumbled finally, feeling like a stuttering adolescent. "I thought maybe..." He made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and swept wet hair out of his eyes.

She sighed heavily and reached for one of his hands that rested on his knees, enfolding it in her own. "It's complicated."

He frowned at their clasped hands and then yanked it away as an image of her and a blond man (who looked remarkably like Lucius) holding hands flashed across his mind's eye. He had better not have to compete for her with Lucius because, old friend or not, he *would* win by any means necessary. "It's that blond man, isn't it?"

"Blond man?" she asked, staring blankly at him until realization widened her eyes. "You peeked into my mind! And for your information, no! He's *not* the complication!" She scooted away from him to the armrest of the sofa, crossing her arms over her chest and giving him a hard stare. This was not how he intended this conversation to go.

"No, wait. I'm... sorry." He held up a placating hand, willing to back down as long as he could get her to listen. Once he figured out what to say, that was.

To his amazement, she softened, truly smiling at him as she took his hand again. Gods, but she was wonderful.

"It wasn't your fault, you know, Severus," she said softly. "It was Peter Pettigrew's for betraying them and Voldemort's for murdering them. You did the best you could."

"*Sirius Black* betrayed them," he corrected her, suppressing the reflexive flinch that the name inspired and eyeing her through strands of drying black hair. "Everyone knows that."

She blinked, paling and flushing alternately, then swept a curly lock of hair out of her face. "That's not the point. The point *is* that it wasn't your fault." Her face clouded, and her eyes saddened, darkened. "But I won't be someone's second choice." This last she said to the teapot.

Severus wasn't sure what to address first: her mistaken naming of Pettigrew as the traitor, the fact that she knew far more about his past than he had ever guessed, or her implication that he had a choice. *It's complicated,* she had said. He decided to pursue the last option, reckoning that once he convinced her to stay, then the others would come in time.

Unfortunately, his tongue still refused to cooperate with his higher reasoning, and he burst out with, "Yousaid you were leaving!"

"It's..."

Abandoning words, he lunged forward before she could finish the sentence, kissing her roughly as he pressed her into the sofa with the weight of his body. She gasped into his mouth, arching her back off the sofa and then shifting her weight so that they both tumbled onto the ground with her straddling his hips. He didn't care who was on top, as long as she continued to touch him. And touch him she did, running her hands up his chest and over his shoulders as she squeezed him with her thighs. Sprawling over him, she tangled her fingers in his hair and planted noisy, wet kisses across his brow, down his nose, over his cheeks to his ears. When she nibbled one lobe between her teeth, he thanked his dearly departed mum for insisting that he wash behind them. His hands were full of soft, round, womanly bum, and he squeezed, his

eyes rolling back when she ground down upon him. Her teeth scraped against his neck, grazing the long vein that throbbed against the tongue that followed. Delirious and painfully aroused, he traced the flare of her hips and dip of her waist with his hands, trailing searching fingers over her ribs on a quest for her breasts. He groaned as she shifted her weight so that he could palm them and then groaned again as her lips trapped his and her tongue demanded entrance. He kissed her as thoroughly as he knew how, and from the little whimpers issuing from the back of her throat, he felt smug, male pride that she liked it. That she liked *him*.

She confirmed it a moment later when she whispered against his lips, "I want you, Severus. I love you."

His heart soared as his pelvis rolled in reflex. "Then stay with me."

"Complicated," she whispered, kissing the corner of his mouth.

"No, it's quite simple."

"You love Lily," she mumbled, nudging his ear with her nose. Her hot breath wafted across the sensitive rim, and he moaned softly, undone.

"I love *you*. I thought I couldn't have you." It was true; he still loved Lily and probably always would, but he didn't think that this was the time to share that information. And he *did* love Heidi. Completely.

"You have me," she assured him. Placing a kiss on his jaw, she snuggled into him, still sprawled on his chest. Relaxing the grip of her legs, she let her hips slide over his groin to rest against the floor, one thigh still pinning him down. As if he were inclined to go anywhere. He smiled, sliding one hand into her thick, curly hair while the other kneaded a breast.

"So, you'll stay with me?" he asked into her hair, wrinkling his nose as a strand tickled one nostril. Blowing it impatiently out of his face, he smoothed the top of her head with his cheek.

She yawned and said sleepily, "I'll stay."

Hermione woke several hours later, stiff, sore and utterly content. Smiling into Severus' robes, she thought happily that if she so enjoyed snogging him on the parlor floor, then she couldn't wait to get him into bed. He was enthusiastic, if a bit green, very intelligent, and they had all the time in the world to learn to please each other. Because she was *staying*.

Sighing blissfully, she considered this new life before her. She would miss her friends and family more than she could possibly conceive at that moment, but they wouldn't be truly lost to her, would they? They would simply know her as Heidi, the Potion master's... what? Girlfriend? Lover? Wife? It didn't matter, as long as she was his *something*. And he was hers. It would be fascinating to watch herself grow up. What kinds of choices would this alternate Hermione make differently? She would have to be careful, of course, but it was akin to running a grand, observational experiment.

Finding a new job might be difficult without O.W.L.s, N.E.W.T.s, or letters of recommendation, but she would find something. She would also be careful to not muck up the timeline any more than absolutely required (except for where his death was concerned *that* she would prevent). Things would work themselves out and didn't need any *fixing*, as Severus had just disastrously demonstrated.

His failed attempt to raise Lily from the dead still bothered her deeply. She supposed that she should have expected something of the sort, given his slant toward the Dark Arts and the versatility of the Starglass. The nature of his love for Lily was also due some thought, for it was warped, at best. It seemed to be closer to obsession than love. Whatever it was, it was unhealthy, but he loved *her*, now, so she would simply have to get over it. She could dwell on the past or she could move on to the... well, past, which was now her future...

'Which reminds me,' she thought as she yawned widely. 'I need to send messages to my friends and family and grab Crookshanks.' She paused a moment, then decided to stick to the story she had told Harry: that she had met someone on her trip and was going to stay with him, which, in essence, was the truth. It might even be a wasted effort. That timeline might wink out of existence the minute she entered the past to stay. But she didn't know and wouldn't want to chance that her friends and family would think something horrible had happened to her.

It was dangerous, what she had decided to do: dangerous and quite possibly very stupid. She may not have considered it if her life in the future was the life she had lived. As it was, that life belonged to a different Hermione, and this was her chance to start anew with the man she loved. She hoped that it was the everlasting kind of love.

Carefully lifting her body so as not to disturb Severus, she plucked her wand and the Starglass from the coffee table and levitated his inert form to the sofa.

As noiselessly as she could, she left the house, sending the sleeping man within a promise to return soon. If all went as she planned, she would be back in an hour or so, perhaps even before he awoke. To save time, she Apparated directly to the bottom of the well, holding the Starglass safely to her chest.

'Take me back to my own time,' she told it, focusing on the time period she had resolved to abandon. It flared brightly, light streaming between her fingers as a familiar weightlessness claimed her body. Closing her eyes, she smiled peacefully into the nothingness until she felt firm ground under her feet.

A fine mist dusted her skin, and she opened her eyes, turning her face to the entrance of the well. The afternoon sky was dark with rain clouds, and a gentle drizzle fell softly to bead on her cheeks. Stretching her arms above her head, she spread her fingers in welcome to the rain, laughing lightly. It was as if her own time was giving her a teary send-off, and she accepted it joyously, blowing a kiss to the heavens.

Until she realized that she was no longer holding the Starglass.

A/N: I suppose that you can guess that I am very fond of horror movies and novels. Hope it wasn't too squicky. If it was, then rest assured that there isn't any more.

On a side note: I'll be out of town for a couple of weeks. If I have the opportunity to post while I'm away, then I will. However, there is a strong likelihood that the next chapter won't go up until I get back. However, this chapter was longer than normal, so it's as if you got two chapters this week!

I'm still behind on review responses, and for that, I apologize.

Masquerade

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Edited by: thyme_is_a_cat

Chapter 18 Masquerade

Hermione tried to draw air through her nostrils unsuccessfully, then gave it up as a lost cause, pulling another tissue from the box on the coffee table. Luna sat next to her on the sofa and patted her shoulder in an absent, but somehow reassuring, manner.

"I wish I could say that I understand how you feel, but I don't," Luna said kindly as Hermione dabbed at her dripping nose. "I was devastated when my mother died, of course, but it's a different kind of loving. So, I suppose that I *kind of* understand, but not really. I'm sorry, nonetheless."

"Thank you," Hermione said and snuffled again. It seemed that her most recent bout of crying was coming to a close, but then again, she had spent most of the last two days crying, so it might be that she had simply run out of tears.

With her surprisingly accurate sense of disturbances in the time-space continuum, Luna had Flooed late that night, a dense fudge cake in tow. If it had been in any other circumstance, Hermione would have accused her of being a Jedi master attuned to the Force, but she had just lost her heart twenty years in the past and her only method of retrieving it somewhere outside of time.

Talking (and crying) until the rosy glow of dawn had crept between the tall buildings of the London skyline to paint her dining nook an unwelcome, cheerful pink, Hermione had confessed the entirety of her adventure. In her previous discussions with Luna, she had hinted and hedged, admitting to only those events for which Luna had proof. Now, she left out nothing, answered every question to the very fullest of her ability, and tried to not be offended as her friend accepted each detail with such easy belief. If someone had come to Hermione with such a preposterous story, then she would have had him or her committed. At the very least, sedated. Then again, perhaps her outrage stemmed from her *own* desire to not believe her story, for which practical, right-minded woman fell in love with a man four years dead? Sedation didn't sound half bad at the moment, though it would only dull the pain temporarily and not make Severus any less dead.

Even her alternate plan had been foiled: the note that she had tucked away in her bodice, in the event that she wouldn't be staying with Severus, had disappeared. She had no idea when or where she had dropped it. It could have slid through a crack in the porch during their confrontation with Lily, slipped under Severus' sofa while they had snogged or been set adrift in eddies of time with the Starglass. She hoped that he had somehow found it, for in it, she had not only expressed her feelings for him, but had hinted about the nature of his death, warning him to keep his stash of Blood-Replenishing Potion, coagulation salve, and anti-venoms close at hand. It was the most her conscience would allow, but much less than her heart desired. And obviously not enough, had he found it.

Her eyes stung and watered, and she sniffled futilely, swabbing her face with her bathrobe sleeve. It appeared that she had more tears left, after all. And they had eaten all of the cake. Damn it.

"Think of it this way," Luna offered thoughtfully. "Now that you have known him personally," she paused when Hermione blew her nose with a muffled honk, "you can help others understand him as a man, not just the sum of his deeds."

The memory of his warm, chapped lips moving against hers shot through her chest as sharply as the shaft of an arrow, and she was sobbing all over again. *This* was the grief she had expected to feel when her relationship with Ron had ended: a hollowed-out wretchedness, as if the greater part of her innards had been scooped away, leaving what was left raw and exposed and *hurting*. An integral part of her was missing, and she despaired of ever finding it again.

Luna was patting her again. "You really should come by Spinner's End before it opens to the public," she said. "Your team has done an excellent job. Perhaps it would give you some closure."

"I don't want closure!" Hermione wailed and flopped sideways on the couch. "I wanted to *stay!*" A thought occurred to her, and she mumbled it into the sofa cushion. "It opens soon?" She could hardly believe it. She had scheduled months of renovation before it was presentable, which meant that her timetable had been accelerated drastically since the last time she had seen the house. Granted, that had been after her first trip to the past, and so many other things had changed...

"Who is going to care for Bewlip, once the house opens?"

Luna blinked at her owlishly. "Bewlip?"

"His cat," Hermione clarified, snuffling to clear her blocked nasal passages. She would have to get this cushion laundered after leaking tears and mucus on it for two days.

"Oh, right." Luna nodded. "Mewlip. He disappeared not long after Headmaster Snape died."

Headmaster Snape. Severus. They were still two entirely different people in her mind: one, the harsh professor whose classes she had enjoyed for their curriculum, but resented for their unfairness; the other, a difficult, sensitive man with whom she had wanted to spend the rest of her life. However, Spinner's End would always be *Severus'* home in her mind: a place where they had studied, fought, kissed, and finally admitted to love. And now Mewlip was gone, as well. No, she didn't want to go back, not even to see the improvements made on the property. Perhaps when the pain of losing him had dulled, but not now.

"Would you mind terribly," Luna started carefully, and Hermione lifted her head enough to eye her friend. Luna rarely prevaricated. Caring little for what others thought, she usually just stated what was on her mind. "If I wrote down your story and published it in the Quibbler?"

Alarmed, Hermione rose up on her elbow and opened her mouth to protest, her tears momentarily forgotten.

"No, I won't mention the name Heidi or anything about time-travel or raising people from the dead. It would be something of a memoir of a woman who had adventured with the Headmaster when he was still a young professor and who has long since vanished, unearthed by the Quibbler's Editor and published in honor of A.A.S.S. opening the door's of Spinner's End..." Luna trailed off with a misty smile, her eyes glazed with what was probably the opening paragraph of her article as it unfurled in her mind.

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about that. She trusted Luna to give the story its due, and she knew that her friend would not publish anything that would allow someone to trace the heroine of the story back to Hermione. Nevertheless, the idea made her vaguely uneasy, as if the publishing of it would somehow leave her exposed and under a spotlight. "I don't 'dow..."

"I'll let you read it before I publish it. Edit it, if you like."

"What harm would it do?" she thought resignedly. Maybe it would even help her to read it from a third person perspective, to pretend that it had happened to someone else entirely. Everyone else in the story had passed on (except, perhaps, for Madam Beetlebump, and she was barmy) and wouldn't be around to ask questions. Sighing heavily through her mouth, since her nose was hopelessly clogged, she shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Thanks, Hermione. I really do think it will be a good thing." Rising from the sofa, Luna stared down at her speculatively. "I think we should go out for breakfast. You've been in this flat for too long. Have you even bathed since you got back?"

Grimacing, but knowing that her hair was a rat's nest and that she could smell her own funk, Hermione slouched off the sofa and toward the bathroom, finally succumbing to the pull of her life moving forward.

The heat of summer lingered as September drew to a close, the sunny days blighted by the occasional rain shower and growing cloudier as the month progressed. It was just such a day, warm and overcast, that the Association for the Acknowledgement of Severus Snape opened the doors of Headmaster Snape's house on Spinner's End in a formal ceremony hosted by the Ministry of Magic. Hidden from Muggle eyes, the ceremony included speeches given by Snape's former colleagues, including a tearful Minerva McGonagall; a reading of Luna's article (with Hermione's blessing, of course); a ribbon cutting and refreshments afterward. The Malfoy family had sponsored the reception, and Hermione had it on good authority that the elf-made wine had come from their own cellars.

Draco had accompanied Hermione to the ceremony as both her date and the representative of his family and stood by her as she severed the deep purple ribbon that wrapped around the house with a nonverbal Diffindo. She had almost called it quits with him during that beastly last week in August when she thought that she would shrivel up with the pain of her lost love. However, his companionship and attentiveness had helped her to start coping. She didn't love Draco, but she liked him and being with him was better than being alone. It pricked her conscience that she was using him, but she mollified it with the thought that she *could* love Draco, if she were ever to get over Severus. She missed him fiercely and suspected that she always would.

For now, she was grateful for Draco's presence: a shelter of normalcy (or as close to normal as she could find, anymore) against a teeming mob of memories waiting to assail her beyond the doors of Severus' house, pitchforks in hand. To her immense relief, the house was so changed, inside and out, that she barely recognized it. In addition to the re-facing of the house, the verdant lawn and beds of pansies lining the walk, a chestnut tree had been planted in the left section of the small yard and encouraged to grow tall and broad. Dark, gnarly branches, heavy with leaves tinted yellow by autumn, partially obscured the brick structure and managed to give the lot a more homey feel. The inside of the house had been repainted, the wood floors polished and waxed, and the tile floors and countertops re-grouted and in places, re-tiled. The bookshelves in the parlor gleamed with wood oil, and the books had been dusted and enchanted against curious visitors.

None of his original furniture remained. Each piece had been replaced with a new item in a similar style, but in immaculate condition. Meaningful objects, including Severus' Order of Merlin, had been mounted in display cases and hung on previously empty walls, each with a brass plaque explaining its significance. Throughout the ground floor, small podiums had been erected, faced with a larger brass plaque that described important points in his life or enumerated his many contributions to the fight against Voldemort. No, this was not Severus' house; this was a museum. She could deal with this.

The reception was located in the backyard, which had seen as many improvements as the rest of the lot. The ugly old tree had been diseased and unsalvageable, so it had been uprooted and a flowering plum planted in its place. A new lawn had been sown, and a tidy, white, wooden fence had replaced the chain link. There was nothing to be done about the view beyond the fence, and Hermione had watched more than one guest stare up at the stacks of the mill beyond the river, as she had once done.

Harry and Ron sulked at the edge of the reception, throwing mutinous glances her way that had less to do with A.A.S.S. and more to do with Draco standing next to her. Though he hadn't said anything directly, early on in September, Harry had hinted at his disappointment that things hadn't worked out with her "foreigner." To Hermione's utter amazement, he had said it *out* of earshot of Draco, showing a discretion and maturity that the wizard *she* knew rarely possessed. As with many things in her life, she found that she had to reacquaint herself with her friends. Luna had given her a thorough run-down of the events in her new life, but she was still prone to mistakes. Her friends and boyfriend attributed her absent-mindedness and pendulous mood to the opening of Spinner's End, and as she eased into the waters of a life she hadn't lived, she found it easier and easier to stay afloat. There were times, however, when she was tempted to take a Portkey and disappear; the location didn't matter as long as it was far away.

To her very great relief, her parents had changed little, and when she needed a break from the magical world that often fit like a pair of shoes two sizes too big, she would hide at her childhood home and relive fond moments that *all* of them remembered. It occurred to her that she could leave the magical world behind altogether, but magic had become a fundamental part of her. In truth, the Muggle world was even more uncomfortable and foreign than this changed present.

Placing a hand in the small of her back, Draco whispered in her ear, "Would you care for a glass of wine?"

"Yes, please," she said, smiling up at him. He really was quite attentive and courteous, for all that he had a keen mind, sharp wit and barbed tongue. Often, as they conversed over dinner or during one of their strolls through Diagon Alley, Hermione saw glimpses of Severus in his speech and manner, and she caught herself wondering how much Severus had taken to heart her admonition to provide guidance to Draco. That led to the thought that she liked Draco because he reminded her of Severus, and then she would have to feign a speck of lint in her eye to dab away the tears. Draco wasn't fooled, but he had a great respect for her privacy and didn't pry with anything more than a concerned glance and a tender squeeze of her shoulder.

Ron elbowed Harry, and they both glared at Draco's back as he wended toward the wine fountain placed in the middle of the refreshments table. Standing next to their husbands, Ginny and Lavender rolled their eyes and shook their heads, heading to the aperitifs and leaving the men to their grumbling. Harry and Ron might not approve of Draco, but their wives were staunch supporters. On one occasion, Ron had accused Draco of slipping her a Love Potion. Lavender had socked his shoulder before Hermione could respond.

"Ronald Weasley," Lavender had snapped, and her husband had begun to flush, his head hunching low on his shoulders as he rubbed his arm. "I am sick to death of that tripe. Draco has grown up to be a decent bloke and a fine catch. It's obvious that he fancies Hermione, and she has been alone for far too long. Now, shut your gob."

Hermione hadn't felt the need to add anything after that; she merely smiled at Lavender and toasted her silently. Who would have thought that "Lav-lav" would grow up into a thinner, prettier Molly Weasley?

It had taken a couple of weeks for Hermione to acclimatize to Ron and Lavender's marriage. At first, she had been jealous of the sweet touches they had shared, as only weeks ago, Ron had touched *her* that way, but that had faded quickly. Now, she was glad that the couple suited each other so well. She found that she quite liked the woman Lavender had become.

Their mouths set in similar pouts, Ron and Harry stalked toward her, and Hermione sighed heavily. Draco was on his way back as well, two goblets of wine in hand. She didn't relish the coming confrontation.

"Potter, Weasley," Draco said, his polite tone served with a healthy dollop of disdain. "I hope that you are enjoying the reception." Hermione could almost see the wheels turning behind Ron's eyes, examining his words for the smallest insult. Finding none, he merely scowled and crossed his arms over his chest.

His face pinched in dislike, Harry said, "It was decent of your family to sponsor it." Hermione smiled at him in reward, and he shot her a look of aggrieved resignation.

Draco raised a surprised eyebrow. "Ah, but Severus was my godfather. It is the least I could do for his memory." His lips curving in what would have been a sappy smile if it hadn't been Draco's face, he added, "And this project is what brought us," he draped a possessive arm around Hermione's waist, "together."

Flushing scarlet, Ron spat, "Listen, Ferret..." He stopped abruptly when Draco raised his glass in greeting to Ginny and Lavender as they approached, dainty china aperitif plates held in one hand and goblets of pumpkin juice in the other. Ron glanced behind him and winced, immediately changing his tone. "Right, erm. Good for you, then."

"Are the boys playing nicely?" Ginny asked as she winked at Hermione.

"Of course, Madam." Draco gave her a small, courtly bow, grinning playfully, and though it hardly seemed possible, Harry looked more sour.

"That's good to hear," Lavender said, giggling as Draco bowed over her hand.

Luna wandered up to their group, her slightly protuberant eyes drifting over them in turn as they greeted her. "It doesn't seem like the same house," she said dreamily, smiling as she gazed up into the branches of the plum tree. "I think he would have liked this tree. The leaves look almost black."

Nodding, Draco eyed the tree speculatively and then turned his attention to Luna. "Luna, I have a question regarding your resources for that article you read." Hermione froze, shooting a nervous look at her friend, but Luna just cocked her head and blinked at him. "The memoir of the woman who had spent time with Severus as a young man?"

"Oh, yes." Latching onto his elbow, Luna steered him away from the group until they were standing alone under the purple foliage of the plum tree. Watching them leave as surreptitiously as she could, Hermione was relieved that Luna hadn't even glanced her way. Lavender nudged Ron's arm, murmuring her desire to inspect the fence because she wanted something similar in her own yard. Always happy to discuss home improvements, Ginny trailed after them, much to the dismay of her brother who didn't give a toss about fences and knew that once Ginny and Lavender got started, the conversation would last for *eons*.

Hermione relaxed, letting her gaze wander back to the newly refurbished house. She wished that she could have truly been a part of its renovation, just as she wished she could have met the man Severus had become. The respect and admiration that the public held for him still came as a shock at times. How much more would she have enjoyed his classes? Would his bushy-haired, know-it-all student have reminded him of a woman he had known long ago? Or had he eventually forgotten her as he clung to his obsession for Lily? "He must have really loved her, to have fought all those years."

"Loved who?" Harry asked sharply at her shoulder, and it was only then that Hermione realized that she wasn't alone and that she had spoken aloud.

"Lily, of course. Isn't *she* why he protected you and spied for Dumbledore?"

"How did you know that?" he asked and then answered his own question with a self-deprecating smile. "Oh right, your research." He shrugged and shoved his hands into his Muggle jeans. "At first, I suppose. He had a terrible crush on her and never got over resenting my dad... but he loved another woman who... just vanished. No one even knew her real name. I saw it in his private memories, though I didn't get to see her face... She had hair like yours." He shook his head, as if to cast off the shadows of the other man's memories. "I think that maybe she was the woman in Luna's article." He gave her a long, serious look and then said, "Promise not to repeat that. If it didn't come up in your research..."

"Of course not," Hermione managed to sound offended around the lump in her throat. So, he hadn't forgotten her at all. He'd loved her.

Lowering his voice to a near-whisper, he continued, "Do you remember that ghostly otter that guided me to the Gryffindor sword? At the time, I could have sworn it was yours, but it was *his* Patronus, and it was also *hers*." Blinking at him stupidly through a film of tears, Hermione nodded dumbly. "She made him want to be a better person."

The Malfoy Halloween party was held in the grand ballroom of Malfoy Manor, a spacious room that held two hundred and fifty guests, a string quartet, refreshment tables, and an entire colony of giant vampire bats fluttering about the ceiling with plenty of room to spare for the numerous dancing couples. Cobwebs had been strewn over the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that lined the ballroom, and the glasses had been enchanted to distort the guests' reflections into caricatures of themselves. Five sets of tall French doors opened onto a wide balcony overlooking a rose garden, a warming charm allowing guests to linger outside for fresh air without catching a chill.

Hermione was not thrilled to be back at the Manor, but the dread that had curdled her blood when she had visited with Severus was now only a shiver of fear. Like a gentleman, Draco had picked her up at her flat and Apparated with her to the front gates where an Abraxan-drawn carriage had carried them up to the front entrance. He'd steered clear of the drawing room, his smile tight and forced until they had entered the ballroom. Only leaving her side to fetch them drinks or nibbles, his attention was almost smothering, but she didn't mind it in this instance. His behavior also answered a question she had been unwilling to ask: had she and her friends been dragged to this house as prisoners on this timeline? Apparently she had, and Draco remembered it. She wondered what this new Draco had done about it.

Her eyes scanning the other guests, Hermione was now glad that Draco had insisted that she wear this costume. She had argued that it was far too elaborate, but he had assured her that the rest of the guests would be dressed similarly. Dressed as a Gorgon, she wore a sleeveless, silk chiton that shimmered and changed from ocean blue to sea green as she moved. A faint scale pattern and the clinginess of the fabric gave the illusion that she was clad in living snakeskin. The dress was belted low with a length of silver chord, and she wore flat, silver sandals that laced up to her knees, occasionally visible through the slits in her skirt that reached from the floor to the top of her thigh. Hermione had pointed out that the slits were *not* historically accurate, but Draco had merely laughed. A heavy, silver collar in the shape of the Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, laid at her throat, and silver, snake armbands twined around her upper arms. Her hair had been charmed into a nest of teal-green serpents that writhed, hissed and lunged at any male who got too close, excluding Draco. Hermione suspected that he had a hidden agenda with her costume, and when he had appeared on her doorstep dressed as a circus griffin tamer, complete with top hat, tailcoat and whip, she had been tempted to sic one of her hair snakes on him. This was *before* she had realized that the snakes would ignore him.

Every guest wore a mask. Each and every angel, demon, fairy, mermaid, cat, bird, Muggle (and some of the Muggle costumes were truly outrageous), vampire, Crumple-Horned Snorkack (at least, that is what she *thought* he was) and naughty schoolgirl wore no less than a demi-mask, and many wore elaborate full-faced masks that gave no clue as to their identities. Hermione had donned a simple, silver eye-mask of the same design as Draco's black mask. She liked the anonymity, and from the raucous behavior of some of the guests, they were enjoying it, as well. That, and they had had far too much to drink.

One such partier stumbled against her chair, his beaked mask and robes decorated completely in red and gold feathers, and her hair rose en masse, coiling and striking at the unfortunate phoenix. Mumbling an apology, he lurched away, toasting her hair respectfully with his half-empty goblet. Sighing, Hermione wondered how long it would take Draco to refresh their drinks when he dropped a kiss on her shoulder.

"Did you know," he said quietly as he took his seat at their table in the back of the ballroom, "that a number of the guests have made a drinking game out of your hair." He smirked, preening at his own cleverness.

"Do tell."

"Take one drink if you get hissed at, two if you get bit, and three if you manage to touch it unscathed." He tweaked one of her snaky locks, and it slowly wound around his finger.

"Do you have to take three drinks, now?" she asked bemusedly, wondering how one could win such a game.

His smirk widening into a grin, he drawled, "No, I just won twenty Galleons from the idiot Can-Can Girl with the hairy chest."

"Oh." She *did* have a rather hairy chest. And a prominent Adam's apple. Shapely legs, though.

"Would you care to dance?" Rising from his seat, he held out a hand and bowed at the waist.

Though not much of a dancer, Hermione took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor. "I'll try not to step on your feet," she said as they fell into a stately waltz. "Just be careful of my back. The scars ache now that the weather has turned chilly."

"Which reminds me," he said, pausing to spin her expertly. "A dear friend of mine, a Healer, is here, and I'd like him to take a look at those scars. They aren't healing properly."

"I'm sure he doesn't want to work while at a party, honestly!"

"He *prefers* work to parties," Draco said with a delicate grimace. "Merlin only knows why." Hermione could name a number of reasons, but held her tongue. "I had to twist his arm literally to convince him to come to this one."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have insisted," Hermione suggested, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. One thing that she had learned about Draco was that he was difficult to dissuade when determined. At times, it was charming, but could also be very annoying. As for this Healer, she could only hope to distract him from his idea to

have her examined or risk creating a scene. Eyeing the crowd for a suitable diversion, she noticed a wizard dressed as Zeus standing proudly in a ring of admirers. His skin was painted with shimmering gold, covered only at the groin and one shoulder with a draped length of white cloth, and his long, blond hair was crowned with a wreath of crackling light. He held a tall scepter of glowing, white metal. Hermione almost blushed to look at him; whether by enchantment or exercise, he cut a fine, male figure. "Is that your father? Zeus is usually portrayed as having a beard."

"Ah, yes," Draco said sardonically as he followed Hermione's line of sight. "No time like Halloween to proclaim one's superiority *and* parade around unclothed. I suppose we should pay our respects."

She supposed that it would be rude to do otherwise and might serve to distract Draco sufficiently from having his Healer friend examine her, but she wasn't looking forward to it. Since she had begun dating Draco, she had not once seen his father. She supposed it was possible that she had run into him *before* her memories of their relationship began, but doubted it. The Malfoy patriarch and his wife were often out of the country doing Important Things. She simply couldn't imagine Malfoy approving of his only son dating a Muggle-born witch and didn't relish the prospect of learning it first-hand from his own mouth. The thought crossed her mind that he might recognize her from the past, but she decided that it was unlikely. He had only met her twice, and that had been twenty years ago. Trying to look like she was enjoying herself, she allowed Draco to lead her from the dance floor to the glowing, golden Olympian and his circle of sycophants.

"Father, you are looking shiny this evening," Draco greeted his father with a firm handshake.

"And you, Draco. Please tell me that you shall be putting that whip to good use?" Lucius eyed Hermione standing by his side, and she tried not to flush and fidget under his penetrating gaze. She managed the latter, but not the former, and the snakes in her hair hissed reprovably.

"Now, Father, no need to be crass. I'm sure that you've met Miss Hermione Granger," he said tugging her gently forward by the hand until she was fully facing him. Hermione smiled tightly and nodded in greeting.

"Mr. Malfoy."

"So, Miss Granger has grown up." He shot Draco a leer, and Draco's smile iced over. "My, my, Draco. You seem to have taken your godfather's words to heart. She truly is the spitting image of his Heidi. Except for the snakes, of course," he added when one of the jeweled serpents struck at his face.

"I am master of my own life, Father."

Lucius drew himself up and attempted to eye his son over his nose. Unfortunately for the patriarch, Draco was a couple of inches taller, not to mention the fact that it was difficult to take a man seriously when he was dressed in an artistically draped sheet. "Very well, Draco. Have your fun. I'm sure she will prove a most... transient... amusement."

Muted snickers rose from the guests surrounding them, but were silenced with a sharp look from Draco.

'I was good enough for Severus as Heidi, but I'm not good enough for his son as myself,' she thought bitterly.

"As transient as your good name," Hermione simpered sarcastically at the Malfoy patriarch. Their audience murmured quietly, and Draco smirked at his father, sketching him a mocking, old-fashioned bow.

Malfoy raised a golden eyebrow, his upper lip curling in a sneer. "The name Malfoy has survived the rise and fall of many a Dark wizard, my dear. *And* their vanquishers. Do not get too... comfortable."

"Father..."

"That goes for you, as well, Draco. One should never forget one's place."

With a tight, false smile that no held no humor, Draco nodded sharply at his father. "As you say. Lovely party." He included the guests encircling them with that last statement, then led Hermione out of the ring of people with one hand at the small of her back. Shocked into silence, Hermione allowed him to lead, her thoughts heavy with the conflict between father and son. She guessed that she was only one facet in what appeared to be a struggle of wills, and she wasn't thrilled to be caught in the crossfire. She had to wonder if part of Draco's attraction to her was his father's disapproval or whether it was *in spite* of it. What was the future of such a relationship? Did she want it to *have* a future? So wrapped up in her doubts was she that she hadn't noticed Draco talking until he was making another introduction.

"Hermione, I would like you to meet my friend, Healer Pericles Greenglass. Pericles, Miss Hermione Granger."

Hermione stared blankly at the masked man that stood before her, belatedly remembering to offer her hand. "Oh, erm. How do you do?"

He took her hand perfunctorily and gave it one pump, his face hidden behind the featureless, full-faced mask he wore. It was stark white and expressionless, contrasting sharply against the long, black hair that he wore unbound. Two long locks framed the white mask and rested against the breast of his crisp, white frock coat. The rest of his suit was of the same pure white except for a shoulder cloak of black velvet. The ensemble was striking, but could have easily been ridiculous on a man who did not carry himself with the same self-possession.

"How do you do?" he greeted her in turn as the snakes in her hair writhed and hissed. To his credit, he ignored them, not even flinching when one struck at his shoulder.

"Your costume is very interesting, but I must admit that I don't understand the symbolism," she said as her eyes wandered over his form. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn't quite place him.

"Indeed."

Draco chuckled. "Another moment to record." Rolling her eyes, Hermione huffed. Still chuckling, he added, "You weren't meant to. It is a private joke between Pericles and me."

"How lovely for the both of you," she snapped, irrationally irritated and well aware of the fact. Mr. Malfoy probably had much to do with her mood, but Draco's gentle teasing was rubbing her the wrong way. Chafing her arms with her hands, she sighed and glanced at the door longingly. She was done with parties at the moment and wanted nothing more than to go home.

"Hermione," Draco stepped into her line of sight, his tone conciliatory. "Please don't let what my father said bother you. He can be a right arse, and he likes to show off for his guests. Not everyone here liked the way the war ended."

She gave him a narrow glance and then slid her eyes toward his friend, Healer Greenglass. A *real* Greenglass, she supposed wistfully. The blankness of his mask unnerved her, and she wished to see his face in order to read some inkling of his feelings on their current topic. Though, if Draco counted him among his close friends, he was probably safe enough. *This* Draco had far better taste than the Draco she had known before.

"He has always treated people poorly and always will. It's not right," she said finally. "I think I'd like to go home."

"It's not yet midnight," Draco protested, replacing her hands with his and stroking her arms gently. "And Pericles has agreed to look at your scars." Hermione groaned and squeezed her eyes shut behind her eye-mask. All of that nonsense with his father, and Draco had *not* been distracted. "Don't be contrary, Hermione, those scars should have healed better by now."

"How did you say they were acquired?" Healer Greenglass suddenly inquired of Draco as they flanked her and walked her out of the ballroom to one of the retiring rooms across the hall. It was small and furnished with one plush sofa and two wing-backed chairs clustered around a cozy hearth. Wood-paneled with one large, picture window and sparsely decorated, it was one of the most comfortable-looking rooms in Malfoy Manor that she had ever seen. The furniture was of the highest quality, of course, and the crystal decanter sitting on one of the end tables assuredly held the finest of liqueurs, but the impression was of hominess, as opposed to opulence. Despite the atmosphere of the room and the warmth of the fire in the hearth, Hermione was distinctly *uncomfortable* as she sat sideways on the sofa with Draco's friend seated behind her.

Draco was right: the scars had not healed well. The tissue was thick and purple where Remus had scratched her, and they tended to ache when the air was cold. She didn't mind, however. They were a constant, physical reminder of the time she had shared with Severus; one of her few reminders, for her Order of Merlin had remained stuffed in a sock in Madam Beetlebump's attic room.

"She was attacked by a werewolf while touring New Zealand," Draco said, continuing their conversation now that they were away from prying ears and wagging tongues. "He just clawed her, fortunately, or we would have had a much bigger problem on our hands. The clasp is at the nape of her neck," he added helpfully.

"The snakes, if you would, Miss Granger," Pericles said silkily from behind her. She shivered, then quickly nullified the charm on her hair, chastising herself for her reaction. All doubts about their relationship aside, she was seeing Draco and should not allow herself to be affected by other men. Not wanting the stranger's fingers on her neck to possibly ignite more unwanted reactions, she swept aside her curly hair and undid the clasp herself. The chiton did not have a standard button-up or zippered back. Instead, it was slit from waist to neck, held together by a single, silver clasp of two snakes linked together. Once undone, the fabric parted, baring her back and its scars. The man behind her hissed slightly.

"They aren't that bad, honestly," she grumbled. He must have seen worse. He cleared his throat, and she felt the cool pads of his fingers trace one of the long wheals of purple skin. Fighting against another shiver, she gave Draco a suffering look and said, "Is this really necessary?"

"He's the best, Hermione."

A sharp rapping sounded on the door, and a voice called through it. "Mr. Malfoy, your father would like a word."

"He can wait," Draco said loudly, sending Hermione's look back at her. She grimaced on his behalf.

"He really was quite insistent."

Sighing heavily, Draco scowled at the door, and Hermione pitied the man on the other side. "Very well. I'll only be a moment," he said to her, slipping out of the room.

Left alone with Healer Greenglass, Hermione stared into the fire and tried to ignore the man examining her back. His breath was ghosting against her skin, and despite her resolve, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck were prickling and gooseflesh was racing down her arms and legs. Her muscles were tense and her pulse racing, and the man was doing nothing more than fingering her scars.

"They appear to have been reopened," he said, breaking the silence, and Hermione started.

"Erm. Yes. Once," she stammered, wanting to hug herself, but reluctant to move. She was almost positive that she had met this man before: his voice, his manner, his build were so very familiar that his name hovered at the tip of her tongue. It was working her into a fit of confusion and distress, as if the answer, when it came, would be terribly painful, and she wanted nothing more than to rip away his mask or flee from the room. At this point, she was in favor of retreat.

His fingers abandoned her back, and she relaxed minutely until she heard a soft rustling. "What are you doing?" she asked breathlessly to her acute embarrassment. She flushed, and her eyes skittered across the room, seeing nothing.

"I carry with me a number of first aide potions and salves," he said quietly. "I prefer to be prepared."

"Oh." Of course he did; he was a Healer, after all. Still, she couldn't shake the image of him opening his clothes. 'Draco. You're with Draco, now,' she reminded herself silently as she stared into the fire again. 'But *why* am I with Draco?' She had gone through this when she had been with Ron: denying her attraction to Severus while clinging to a man she didn't love. At least with Ron, she had *thought* she loved him. She was still *trying* to love Draco, and their encounter with his father had her doubting the wisdom of her efforts. 'I'm in love,' she thought sadly, 'just not with my boyfriend.'

Healer Greenglass was now rubbing something cool and minty into her back, the fragrance reminding her of the afternoon in Severus' bathroom. His greasy hair had hung in eyes, dark with his love for her, and she'd kissed him finally, sweetly, breathlessly...

Inexorably, she turned her head slowly, against her will, to look at him, but instead of the awkward face of the man she loved, only a blank, white mask stared back at her. Tears welled in her eyes, and she choked on a sob, clambering off the sofa and fumbling with the clasp to close the back of her dress.

"I'm sorry, I must go," she said looking anywhere except at him. She gave her clothes a tug and her hair a quick toss as she hurried toward the door. "Thank you very much for your time, and please give my regrets to Draco."

"Miss Granger..."

'Gods, he sounds like *him*!'

"Sorry!" she gasped and fled the room, slamming the door behind her. Heedless of the tears leaking from under the edge of her mask, she ran for the front entrance of the manor.

A/N: Oh, the angst! We're winding down, guys two more chapters to go.

Black Holes and Revelations

Chapter 19 of 20

Who is that masked man?

Disclaimer: Don't own it.

Edited by thyme_is_a_cat

Chapter 19 Black Holes and Revelations

November in Scotland was as miserable as she remembered, and she doubted the prudence of her impromptu visit as she wandered up the muddy lane toward Madam Beetlebump's cottage. It was a Saturday, so she was not expected at work... rather, she wasn't *required* to be at work, but no one would have been surprised to see her. And it had stopped raining for the first time in two weeks. Feeling lonely and very sorry for herself, she had decided to Apparate to Hogsmeade instead of the Ministry, partly because she couldn't think of anything that needed doing (even her desk was clean) and partly because the odd letters that Luna had been forwarding to her since the beginning of the month had stricken her with maudlin nostalgia.

Though it might not have been raining in London, the weather was not as cooperative in Scotland. The air was cold and damp, easily penetrating her thick, woolen cloak and heavy, winter robes to settle in the marrow of her bones. Her scars seemed to have shrunk, pulling uncomfortably at her back. It wasn't raining so much as misting: a gentle drizzle that at first seemed harmless, but was as insidious as the cold. She had her hood pulled over her head, a fuzzy muffler tied around her neck, and a warm pair of leather gloves on her hands, but was already considering abandoning her trip down memory lane in favor of something hot to drink at the Three Broomsticks.

Stepping carefully around puddles that had collected in depressions in the ancient, cobbled road, Hermione caught sight of the cottage.

An arbour had been added to the front gate.

She stopped, staring at the lattice archway that supported a tangle of bare, thorny vines, and was suddenly reluctant to walk any closer. Over the past couple of months, she had wondered if Madam had survived the last two decades, but had been reluctant to return. She had been the only person still possibly living with whom she had spent a significant amount of time in the past, and Hermione hadn't wanted to tempt fate. Granted, no one would have put much stock into the ravings of a crazy old cat lady, even if she had deigned to speak to a non-feline, but Hermione had decided against it, nonetheless. Especially since the letters had started arriving.

Luna had forwarded the first letter three days after Halloween, and one day after she had called it quits with Draco. *He* had refused to term it such; he had insisted that it was a "cooling off period" after his father's beastly behavior. However, she hadn't made the break just because of his father, but she had been at a loss to explain it to him. That his friend, Healer Greenglass, had driven her to distraction by his similarities to the man she loved would not have gone over well. She also didn't want to admit that she had been using him for his companionship and didn't return his feelings. She suspected that he loved her, though he hadn't said as much, and she was fond of him, but not the way that he obviously wanted. She couldn't continue to exploit his feelings so that she would feel less lonely; he didn't deserve that, and her conscience wouldn't allow it. And perhaps he was right; after an absence, her heart might grow fonder, and they would give it another go. Or perhaps not. It had been a month, and though she was forlorn and often miserable, she felt truer to herself than she had in what felt like an eternity.

Hermione was sure that Luna had meant well with the letters, and after she had managed to swallow her heart back into her chest and shake life into fingers that had been numbed by fear, she had appreciated her friend's thoughtfulness.

Someone had read Luna's article in the Quibbler about Snape and an unnamed woman and was now demanding to see her sources. This person was clever and thorough, having managed to dig up references to a Miss Heidi Greenglass in the archives of the *Daily Prophet* and claimed to have her Order of Merlin in his or her possession.

It was this last point that had finally driven Hermione to visit Madam's cottage. If someone *did* have her Order, then they had to have acquired it from Madam. Therefore, if Madam were alive, she might know the identity of the letter-writer, or at least the person who had collected the medal.

'What if *Madam* had written to Luna?' she thought suddenly, but discounted that possibility as preposterous as soon as it occurred to her. For one, the letters had been written in an arrogant, condescending tone, and the last one had been vaguely threatening. And for another, she doubted that Madam would remember her as anything more than one of many in a long procession of domestic help, *if* she remembered her at all.

Despite her reticence, she pushed open the little gate below the arbour and walked up the path to the front door, noticing with dismay the shoots of weeds that had pushed through the stones and the overgrown, but now dormant, state of the flowerbeds. The windows were dark from the street, and now she could see that they had been shuttered from the inside. The front door was warded against intruders much the same way that Spinner's End had been after the final confrontation with Voldemort. The house was clearly abandoned and had been for some time.

Like the cold, melancholy seeped through her skin and seemed to replace her blood, pushing sluggishly through her body. Hermione gazed wearily at the front porch where the cats had liked to lay. There wasn't even a dusting of cat hair to speak of their presence. She stared at the stone steps, waiting for the inevitable tears, but her eyes remained dry. Too dry, and she blinked to relieve the sting.

'It was a mistake to come here,' she decided, even as her feet shuffled along a tributary of the path around the front of the house to the garden gate. The latch had rusted shut, but she could see what remained of the herb garden: a tangle of dead and dying plants that had long since spilled over their planters and had begun to encroach on the black, wrought iron patio set. A vine had seeded between the flagstones of the patio and had twisted itself through the ironwork, knotting the chairs and table to the earth. Sunny summer days and white cat hair on black robes seemed so far away as to be impossible, a pleasant dream that was slipping slowly from her grasp. She should let it go.

A gust of wind whipped her cloak around her legs, and the drizzle thickened into a driving rain. Turning away from the gate, she hurried back up the path to the road. That hot cuppa, or perhaps a toddy, was long overdue. From the corner of her eye, she spied a dark figure approaching from further out of town, bundled up as warmly as she was with his hood completely concealing his face.

'Poor sod, to be out in this weather,' she thought, giving him a sympathetic smile that she was sure he couldn't see. Drawing her cloak closely around her, she turned away from the man and Madam's cottage, quickening her pace as she headed back into town.

The Three Broomsticks was crowded, noisy and unbearably warm, wrapped up as she was. Grimacing against the raucous shouts from a party at the bar, deafeningly loud compared to the quiet of the empty streets, she stripped off her gloves and shoved them into a pocket in her cloak, which she shrugged off and hung to dry near the door. Winding her way through the tables, she stopped at the bar to order a bowl of soup and a hot drink, then found a small table at the back, her drink in tow. Pulling the latest Terry Pratchett novel out of a pocket in her robes and Engorging it, she settled down to read while waiting for her food, a mug of hot mulled wine at her elbow.

The door blew open with a spray of rain, and Hermione glanced up to see the figure from the road slam the door shut behind him. Her food arrived just as he was shedding his cloak, and she forgot about him as the steam from her soup, redolent with the rich scent of vegetable broth and barley, bathed her face. Returning to her book, she tucked in. She was taking a sip of wine when something blocked the feeble light that had managed to penetrate her dark corner, and she shifted in her seat, trying to regain it.

"Excuse me, Miss Granger," a voice spoke above her, a rich, silky voice that made her heart skip a beat and then plummet into her stomach. Trying to steady her nerves, she slowly lowered the book and gave the man her polite, but discouraging, attention. His face was hidden in the shadows, but there was no mistaking that long, black hair or that voice.

"Healer Greenglass," she said courteously and buried her nose back into her book, pointedly *not* asking him if he would like a seat. He took one anyway, setting a glass of smoking Firewhisky onto the table. Scowling, she shifted the hand that was holding her book *open*, thank you very much, and willed him to go away. His presence, devastatingly familiar, was disconcerting, and she was a trifle embarrassed about her flight from the Halloween party. She was not in the mood for his company.

"I hope you don't mind; it is the only seat left in the house," he said, his tone belying the fact that he knew *she* had mind, and he did not care.

"Of course not," she lied poorly, and turned her attention back to the story. She would ignore him until he left. She would *not* be forced away from her own table by this man and the memories he stirred.

"You left the party in some amount of distress," he said, obviously disregarding her cues to leave her alone. "I hope that I was not the cause."

She hummed noncommittally as she scanned the page, trying to find her place again. Just as her eyes landed on the paragraph, the book was snatched out of her hands. Squawking indignantly, she raised her eyes to the man sitting across from her, holding the book out of her reach. He had arrestingly dark eyes, and for a moment, her heart had tripped its beat again, but then the rest of his features registered. His nose was straight and narrow, but perfectly proportioned, and his features were sharp, but not overly so. The impression was of a classically handsome face, slightly aristocratic, and it disappointed her more than she cared to admit.

"Well?" he asked impatiently, and his teeth, straight as soldiers, flashed whitely.

"Do not flatter yourself," she sniped. "It had nothing to do with you. My book, if you please."

Watching her intently, he leaned back in his chair. Narrowing her eyes, she pursed her lips and calmed the urge to snatch back the book by taking a sip of wine. She had the distinct sense that he was goading her to speak with his silence, so she kept her lips pressed tightly together when they weren't busy with her cup. The corner of his lips tugged upward briefly as he took an answering sip of Firewhisky. They might have stared at each other for seconds or minutes, Hermione wasn't sure, but the longer they sat there, the more unnerved she became. When he finally set the book on the table and propped his elbows on the tabletop, steeping long fingers in front of his face and tilting his head to stare at her from under black eyebrows, she twitched so hard that her mug jerked in her hands.

"Draco mentioned that you have decided to... ah... separate temporarily." He broke the silence casually, as if they hadn't just had a tensely silent struggle of wills. Then again, it could have been her imagination. Either way, the pressure rushed out of her as if she had been punctured, and she was excessively grateful that he had spoken first, ending the conflict.

"There was nothing temporary about it," she said, though she had *meant* to tell him that it wasn't any of his business. "He's a good man, but..." She took another sip of wine before anything else revealing could escape.

"But?"

Taking another sip, she noticed with no small amount of anxiety that she was going to run out of wine very soon. Her soup was only half finished and rapidly cooling. She supposed that she could simply continue to eat, but despite her earlier display of bad manners, she couldn't eat in front of him when he wasn't. Surrendering to the inevitable, she gestured at her soup and the hunk of crusty bread next to it. "Will you join me?" she asked with little grace.

He smirked, recognizing his victory. "It's coming." No sooner had he spoken when his food arrived, plunked onto the table by a red-faced man in a stained apron. He had ordered a thick stew, accompanied by the same crusty bread.

"And more wine, please," Hermione said, draining her cup and passing it to the waiter, along with a few coins for the wine. "What brings you to Hogsmeade, Healer Greenglass?"

He shrugged, a languid gesture with one shoulder, and her eyes were drawn to the movement. She had always admired Severus' shoulders. And his hands. This man also had an upper body worthy of a second look. A similar build, even. Forcing her eyes away, she stared at the wooden tabletop and started counting the knots until he spoke again.

"Certain information of interest had come to light recently, and I wished to investigate." In spite of herself, her curiosity was piqued, but before she could inquire further, he added, "I saw you at the late widow Beetlebump's cottage. Did you know her?"

Surprised that he would have known her as well, she stared at him for a moment, speechless. "I, erm." She cleared her throat. "Yes, a number of years ago. I did not know that she had passed on." Raising a spoonful of stew to his lips, he blew on it carefully, then slipped it into his mouth. Catching herself staring yet again, she asked the first question that came to mind. "What happened to her cats?"

"New homes were found for them. Surely, you did not expect them to be cast out on the street?" He was teasing her gently, and she had to force herself to remain irritated with him.

"No," she replied testily. "Did you take any of them?"

"One," he said slowly, significantly, though the significance was lost on her. He seemed to be dancing around an issue that should have been clear to her, prodding her in a direction of his choosing, but she remained frustratingly blind to it, as if she were running into a mental block. "A relative of my own cat."

"That was kind of you."

"Indeed, but it was no great hardship."

"Then do you live around here?" she asked, hesitant to nose into this man's life, especially when he unnerved her, but curious nonetheless. He seemed willing enough to answer, encouraging even, in a strange way.

"I used to live in Manchester, but had to relocate due to... circumstances beyond my control."

Manchester. He had lived in Manchester... "Have you been friends with the Malfoys for long? Draco thinks highly of you."

His lips twitched, but she wasn't sure if it was in humor or a nervous tick. "I have known Lucius since we went to school together, and Draco is... almost family."

Hermione absently swallowed a spoonful of soup, not tasting it. An idea was starting to form against her better judgment. It was impossible and was sure to devastate her if it turned out to be false, which it would because it was *impossible*... but what if...

The man who called himself Pericles Greenglass watched the young woman finish her soup, her eyes glazing as she grew paler. She had no idea, for he was practiced in the art of concealing his emotions, but he hung on each breath, savored every small movement she made. It was torment to sit across from her, close enough to touch, but not touching, knowing what he did and waiting impatiently for her to come to the same realization. He had thought that she would have reached it by now, for she was quite intelligent, but he supposed that she would have difficulty accepting the idea as a possibility. *He* certainly had doubted his sanity until he had seen the proof in the scratches on her back. He understood that she would have just as much trouble believing as he had; more so, bearing in mind that he had been deemed dead for the past four years.

He had considered keeping his distance. For several days, he had raged that after all these years of believing her gone beyond recovery, she had turned up now when he was old and exiled. Then, he had dithered over the raw facts and the fantasies around this woman that his mind had created over the decades, debating whether he should leave her in peace or confront her with the truth about himself. Finally, the man who had lived for others for most of his life now could not deny himself this one thing.

The morning that he'd woken up to find her gone, he had been disappointed and more than a little insecure, but not terribly worried. He would have preferred to drift into wakefulness wrapped in her arms and continue the snogging that they had left off the night before. It had been entirely plausible that she had gone back to Madam Beetlebump's to freshen up. They had gotten a bit dirty the previous night, and she hadn't had a shower. Of course, he would have let her use his.

By lunchtime that day, he had begun to imagine that her scars were bothering her, and she had gone to St. Mungo's to have them examined. Though wouldn't she have woken him up? Or left a note? She hadn't changed her mind about staying with him, had she?

Evening found him back at Madam's after having already visited her once, St. Mungo's, Lupin (he had taken a job as a bartender with Aberforth Dumbledore at the Hog's Head) and having cast several tracking spells. As before, the spells had failed him, even though he had several hairs and some of her blood from when he had cleaned her wounds. Again, the spells that required samples of her body pointed him to the boring Muggle family. He had actually approached the woman as she walked her toddler to the neighborhood park. Her name had been Jean Grange or something, and no, she had not heard of a Heidi Greenglass. The woman had been a *dentist*, for Merlin's sake.

The week dragged on with still no sign of her. Madam had not seen her for several days, and she had not left a note. The fact that Heidi had left her possessions in her attic (including her Order of Merlin that he had pocketed for safe-keeping) seemed to imply that she might have gone home (wherever that mysterious, *complicated* place might be) to take care of something (like arranging to stay with him?), but as the week lengthened and the beginning of the fall term loomed, precipitating him leaving Spinner's End, he had grown more anxious and hurt. Alternately, he cursed her name for breaking her promise to stay and sat on his sofa, staring at where they had slept together, imagining her body broken and battered in some terrible accident. The only thing that had prevented him from drowning in bitterness and resentment was the fact that he had *felt* the truth behind her declaration of love. She *had* loved him. She had meant it when she had said that she would stay. So what had happened to her?

He had finally found her note while packing. As he had shrunk his cloaks and whisked them into his luggage, the folded piece of parchment had fluttered from underneath the hem of his winter cloak to rest on the floor. It was slightly crumpled, and he had been tempted to toss it without bothering to look at it, assuming it was a grocery list that had fallen from his pocket. Luckily for him, he had been running late enough that he had ended up shoving it into his pocket and forgetting about it, only finding it again when one of the Hogwarts house-elves returned it with his laundry.

They had ironed the creases out of it and then refolded it, and it was suitably intriguing sitting atop his tallboy that he plucked it up and opened it. The first sentence knocked the wind out of his lungs, and he'd barely managed to stagger to one of his armchairs before his knees buckled.

Dear Severus,

If you are reading this note, then things did not go the way that I had hoped, and I could not stay with you. That does sound trite, doesn't it? Regardless, if I could not stay, then I know that my heart is broken.

The thing is, it is complicated more than you can image, and more than I can explain. I wish I could, but as I said before, it is for your protection. Do not go looking for me you won't find me, as much as I wish you could.

(A splotch of water had blurred what appeared to be a drop of ink, and as he sat sobbing in his room, he had imagined it to be one of her tears.)

However, I find I must tell you something, and damn the consequences.

Be wary of snakes, and add anti-venom to your little store of emergency potions. Always keep them on hand.

(Another splotch here, distorting several words)... *we had had more time, but therein lies the crux of our problem. It isn't fair that we didn't have more. Then again, the time we had was stolen, so perhaps it wasn't fair that we had any at all.*

Now I'm babbling, and I don't want to rewrite this letter again. What I really want to say is that I love you. You are a better person than you believe, and you are meant to do great things. The gift of your friendship is more than precious to me, even if you don't return my feelings.

Know that I love you.

H.G.

Minerva had dropped by that evening to ask after his summer fling, only to find him crying into his Firewhisky. After much inappropriate prying and a spot of Muggle scotch, Severus had not only spilled his guts about his Heidi, he had also let her read the letter. Producing a surprise of her own, Minerva had handed him a clipping from the *Daily Prophet*: the two of them walking together in Diagon Alley, which he had added to the photo taken just after the Fortescue robbery. She had been sympathetic and compassionate, assuring him that Heidi would have returned to him if she could and commiserating with him regarding the vagueness of her note. She had also blabbed to the Headmaster, and he'd had to endure some rather pointed questions regarding her identity, motives, and the Starglass.

However much he had been hurting, the school year had progressed as school years tended to do. His students were as miserable as he was, largely due to his behavior, but at least teaching had given him something on which to focus. He had also brewed Wolfsbane for Lupin, and the monthly meetings became an evening of socialization for the both of them. He had caught himself wishing more than once that he and Lupin had been on better terms in school. Remus Lupin could be tolerable company.

The werewolf was devastated by Heidi's disappearance, but acknowledged over a few drinks that she had only had eyes for him. They had speculated on who she could have been and from whence she'd come, to where she had disappeared and what it had to do with the Starglass (which had also vanished). Was she an Unspeakable on a top-secret assignment or a Changeling in human disguise visiting from the Fairylands? Had she come from a parallel universe or traveled through time? Once, they had taken a bottle of Old Ogden's out to the well and gave it a thorough inspection. In the end, all of it had been nothing more than conjecture, some of it sillier than others. They knew little about her, except for the fact that they missed and loved her in their own ways.

That year, his state of mind had been very similar to that of the previous year, after Lily's death, and slowly, he let go of the hope that she might find her way back to him. His friendships with Lupin and Minerva helped to buoy him above the numbing despair that had wrapped insistent, insidious fingers around his ankles to pull him into desolation. He had never stopped loving her. Every woman he met was held up to her image and found lacking. His more promising students were compared to her intelligence and integrity and then pushed harder to reach her ideal. He protected the Boy-Who-Lived for Lily's sake, but lived for Heidi.

That she had traveled through time was never a serious consideration. In all actuality, it shouldn't have been possible, for he had read nothing supporting the feasibility of long-interval time travel.

Now, he could think back to the student Hermione had been and wonder how he could have been slapped in the face with the woman he loved and been utterly oblivious to her. She had had the same hair, the know-it-all attitude, the righteous, Gryffindor sense of honor and penchant for bending the rules in order to right the wrongs of the world not to mention her respect for him, in spite of her classmates' opinions. Even Lupin had pointed out the striking physical similarities one night at the Black house, the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Miss Granger is growing into a lovely young woman, don't you think?" Lupin had asked him one evening, watching the student in question as she had chastised her friends for not studying over the summer holiday.

"Might I remind you that she was your student," he had said, scowling at him in rebuke.

"Not any more." Lupin had winked mischievously and then sobered. "I simply can't help thinking that she reminds me of someone. Of Heidi Greenglass."

"Nonsense," he had snapped, tearing his eyes away from the cozy little scene. She *had* reminded him of Heidi, so much so that he was unnecessarily strict with her. Fair, but strict. "Heidi wouldn't have bothered with those twits."

"She bothered with us."

He hadn't had anything to say to that.

He had been just as unconvinced when Draco had told him that he had found a Heidi for himself. Taking her advice, he had insinuated himself into his godson's life, instilling character into the boy that Lucius neither possessed nor could teach. Once, when the boy was six, he had found his clippings of his lost love, inquiring after her. He had told Draco a modified version of his adventures with her, impressing upon him the importance of loyalty and friendship. He had been amused when Draco had asked for many retellings of the story, eventually modeling his perfect woman after his own.

As it turned out, Draco *had* found Heidi, and he had nearly crumpled under the blow when he realized that she did, indeed, belong to him. Or so the aristocrat believed.

Draco had been the only person with whom he had trusted his secret: that he had not died of the snakebite in the Shrieking Shack. When the Dark Lord had risen the second time with Nagini as his familiar, he had begun to experiment with anti-venoms and poison tolerances. By the time his ungrateful master set the snake on him, he was immune to most poisons and had added a powerful coagulant to his store of emergency potions. He was not the first Death Eater to have been attacked by Nagini. It wasn't until he had fled Western Europe for Australia that he had recalled Heidi's warning about snakes. He and Draco had been exchanging letters ever since, but it was only recently that his godson had encouraged him to come back to England to see the renovations they had made to his house and to meet his new girlfriend.

Deciding that a trip to England would be relatively safe if he were suitably disguised, he finally allowed himself to be convinced. The house had been less interesting than he thought it would be. It certainly looked better, but he really couldn't have cared less. He had never been fond of it in the first place. The honoring of his memory was nice, but a bit late. He would have appreciated having more of the public's respect *before* his apparent death. Expecting Draco's new squeeze to be even less interesting than the house, he had been completely unprepared for the truth. So much so that he hadn't believed his eyes until he had seen the angry welts crossing her back.

It was at that moment that the hints, the inexplicable knowledge that she had possessed, the *complications* had finally fallen into place. Heidi Greenglass was Hermione Granger, and she had traveled through time. He had felt like the biggest dunderhead to have missed it. It was just as well that he had remained ignorant, for had he figured it out while she was still his student, he was quite sure that he would have been driven insane with unrequited love and an internal ethical struggle over whether to approach her, *how* to approach her, and whether or not the time-travel would actually take place if he were to say something before the event occurred. Now, he understood why she had refused to tell him who she really was it would have been disastrous. At that instant, however, he had been so completely flummoxed to have finally found his Heidi, that he hadn't cared *who* she had turned out to be, just that she *was*.

And then she had fled from him.

It shamed him to admit it, but when Draco had ranted and wept over their breakup, he had been wholeheartedly relieved. With a selfish longing in his heart, he had hoped that she had somehow recognized him (despite her flustered flight) and therefore could not continue to see his godson. Because she loved him. She *had* to. The wounds on her back were only months old, implying that she had only just left him. He wanted the answer to *that*, as well.

Simply asking Draco where she lived would not have done; even a concerned Healer (he had taken her advice on that point, also, and found that not only was he good at it, he rather enjoyed it) would not track down a patient that he supposedly didn't know to check up on scars that the patient had insisted she didn't want examined. Draco would suspect something, as would anyone else he could ask. He had considered tracking spells, but he seemed to have developed an irrational superstition of them; that if he was to cast one, then she would disappear again. It was nonsense, but there it was. So, he had put off tracking spells as a last resort and instead tried to whittle the source of the Quibbler's article on he and Heidi out of Miss Lovegood, hoping that it might lead him to her. He was almost positive that Hermione had been the source because he was certain that no one could have found a diary left by a woman who had never truly existed.

Instead of returning to Australia, as had been his original intention, he had taken to trolling about Hogsmeade, hoping that she would eventually make an appearance. Finally, on this miserable day in November, she had.

She cleared her throat, staring bemusedly at her now empty bowl as she drew patterns in the dregs of broth at the bottom. Hardly able to contain himself, his fingers straining to break from their steeple to snatch up her hands, he watched her, willing his calm mask not to crack. He couldn't remember a moment when it had been more difficult to remain stoic. Her eyes darted up to his, then swept his glamoured face, her hopeful expression clouded and hesitant. She was afraid to hope, he realized, and she didn't have the visual confirmation that he had had.

"Walk with me," he said, breaking the silence as he stood and extended one hand, pleased that his voice was strong and confident, if a tad husky. He had to be able to speak freely with her, to give her the reassurance that she needed, but he couldn't do it here, in a pub. Not if he wanted to maintain his privacy. Though if it were required of him, even if it meant revealing his secret, he would shout to the rafters that he was Severus Snape and that he loved her. There was little he wouldn't do to have her again. When she stared up at his hand blankly, his gut clenched in fear that she would refuse. He experienced a long moment of almost debilitating panic until she placed her hand into his, curling her fingers around his palm and offering him a shy, tentative smile.

"Alright."

A/N: The title of this chapter is from a Muse song. I love that band.

Starting Anew

Chapter 20 of 20

Things work themselves out, just as Luna said.

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Edited by thyme_is_a_cat, without whom this fic surely would have sucked.

Chapter 20 Starting Anew

The moment that they stepped outside, Hermione was reminded of why she had ducked into the Three Broomsticks in the first place. Rain sheeted down in torrents, blown vertically into her face by a strong, cold wind. Hunching down into her muffler and pulling her hood low over her face, she squeezed the hand that she still held and said, "There is a park near my flat in London. Maybe we should walk there instead?"

The man (she refused to think a name in order to avoid possible bitter disappointment) nodded and gestured with his free hand for her to carry on. She took that as the signal to Side-Along-Apparate them, and she did so, landing them in an alley two blocks away from her flat and approximately three from the park. The alley was neat and

freshly swept, as was the norm for her neighborhood (and would remain so until someone dismantled her network of Do-Not-Litter, Do-Not-Pee, and countless other wards that discouraged uncouth behavior). The London weather was as mild as the Hogsmeade weather was foul, and the surcease of freezing rain and wind was a relief to both parties.

The compulsion to drag him to her flat was strong, but she couldn't quite allow herself to believe what she thought might be the truth. And if it weren't, she didn't necessarily want this man to know where she lived, no matter how close a friend he might be of Draco's. Then again, he could simply acquire her address from Draco, might have, in fact, and could already know where she lived. Perhaps he had let her Apparate them here to make her think she was safe, all the while knowing...

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and took a bracing breath, trying to wrangle her mind into some sense of order instead of the babbling, circular mess into which it had just spiraled. She was nervous and terrified; both that he was who she thought he was and that he wasn't. Her stomach was now the home of a nest of angry wasps, and it felt that at any moment, they would violently rebel. The alley tilted alarmingly, and she realized that instead of taking a breath, she had held it. An arm snaked around her waist and steadied her, and she found herself leaning against a body that felt comfortingly familiar, inhaling a scent that she had sorely come to miss. Keeping her eyes closed, she melted against him, finally permitting herself to entertain the idea that he was, in fact, the man she loved, and they might have the life that she had envisioned as she had lain in his arms on his parlor floor. Her hood fell back, and he nuzzled her ear, his warm breath washing over her cheek as the cold tip of his nose settled in the hollow behind the lobe.

His nose. It was wrong, wasn't it? Straight and narrow and entirely unlike Severus' nose...

She had to know for sure, before her heart was irreparably broken.

Turning in the arms that had wrapped around her body, she kept her eyes closed until she faced him. Slowly, dreading that she would be confronting the same handsome face that had walked into the Three Broomsticks, she opened her eyes.

A hooked nose and glittering, black eyes dominated a face lined with years of worry. Though not as care-worn as she remembered from her school days, his time spent doing whatever it was he had been doing having a beneficial effect on his features, it was still the face of her ex-Potions master and an older version of her beloved. She gasped as her knees buckled, but he caught her easily, holding her pressed against his chest. His smile was warm, but slightly self-mocking, and she caught a glimpse of stained, crooked teeth as he said, "By your expression, I shall assume that you have discovered enough of the truth to see through the glamour."

"Se..."

He shushed her with a hiss. "Not here."

"But..."

"I *said*, not here," he repeated firmly, and if she had not finally broken through his glamour, then his supercilious tone would have convinced her.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? Why did you let me believe...?" She shook her head forcefully when he made to interrupt her again. "You supposedly *died* four years ago!" she snapped, pulling out of his embrace before she gave into temptation to throw her arms around him and kiss him senseless. Fear lit at the backs of his eyes, and she regretted her decision, but she had to understand, to *know*. Following her heart had gotten her into a fair bit of trouble recently, and she liked to think that she learned from her mistakes. He let his arms fall to his sides and stared at her expressionlessly, his eyes shuttering his emotions.

"And just who, precisely, did you expect me to tell?"

He was absolutely right. She hadn't left him much to go on: no name, no address, not even the fact that she had traveled time to reach him. What had he thought had become of her? She was being grossly unfair. "I wanted to..." Her lips were numb and somehow not connected to her brain.

'How could I have said something *so stupid*,' she chastised herself as his expression twisted, and pain and fear flared to life once again in his black eyes. Unconsciously, she took a step backward, her back hitting the wall of the alley. He stood where he was, his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

"You *wanted* to... Tell me, *Heidi*, where have *you* been these past twenty years?"

She blinked at him miserably. Swallowing against the lump that swelled in her throat, she pressed her back against the wall, gratefully taking the support it offered. She had suffered only months since she had returned from the past, hopelessly in love and believing him dead. She had vanished on him *twenty years ago*, after telling him she would stay. Why wasn't he pissing mad? Then again, he had remained infatuated with Lily for years, despite the fact that she had married the man who had tormented him through their school years. She could hardly fathom the loyalty he held for those he loved, and she considered herself a loyal friend.

"The..." She swallowed again, choking down a sob that threatened to strangle her. "The Starglass, I lost it in the well. I only wanted to send a few notes and get Crookshanks before going back to stay..."

"The Starglass," he repeated, nodding to himself. "A catalyst."

"It just disappeared, and I was stuck, and you were dead." Despite her best efforts, her face was crumpling, and the spigots behind her eyes were opening to release steady streams of tears.

"And Draco?" he asked bitterly, the accusation hanging heavily between them.

She shrugged helplessly as she stared at the ground, at a loss to explain. There was a very strong likelihood that he really had died in her own timeline, and that she had influenced this change. This should have made her blissfully happy, and there was no doubt that she was happy that he was alive, but the distance between them seemed to be growing. She felt that it somehow must be her fault but wasn't sure what to do about it and was emotionally fragile enough that no choice seemed to be right. He had his prickly, defensive mantle fastened securely about his body, and though he seemed to have been pleased to see her earlier, she was afraid to approach him now, lest she be skewered on his spines. Glancing up at him, she saw that he, too, was staring at the ground. She couldn't tell if the glimmer of moisture on his face was from the rain in Hogsmeade or not.

'I've bugged this up already,' she thought despairingly. 'He was waiting for me, isn't that what he was implying? If he didn't still love me, would he have gone to the trouble and danger of revealing himself? And I pushed him away.' It occurred to her that perhaps she *should* have just left the questions for later and gone straight for the snogging. 'Sensitive, remember? And woefully insecure...' It would be like him to assume that she was rejecting him.

"Severus," she said quietly, hoping that he would look at her. Instead, he glanced up the alleyway, and she was struck with the thought that he might just leave.

"Sod it," she mumbled and launched off the wall. Obviously, he hadn't been expecting a full-frontal attack, for he stumbled backwards several steps, and they bumped noses painfully before her lips found his. It didn't take him long to recover. His arms wrapped around her too tightly for comfort (not that she planned to complain any time soon), and she was lifted to the tips of her toes. Even with her lips sealed to his with his tongue doing delicious things to the inside of her mouth, the contact wasn't enough. With what little leverage she had, she hopped up and coiled her legs around his hips, overbalancing him. He grunted low in his throat when his back hit the alley wall, but as neither was willing to relinquish their positions, they slid down the wall, intertwined, until she was perched astraddle on his lap. *This* was where she wanted to be. From her position on her lap, she could tell that he was just as pleased.

Twisting her fingers into his long, black hair, she tilted her head and kissed him for all she was worth, pouring her joy at their reunion into every sweep of her tongue, hoping that it would somehow convey what she hadn't been able to say. He kissed her back with equal fervor, his hands traveling her back and hips, having somehow found their way under her cloak.

"Oh! Erm," a voice said, accompanied by a scuff of shoes against concrete, and Severus reluctantly pried his lips away to glare at the intruder around the tangle of Hermione's hair. A Muggle dressed in a plain, brown coat carrying a folded umbrella was staring at them in embarrassed amusement, paused in the act of passing by the alley. The man's face paled, amusement fading into nervousness as Severus' scowl blackened. Without another word, the Muggle scurried out of the alley, shooting them an anxious look over his shoulder. Feeling accomplished (scowling the fear into people was an art form that he had mastered), Severus leaned back in for another kiss to find Hermione gazing down at him, her face wreathed in somewhat matted curls. She frowned at him, and his heart, which had been beating fast and irregularly since he had seen her on the street in Hogsmeade, tripped and stuttered.

"You aren't a dream, are you?" she asked, pulling a hand out of his hair and trailing an ink-stained finger down the bridge of his nose.

In answer, he pinched the hip under his left fingers, grinning when she yelped and squirmed on his lap. Catching his hand and twining their fingers together, she smiled and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Not a dream then. You'll tell me how?"

Talking was actually rather low on his list of priorities, though undoubtedly necessary, but seeing as few of the things on his mind should be performed in an alley, he nodded acquiescence. He would have agreed to just about anything, really, if it meant that she would kiss him again. It was a pity she would have to leave his lap for them to move anywhere more circumspect.

"Would you like to come up to my flat?" she asked, as if reading his mind, and flushed immediately afterward. She quickly added, "We have a lot to catch up on." When he raised a meaningful eyebrow, she blushed harder and rolled her eyes.

Having mercy on her, he said, "You *do* have a fair bit of explaining to do." And he wouldn't be taking cop-out answers like "It's complicated" or "It's for your own protection." Furthermore, she would describe from where the Starglass came, how she lost it, and what his blasted well had to do with it. He suspected there was a *lot* of back-story that he was missing. Then, he would secure his place in her life... or her place in his. Whatever the semantics, there was no way he would allow her to slip through his fingers now that he had finally found her and determined that she did, indeed, want him. When she had pushed him away earlier, he had feared the worst: that he was twenty years older and no longer the man that she loved; that she had decided that she preferred young, handsome Draco after all.

"I know." She smiled the smile that had visited his best dreams for two decades. It was tender, soft, and only for him. It begged to be kissed, so he did.

"Do you realize how utterly foolish and idiotic it was to meddle with time?" Severus asked as he traced a tickling spiral around her belly button, exposed by the hem of her jumper, which had ridden up as they snogged on her sofa.

She hummed contentedly as she twisted her fingers through the silky, black hair that lay splayed across her chest. Her head was propped on one armrest with her legs stretched across the length of the sofa. Slowly sinking behind the seat cushions as they were pushed out of place, Severus was wedged between her and the backrest. She wasn't particularly comfortable, but with his dark head resting on one breast and his fingers brushing her skin, she wouldn't have moved for the world, let alone a crick in her neck. Except for one thing that she did *not* want to do on the sofa, at least not the first time. "You're alive, aren't you?"

"There is no reason to believe that I wouldn't be if you hadn't. After your friends had left, you administered the coagulation salve to the snakebite before leaving yourself..."

"I didn't, Severus. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Though I rather wish I had. I assume it was *your* plan that everyone believed that the salve had failed and assumed that you had died."

"Astute observation," he said slightly mockingly, as if events could never have proceeded according to anyone else's schemes. "No one actually knew about the salve, for I Obliviated you as soon as I had the strength. They buried an expertly transfigured body, created in conjunction with my own blood and hair. Had I known..."

He shifted over her, his knees straddling her upper thighs so that he could look fully into her face. Staring at her searchingly, he opened his mouth to speak when one of his knees slipped into the gap between the cushion and sofa, and he fell bodily on her. She didn't mind this position, either, and wiggled against the hot, hard knot that was pressed against her. He nibbled her earlobe in appreciation. 'Maybe this concludes our discussion?' she wondered hopefully.

They had been discussing their adventures for the past hour and a half. Upon reaching her apartment, she had made tea, and they had retired to her living room, settling side-by-side on the sofa. Instead of commencing with heavy petting, which is what she would have preferred, he had directed her to "Explain yourself."

She had, to the best of her ability, though he had interrupted her frequently with often disparaging comments on her choice of actions and tangents on time-travel theory. He had speculated on changes in the timeline that she had not yet seen, and her immunity to those changes. Though horrified by her initial relationship with Ron, he had been intrigued by her observations of the changes in Draco and the fact that she had dropped into the future in the midst of that affair. He had gone quiet for a moment, his black eyes sweeping over her body from his vantage on the other side of the sofa as he seemed to struggle with a question. Hermione had put two and two together and answered, "No, I did not sleep with him. I couldn't, not after... you."

"You kissed him," he reminded her unnecessarily, the flesh between his eyebrows creasing as he frowned.

"Had I known that you weren't dead, then I wouldn't have bothered to try making that relationship work!" She had taken a bracing sip of tepid tea before continuing in a much calmer tone of voice. "You can't imagine how bizarre it was to learn that I was suddenly dating my childhood nemesis. Do you know how many times he called me a Mudblood?"

"Draco would never use that word."

"Yes, well, things changed." She had smiled and shifted her socked foot to caress his ankle, which had eventually led to their currently entwined position on the sofa.

His lips were creeping down her neck with tiny, nipping kisses, and Hermione shifted restlessly with rising ardor, suddenly very much aware of how long it had been since she had been intimate with anyone. Should she make a quick trip to the bathroom to make sure everything was in order? Which pair of knickers had she put on this morning? She couldn't quite recall, but it might be the old, torn pair with "Hello Kitty" stenciled across the arse.

'I hope he isn't terribly disappointed when he finally undresses me,' she thought and then gasped as one of his long-fingered hands crept under her jumper to knead a breast. She was fairly certain that her bra had not been chosen to impress, either.

"Severus?" she asked before she could stop herself. Her knee also rose of its own accord, frustrated in the cage made by his thighs. He seemed to understand, for after he shifted his weight, she was able to wrap her legs around his waist. "Did you, erm. Are you seeing anyone in Australia?"

His tongue paused in its path to the hollow of her throat, and she felt his sigh against the moisture on her skin. "Briefly," he said, his voice rumbling against her throat, "but it didn't last very long."

"Why not?" Hermione said and then wished she could tie her own tongue in a knot. Hadn't she just wondered if they were finished talking? Did she really want to know this?

"Because, quite frankly, she wasn't you."

And now he was staring down at her with those glittering, dark eyes instead of removing her jumper. 'Nice one, Hermione.' Unfortunately, her mouth continued to move, despite her keen wish that it wouldn't. It didn't help that she was beginning to feel quite insecure because this man seemed to have placed her on a pedestal over the past twenty years, and she didn't know if she could compare to the memories of his Heidi. His natural Legilimency, which was so much stronger than it had been when he was young, saved her from another awkward question.

"You *are* Heidi," he said quietly, intensely. "The question is: do you want an old, ex-professor living in hiding several continents away?"

"Oh, yes." She grinned up at him and squirmed suggestively. "My job at the Ministry was getting stale, anyway. It's time for a change of scenery."

He frowned, a hand on her hip stilling her. "Just like that?"

"I've been promoted as far as I can; the Director is decades away from stepping down. My choices are to start near the bottom again in a different department or move." He was still frowning, so she continued, "If I was ready to leave my own time period to live with you under a false identity, then why is it so difficult to believe that I would go to Australia? Unless you don't want..."

"Oh, I want. Be sure that I want. I simply expected to have to do a little more convincing." The fingers on her hip were now insinuating themselves between her bum and the cushion to firmly squeeze her flesh.

"It will take some time to get everything arranged, of course," Hermione said after a moment of reflection. "Letters of resignation and recommendation, finding a new employer, a flat... Are you using the glamour as well as the false identity?" she asked as her mind spun through the list of things she would need to accomplish before leaving England. A great bubble of excitement was swelling inside of her, the promise of love, a new adventure and a fresh start polishing off the tarnish that stained the last few months of her almost hand-me-down existence.

"No glamour, but I had assumed that you would move in with me..." he trailed off disappointedly, and she recognized the sulk that was about to overtake him. She didn't bother to suppress a fond smile. Who knew that Severus Snape was a hopeless romantic, believing that she would simply shack up with him after months (or years, depending on one's point of view) of separation and only a few weeks of interaction? Was he imagining an elopement as well, complete with tropical beach and frozen cocktails?

"As much as I am hopelessly in love with you, Severus," she said as her smile grew into a toothy grin, "I think we have a significant amount of getting-to-know-each-other to do, first. The rest will come in time." His face fell further, but she didn't need to be a Legilimens to see what he was thinking. "Except for sex. I think we should do that right now. If you are amenable."

Brightening significantly (though she suspected that he really might have been considering elopement, and she doubted that she had heard the last of his arguments), he levered himself off of the couch and gave her a hand up. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

Fin

A/N: Yay for happy endings! I know, I didn't tie up everything into a tidy package with marriage, kids, etc but that is the end of *this* story. Sorry to those of you who were wanting smut, but I've written so much of that for other fandoms that I just didn't feel inclined to put it in this fic. I'm actually pleased that I managed to write a multi-chaptered fic that is relatively clean. Maybe next time.

Thanks to all of you who have stuck with this fic and to those who have left a note. I love to hear from you.