

Mea Culpa

by floorcoaster

While on vacation in Italy, Hermione stumbles into an unexpected and dangerous adventure.

One

Chapter 1 of 8

While on vacation in Italy, Hermione stumbles into an unexpected and dangerous adventure.

Story: Mea Culpa

Chapter Title: One

Progress: Complete; 1/8

Words: 3653

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story. This was my first sshg story and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. This story is infinitely better thanks to their help. Special thanks to , for the many, many delightful and invaluable hours spent working with me on this. I have learned so much from you and just adore you! And to who encouraged me to join the exchange in the first place, coded with me at the last minute, and has been a wonderful help and source of many smiles. True friends, both of you!!!

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter One

Hermione and Luna listened intently to Ginny relate the story of how she had acquired the fabulous silver necklace she was wearing for the incredible price of only five euros. The three women were in Florence, Italy, tucked in an out of the way café where they had stopped for lunch. They were seated outside, enjoying the cool spring air and the sounds of the city.

"No magic at all?" Hermione asked when Ginny had concluded her tale with a giant satisfied smile.

"None!" Ginny replied. "I'm telling you, flirt a little and you'll get exactly what you want."

"What would Harry say?" Luna asked.

"He'd say, 'Good job; what else can you get?'" Ginny replied and then took a bite from her sandwich of foccacia, ham, fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil.

"I feel bad trying to talk down their prices," said Hermione. "These merchants have to make a living."

"They do," assured Ginny. "They wouldn't lower their prices if they couldn't afford to. It's part of the charm of the market, haggling. You really should get into the game, Hermione."

She shrugged. "I thought ten euros was a reasonable price for my scarf."

"I got a very similar one for six euros," chimed in Luna. "And I have money left over for gelato." She smiled primly and finished her sandwich, one similar to Ginny's but without the ham.

"Oh, I have money for gelato," said Hermione with a laugh. "What do you say, Ginny? I saw three gelatorrias between here and the market. Ginny?"

Ginny wasn't paying attention to Hermione, but was looking intently at something over Hermione's shoulder. Her eyes were narrowed and her brow furrowed, as though deep in concentration. "Is that ...?" she began. Her eyes widened. "Oh! I don't believe...I think it **is**!"

"What? Who?" said Hermione, starting to turn.

Ginny grabbed her arm. "No, don't look!"

"Why not?" asked Luna, her curiosity evident.

Ginny looked from Hermione to Luna with such a serious expression on her face that Hermione instinctively put her hand on her bag where her wand was stowed. The three women hadn't had a single serious moment during their entire two-week trip, enjoying the freedom of a true vacation from work, responsibilities, and life in general.

"I think ... there's a man sitting at a café across the street, just in the corner of the outdoor seating. I think it's Snape."

"Snape who?" asked Luna evenly.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Are you sure, Ginny?"

"Nearly. Have a look now. He's gone back to reading. Be subtle!"

Hermione nodded. "Any idea where the nearest Water Closet might be?" she asked as her excuse for turning around. She scanned the café briefly and then let her gaze fall on the man in question. She nearly fell out of her chair.

It could truly have been no one else. Even without the black wizarding robes, everything about the man screamed *Snape*. He was sitting with his back to the wall, facing Hermione's right but with a view of the whole street. His back was ramrod straight and there was a stack of books on the table beside him. His black hair was a bit shorter than it had been when Hermione had seen him last, falling just to his chin. He wore Muggle clothes: grey trousers, a light green button-up, long-sleeved shirt, and a lightweight, black blazer. From across the street, Hermione was surprised to find that he looked very approachable and even agreeable.

The table was set for one, and he seemed to have ordered only a cup of tea or coffee. A square napkin was set out near the edge of the table with what looked like three sugar cubes on it.

Quickly Hermione turned around and looked at Ginny. "It's him, all right."

Luna took a turn and nodded to the others. They sat in stunned silence for a few minutes, until the waiter came over to see if they needed anything. Ginny asked for another bottle of water, *no gas*, and then she and Luna began talking quietly about Snape.

Hermione was deep in thought. Severus Snape's body had disappeared from the Shrieking Shack by the time Aurors had arrived to investigate. They'd found a copious amount of blood and traces of an unidentified potion but nothing else to suggest what might have happened after Harry, Ron and Hermione had returned to the castle on the night of the battle. No footprints led to or from the Shack, so the Aurors had concluded that Snape had Disapparated.

Considering his condition at the time, the Aurors had further assumed Snape would go to hospital, but when they'd checked, he hadn't shown up. When two weeks had passed and there was still no sign of him, they had given up the idea he would go to St Mungo's.

After six months of half-hearted, fruitless investigation, the Ministry had closed Snape's file and stopped the search. Harry's testimony on the behalf of the ex-Death Eater had ensured that he would not have to stand trial, and frankly, the Ministry and the Aurors had a list of dangerous Death Eaters still at large and wanted to focus their attentions toward capturing them.

Six years had passed.

There had been occasional murmurings of what were dubbed "Snape Sightings" by the *Daily Prophet*, but they had turned up nothing. Almost every month, an article was published in *The Quibbler* with some witch's or wizard's theories on Snape's whereabouts.

Once the dust had settled following the war trials, Snape quickly became the most interesting character of the war. His double-life, working for a madman, his mysterious disappearance, and ill-fated love of the woman who also happened to be Harry Potter's mother, all made for the most interesting gossip and speculation.

Luna giggled, bringing Hermione out of her thoughts. She looked at her friend. Both Luna and Ginny were looking at her expectantly.

"What?" Hermione said.

"Dare you to go talk to him," said Ginny, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Hermione's eyes widened. "*What?*"

"Talk to him," said Luna. "We've already decided that neither of us is up to the task. Though I would like to ask him if he has come across any three-legged Billaboos during his time in Italy. Perhaps once you've warmed him up, Ginny and I could join you."

Hermione glanced at Ginny whose expression clearly said that Luna's idea was hers and hers alone.

"Why on earth should any of us go and talk to him? What could we possibly gain from that? Besides, he'd probably bite my head off before I got within ten feet."

"We're nearly that close already, and he hasn't done anything," said Ginny. "It's a dare, Hermione; it's not as if he could hex you here. There doesn't have to be a good reason behind it."

She narrowed her eyes. "What's in it for me?"

Ginny and Luna exchanged a look. "We haven't really discussed it. What do you want?"

Hermione thought for a moment. Under normal circumstances ... at least, normal before the end of the war ... the thought of approaching their former Potions professor while he was eating was appalling. She would get her head bitten off and be insulted at best, hexed and completely demeaned at worst.

Now, after everything she knew about him, things she doubted he would want his closest friends to know much less an entire country, the thought was more and at the same time less terrifying. She didn't think he would actually hurt her, as he had always been on Harry's side even when no one knew it or would have believed it. But he was still Snape, and he'd never left any doubt as to his feelings toward Harry and her.

On the other hand, there was something about the Italian air, the easy manner of the lifestyle and the bright, sunny day that made her feel brave.

"Dinner, at a four-star restaurant, tonight. You two split my meal."

Ginny chuckled. "That's it? Merlin, Hermione, this is huge! You could've ... I don't know, required we do your washing for three months or something like that."

Hermione sniffed. "Do we have a deal?"

"Sure, Hermione," said Luna.

Hermione took a sip from her water and took a few deep, steady breaths. "Wish me luck."

ooo

Severus Snape was, to the casual observer, peacefully reading the book, *"The Brothers Karamazov."* In fact, he was merely turning the pages at regular intervals and taking occasional sips from his coffee, which was Charmed to stay at his desired temperature. His wand was stowed safely in its holster, a slim pocket sewn into the lining of his blazer. At a moment's need, he could press a button on the thick, gold ring he wore on his right hand, and a mechanism in the holster would release his wand directly into his hand.

A Glock 19 9mm pistol with silencer was tucked into a shoulder holster hidden beneath his jacket.

Snape took another sip of coffee, and as he set the cup back on its saucer, movement caught his eye. He glanced up to see Hermione Granger walking purposefully toward his table. He was surprised but only briefly. She had been an extraordinarily bright student, despite hiding behind trying to have all the answers, and he had no doubt she was a brilliant woman, thus it took very little imagination to see her fitting right in with his line of work. One lone axon in a dark recessed corner of his mind fired, registering that she was wearing a light green, strappy sundress that perfectly highlighted her toned arms and legs.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked, not waiting for an answer before settling into the chair immediately across from him.

He eyed her impersonally and added one of the three lumps of sugar to his coffee. Though he was trained to remain impassive in his work, and his face betrayed nothing other than professional interest, his mind was spinning at the sudden appearance of his former student. The last time he had seen her had been the night of the Dark Lord's defeat, when he had given Potter his memories. Had she seen them? Would she mention them? Certainly not while on the assignment, he reminded himself.

She was two minutes early; an anomaly, but then she was always the overachiever. Perhaps this was her first field mission. He would have to wait the two minutes before he could continue.

"I fail to see why you even bothered asking," he replied, bored.

At that moment, the waiter returned and offered Hermione something to drink. She declined. A light went off on Snape's watch, alerting him that it was time. What was to happen next would be very straightforward, and he would be on a train to Portovenere within the hour.

He would begin and say, "I recommend the rigate arrabiata." Slowly, deliberately, he swirled the spoon in his cup.

Then she would reply, "Why didn't you say that when the waiter was here?"

No, not that.

Snape stopped stirring and looked at her intensely. "I'm sorry?"

Hermione looked at him strangely. "I've already eaten, and I'm looking forward to gelato for dessert," she said, and then reached for one of the sugar cubes on the napkin.

Something was wrong.

Snape's eyes darted first to the empty street and then to the interior of the restaurant. He saw a waiter looking directly at him and pulling something from an inner coat pocket. Snape didn't hesitate but reached out and caught Hermione's hand as she withdrew it in hope of depositing the cube into her mouth.

"Hey!" she said, trying to wrench her arm from his grasp.

Snape was on his feet and moving around the table as he heard the door to the restaurant open. Without paying attention to Hermione's protests, he pulled her forcibly from her chair, out of the small courtyard, and into an alley.

"Just what do you think..."

He clamped a hand over her mouth, pulled her tightly against him, and with a soft *pop*, he Disapparated, taking Hermione with him.

~o~

"I think I'd like to have a look at those handbags," said Ginny as she rummaged through her purse for the money to pay her part of the check.

"Oh! Ginny, look!" exclaimed Luna, pointing across the street.

Ginny looked up just in time to see Snape pulling Hermione behind him, and then running from the café and into an alleyway. "What's he..."

Luna was on her feet, reaching for her wand, when Ginny noticed someone else leaving the café.

"Luna, wait!" she cried, grabbing her friend's arm and pulling her back into her seat. They watched as one of the waiters, a tall man with striking orange hair, ran from the restaurant.

"What's that?" Luna whispered, pointing discreetly to something in the man's hand.

Ginny frowned, trying to get a better look, but it was difficult because the man ran in the direction Snape had pulled Hermione. All she could discern was that the object was small and black, sunlight gleaming off its metal surface. The waiter disappeared into the alley, the sun shining off his bright hair. Ginny and Luna fidgeted, uncertain whether to interfere or wait. Moments later, when the waiter re-emerged, he was obviously distressed. The waiter didn't return to the restaurant but walked to the curb. He'd only been stationary for a fraction of a second when a black car screeched to a stop in front of him.

Ginny and Luna stood, stunned, as the waiter disappeared into the car which then sped down the street, around a corner and out of sight.

Luna gave Ginny a worried look. "Let's go." She moved toward the gate that led from the enclosed eating area to the sidewalk, her hand once again on her wand.

"I've got to pay...wait for me, just in case!"

Ginny tossed a few bills on the table, not bothering to wait for change. She followed Luna across the street, and then cautiously they approached the alley. "I'll go," Ginny muttered. Luna nodded.

Ginny quietly counted to three, readying herself for whatever she might see, though doubting she'd find anything. The waiter wouldn't have left so quickly or have been so upset unless the alley had been empty. On three, she spun around to face the alley, her wand discreetly at the ready. The only thing she saw was a stray cat, which looked at her with a bored expression.

"They must have Disapparated," said Luna, following Ginny into the alley.

Ginny's mind raced with what had happened in the space of less than a minute. Hermione had crossed the street and sat across from a man who looked like Severus Snape, then she'd been pulled into an alley and now she was gone. Ginny examined the alley closely, looking for signs of a struggle, or to see if perhaps Snape had left something behind. She found nothing.

Hermione was gone.

"We've got to Floo Harry," Ginny said, returning to where Luna was waiting.

Luna nodded. "Back to the hotel, then?"

Ginny paused, glancing around one more time, desperate for something, anything to be different and give her a clue. "Let's check the table where he was sitting first."

They spent half an hour at the café, talking to the staff, the owner, anyone who might have seen more, but it had happened so quickly that no one had noticed a thing. One of the staff said Snape had paid for his coffee up front when he ordered and had asked his waiter, the orange-haired man, to leave him in peace. Other than that, no one had any significant impressions of Snape. It was as though he was completely forgettable.

They did learn one useful piece of information: one of the restaurant's employees had called in sick that morning but said he was sending his brother to work for him. The 'brother' gave his name as Rubio and had been adequate in his work, not drawing any attention to himself, also forgettable, except for the hair.

Finally, Ginny and Luna thanked the people in the restaurant, and they Apparated directly into their hotel room from the same alley where Snape and Hermione had disappeared. Ginny spent a few minutes on the phone setting up an international Floo call. Their hotel was primarily a Muggle one, but it also offered wizarding rooms and services, with amenities such as free use of the local Floo network, fireplaces in each room, and broom servicing.

When the required connections were made and payment sent up, Ginny grabbed a handful of Floo powder, knelt on the floor and stuck her head into the fireplace, then tossed the powder in. "Harry Potter's office!"

A moderately sized, drab office came into view, but Ginny didn't see Harry at his desk. She called for him repeatedly, her voice climbing in decibels until she was yelling.

After what felt like an hour, but was really only a couple of minutes, Harry came running into his office, glancing around until he saw his wife's face in the fire. "Ginny!" he called, rushing toward his fireplace and practically flinging himself to the floor. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Luna's fine ... it's Hermione. She was kidnapped."

Harry's eyes widened in shock.

"By Snape," Ginny said gravely.

"Snape?" Harry repeated incredulously. "*The* Snape?"

"Yes, of course. Severus Snape, former Death Eater, slimy git, all that. Harry, it was very strange, and Luna and I don't quite know what to make of it."

"Tell me what happened," Harry said, Summoning a pad of parchment and quill with which to take notes.

Ginny told him everything that happened, from the moment she recognized Snape until she returned with Luna to their hotel. Harry scribbled furiously the entire time, stopping her frequently to ask questions, or to repeat something, or for more detail. He seemed most interested in the waiter who had run after Snape and Hermione and the black device he had in his hand.

"Was it shaped kind of like a capital 'L'?" he asked.

"It might have been ... it was hard to see, and everything happened so fast."

Harry nodded, looking over his notes. "Well, it was probably a gun."

Ginny gasped. "Really? You've told me about those...Muggle weapons, used to hurt and kill."

"Yes." He frowned. "Did it look like Hermione was following Snape?"

"No, she seemed to be struggling against him."

"Has she said anything about Snape, anything at all? That she'd heard from him or seen him elsewhere?"

"No, Harry."

Harry tapped the side of his head with the quill as he stared at his notes. "I'm going to have to contact Steve at MI-6"

"Do you think you'll find anything?"

He chuckled wryly. "I have no idea. There hasn't been a single peep from Snape since the end of the war, so I'm pretty sure tracking him down isn't going to be easy. I need to know if he's still using his wand ... maybe we could put a trace on it."

"He Disapparated," said Ginny. "But there's no way to know if it's the same wand he had before. Luna and I didn't see a wand."

Harry was still frowning as he made a few additions to his parchment. "That's where I'm going to start. I'll also put in a call to my Muggle associates at Interpol, see if there's anything on Snape there. I'm sure we've got his fingerprints somewhere around here" He looked at Ginny and smiled. "Don't worry. I can't really see Snape hurting Hermione. Likely, they were running from the waiter with the gun."

"But you can't be sure," Ginny protested. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Make sure that either you or Luna is at the hotel at all times, window open for an owl, in case Hermione tries to contact you. I might need you to check on things for me" He drifted into thought once more. "It will be helpful to know what we're dealing with. If Snape is in the wizarding world, our job will be much easier, but if he's primarily in the Muggle ... not so easy. I doubt he's using his real name, regardless"

"I can't just sit here, Harry."

"Well, you've already got as much information as possible...Oh! Fingerprints! Wait ..." Harry jumped up and disappeared from Ginny's view. When he returned, he had a little box in his hands. "This is a fingerprint kit. Get back to the restaurant as soon as we're done and dust for that waiter's prints."

"How?"

"Sprinkle the powder on places he might have touched, then dust away the excess. Our skin leaves behind oil; the powder sticks to it. Once you have the prints, use the film to lift the powder; be careful not to smudge. Then you'll give those back to me."

Ginny nodded, and Harry set the box on her head.

"You'd better go so that box doesn't fall. You'll want to get the fingerprints before they're ruined by other employees. I'll be in touch."

"Room 323," Ginny said. "Kiss?"

Harry leaned over and kissed her gently so he wouldn't dislodge the box. "When you've got the prints, Floo me."

"I love you."

"You too, Gin. Having fun? Before this, I mean?"

"Yes." Tears filled her eyes. "I'm worried about Hermione."

"Don't worry too much, love. It's Hermione. She can take care of herself."

"I know. Bye, Harry."

Ginny carefully pulled her head out of the fireplace and removed the fingerprint kit.

"What's that?" asked Luna, her eyes full of concern. "What did Harry say?"

Ginny took a deep breath and smiled confidently at her friend. "I'll tell you when I get back. For now, I've got work to do."

ooo

Two

Chapter 2 of 8

The adventure continues when Severus and Hermione appear in a flat and are soon visited by one of his colleagues.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 2

Hermione had been alarmed for sure, but as soon as she felt the pull of Apparation, she was angry too. In the few seconds it took to arrive wherever Snape intended, she formulated a plan. When her feet once again hit solid ground, she pushed as hard as she could. Snape slammed against a large dresser so forcibly that all of the contents of the top shelf either fell over or crashed to the floor.

Hermione didn't wait. She trained her wand over his heart as he slowly righted himself.

"*Expelliarmus!*" she cried. Instead of Snape's wand flying toward her, the man himself was propelled into her forcefully, knocking them both to the floor. The impact caused her to drop her wand. Hermione's heart had already been pounding from the fright she had felt at being dragged from the café and then essentially kidnapped; now it was threatening to burst from her chest as she lay under Snape's body.

At first she thought he'd been knocked unconscious, but slowly he lifted himself until his arms supported most of his weight.

He looked down at her and smirked, his hair falling just shy of her cheeks, his breath ragged. "Typical," he said finally.

For a brief instant, she thought he would kiss her, as he lowered himself toward her. Instead, he stopped impossibly close to her face, without touching her, and pushed up and to his left, flipping over to land beside her. Then he jumped to his feet.

Hermione took a few deep breaths before sitting up slowly. Snape had his wand out and was magically shutting all the windows. She kept her eyes on him and, as inconspicuously as possible, reached for her wand, which lay just a few feet from her hand.

"Let's not have a repeat of your ... heroics," he said smoothly. "You cannot so disarm me."

She said nothing but grabbed her wand, stood and rubbed her bum...which had hit the floor hard...and retrained her only weapon on him. They were in a drab bedroom: all the linens were grey, the furniture old, and the walls cracked. A small door presumably led to a bathroom, and through an open door across the room, Hermione could see a sofa and a large window.

Snape closed the last window and, without a glance at her, left for the other room. Hermione followed, annoyed that he was ignoring her. She watched as Snape closed all the windows and then disconnected the phone line, plugging it into a laptop computer. Her mind was spinning; seeing her very magically inclined professor now efficiently working with Muggle objects, electronics even, was puzzling to say the least.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice betraying her fear.

Snape held up a hand and scowled at her, then tugged off his blazer and tossed it on the sofa. He then pulled something small and black from its pocket. He pressed a button and a red light started blinking then went off after a few seconds. "Bug killer."

Hermione stared at him. "A what?"

Snape held up the device; it was the size of a Muggle pager and had a small LED screen on it, now blank. "We're in a safe house, but one can never be too careful. As to your question, I believe you already know the answer."

"All I **know** is that you're a wizard. You could be impersonating Severus Snape."

He laughed wryly. "That's absurd. Why would I need to assume the appearance of a wizard when I'm living in the Muggle world? I could be anybody."

"Tell me something only Snape would know."

He rolled his eyes. "I'm certain there are quite a few pieces of my life of which you know nothing, rendering this line of questioning irrelevant. I could tell you I've been to the moon, and you wouldn't be able to prove me wrong."

"I know ... your memories ..." she said hesitantly.

Snape froze and glared at her. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes."

"Fine. I met Lily when I was nine."

"What was the first thing you said to her?"

"I said, 'It's obvious, isn't it? I know what you are. You're a witch.'"

Hermione relaxed a little. "Good."

"Your turn," Snape demanded coldly. "I need to make sure **you** are whom you appear to be and not an imposter."

She spoke without hesitation. "In third year you assigned an essay on werewolves. I learned about Professor Lupin by doing that essay."

He nodded curtly and then went to check on the progress of the laptop. When he turned his back to her, Hermione gasped at the sight of the gun. He must have heard her because he removed the gun from its holster and an extra magazine from his trouser pocket and set them on the coffee table.

"I want to know what's going on **right now**," Hermione said, eyeing the gun warily. She had more questions than words at the moment and wasn't sure which one to ask first.

Snape turned around and looked at her solidly for a few seconds, trying to decide exactly how much to divulge. "If you answer my questions, I may choose to provide you with ... certain information."

"I make no promises." Hermione stubbornly crossed her arms.

"Then you get no answers." He didn't think she had changed so much that she would be able to ignore the incentive to get the information she desired, even if it meant revealing things about herself in return. She'd been the most inquisitive student he had ever taught. Still, he wasn't ready to share as much as she would probably ask.

She glared at him so fiercely he nearly blinked. Nearly.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"What are you doing in Florence, and what were you doing at the café today?"

She huffed. "I'm here with Ginny Potter and Luna Lovegood. We're on holiday...Luna is getting married in a few weeks, and Ginny and I..."

Snape held up his hand. "Not interested in the details."

Hermione glared at him and clenched her jaw. "We had lunch today at the café across the street from the one where you were. Ginny saw you and dared me to talk to you."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"That's it."

He nodded once and turned to the laptop. Hermione waited impatiently until he returned his attention to her.

"I was at the café for a meeting," he began, casually taking a seat on the sofa as though there wasn't a semi-automatic pistol a few feet away. "You ... interfered."

She stared at him, waiting for him to continue because surely there had to be more. However, he said nothing further and sighed, glancing at his watch.

"That's it?" she asked, annoyed.

He tilted his head to one side. "That's it."

She gaped, incredulous, then took a few calming breaths and then launched into a string of questions. "Why did you kidnap me? Where are we? Why do you need a safe house and a bug killer, and why do you have a gun?"

He raised an eyebrow, slightly amused. "I 'kidnapped' you to keep you safe. We are, as I said, in a safe house in the heart of Florence. I need the safe house to keep me safe...and now you as well...the bug killer to kill any potential bugs in the room, and the gun is for my protection. Obviously."

Hermione looked at him, unimpressed. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"In the future, I suggest you ask questions in such a way as to get the information you desire. Of course I knew what you meant, but there are reasons why I cannot answer you."

"I don't care..." she began.

Snape spoke over her, casting an annoyed glare in her direction. "Do not think for an instant that I expect you to let this go or to simply accept what I have told you. You must do as I am doing and **wait**."

"For what?"

"Information."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Snape jumped up from the sofa and strode quickly to the door.

"Who's there?" he asked in Italian.

"The barmaid," came a woman's voice, also in Italian.

Snape opened the door, and Hermione was surprised to see, not a barmaid, but a woman with dark brown hair pulled into a ponytail, smartly dressed in a fitted pantsuit saunter into the room. Snape shut the door behind her.

The woman glanced from Snape to Hermione and raised an eyebrow. "This is the girl?" she said in English now.

Snape nodded.

Hermione's patience, already thin, was on the verge of snapping. "I am not **agirl**," she said with disdain, glaring at the newcomer.

The woman raised an eyebrow and glanced once more at Snape. "What happened?"

"Shouldn't we discuss this somewhere more ... private?" he asked.

"What does she know?"

"You could just ask me, you know," Hermione said calmly.

Both Snape and the woman looked at her.

"I'm Claire," said the woman, crossing the room to Hermione and extending her hand. "And you are?"

"Rebecca Hammond."

Claire smiled. "Rebecca. That's a lovely name. So...what do you know?"

"My guess is that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Snape chuckled darkly. "The ... meeting was botched, Claire. When ... Rebecca ..." ...he gave Hermione an intense look... "sat at my table, I thought she was my contact. It soon became clear this was false thinking."

Claire folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. "You took a sugar cube."

"Contact was made. There were no stipulations requiring I confirm it at that stage."

Claire paced and then stopped, looking at Hermione. "Why did you approach Clint? Do you know him?"

Hermione glanced from Claire to Snape. He hadn't specifically told her whether his status as a wizard was known, nor had he warned her not to mention it. However, if he was going by an alias, then there was a good chance he didn't want the truth revealed, even to this woman with whom he appeared to work. "He was my chemistry teacher. Once."

"Teacher?" Claire looked at Snape. "You were a teacher?"

Snape held Hermione's gaze and nodded. "Yes. Once." He very slightly inclined his head toward Hermione, then looked at Claire. "It was a long time ago," he said, his expression impassive.

"A teacher ... Well, nothing really surprises me about you anymore, Clint. You took a sugar cube...we initiated the exchange. When the second one was taken by," ...Claire glanced at Hermione... "her, they thought we were somehow double-crossing them."

"What happened?"

"One of our people was shot in the leg. He'll be fine," Claire added quickly. "But our relationship with Red Fox is now tenuous at best."

Snape cursed and began to pace. "Can it be repaired? Is there a way to explain what happened?"

Claire scoffed. "You can't explain things to terrorists, and you know it. The question now becomes how do we complete the transaction, sell the device, and get paid? Be thankful it's the Red Fox who is willing to negotiate for this item. If we were dealing with another organization ... the L'invisible, for example, then your former student, here, would really have bollocks'd it up for us, and we'd all be dead."

"What about ... her?" Snape indicated Hermione with a nod of his head.

"What about me?" Hermione demanded, feeling overwhelmed at what she did and did not understand about their conversation.

Claire looked at her. "As I said, you interfered, apparently unknowingly. The Red Fox...a name you need not concern yourself with...was certainly watching the exchange and now has a picture of you and probably already knows more about you than you do. Soon your face will be circulating all over the networks. People want to know who you are. **Unfriendly** people."

For a moment, Hermione panicked, and then it all started to get jumbled in her head. The primary danger, as far as she could see, was that the Muggles would discover she was a witch and then, as a result of saying Snape had once been her teacher, he would be discovered as a wizard. A secondary danger, as yet unqualified and unquantified, was the number of terrorist groups who might want her harmed or worse, and for reasons she couldn't fathom.

Hermione sank onto the sofa.

"That is a very relevant point," said Snape. "Miss Rebecca will stay here," ...the subtle command wasn't lost on Hermione's dazed understanding..."while we finish our conversation in the other room." Snape ushered Claire from the sitting room, leaving Hermione to her thoughts.

Her mind raced with the implications of all that Claire and Snape had said. They were obviously spies. Was Snape working for the good guys or bad? Was it true that a terrorist organization was now compiling a file on her?

Hermione shook her head and thought about Snape. He looked ... good. Ginny and Luna had no idea that as she approached Snape's table...was it possible it had only been half an hour ago?...her palms had started to sweat, her heart had raced, and nerves had bundled in her gut.

When the truth of what Snape had done was revealed, about the sacrifices he had made, the full extent of his double life, and especially the depth of his love for Harry's mother, Lily, the wizarding world at large had been quick to embrace him. It had exonerated him long before the Ministry did, praising him relentlessly for the incredible things he had done for Harry, the Order, and the world itself. It was easy: Snape wasn't there to deny or discourage it. The mystery of Snape's disappearance had only fueled the speculation and mystery. Some even claimed that Lily was still alive somehow and that he had finally gone to be with her.

Hermione had never believed it, knowing full well that if Lily Potter were alive, nothing would have kept her away from her son. Still, it was a very romantic notion. Women all over Britain talked about what an incredible **man** Snape was, how alluring, intelligent, and sexy. Hermione had always thought them slightly touched; they obviously had never spoken a single word to the man. Nevertheless, as Hermione did her own research into Snape's relationship with Lily, talking to their former classmates and teachers, she began developing complex feelings for the missing man.

He had loved Lily Potter so much that he had essentially given his entire life to her. From the time he had first met her as a young boy, he had adored her, and as they had

grown older, he'd fallen in love with her. He had made a fatal mistake, brought about by his weakness for not only the Dark Arts, but also to a much more common one: the desire to belong. His disastrous decision had led to the death of the only person he had ever truly cared about, and it had broken him. He had then dedicated the rest of his life to restitution.

It had been that love which had touched Hermione's heart. Love worth dying for, worth living an unsatisfying, dangerous double life ... That was the kind of love she wanted to inspire, and she had been certain she would find it in her longtime friend and childhood crush. However, it had not taken her long to realize that Ron Weasley was as romantic as a block of corrugated steel.

Hermione's pining for the kind of love Snape had for Lily had gradually turned into nebulous feelings for the man himself. As time distanced her from the last occasion on which she'd seen him...when she had Conjured the vial in which Harry had collected his memories in the Shrieking Shack...it became easier to admire him. He wasn't around to snarl, growl, threaten, or hex her or anyone she knew. This somewhat delusional view of Snape had been part of what had prompted her to accept Ginny's dare so quickly. Even his abrupt manner at the table hadn't been enough to still the swells of excitement in her heart.

A sound from the next room interrupted Hermione's thoughts, and she bit her lip and then stood to pace for something to do. She thought about Claire and wondered if she and Snape were lovers. A tiny, nearly imperceptible twinge of something akin to jealousy pulsed through Hermione.

Hermione looked at the gun on the table, the hard evidence that she knew little about the man, despite all the research she had done on him after his disappearance. And yet, he had protected her ... at the café, and now with his colleague. It was further proof, if she had needed it that he was the same man who had protected children he hadn't liked...hated, even...with his own life.

She spun on her heel and paced in the opposite direction.

The fact that Snape was a spy surprised Hermione. She had always assumed he had only accepted his former role out of guilt, fear, and an attempt at both revenge and absolution. He was excellent at the brewing of potions, and had she been asked to hazard a guess as to his occupation, she would have said he worked in that field. There must have been some aspect of being a spy that had appealed to Snape beyond the magical component if he sought a life as the Muggle version.

The door opened, and Hermione looked up to see Snape and Claire enter the room. She felt frustratingly out of her realm.

Claire strode to the shuttered windows while Snape resumed his seat in the chair. "We've received confirmation that Red Fox has identified you. It is likely that most, if not all, of the larger terrorist organizations in the world are seeing your face as we speak."

"What we need to know," interjected Claire, "is what they're going to find."

Hermione looked at Snape and for the first time saw trepidation in his eyes. She smiled primly at Claire. "My name is Rebecca Hammond. I am a Primary School teacher. I live in Bristol. I have very few friends, read all the time, have two cats, and no current boyfriend."

Claire's narrowed her eyes. "Is that true?" she asked, then shook her head. "No. I don't need to know if it's true. Will they be able to find anything when they go digging through your life? Parking ticket, speeding ticket, late credit card payment?"

"No," Hermione said without hesitation.

Claire huffed and returned to pacing the room.

Severus was thankful neither Hermione nor Claire had looked at him during their exchange. He was truly surprised by the answers Hermione gave. First, that she was a Muggle school teacher who lived alone and had no boyfriend...the cats were no surprise...and then at her insistence there was nothing to find. It piqued his curiosity, to say the least.

"How can you be so certain?" Claire asked.

Hermione scoffed lightly. "I think I would know my own record, don't you?"

"Clint is convinced that you might be competent to help us remedy this situation to the benefit of us all and remove you from the active interest lists."

"I take it that would be a good thing."

Claire smirked. "Unless you want people following you for the rest of your life, yeah."

Hermione glanced at Snape, who was watching her intently. "I'm listening."

Snape and Claire sat in the armchairs facing the sofa; Claire spoke. "Here's the thing, Rebecca. Your picture is out there and as I said, people will want to know who you are. You've been connected with us now,"...Claire glared at Snape..."and we don't want that. We want you ... off, back at whatever life you were living before."

"Me, too."

"Good. However, it's not a simple matter of letting you go. We need to complete the transaction with Red Fox and somehow explain you or show that you really aren't one of our or anybody's agents. You are a person of interest now, unfortunately for you. Once you've stepped into this world, however little, it's very hard to get out of it completely. There must be no doubt left in anyone's mind that you can never pose a threat again." Claire glanced at Snape.

"You must be convincingly dead," he said dispassionately.

Hermione gaped at him. "Dead?"

Claire laughed. "We won't actually kill you, just make it look like it. You'll have to change your name and move and start over, but it's better than being ... dead. We can't help you with that either."

Hermione digested the information and realized that only Rebecca Hammond, who lived in Bristol, would have to start over, not her. She would have to clear that up with Snape later.

"Not a problem," she said after a moment.

Claire raised an eyebrow. "Good. Ideally, we can contact Red Fox and ask them to repeat the mission that was botched, as it was supposed to happen, inserting you somewhere. Then, we can arrange for you to be taken out."

"How was the mission supposed to go?"

Snape spoke. "There were two segments taking place simultaneously. The objective was to exchange a device for payment; the device was to be given up and examined in one place, the funds in another."

"Which part did I interrupt?"

"The funds exchange, though the other segment was disturbed as a result. The two exchanges were coordinated, requiring first an examination of the device. Once that was approved, the funds would be inspected and then accepted."

"Oh. Are you going to tell me how this ... mission ... is supposed to go this time?"

"Clint can tell you the details later. We still have to contact Red Fox, and our window of opportunity to fix this is closing rapidly."

Snape looked at Claire. "How do you propose we get Rebecca involved and then ... killed?"

She thought for a moment, then said, "Well, Red Fox knows that you somehow got away from the scene with her. For all they know, we kidnapped her. If she were to approach Red Fox ... if we could boost her profile, make her somewhat desirable ... it might work ..."

"You left out the actual plan," Snape said testily. "Care to fill in the gaping holes?"

Claire gave him a scathing glance. "You, of all people, know that it takes more time to develop a plan which will go smoothly. I'll give you the details when I finish working them out."

"Acceptable," he said curtly.

"However," Claire added, "I'll be the one to 'kill' her."

Hermione jerked, but Snape ran a slender index finger around his pursed lips, deep in thought. After a moment he agreed. "Provided Miss Hammond trusts me, I will provide the weapon." He glanced at Hermione.

Hermione trusted Snape not to hurt her, but when it came to her life ... did that trust extend? It seemed impossible; she wasn't sure she'd trust Harry or Ron that much. But there was something indefinable that wrapped itself around in her mind, twisting and enveloping her thoughts. She realized she *did* trust Snape that much. Though she doubted she could articulate why.

"Okay," she said finally, meeting his expectant gaze.

He blinked and nodded once, surprise flitting across his face before he masked it. "Once Red Fox thinks you're dead, they will spread the news. You'll be free to return ... home."

She smiled weakly. "Home sounds really good."

ooo

Ginny and Luna were sitting in their hotel room that evening around dinnertime, not the least bit hungry. Ginny attempted to read and Luna to draw, hoping the activities would distract them enough to block their minds from wandering aimlessly to their friend and the possible horrors she was experiencing.

Ginny had returned to the restaurant, and even though it closed after lunch, the owner had let her in to check for fingerprints. She had returned to the hotel within an hour, immediately sending the samples to Harry.

"Ginny, are you there?"

"Harry! Coming!" She and Luna scrambled across the room and plopped onto the floor in front of the fireplace. Harry's head was nestled among brilliant green flames.

"Well?" asked Luna excitedly. "What did you find out?"

"Any word from Hermione?" Harry asked.

"No," replied Luna.

He sighed. "Most of the fingerprints you collected were not the waiter's...just the employees we know about...but there were a few partial prints that require further analysis. Hopefully, I'll get the results by tomorrow."

"Well, that's something at least," said Ginny.

Harry nodded. "There is some good news, however. I sent some of Snape's prints to Steve, who works at MI-6, and they were in the system. However, they aren't very useful. They weren't linked to any known illegal or terrorist activity. Suspicious, however, is the fact that the fingerprints reportedly belong to four different men...which is impossible. Either Snape was able to obtain the fingerprints of other men to use in his ... work, for lack of a better word, or he has a number of aliases."

"I don't know if that helps us or not," said Ginny.

"I have four names for you to inquire about around Florence. Use the phone in your room and call hotels, hostels, anywhere you can think, asking for these names. Something might turn up. Have you got something to write with?"

Ginny got up and scrounged through the drawers until she found a pen and something to write on. "I'm ready," she said, returning to her spot on the floor.

"Edgard Bontecou, Alexei Madatov, Carlo Renzetti and Gen Suen. There are no credit cards," ...Harry looked at Luna then ... "those are Muggle payment devices, registered in any of those names. This also leads me to believe these names are aliases. Whatever Snape does, he isn't going to leave more of a paper trail."

"Is he dangerous?" Luna asked, her expression thoughtful.

Harry frowned. "It's hard to tell without any direct evidence. I would say that he is capable of being dangerous...it's Snape...but we have no reason to believe he would hurt Hermione. From what I know of Snape, I think he'll be rude and unpleasant, but I don't think he would harm her. He knows he will have to let her go at some point and she has friends who wouldn't rest until she was avenged for whatever injuries she incurred from him."

"Anything else, Harry? What can we do?" Ginny pleaded. "I'm going nuts just sitting here; I hate feeling so useless."

"I know, Ginny, I know. At least you're there; I'm stuck in England for the night but I'll be there as soon as I possibly can. I've got a meeting I can't miss, and I moved it to first thing in the morning."

"At least you have things to do."

"True, thanks to Steve. However, it's also very important to be on Snape's trail. I'm keeping this investigation off the record for as long as I possibly can. The last thing we need is a press leak that Hermione has been kidnapped. If word gets about that it was **Snape** ... it could be a disaster, for everyone involved.

"Oh, there was one other thing. Snape's wand. I checked with the registry: he has had one wand since he was eleven. Thirteen and a half inches, mahogany, dragon heartstring core. He still has it, and it was last used earlier this afternoon."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" exclaimed Luna.

"Can you track it? Find out where he is?" Ginny asked.

"We're working on it. Trouble is we don't know if he last used it to Apparate, or if he used it after that. If the former, then it doesn't really tell us much since both of you already know he was in Florence this afternoon. There's no telling if we'll get anything; the tracking system is still in testing stages, and Snape's wand hasn't passed through Ministry security to be registered."

"Sounds like you've got quite a job ahead of you. Is there anything else we can do?" Ginny asked.

"I'd get a good night's rest if I were you. I'll Floo you in the morning. I'm two hours behind you, and I plan to head over to MI-6 to see a friend. Love you, Ginny. And please, both of you. Don't worry. I know that's like asking Snape not to pick on Gryffindors, but at least try."

"I love you too, Harry," Ginny replied, leaning forward to kiss him. "We can start calling hotels tonight. We'll be up a while longer if you need anything."

Harry nodded. "Goodnight, Ginny. Luna."

"Good luck, Harry," said Luna.

Harry looked once more at Ginny and then disappeared. The two women sat in silence, each deep in thought. Then Ginny spoke. "I'll call around if you look up numbers."

Luna nodded, and they went to the phone. Luna opened the phonebook and found the section for hotels.

"What's the first one?" said Ginny, picking up the phone, her brow furrowed in concern.

Luna frowned and closed the phonebook, using her wand as a page marker. "Ginny, I know you're an Auror and that Harry is part of a semi-secret division of Aurors in the Ministry. I don't know much about what he does, but ... how does he know so much about Muggle law enforcement? What is MI-6, and how does he know people there?"

Ginny smiled warmly at her friend. "I wondered when you would ask about all this. I'm not really supposed to say...Harry's job is very sensitive...but considering the circumstances, I think I can tell you enough."

"I would appreciate it," replied Luna.

"You're right. Harry is part of a special division of Aurors. He's only been there for a year, so he's relatively new, but he loves the work. Basically, his division handles cases similar to what happened to Hermione. When wizards commit Muggle crimes without magic, both wizards and Muggles are involved in the investigation. The Muggles don't know about magic of course; they think Harry and his coworkers work for a super secret division of the Muggle government.

"MI-6 is the British government's intelligence agency. Harry has made a friend or two there, and he's called them in the past and today, off record, for a few favors, such as running the fingerprints."

Luna nodded. "Oh. That makes sense." She reopened the phonebook. "Shall we begin then?"

ooo

Words: 5116

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story. This was my first sshg story and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. This story is infinitely better thanks to their help. Special thanks to , for the many, many delightful and invaluable hours spent working with me on this. I have learned so much from you and just adore you! And to who encouraged me to join the exchange in the first place, coded with me at the last minute, and has been a wonderful help and source of many smiles. True friends, both of you!!!

Three

Chapter 3 of 8

The adventure continues!

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 3

When Claire finally left, it was after nine. Hermione's head was pounding, and she was fiercely hungry, not having eaten anything since half of her sandwich at lunch. With a twist of longing, she remembered sitting with Ginny and Luna in the bright, warm sun, their biggest concern finding the nearest gelato shop. It felt like a lifetime had passed since then.

Snape escorted Claire to the door, and the woman was obviously loath to leave Snape and Hermione alone. After everything she'd been through that day, Hermione counted it as one small victory. Still, she wanted more: she wanted to see Snape squirm.

"She fancies you," Hermione said as soon as the door was shut.

Snape paused, his back still to her. "I know." He turned around. "Not that it's any of your concern, but I don't mix business with pleasure."

"Have you mentioned that to her? Because I got the impression she was ready to jump you if you gave the word, my presence notwithstanding." She stretched out on the sofa and smiled knowingly at him. He ignored her, which only served to make Hermione more determined. "I must admit, you're considerably more fanciable now than the last time I saw you."

He visibly stiffened, and she inwardly cheered. When he looked at her, his face was blank, but she saw the beginnings of a sneer on his lips. "Considering that, at the time, I was lying on the floor of a grimy shack, gushing blood from a large snakebite, I'm not terribly surprised or flattered. Not that I'm deluded enough to think you were paying me a compliment."

Her smiled dropped. "I...that's not..." she said hurriedly.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Spare me."

She made no reply and looked away, fidgeting with a thin, leather bracelet she'd purchased earlier that day.

"Are you hungry?" Snape asked as he neared the sofa.

"Yes."

Snape regarded her for a moment. "Stop brooding. I have much thicker skin than you give me credit for if you think a comment about my appearance is going to harm me. Look, I know you have questions, and whether I should choose to answer them or not, I suggest waiting until we've eaten. It will allow us longer tempers."

"Fine. I'll eat anything."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Good. Because there probably isn't a large selection here."

Hermione was suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion, but she refused to think about giving in to it. "May I get cleaned up?" A shower would be just the thing to energize her for whatever lay ahead. She had questions about the mission, sure, but even more pressing were her queries about him.

"Of course. The bathroom is through the bedroom where we first arrived. I'll have something prepared when you return."

Hermione nodded and wordlessly left the room. She shut the bedroom door and locked it, cast as many locking and protection charms as she could, then went into the bathroom and turned on the water.

While she waited for the water to get hot, she surveyed the bedroom more closely than she had when she'd been there earlier. Her search revealed nothing. The drawers of the dresser were empty, the closet had only a jumper hanging in it, there was nothing under the bed, and there was only extra paper in the bathroom.

After a quick shower, Hermione cleaned her clothes and put them on before returning to the main part of the flat. Snape glanced up from the table when he heard the door open.

"There's more in the kitchen," he said, indicating his meal of pasta and a red sauce.

In the kitchen, open to the living room and separated only by a half-wall, Hermione fixed herself a plate. She then returned to the living room and sat across from Snape at the small table. "What's the sauce? Where did you get it?"

"There are several varieties in the freezer. This is the arrabiata ... I thought it fitting, in more ways than one." He smirked.

She pinked; she'd been in Italy long enough to know the names of sauces. Arrabiata meant "angry" and the sauces were usually spicy. "What was I supposed to say?" she asked. "Earlier. If I really had been there to meet you."

Snape looked at her, his eyes dark and full of amusement. "I prefer the Bolognese."

"Hmm ..." she said, looking at her dinner. "What would have happened if I had said that?"

"We'll talk after we eat and I've cleaned up as well," he replied, focusing on his meal.

They ate in silence. Snape finished quickly and went to the bedroom. As soon as the door closed behind him, Hermione jumped up from the sofa and went to the laptop. He had either been careless and left it unlocked...not likely...or he didn't care if she looked around.

The laptop yielded nothing. All the files and programs were password protected. In vain, Hermione tried 'Lily' but hadn't expected it to work. She abandoned the laptop and took the dishes to the kitchen, ostensibly to wash them. Her search revealed bottles of water, yogurt, and a set of test tubes labeled in a language Hermione couldn't place in the refrigerator. She guessed either Mandarin or Japanese. The freezer held containers of sauce, and the cabinets were largely empty except for rags, cleaning supplies and a few pounds of dry pasta.

In the sitting room, Hermione remembered that Snape had removed the laptop from the television cabinet. She crossed the room and pulled open its drawers. All were empty save the top one, which held the television remote and several miscellaneous wires.

Hermione stood and crossed her arms, upset with the entire flat for not containing a shred of evidence about who Snape was, what he was doing, or anyone he might be involved with. Her gaze fell once again on the gun, and she wondered if she would be convincing enough with it to pass as a freelance spy. Then she noticed Snape's blazer, still lying over the back of the sofa. He had pulled one interesting gadget from it ... Would there be more?

She started investigating. Quickly, she found the wand holster, now empty, and realized it was the reason she couldn't disarm Snape earlier. The wand was Spelled not to leave the holster until Snape activated the release mechanism. He must have constructed the holster himself, or perhaps Charmed it, to make it immune to the Disarming Spell.

The blazer's outside pockets contained a gum wrapper, a matchbook for a café in Rome, and a small comb. Hermione chuckled at the comb and moved to the inner pockets. As her hand brushed against something cold and hard, she heard the bedroom door open. She froze.

"I keep an extra clip in that pocket," said Snape drolly.

Hermione pulled her hand out of the pocket and looked at him defiantly.

He entered the room and took the blazer out of her hands. "I would have been rather disappointed if you hadn't looked," he said, removing the extra clip and tucking it into his shirt pocket, never taking his eyes off her. "Did you see the jumper in the closet? Feel free to use it if you get cold." He looked her over from head to toe as if to say how could she not be, in her present attire. The stirrings in his gut had nothing whatsoever to do with how she looked; his food was settling.

Their proximity, and the way the air between them seemed to crackle, stifled any witty reply Hermione might have made. She swallowed and took a step away from him, then resumed her seat on the sofa, failing to stifle a yawn as she did.

"Are you too tired to continue?" Snape asked without looking at her.

"No, not at all. I have too many questions to sleep," she declared.

"No doubt," said Snape drolly. He took a seat facing her. "Let's try an exercise in trust. I will ask you one question. The more elaborate and detailed your answer, the more open I will be in answering your queries. What do you say?"

She considered his words, looking for a trap, but found none. "All right."

"Claire was not convinced by your cover story. As I know you, at least in part, I am well aware that you're not suited to the arduous task of filling children's empty heads with information they will never use, Muggle or magical, in primary school. I am curious as to what you do for a living."

"That's what you want to know?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. That is my question."

"Oh," she said, frowning slightly. "I'm an Unspeakable."

Snape waited briefly for her to continue, then smirked. "I am a spy."

Hermione quickly caught on to the game and laughed in surprise. "I'm not exactly supposed to talk about what I do."

"Nor am I. That is where the ... trust comes in. I assure you that in the arena of information, you have the advantage. No one in my world will ever hear the truth about what you do, or that you are a witch. That would raise too many questions about me. However, I have no doubt that everyone in England would want to know what it is I have been doing since I left."

Hermione shook her head. "You have no idea. You're almost more interesting than Harry now."

Snape rolled his eyes. "My life's ambition. I can die happy."

Hermione reddened. "Fine. I'm an Unspeakable. I was recruited two years ago after three years as an Auror. The Department of Mysteries is involved in a wide variety of work, from experimental magic to research about not just magic but death, love, life, etc. My job falls somewhere in that spectrum."

She waited expectantly for his reply.

Snape chuckled. "That's hardly adequate information. I already know as much, and all you really said is a bunch of nothing, which all wizarding children suspect of Unspeakables anyway."

She narrowed her eyes, gave a small huff and elaborated. "I'm part of a small team whose primary job is to investigate what Muggles call paranormal activity. For example, if a Muggle reports a UFO...or Unidentified Flying Object...sighting, my team and I investigate it for any magical roots. It may have simply been someone too careless to disillusion him or herself while flying over a populous city, or a broom Spelled to fly on its own. Something like that. We take care of things from the magical end: memory modification, occasional Legilimency. Anything odd in the Muggle world that cannot be rationally explained through Muggle science gets sent to us."

Snape hadn't taken his eyes off hers the entire time she spoke. He was more than a little intrigued. However, he merely nodded and waited.

"Er ... my last mission was a series of bank robberies in Russia. The culprits used a combination of Muggle technology and magic to steal a few pieces of the Crown Jewels, just to prove they could do it and completely fool the Muggle authorities. It isn't a big surprise that they were successful, considering they were using magic; it isn't quite the same thing as thieving using strictly Muggle methods."

"Fascinating," said Snape. "I wonder if we've ever run in the same circles."

Hermione was surprised to hear genuine interest in his voice. "I doubt it," she replied. "Have you ever been caught in your line of work?"

He smirked. "No."

"I haven't left a single case unsolved yet."

Snape leaned back in his seat and got comfortable. "I am ... nearly satisfied. There is still the matter of your complete conviction at what someone would find when they looked into your life."

"I can't wait until I get to ask the questions," she said with a frown. "It's simple. I keep a Muggle profile that says I'm a teacher. I have a little house where only two cats live, and a woman comes by to clean every week. Money is left on the counter for her. There's another woman at the school where I supposedly work who has brown eyes and hair like mine. Every month, she gets a deposit in her bank account to pretend, in the event someone should ask, that she is Rebecca Hammond."

"Why?"

"Since my job sends me into the Muggle world on occasion, I have an alias." She looked at him. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

A thought crossed her mind that troubled her. "Could she be in danger now? No one knows that name except you and Claire"

Snape took his time answering. "You may want to have her extracted. In this business, there is simply no way to trust ... everyone with whom you work."

"Claire? How awful," Hermione said. "If you can't trust anyone, you'll always be alone."

Snape shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He knew the tables were about to turn, and though he had agreed to share as she shared, he was beginning to worry that he had offered too much. There were things he wasn't ready to say aloud, much less tell another person who could then repeat it. It was with great reluctance that he inclined his head to her and said, "Your turn."

At least a dozen questions jammed their way into her mind, and she was momentarily overwhelmed. What did she want to know most of all? "How long have you been a spy?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Since I was twenty, of course. Over half of my life." He felt a twinge of pain when he said it that way; he'd never thought about how much of his life had been lived in subterfuge, as a double agent, unable to completely trust anyone but Dumbledore.

"A Muggle spy," she amended.

"Six years."

"That's almost how long it's been since you disappeared! How did you get into the work? How did you survive the snakebite?"

Still disconcerted, Snape stood and went to the laptop. "I would like to input background information under the name Rebecca Hammond to make you less of a mystery. The unknown is not good...too many blanks lead to too many questions. I'll just be a moment."

Hermione frowned at his back. "All right ..."

Minutes passed, the only sound the clickety-clack of the laptop keyboard; occasionally, there would be a soft beep.

"Done," said Snape eventually. "You are now a mysterious-but-intelligent, highly experienced persona in the intelligence world."

"Thanks ... I guess ..."

Snape resumed his seat, feeling still surprisingly overwhelmed by the realization that he'd spent more than half of his life in a line of work in which he never would have imagined he would find himself. He didn't even necessarily like the work; he was good at it, and he liked doing something at which he was good.

He also felt a strong compulsion to explain himself, to unload the weight he had been carrying since the end of the war. There had been a time when he had someone in whom to confide, someone who would listen and encourage, remind him of why he was doing what he was doing. He truly missed that; here was an opportunity to unload,

as he had once done on a weekly, if not daily basis. He trusted Hermione for some reason, if only for the fact that she was who she was and no matter how grudging he was to admit it, he knew she had character. She would not betray him.

Snape sighed; best to get the most unpleasant bit out of the way first. Talking about his work would be no big deal compared to it. "First, I will address the question I had guessed you would ask first. Simply put, I survived because I'm not a dunderhead. I had enough forethought to have considered that the Dark Lord might use the snake at some point. I had been drinking Anti-venom Potion since the Dark Lord's return. As for the matter of the physical wound ... the details are tedious, and I doubt you are interested in the mechanics. Suffice it to say, the wound was not incapacitating. I Apparated to a hospital in Paris and assumed a pseudonym, knowing the Ministry would be after me."

"Not to convict or arrest you though," Hermione interjected.

"Perhaps eventually. I doubt they believed Potter immediately."

"Still, why not go to St Mungo's?"

"Contrary to my earlier statement, I did not wish to risk becoming ... 'nearly as interesting as Harry' by remaining in England. In large part, I have no desire or reason to set foot on English soil ever again."

"Never?" Hermione asked, stunned.

He looked at her pointedly. "I have nothing to return to. More specifically, nothing worth going through the efforts of returning for."

"That's ... awful."

Snape continued as though she hadn't spoken. "As for the other question, it's quite simple. I walked into the S.D.E.C.E....that's the Service de la Documentation Exterieur et de Contre-Espionnage, or French Intelligence...and told them I wanted to become a spy."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "That *worked*?"

"No, of course not. But word got around, how I'm not really sure, nor do I care ... There must have been a leak. One week later, I was contacted by an organization in need of a hire."

"How much time had passed since the end of the war?"

"Approximately one year, during which time I learned to use a wide variety of Muggle weapons, three forms of martial arts, seven foreign languages, and how to tie the perfect knot."

"All that in a year?"

"The knot took the longest, actually," Snape said.

Hermione wasn't sure what to think and gave him a very confused look. It must have been an amusing look because Snape actually laughed. Hermione watched in wonder as his face lit up and his eyes shone with mirth. She had never seen him laugh in all the time she had known him. Combined with the other feelings she had for the man, latent, buried and unformed as they were, seeing him so happy, even for the briefest of moments, sent her stomach flipping delightfully.

He stopped laughing, the traces of his amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. "I had nothing else to do. It's amazing what a person can do when properly motivated."

"As you have demonstrated through your efforts against Voldemort," Hermione said softly, regretting it instantly.

Snape's face hardened, then he shut his eyes and rubbed his temples. "To continue the tale, I quickly proved myself to my employer as capable and efficient, and they trained me. When that association ended, I had no shortage of job offers."

Still flustered by her strange reaction to Snape and then her ill-timed question, Hermione blurted out the first thing that entered her mind. "Are you in love with Claire?"

Snape didn't even blink. "I don't recall hearing a word about your love life. And frankly, I find it puzzling that you're so interested in mine."

Hermione reddened again and looked at her hands. "I'm only curious."

"Quite." He couldn't deny, and didn't bother trying, that her curiosity was bolstering, and the way she blushed was rather alluring.

She bit her lip and then said, "So you've found other worthy causes to spy for."

For a reason he couldn't explain, Snape's heart softened at her declaration, and he felt an unusual surge of warmth toward the woman before him. She was the kind of person who always looked for the good in people, and even when confronted with evidence that he wasn't the most upstanding human being, she wasn't willing to assume anything or to condemn him.

A tiny piece of the shell he kept tightly sealed around his heart chipped away when he saw that Hermione was waiting expectantly for his answer, a rare vulnerability reflected through the windows to her soul, as though her entire happiness depended on it. "Certainly I do my best to be hired by the ... good guys," he replied.

"What do you mean?" she asked, all traces of the emotions she had just shared gone, replaced with curiosity "Whom do you work for?"

"Myself. After the war, I was determined never to call another living person 'master,' either by name or through my actions."

"But you work with Claire, and from the way the two of you talk, it sounds as though there are others."

"I am part of a freelance agency. A 'spy-for-hire' if you will. Organizations contact us with a job, and whoever can or wants to do it, takes it. Claire and I are the only two from the agency working on this mission. The others are part of the organization."

"What's the organization called?"

Snape considered not answering; after all, he would be divulging information not generally available to the general public. However, he couldn't see the harm in telling her. Perhaps it would come to her aid in the near future. "They are called 'Il Nove' or, 'The Nine.' They are primarily a research and information gathering group based in Torino. That's why they hired Claire and I...their agents aren't typically trained in field work."

"What can you tell me about Red Fox?"

He chuckled softly at the way she'd phrased the question. "Red Fox is an international group, meaning they have members from across the globe. They don't limit themselves to a region or country for recruiting, and the location of their base of operations is unknown."

"Good guys or bad?"

Snape gave a patronizing smile. "In general, unless the organization is affiliated with a government, they are considered the 'bad' guys; however, there are always the

usual politics and debates about grey areas."

Hermione nodded. "What's the worst group you can think of?"

"Easy. L'invisible. They're French, based in Paris. Their agents are the most ruthless and unnecessarily violent of any I've encountered."

"Good thing they're in France, right?" she said with a small smile.

"Indeed. Have you reached the end of your line of questions?"

"Hardly. How long are you going to do this work?"

Snape looked at her thoughtfully. They had jumped from relatively harmless discussion about terrorist and intelligence organizations in Europe to something far more personal. He was hesitant, and yet once again he felt as compelled to divulge as he had earlier. It had been ... cathartic to share the details of his surviving the war; perhaps he would feel the same after answering. "To be honest, not much longer. I've got a considerable nest egg. A few more jobs, and I'll be able to retire and live the rest of my life in the manner and style of my choosing."

"What do you want to do once you've left this life behind?"

Snape frowned. "I'm ... not sure."

Hermione smiled. "Sounds to me as if you're not very serious about quitting this life. If you were, I think you'd know **exactly** what you wanted to do next."

A hint of a smile escaped Snape's lips, and he nodded. "You're probably right. I'll give it some thought tonight."

Hermione yawned at even the suggestion of going to sleep.

"Before you pass out on the sofa, we need to discuss some modifications to the plan."

Hermione lifted an eyebrow. "Why? It's all set. Claire..."

"Does not know you are a witch. I want to make sure you have every advantage." He paused to gather his thoughts. "Your involvement was a complete accident, and I don't want to see anything happen to you because you chose the wrong moment to say hello." His eyes were intense when he looked at her. "I couldn't forgive myself if you were hurt ... or worse."

Hermione could only nod; she was surprised and touched that he was so concerned about her. "All right," she replied. "What modifications did you have in mind?"

"Nothing extensive, but you should be aware that I am not relying solely on Claire to get you out of this. Once the plan is more defined, we can discuss this further. However, I am not prepared to leave you at the mercy of Muggle technology; I will employ a few magical techniques I have developed over the years."

"Care to elaborate?" she said, interested.

"Not now; when the time comes, I will show you."

She nodded. "Oh! Um ... I would really like to send a letter to Ginny and Luna. They were right there when everything happened ..." Her eyes widened. "What if something happened to them? What if they went after that waiter who chased us?"

"They didn't. We know. They are fine."

"Your people saw them?"

"No. My people saw the other man leave in a black car."

"May I write to them, just to let them know I'm all right?"

Snape sighed. "Have you been to wizarding Florence yet?"

"No, we arrived here last night and went straight to the hotel."

"Tomorrow morning, before we leave, we can Apparate directly from here into wizarding Florence and you may send **a** brief letter. And Granger, no codes."

She bit her lip. "What makes you think I'd send a coded message?"

"I know enough about you, I think. It's also exactly what I would do, if I were you."

Hermione smiled again. "No codes. Thank you, er ... What do I call you? Clint?"

"Yes. Those of us in the agency are given names to use when around others in the agency. Claire's real name is not Claire, either."

"That makes sense. So ... then my question is still unanswered ..."

"I put the name Roger Stevenson into your bio as your former chemistry teacher. In company, call me Roger. When it's just the two of us ... call me Severus. I...I haven't heard my own name in years."

She nodded, feeling as she had when she'd discovered the answer to the Chamber of Secrets, or when they'd found the final Horcrux, or the moment she'd realized Snape wasn't a faithless betrayer. His was a small request for a man to whom the wizarding world owed so much, and Hermione was properly humbled by the honor. "Severus," she said for the first time, as though tasting a new wine. "Call me Hermione."

"Hermione," he repeated, the mark of indifference slipping fractionally, revealing ... gratitude? It disappeared quickly, and then Snape excused himself to wash the dishes.

ooo

As Hermione lay in bed that night, trying to fall asleep, she shed a few tears of fear and frustration. She trusted that Snape **Severus**... would do his best to protect her, but she was about to enter an arena she had absolutely no experience with, and she couldn't learn all she needed in order to feel confident in what she was doing.

The plan he, Claire and Hermione had discussed was intense and dangerous. The modifications Severus had made were all to Hermione's benefit, but they still didn't put her at ease. She would be lucky to come through unscathed.

Hermione thought about Snape. He had been ... almost sweet, in a way. The small things he had done to take care of her showed that either he had left his feelings of animosity for her in England or he was trying to make up for getting her involved, though through no direct fault of his own.

They had gone back and forth when he offered her the bed. She didn't want to inconvenience him. He had insisted that he had never spent a night in the flat and it would be no loss. Finally, he had taken her arm and led her firmly to the bedroom door. For a moment when she'd looked into his eyes, for the second time that day, Hermione

had thought he might kiss her. There was a side of Hermione that thought it was terribly romantic. After all, she'd been fed and cautiously flirted with by the man she had grown to believe was the ideal sort of man on whom she could bestow her heart.

When he had only given her arm a little push toward the bedroom, Hermione experienced a monumental disappointment. She had reminded herself that this was Snape, after all, a man about whom she knew mostly facts and conjecture, and not the wizard she'd seen revealed that day. She began to separate him from her pre-conceptions.

She wondered if, having spent so much of his life loving one woman, he had anything left to give. It was a depressing thought that he might be unable to love again for the rest of his life. He was so young, far too young to be consigned to such a fate. What would that love have been like if it had been returned? What if Lily had loved Snape enough to ignore his attraction to the Dark Arts? Hermione imagined they would have been very, very happy. Any woman would be thrilled to have someone love her as much as Snape had loved Lily. At least, *she* would be thrilled.

Hermione rolled onto her back, tired of thinking about Snape. She thought about her friends instead. What were they doing? They were probably out of their minds with worry. Were they trying to find her? She realized Ginny would have probably contacted Harry, who was perfectly positioned to begin a search. If anyone could find her, it was Harry. The thought occurred to Hermione that while Harry would enjoy the investigative work he would have to do in order to locate his friend, she didn't think he would mind a bit of help. She smiled at the ceiling and wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks as she developed a little plan of her own. Finally feeling as though she could do something for her friends, Hermione rolled over and fell into a deep sleep.

ooo

Luna woke before Ginny to the sun shining through the large window in the hotel room. Its light was warm and bright, highlighting the rich textures of the room: the orange and red silk coverlet, the deep brown woods of the furniture. She yawned and stretched, then snuggled under the blankets, wondering why her head felt full of lead. Then, like the wind rushing into a vacuum, she remembered that Hermione was not in the room with them.

She sighed and looked at Ginny, still sleeping soundly. Luna suspected she had used some kind of sleeping or dreamless potion to help her get to sleep so quickly the night before. Luna had trouble herself; she hadn't been able to close her eyes for five seconds without seeing images of horrible things happening to Hermione.

Luna was a generally happy, peaceful woman. She didn't like confrontation, she didn't enjoy arguments for the sake of argument as Hermione often did, and she had a few treasured friends for whom she would do anything. She was set to marry Ron Weasley in a few weeks, and she couldn't have been happier.

She knew Hermione had seemed thrilled when Luna had announced the year before that Ron had asked her out. Luna had wanted to be sure it was all right with Hermione, who assured her it was. Still, Ron and Luna took their relationship slowly out of concern for Hermione. When it became glaringly apparent to everyone...the night the entire Weasley family had caught Hermione snogging Charlie on a picnic bench outside the Burrow...Ron asked Luna to marry him.

It had only taken a few months to plan a sweet, intimate wedding to take place at Luna's home. Her father had even postponed an expedition into the jungles of Africa in search of five-legged iguanas, said to have magical properties in the extra appendage, to prepare the house and grounds for the festivities. Ron didn't exactly get on smoothly with Xenophilius; he still harbored bad feelings about being sold-out when he had gone to the Lovegood home with Harry and Hermione during the war. Nevertheless, he was polite and cordial for Luna's sake.

Ron was a good man. He made her laugh, and Luna knew he would never hurt her. She loved him completely.

The sound of something solid hitting a wall in the other room startled her out of her musing. She glanced at Ginny; she hadn't heard a thing. Luna doubted she'd be able to rouse the other woman until the sleeping potion wore off fully.

Luna heard the sound again and got up, wrapped a robe around her, and with her wand at the ready, crept into the sitting room. She wasn't really surprised to see Harry's head in a swath of bright green flames.

"Hey, Harry," she said, pulling her hair up atop her head and tucking her wand in to keep it in place. "What was that?"

"Hi, Luna. Sorry to call so early. I threw rocks to get your attention. Is Ginny awake?"

"No. I think she took something."

"Oh. I wanted to give you warning that I'll be joining you in a few minutes, as soon as I get the connection established to allow me to come through."

Luna frowned. "Is everything all right?"

Harry grimaced. "I haven't heard anything about Hermione, if that's what you mean. But my friend at MI-6 got the results on those partial prints. They belong to a known terrorist in an organization called L'invisible, a French organization based in Venice. His name is Shaul Silberman, and he's a real nasty piece of work. I want to be there with you and Ginny, if for some reason we have to get more involved."

"All right. How's Ron? Have you talked to him about this at all?"

"Er ... Bigger! No, I haven't. I've barely spared an extra thought for anything yesterday or last night. I'll let him know what's going on before I come through. I imagine he'll want to come, too."

Luna nodded. "I know he'd be furious with you if you didn't tell him, and yeah, he'll want to come."

Harry smiled. "He'll be useful, don't worry. This *is* Hermione we're looking for. Ron and I don't take chances when it comes to her."

"Good."

"I need to Floo Ron now. I'll be over soon ... Would you try waking Ginny?"

"Sure. See you, Harry."

He disappeared, and Luna stood and stretched. She yawned and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She needed to be more alert, and soon. Undoubtedly, they had a busy day before them.

When she returned to the bedroom, Ginny stood at the window, untying a letter from the leg of a plain, brown owl.

"What is it?" Luna asked.

"I'm not sure ..." She trailed off, then shrieked. "It's from Hermione!"

Luna darted across the room to read the letter with Ginny.

G&L...

I'm safe. I'm all right. I miss you. I'm terribly disappointed that I'm not going to be joining you in Rome as we had planned. Enjoy.

HG

"Rome?" said Luna, puzzled. "We've been there already, just came from there."

"Must be a clue!" Ginny exclaimed. "Oh, brilliant, Hermione!"

The familiar sound of the fireplace roaring to life came from the other room, and both women looked at each other, a shared sense of relief palpable. Next, they heard muffled conversation, two male voices cursing the other for some injury incurred on the journey.

"Oh, good," said Luna with a glittering smile. "Harry and Ron are here."

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading!

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story. This was my first sshg story, and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. This story is infinitely better thanks to their help. Special thanks to Bambu, for the many, many delightful and invaluable hours spent working with me on this. I have learned so much from you and just adore you! And to sshg316, who encouraged me to join the exchange in the first place, coded with me at the last minute, and has been a wonderful help and source of many smiles. True friends, both of you!!!

Four

Chapter 4 of 8

Severus and Hermione arrive in Rome.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 4

Hermione and Severus left for Rome the next morning. Severus had received a call during the night requesting he meet with Claire and Cole, the man who ran the freelance agency of which Snape and Claire were a part, first thing that morning. Cole wanted to discuss what had happened with the exchange.

Once in Rome, Severus led Hermione into a Metro station. They boarded the Orange line and rode it to Numidio Quadrato. They exited the subway, but instead of leaving the station, they waited until the train had departed and the stop was clear. Then Severus located a door at the far end of the platform and entered a series of pass codes into a keypad. The door opened, and Severus all but shoved Hermione through, then closed it tightly behind them.

"Don't say a word," Severus commanded. "Unless you are specifically asked a question."

"Okay."

After rounding three corners, the corridor opened into a small reception area, complete with a desk and filing cabinet sitting in front of a door; there was no one at the desk. Severus went to the cabinet and opened the second drawer, then pulled on a hanging file inside. Hermione heard a click, and then Severus returned the file and closed the drawer.

The door opened. "Ladies first," Severus said.

Hermione hesitated, then went through. Severus was right behind her. A short, stocky man wearing glasses met them immediately, quickly sizing up Hermione.

He spoke in Italian, so Hermione quietly cast a spell on herself that would allow her to understand what he said. "Cole is right this way, Clint. He'll be with you in a moment." They stopped outside a plain brown door.

Severus knocked twice.

"Come."

"Remember," he said with a meaningful glance. "Not a word."

"I got it," she returned, slightly perturbed.

Severus opened the door and stepped through. Hermione saw Claire sitting at a large conference table with a tall, blond man; he had a scar running from his right ear to his chin. He smiled grandly when he saw her.

"This must be Rebecca. I've heard more about you than I never knew I didn't want to know," he said, first in Italian, then in English.

Hermione raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Cole's smile slipped into a sneer. "Out. Clint, we've got a lot to discuss."

Severus gave Hermione a hard look before shutting the door, leaving her standing in the hallway. Fortunately, she didn't have to wait long. He returned after a mere ten minutes, sweeping out of the room in the manner she was accustomed to seeing in school. "Let's go."

Once again in the subway station, Severus Apparated Hermione and himself to an alleyway somewhere in the city. She barely had time to glance around her at the aged cobblestone streets or the houses which had been standing for centuries before Snape took her arm firmly in his hand and pulled her after him, toward a main road.

"Hey," she whispered, getting his attention. "I'm not going anywhere."

Snape slowed his pace and gave her a penetrating look. He seemed to hesitate but finally released her arm, letting his fingers linger on her wrist as though deciding if he really should let her go. "Stay close," he said briskly and resumed his path.

There were a lot of people on the sidewalk, and Snape slid through them as though he were a boulder in a stream. The people parted for him as if by magic, not once brushing against his clothing. Hermione, meanwhile, kept getting jostled, and she feared she would fall behind. She almost had to jog in order to keep up with him, so after

only a moment's consideration, she reached out and took his hand in hers.

His hand tensed and she thought he might throw it away, but instead he gripped her hand securely. Hermione forced herself not to focus too intently on the pleasant sparks radiating from every part of her hand where it came in contact with his, releasing a horde of butterflies in her stomach.

This was Snape. A much different Snape, true, but still *him*. To think for even a moment that he was capable of feeling anything for her beyond acknowledging that he knew her was ridiculous. It was also rather disconcerting to discover that the abstract feelings she had developed for the man over the last six years had transformed themselves into concrete attraction. She was no better than all the women in England who fantasized about Snape, who wished their own husbands were half the man Snape was. Hermione had always rationalized that her interest in him had been for intellectual reasons: he was a brilliant man and he loved more intensely, more devotedly, than anyone she knew or had heard of.

Now his voice sent shivers up her spine, his eyes burned hers when they met, and she felt the nervous apprehension that accompanies a new crush. Hermione groaned.

"What's wrong?" Snape asked immediately, his eyes searching the crowd in a practiced manner.

"Nothing," Hermione muttered.

"Here," he said, pulling her toward the edge of the sea of people. Snape turned down a less crowded side street and finally stopped in front of a large door. He released her hand, and while he procured a key to unlock the door, Hermione gazed at the buildings on either side of Snape's. They were about four stories each, their faces in perfect condition despite the hints of age in the pipes and warped glass in the windows.

"Quickly. In," he barked, opening the door just a sliver and practically shoving Hermione through.

She stopped immediately inside the door and looked around. The first thing she noticed was the incredible openness of the space; the second was the two loft areas. A set of stairs directly in front of her led up to one of the loft areas, where she could just make out the side of a bed. Presumably, there was a bathroom upstairs as well.

To her left was a solid wall. To her immediate right was a set of brick columns separating two open spaces. In one space, stairs led to the other loft that housed an open kitchen. Beneath the kitchen was a desk and work area.

On the other side of the brick column was a pair of steps that led down into a large sitting room. The sitting room was open to both the work area and kitchen. In the sitting area was a large, U-shaped sofa. On the far wall opposite the kitchen and work area was an enormous bookshelf that reached from just above the sofa to the ceiling of the loft.

Hermione gaped at the floor to ceiling bookcase. It was full of books. A short balcony extended from the bedroom area in front of the bookcase, looking down over the sitting area. At least she would have plenty to keep her occupied during her 'captivity.'

As she looked around, she noticed that there were personal touches throughout the space which hadn't been present in the safe house they had left that morning. There were black and white pictures lining the left wall depicting destinations all over the world, not quite perfect and obviously taken by a non-professional. A stack of books sat on the bottom stair of the set leading to the kitchen. Nothing in the flat was out of place.

As though someone lived there.

Severus had opened a small closet along the left wall and hung his jacket. Hermione waited until he looked at her.

"You live here," she said proudly.

"Yes," he said simply, shutting the closet door.

"Why are we here? What about the safe house?"

"I'll take you to the safe house after my meeting this afternoon. There is a small amount of paperwork involved. The safe house here in Rome is bigger than the one in Florence and usually has a few inhabitants at any given moment. I don't have much time before the meeting, so you're stuck here."

She chuckled. "Another meeting?"

"These things require copious attention," he replied.

"How long will you be?"

"An hour at most, I expect."

She turned to him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I reckon I'll have to be quick about my thorough investigative search of your place."

He quirked an eyebrow, his eyes smiling. "Be my guest. However, I must warn you that many things in this flat will fight back. The more sensitive, the more painful and disfiguring the bite."

"I'll remember that," she said with a grin.

"Er ... make yourself comfortable," Snape said, gesturing to the room. "I've got to get changed." He walked toward the stairs. "I don't suppose you have a change of clothes with you."

"No," Hermione replied, going down the steps to where the large, black leather U-shaped sofa was practically screaming at her to sit and dive into a book. "I didn't bring my emergency 'in case I'm kidnapped' bag."

After a few minutes, Snape came down the stairs wearing a pair of brown pants, dark brown leather shoes and belt, and a stark white button-down shirt. He looked very sharp, his clothes pressed and his shoes shined. A watch was just visible on his left arm, and Hermione wondered briefly about the Dark Mark hidden beneath his sleeve. Snape's gun was once again stowed in its holster.

"Here," he said, handing her a wad of clothes. "You can Transfigure them yourself."

"Thank you," she said, accepting a pair of dark blue track pants and an old t-shirt. She had to shake her head in amazement at the track pants, trying to imagine him running. It still hadn't sunk in that Snape was by and large living as a Muggle.

Snape pulled a jacket from his front closet and put it on. "Because I have to say it...because I need to know that you at least understand the potential consequences of your actions should you choose to ignore me: don't leave this house and do not open the door for anyone."

"I won't," Hermione promised.

He looked at her as though he would say more, but instead gave her a curt nod and left, locking the door behind him with a key and a series of magical wards.

Hermione took a deep breath and examined the clothes in her arms. It was kind of him to have thought of clothes for her, and she was grateful she didn't have to wear the sundress for the entire time she was with him. She could really use a nice, long bath and wondered if he had a tub, and whether it would attack her for trying to use it. She

giggled at the thought and made her way up the stairs.

The master bath had only a boxshower...an enclosed area with a glass door...but Hermione was only slightly disappointed. A hot shower would be almost as good as a bath.

She stood for a few minutes under the streaming water with her eyes closed, trying to forget everything that had happened within the last twenty-four hours. When she opened her eyes, however, she saw Snape's bathroom instead of the hotel bathroom she'd shared with Ginny and Luna, saw Snape's black robe hanging from a hook on the wall. With a sigh, Hermione began washing.

Twenty minutes later, she was clean and refreshed. Hermione decided not to Transfigure the clothes Snape had given her, but to alter them to fit instead. The pants and shirt were soft and appeared extremely comfortable, and as she had no doubt that she wouldn't be setting foot outside, there was no reason to wear anything more stylish.

Once dressed, Hermione went downstairs in search of the kitchen; it was up another set of stairs. She opened the refrigerator and was surprised to find two shelves covered with small bottles. Curious, she picked one up. The label read: "Pepperup Potion. Date: 4/2/07" All the other bottles had similar labels. Part of the third shelf was devoted to food, and Hermione found a half-full carton of orange juice. When she searched for a glass, she wasn't surprised to find most of the cabinets full of more potions and ingredients. There were two place settings of dishes and silverware, and two glasses. She poured herself a glass of juice and went downstairs to find a book.

Half an hour later, the door opened. Hermione had her wand ready and a spell on her lips when she saw Severus Snape's familiar face. With a tentative smile, she lowered her arm.

"You're back," she said.

Severus had been so deep in thought he'd forgotten Hermione was in his home. He glanced up, mildly startled, to find her looking at him. He was surprised to see her in the pants and shirt he'd given her that morning, but when she stood, he saw that his clothes now perfectly fit her. Severus had hoped that by giving her something else to wear that he would be able to concentrate normally, undistracted by the sweet expanse of her skin as it dipped here, curved there ... He saw with dismay that her curves, while more covered, were every bit as distracting as they'd been in the dress. He swallowed hard and turned away from her to replace his jacket in the closet and hopefully get a better handle on himself. A few deep breaths and he was ready to face her again.

"Astute observation," he finally replied, unbuttoning his sleeves and then the top button of his shirt. "What have you found to occupy yourself?"

"A book," she said, sitting back on the sofa. "And a shower."

That was not what he needed to hear.

"You don't entertain much, do you?" Hermione said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

Severus frowned. "What makes you think that? I am more than capable of as much entertainment as I desire." He felt like banging his head on the wall.

Hermione blushed. "I ... I didn't mean ... It's just ... You have potions in the refrigerator and almost all of your kitchen cabinets, and there are Potions books in plain sight on your coffee table."

"Oh." It was Snape's turn to redden. "No. You are actually the first person to enter this flat besides myself since I bought it."

"I am?" she asked in surprise. "Why? Why did you bring me here?"

He sighed and sat on the sofa at a safe distance from her. The answer to her questions astonished even him, and he needed a few moments to compose his answers.

"I maintain my skills as a wizard, and I brew potions in my home. It is my sanctuary from the outside world, from the work I do. I have very few acquaintances that are not part of my work, and they are not close enough to me to warrant inviting them here. As for why I brought you here ..." He trailed off and looked at her.

"Since seeing you yesterday, I admit that I have felt rather homesick for the life I left behind and for people who understand me. You are part of that world, a world which I do not wish to leave. I live that life in this house, and so it seemed fitting that you be allowed in. You are one of the very few people who truly **do** understand me, not only who I am as a wizard, but also as a person. At least, in theory, since we have not had a civil conversation in all the years we've known each other until yesterday."

"Of course, that conversation came after you kidnapped me."

"I prefer the term rescued."

Hermione bit her lip. Again, she felt as though she had been given a great honor in being the only person Snape had allowed into his home because it was **more** than just his home; it was his life, too. In just twenty-four hours, she already counted the man before her as a friend.

Severus wondered when Hermione would ask about the past. It seemed now was the perfect opportunity, as he had brought it up and practically handed her the chance to ask him why he had been so awful to her. He dreaded the question because he hated his answer. From the very first time she raised her hand in his class to give the answer to a question, she had reminded him of him. Although, he had never been as anxious to publicly answer a teacher's question, nor had he taken every opportunity to rub his intelligence in others' faces, even though he knew Hermione had not done it to intentionally hurt.

When he was in school, he had been the student who sat in the middle of the classroom...not the front, to appear too eager, and not the back, to appear uninterested...the student to read his books over the summer and know all the answers before the year even started. He and Hermione had shared those traits. However, he had despised those students in his year that felt the need to show off, in any arena, and Hermione's attitude had very quickly turned him against her. When she had befriended Potter that decided it. As the years passed, and she showed that she had not only intelligence, but presence of mind, bravery, and strength of character, it was far too late for him to go easy on her or let her think he approved.

"How was your meeting?" Hermione asked.

Momentarily stunned, Snape blinked, then answered, "It went well. We've been given the go ahead from Il Nove to attempt another exchange. The next step is contacting Red Fox. Cole agrees that he wants you...Rebecca, rather...out, but he was curious about you and, like Claire, not convinced that you are a teacher. It's a wonderful cover, but I'm afraid it's too good for people in my business. Anything squeaky clean is automatically under suspicion."

"So the plan is the same as we discussed yesterday, we're just waiting to hear when."

"That, and also that Red Fox wants to complete the exchange in the same way. I imagine the code phrases will be different."

"Naturally," Hermione said with a smile.

Severus slowly smiled back. "Claire is contacting them, and when she hears something definite, she'll call. You'll ... be staying here rather than going to the safe house."

"Oh?"

"Better to have you near at hand, just in case."

Hermione's smile went from sweet to mischievous. "So Claire has never been here, right?"

Severus shook his head. "No, Hermione. By no one, I meant not even Claire." He stood, effectively ending the conversation. "Would you like something for lunch?"

"Yes, please. Oh, Severus. How long do you anticipate it will take before Claire hears something?"

He shrugged. "It could be a few minutes, it could be days. If I had to guess, I would say no more than two days."

She let out her breath. "Two days. Poor Ginny and Luna! They've got to be worried out of their minds!"

"Let us hope your letter will put them at some ease."

Hermione nodded. "But what am I to do with myself?"

Severus smirked. "There are always potions to brew, if you are so inclined."

She groaned. "Oh, **that** sounds lovely. I spent my vacation locked in a flat in Rome, forced to brew Pepperup Potion all night and day with only scraps to eat and..."

"One hand tied behind your back, blindfolded."

Their eyes met, and Hermione started laughing. "Did you say something about lunch?"

ooo

At least the morning had been busy for Harry, Ginny, Ron and Luna, sparing them from having too much time in which to think about Hermione. Ginny and Luna had showed Hermione's note to Harry and Ron, and as soon as they could check out of their hotel, they had quickly Apparated to Rome. It took them two hours, stopping three times to ask for directions and getting help from a gypsy woman who tried to con Ron, to find a suitable place to rent on such short notice, but they ended up with a modest, two bedroom flat with a fireplace and phone lines.

Harry had first called the Italian Ministry and, after a few Expediting Fees, got the fireplace temporarily connected to the Floo network. While Ron and Luna unpacked, Ginny went over the list she had made the day before of everything that had happened, what they knew, and what they were looking for.

Harry hung up the phone just as Ron and Luna returned with lunch. "We've got news," he said, going to the table and sitting down. The food remained in the take-away bags. "MI-6 has an insider at Red Fox who reported that an exchange had been botched."

"Red Fox ... why does that sound familiar?" Ginny interjected.

"You know, Ginny. Red Fox? They were the ones responsible for that high profile assassination in Prague last year. I thought I told you about that, right?"

Ginny gasped. "That's them?"

Harry nodded his head, a grim expression on his face. "The people at Red Fox were really upset about the failed exchange, but then they heard from the people with whom they were supposed to make the exchange, requesting another meet. Red Fox is thinking about it, but the insider is confident they'll agree. Apparently, they want something pretty badly."

"What's the exchange for?" Luna asked.

"No idea, my colleague wouldn't tell me. Too sensitive, I guess."

"Doesn't really matter," said Ginny. "Do you think Hermione will be there?"

"I can't imagine why she would," said Harry. "But if we find Shaul, whom we suspect is part of Red Fox, and then find out when and where the exchange is to take place, we just might find Snape."

"Once we've tortured him to within an inch of his life, we'll ask him where Hermione is," said Ron, his jaw set.

"I don't think Snape means her any harm," said Harry.

"But you don't *know* that," Ron returned.

Harry sighed. "No. But I simply cannot believe that the man responsible for practically winning the war would hurt her. He let her send a letter by owl post."

"He doesn't like her," Ginny said hesitantly. "Never has."

"He's never liked me, but he saved my life more times than I can count," Harry replied. "I ... I trust him, until I find a reason not to."

ooo

At two that afternoon, Harry's phone rang. He was told that Shaul had just landed at Rome's airport and was being followed, though Harry didn't expect that to last.

At three-thirty, Harry was given an address in Rome where Shaul might be staying...Ginny was pleased that Hermione's clue had panned out. The Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare (SISMI), who surprised both Harry and his colleague at MI-6 by showing excessive interest in Shaul, had managed to effectively tail him, through the use of twenty different vehicles, to a house just outside the city.

At four, Harry and Ginny were hiding behind the bushes outside a small, suburban villa, trying to catch a glimpse of Shaul. Finally, they spotted him through a window, his bright orange hair standing out like a beacon, talking on a cell phone. Harry called his contact.

"Steve," he whispered. "Can you get a lock on the GPS in my phone? ... Good. Now search for other signals in a thirty foot radius. ... Find anything? Two? Track them both. Send an electronic tag through, if you can. ... Yeah. Thanks."

By six-thirty, Harry had a complete phone record for both signals and transcripts of all phone conversations since the surveillance had been initiated. One of the phones belonged to a real estate agent in the adjacent flat, the other to Shaul. He had been contacted by someone Harry hadn't heard about who went by M.C. about the possibility of an exchange and told to wait for further instructions. There were no other relevant calls for the rest of the day.

When it came time to sleep, Harry suggested they take turns watching the transcript emails. Everyone agreed so Harry showed Ron, Luna and Ginny how to check emails and open the files.

They had a generic plan for the next day, which was really all they could do, but they were at least grateful to have something to keep them focused on short-term goals, rather than empty time in which to worry.

ooo

Hermione yawned and turned the page in her book. She glanced at the clock on the wall: eleven. Severus had been gone since four, and she had no idea if she should be worried that he hadn't returned or not. He had said he would be back that night, but she had expected him much earlier.

After lunch, she and Severus had passed a surprisingly enjoyable few hours. Severus had showed her his small Potions workshop and was in the middle of showing her where everything was in the kitchen, in case either of them needed her to brew something, when he suddenly stopped and chuckled.

"You already went through the kitchen, didn't you?"

"Yes ..." she said, smiling slyly.

Then they had discussed a wide variety of subjects, beginning with Severus' questions about post-war England. He had listened attentively while Hermione spoke, asking questions now and again.

Hermione had asked him to describe some of his more interesting missions. At first, he refused to provide details, but then discovered that Hermione had so many questions as a result of his vague descriptions that he gave up. Each thought, each story led to another and before either of them knew it, Severus was nearly late for a meeting. He had jumped up and nearly run out the door.

She closed the book. Surely he should have returned by now!

Coinciding with her thought, the door opened then, and Hermione glanced up anxiously.

Severus closed the door behind him and rubbed his forehead, his brow furrowed deeply. After a moment, he removed his coat and hung it in the closet before finally turning around. When his eyes fell on Hermione, sitting on his sofa, he paused, thinking how naturally she appeared to belong and how normal it felt. As though he led an uneventful life with a simple desk job, and every night came home to a woman...the **same** woman.

Severus removed the gun from his belt. "I thought you'd be asleep."

"You weren't here," she said simply.

He looked away and emptied the clip. "I am now. Do you require anything?"

Hermione stood and stretched. "A blanket and pillow should do," she said, picking up her glass to return it to the kitchen.

When she reached Severus, she smiled, and without thinking he reached out and stopped her. She looked at him, curious. "I'm going up anyway," he said, taking the glass from her hand but keeping a grip on her arm.

Merlin, he had never been so undone by a woman than when he looked into her eyes. It was more than unexpected...her entrance into his life had been a jolt that had shaken him to the core. He hadn't thought about a normal life in years and had all but vowed never to return to England. Now, after just two days in Hermione's presence, he was already entertaining domestic thoughts, as if *she* were that **same** woman he'd been imagining. It was ... disturbing.

Hermione nodded and moved away, and Severus could breathe again. He wasn't ready to interact with her, and he was hungry, so Severus went to the kitchen, heated leftovers and sat at the table to eat.

There had been one other time in his life when he had truly wanted the 'normal' existence of a regular job and a family. He had been young, and it had been stupid to consider the idea that Lily Evans would ever think of him. Not once since the day she married James Potter had Severus wanted that life. At least, not consciously. During the years between the two wars against the Dark Lord, when life was less complicated, Snape had felt an occasional twinge at the concept of a forever kind of relationship. He had excused it as a desire for a reliable partner.

Since the Dark Lord's death, those twinges had become more noticeable and more pronounced, though still easy to ignore. He hadn't been able to get the image from the night before of coming home to find Hermione on his sofa out of his head since that morning. Was it simply the fact that she was a woman? Was it because she knew the truth about him, when no one in his life now did? Or was it **her**? He didn't know, and she would be gone before he could figure it out.

Suddenly not hungry, Severus pushed the plate away, stood and went down the stairs. Hermione was still on the sofa, reading.

"I can get you a blanket, or you may sleep in my bed," he said.

Hermione turned bright red, and her eyes widened.

"I meant that you may have the bed," he amended quickly. "And I will sleep down here."

She shook her head and looked away. "No, that's all right. This will be fine."

"I insist," he said stiffly.

"Severus, really. The sofa is very comfortable."

"I'm sure it is; I will be glad of that in the morning."

"No, **really**, it's fine."

"Stop, please. Take the bed."

She bit her lip and looked at him. "It's *your* bed. You haven't been home in at least a few days. I don't want you to miss your bed on my account."

"It's just a bed, Hermione. I'm not terribly partial to it."

"But..."

"Hermione!" he interrupted forcibly. "I am sleeping on the sofa. If you wish to sleep with me, stay down here." He knew his face was red. "Otherwise, take the bed."

Hermione's eyes were wide as she looked at him, and then she did something he did not expect. She laughed. "Merlin, this is awkward!" She touched her cheek. "I'm flushed! I'll take the bed, and thank you."

Severus was so surprised at her admission that he smiled. "Good. That's settled."

Hermione stood. "Well, night then."

"Goodnight."

As he lay wide awake for hours that night, Severus couldn't help but think that he had never before had a woman in his bed. **His** bed. Now, he didn't have just any woman, but the refreshing and surprisingly interesting Hermione Granger. She was the first woman he had allowed not only into his home, and into more of his life than anyone else, but in his bed. And the terrible reality was that he wasn't with her, lying beside her with his arms wrapped around her luscious body, inhaling her scent as he drifted into dreams.

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading!

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story. This was my first sshg story and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. This story is infinitely better thanks to their help. Special thanks to Bambu, for the many, many delightful and invaluable hours spent working with me on this. I have learned so much from you and just adore you! And to Shug, who encouraged me to join the exchange in the first place, coded with me at the last minute, and has been a wonderful help and source of many smiles. True friends, both of you!!!

Five

Chapter 5 of 8

Severus and Hermione venture into Rome.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 5

Hermione woke the next day with the smell of nature, musk, and neroli filling her senses. It was a very masculine smell. She took a deep breath and let the aroma saturate her awareness. When she opened her eyes, they fell on light grey sheets and a dark grey coverlet. She remembered that, for the third morning in a row, she was in a different bed.

This morning, it was Snape's.

Hermione heard what sounded like someone moving around the kitchen. Shaking herself awake, she glanced around the room. A clock on the nightstand read eight in the morning. With a yawn, she stretched and got out of bed. She had slept in the shirt Severus had given her the day before, and she hoped he would lend her another set of clothes for the day.

Hermione went onto the short balcony that provided access to the wall of books and saw Snape standing in the other loft over the stove.

"How do bangers and mash sound?" he asked without looking up.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Where did you get those? They weren't in your fridge yesterday."

He turned to her. "I've been up since six. I went to the market."

"Oh! I love the market! And, um, bangers sound fabulous."

Severus inclined his head. "Unless you intend to imagine yourself eating, I suggest you join me over here."

Hermione grinned as she made her way down the bedroom steps, across the short hall and up the kitchen steps. In some ways, Severus was more of an enigma now than he'd ever been. He still had the sharp edges, but the middle seemed softer, more flexible than before. He smiled easily and there was a warmth now that of which she never would have believed him capable.

When she reached the kitchen, Severus had set the table and was placing the pot on the table when she reached the top.

"Orange juice?" he asked.

"Yes, please," she said, taking a seat.

Severus poured the juice and sat across from her.

She thanked him and started eating. "Mm. I love Italian breakfast...the coffee and pastries...but I have missed these."

"How long have you been in Italy?" Snape asked conversationally after a few minutes of silence.

"Two weeks. Luna is getting..."

"Married, yes, you mentioned that. Where in Italy have you been?"

Slightly annoyed that he had cut her off again, Hermione didn't answer right away.

Severus sensed her irritation. "Oh, come now," he said. "You've got thicker skin than that. What does it matter that I have no interest in hearing of Miss Lovegood's impending nuptials?"

She sniffed. "I know you don't care," she replied tersely. "I think it's rude to interrupt when someone is speaking."

Severus nodded. "That I understand. Forgive me."

Hermione sat silently for a few moments slightly stunned at the easy way he had apologized, before answering his question. "We started in Venice, then went to the Lake region, then Milan and Florence. We were headed next to Rome and then Pompeii."

"At least you're in Rome," he said quietly.

"Right. I'm sure I'm missing nothing by being stuck inside here all day. Who needs to see the Colosseum, or the Roman Forum? Why bother, when there are books I haven't read?"

Severus frowned. "I'm sure you'll be able to return to Rome, after all of this, to see those things."

She waved him off. "At least I'm alive, right?"

He shrugged; his seeming lack of concern didn't fit with his action. Perhaps he resented her for interfering. Because of her, his mission had been ruined. He'd been forced to try and fix the mess that her intrusion had created, and now he had let her into his home, something he had never done before. She looked at her plate, suddenly not hungry. He probably did resent her.

"Are you finished?"

She mumbled an affirmative, and he stood to take her plate.

"So what happens now?" Hermione asked, forcing away the thoughts of anger, guilt and annoyance.

"Today I must work with Claire and Cole to construct the details of the meeting with Red Fox. Unfortunately, we will probably have to let the item they want go at a much reduced rate, since our side was the cause of the breach."

"I'm really sorry," Hermione said, the guilt resurfacing.

"Don't be," Severus responded quickly, turning on the water in the sink.

"I'll do the dishes," Hermione said. "You cooked ... it's only fair. Plus, I imagine you're going to be gone all day again, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Most likely." He turned around, leaned against the counter and started unpeeling a banana. "There's something you could do in order to further our plans."

"Name it," she said.

"There are a few potions I need brewed, one of which you will drink."

"Oh. I remember," she said, a flood of nerves rushing through her at the reminder of the upcoming mission. "Don't you keep some on hand?"

"Usually, yes. Two things, however. One, my stores are low and could use replenishing. Second, I figured you would be more comfortable drinking a potion you had brewed yourself."

Hermione shrugged. "You won't hurt me."

He blinked. "True. Nonetheless, it would still be helpful." He tapped his wand on the kitchen wall and a list of instructions appeared, just like they had done in school.

"Of course I'll brew the potions." A thought struck her suddenly. "Why did you never assign us books in class?" He turned around, surprised. "In Slughorn's class," she said, "we followed instructions from a book. You always put the information on the board."

Severus smirked. "You don't know the answer? Even after Potter's experience in your sixth year?"

Hermione bit her lip and thought hard. Harry had used Snape's old Potions book, she knew that, but it didn't help her. "You didn't like the books available?" she guessed.

"Partly, yes. The rest of the answer is that I always exceeded the books. Why do you think your assignments always turned out right in my class, but when you followed the instructions in Slughorn's book, the potions were unsuccessful?"

"You had already perfected the potions. Books could only take you so far, but when you saw that your attempts failed, you sought the truth."

He nodded. "Exactly. The subject of potions is a very exact science in execution. A fundamental understanding of certain ... properties is required in order to create new potions, or improve upon existing ones."

"I see."

Severus smiled. "I must be going. The potion requires full sun, which is why I could not brew it last night. There is a door at the back of the flat which leads to a small porch. I have Charmed it so that no one will see you when you are outside. Nevertheless, be careful."

She nodded. "Good luck, then," she said.

"Thank you. Have a good day."

ooo

Severus returned at a quarter-past-five. Hermione looked up when she heard the door shut to see him standing in the hallway, his brow furrowed. She was surprised at the warmth that filled her at the sight, despite his frown.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

He looked at her as though he were still contemplating a difficult decision. "Yes. Why?"

She shrugged. "No reason, just asking. You've been gone all day."

He removed his coat and then joined her on the sofa, sitting across from her. "How was your day?" he asked stiffly.

Hermione fought back a giggle at the absurd domesticity of his question. "Oh, fine. I finished the potion a few hours ago, and I've been reading, I did the dishes, alphabetized your books ..." Her grin faded when his frown didn't change. "How was yours?"

Severus sighed. "We're on for tomorrow. Ten in the morning."

Hermione looked away, the bundle of nerves from earlier that day reigniting. "Oh."

"The plan remains the same."

She nodded, biting her lip.

Severus leaned forward in his seat and folded his hands. "I have successfully completed ninety-seven hundred missions, most far more dangerous than this one."

"You're certain things will go smoothly?"

"We've already done the profiling for everyone involved. Unless something unforeseen happens, things will go as planned. Do not be concerned...when people break plans, people die, on both sides. No one wants that." *Especiallly me*, he added to himself.

Hermione sighed. "It's obvious I trust you." She met his gaze. "And I know I have to follow the plan exactly."

Severus nodded once. "I want to go over the details again, but ... I need a few moments of rest."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic smile. "Well, enjoy."

ooo

Severus woke from his nap and found Hermione in the kitchen, standing over the stove and watching the kettle.

"A watched pot never boils," he said, leaning against the wall. When she turned around and smiled, the kettle whistled. "See?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned to fix her tea. "Have a nice nap?"

Severus muttered an affirmative and watched her move gracefully through the kitchen, going for the teabags and sugar, whose locations she already knew.

Hermione took her cup to the table after a moment, during which he watched her with a growing sense of nervousness and anticipation...and felt ridiculous for both. Still, he would not back down.

"Hermione," he began, hesitation apparent in his voice. He had been strongly debating with himself, and when she turned to ask him if he would like a cup, the fire in her eyes settled the issue.

She looked at him appraisingly.

He took a deep breath. "You've been stuck inside for nearly three days. I ... was wondering if you would like to go out for dinner."

Hermione's eyes widened, and Severus realized how his question sounded. He wasn't sure that he wanted to correct her thinking.

"I ... well, dinner out sounds nice," she finally said.

Severus nodded. "Will you be wearing that?"

Hermione blushed and glanced at her attire: lounge pants and another t-shirt. "No, I can wear the dress I had on when all of this started. I'll only need a few minutes."

Severus groaned softly as soon as she was out of earshot. Why had he mentioned what she was wearing? Now he'd brought attention to it and things would likely be awkward, at least at first.

Severus was pacing when Hermione, true to her word, reappeared after only six minutes. She cleared her throat to draw his attention, and when he looked up, his eyes widened slightly.

"I ... guess I'm ready," she said.

He tried not to stare, but lost the battle for a few seconds. Merlin, she was beautiful! He had seen her, days before, wearing the same dress, but the effect now was quite different. Before, he had noticed in a peripheral part of his brain that she was showing more skin than he was accustomed to, but now it hit him like a sledge hammer between the eyes. Had she changed so drastically in three days? No, it certainly wasn't her ...

She watched him expectantly, waiting for his response to her statement.

"I ..." He stopped, realizing his throat had gone dry. He cleared it and started again. "You look ..."

Hermione blushed and glanced at her feet, then at the door, then nervously back at him.

"Lovely," he finally choked out.

Hermione bit her lip. "Thank you," she said softly.

They stared at each other for a few moments which could have encompassed days, or even weeks, before Severus spoke.

"Now that the awkward portion of the evening is over," he said, standing and going toward the kitchen steps. "We've got to do something about it."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Severus pulled a bottle from the cabinet and returned to the sitting room. He held up the vial. "Do you recognize this?"

Hermione looked closely and smirked. She would know that potion anywhere. "Polyjuice."

"Correct. Since you are a marked woman, it wouldn't do to have you out and about Rome as you are." He pulled a small plastic bag from his shirt pocket and held it up. "She was about your size, I think."

"Who?"

Severus shrugged. "A woman on the street. Took me about an hour to find someone I thought would suit."

Hermione raised an eyebrow and moved to sit across from him. "Are you sure that's a human hair?" she asked warily as Snape dropped the strand into the bottle. The potion fizzed and hissed, finally settling on a dark shade of aqua.

"Of course," Severus returned. "Have you ever experienced a Polyjuice transformation?"

Hermione chuckled. "Yes. It was ... unforgettable."

"How so?" he asked, handing her the bottle. "Just two ounces. There is enough potion for four hours, though I don't foresee needing all that time. I hate to feel rushed."

"I'll tell you at dinner," she mumbled, eyeing the bottle one last time before taking a drink. Seconds later, she felt the potion start working. Hermione went into the small downstairs bathroom and looked in the mirror. She was a different person, with dark brown, straight hair, olive colored skin and dark eyes. She looked ... Italian. Exotic, even. Severus had chosen a very beautiful woman from whom to steal a strand of hair. *This* must be his taste in women now, though Hermione noted she looked nothing like Lily Potter.

She remembered that Snape had said it took him nearly an hour to find someone ..*suitable*. If the woman in the mirror was suitable, what on earth passed for desirable? Briefly, she recalled that he had said she was lovely, but she dismissed it in light of the new evidence staring at her.

Hermione took a deep breath. Her attraction to Severus was a long-shot at best, and she had known it from the beginning. She hadn't given a single thought to the possibility that something between them was even possible. Still, the proof was literally staring back at her with the perfect face and full, red lips ... and it was rather distressing to learn just how far from *suitable* she was in his eyes.

No matter. She would enjoy the evening out regardless.

When she rejoined Severus, he looked at her and nodded. "I wonder what kind of accent you'll have," he said with amusement.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, a stranger's voice in her ears. "I'd forgotten that part." It was strange. Her mind was her own, but the vocal cords belonged to the other woman. She didn't know Italian, and it was possible the woman didn't know much English. Hermione's words were an odd combination of English with a heavy Italian accent.

Severus chuckled. "I tried to find someone with a particularly strong accent. This woman is Sicilian, I believe. I've always wondered ..."

"Wonderful," said Hermione. "Can we go?"

"After you," Severus replied, opening the door after unlocking the wards.

ooo

They were nearly through their meals before either of them noticed that almost two hours had passed and the restaurant was nearly empty. None of the tables around theirs was occupied. Hermione had started the meal, as promised, with the story of second year's Polyjuice experiment. Severus had been incredulous to learn that not only had **she** been behind the theft of his stores, but she had also been the impetus behind the brewing of the very complicated potion in her second year.

From there, the conversation moved, never falling into uncomfortable silence. The waiter had just refilled their wine glasses, and when Hermione took a drink, she saw Severus's face turn serious.

He pushed the remnants of his *Secondi*, a dish of wild duck, around on his plate, then met her eyes. After a soft *Muffliato*, he leaned forward and said, "I wanted to tell you that I've given serious thought to the question you asked the other day."

"Oh?" she replied, interested.

Severus nodded, thoughtful. "I meant what I said, that I hoped to quit this kind of life soon. However, I could have left it much sooner."

"Go on," she prompted.

"When I started, I meant to do this for five years. I would live simply, save everything extra, and then bow out and move on. This job was supposed to be a means to an end. Instead, it has become a way of life. I certainly don't need a flat as nice as the one I own, and it isn't cheap. If I had spent differently, I could have quit.

"However, I spent nearly twenty years of my life as a double agent. There were *...are* parts of that role I relished, most prominently being able to deceive the Dark Lord as thoroughly as I did. It was a feat that I, alone, seemed capable of, and it gave me an odd feeling of pride in my work. I was good at what I did. I had to deceive the Order, keep them wondering throughout so that if the time came, I could convincingly leave."

"You certainly did that," Hermione said.

Severus continued. "There has been only one time in my life when I considered ... settling down. It was ... very long ago, and not meant to be."

"Lily Evans."

He clenched his jaw and gave a slight nod. "I haven't thought of such a life since. I had no choice, really. Throughout my career as a spy, I could not...~~would~~...consider bringing someone into it whom I might, at some juncture, have to disappoint. In addition, my focus was needed on the task at hand."

Hermione nodded, appreciating his honesty and understanding yet another sacrifice he had made for Dumbledore and Harry.

"It would be safe to say that such a mentality became a habit, and even though this present job is not nearly as dangerous as my former role, it still carries the potential consequence of death for making mistakes. It was natural to continue my long-established pattern of avoiding relationships." He took a sip from his wine and continued. "This doesn't mean I intend to quit this life and start right away with *that* life. For one thing, it would take time. However, in order to achieve those other aspects of the human experience, I must first do something other than this."

Severus paused and glanced at Hermione, who was watching him intently. It troubled him to see a stranger sitting before him, even though he knew it was her. "Since your sudden appearance in my life, I have felt a desire to be ... myself." He dropped his voice. "I **am** a wizard. It would be nice to be around people from whom I don't have to hide this fact." He focused on the edge of the table, speaking more to himself than to Hermione. "I would like to have someone from whom I have *no* secrets." Then he seemed to remember Hermione's presence but didn't look at her. "I do not wish to spend the rest of my life as a Muggle."

"What *do* you want to do?" she asked.

He was grateful she hadn't mentioned anything else he had said. The only problem was he didn't have an answer for her.

"I don't really know. In my life, I have taught Potions and one year of Defense Against the Dark Arts. My year as Headmaster of Hogwarts hardly bears mentioning. I have no desire to teach, especially at Hogwarts."

"You could have been a really good teacher," she interrupted, "if you hadn't played favorites and berated and intimidated your students."

Severus laughed from deep inside. He was still grinning when he responded; Hermione looked confused. "That's what makes it interesting!" he said. "It's far more rewarding than you can imagine to see the students," ... he looked at her pointedly ... "who do well despite my ... teaching style."

Hermione frowned. "But you might see success from more students if you were nicer, more encouraging. Not everyone could look past your icy, hard demeanor and biting discourse to want to learn the subject. For most people, a less hostile environment is more conducive to learning."

Severus picked up his knife and started to twirl it through his fingers. "I did not accept mediocrity in my N.E.W.T. level potions. I wanted the best."

"You wanted the ones with the thickest skin," she argued.

He shrugged. "It generally worked out that way. Only those who truly enjoyed the subject would attempt a N.E.W.T. in it. If you like something enough, you can ignore the less pleasant aspect of it."

Hermione sniffed. "Your classes went beyond 'less pleasant.' Honestly, Severus, you were unnecessarily cruel to Harry, Neville and me."

He pursed his lips. "Let's talk about something else."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Whatever I do, I won't be returning to England," he said with an air of finality.

"Why not?"

"I meant it when I said I had no desire to compete with Potter for attention."

"But it's your home," she protested.

"There is nothing there for me," he said.

"What do you have here?" she asked, ignoring the dangerous tone in his voice.

He clenched his jaw. Nothing, really. Just parts of a life he couldn't share. "It's **nothere**."

Hermione nodded solemnly. "That I understand."

Severus waited, but she did not elaborate.

"Still, it's where you've spent most of your life," she continued. "It would be easiest to go there over most places, especially if you want to return to the magical world."

Severus stared at her, incredulous. "Easiest." He paused. "How can you say that?"

He noticed then a hint of mischief in her eyes that hadn't been there before, and his stomach dropped in dread. She was scheming. He would know that look anywhere.

"I really think it's possible," Hermione said. He wasn't sure if she was speaking to him or not. "Tricky, of course, but it would have to be ..." Finally she looked at him. "You want to be as inconspicuous as possible, right?"

"Of course," he answered warily, watching her closely as though she might burst into triumphant song or some other such horrible display.

"That's really not possible, if you want to live in the wizarding world. Everyone knows your name and your story. You are bound to cause a stir wherever you go."

"Most especially **England**," he said insistently.

"True, but we could work with that," she said, the wheels still spinning. "Everyone in England has an opinion about you. The men want to make you a tragic hero. The women ... well, you're highly sought after."

Severus snorted.

"At least, the characteristics publicly attributed to you, as extrapolated from your actions in the war, are highly sought after."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Rubbish."

"I know that. But they don't. You have truly been immortalized. You can do no wrong. All the women want you, you know. You can't possibly be anything *but* the perfect lover. Essays and articles have been written on the subject *proving* it. You would have a queue a mile long."

"You're doing an excellent job of convincing me that England is that last place on earth I would want to go."

She was practically bouncing in her seat. "No, don't you see? It's perfect. It would only take two, maybe three dates before everyone realized you *aren't* perfect. They'll realize you're just the same as before, and well ..." She bit her lip.

"No one liked me before," he finished for her.

"I didn't mean that."

"It's what you were thinking," he said.

Hermione looked as though she was struggling to find a suitable response, and then she finally gave up. "Oh, bother. You didn't exactly make yourself very likeable."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "That's true ..."

"All I'm saying is that you could *act* like that again. Once people see that you aren't the saint they've painted you, interest in you will plummet. If we time it right, say you return just when Harry and Ginny are about to have their baby...they aren't pregnant now, of course, but they're trying...we could significantly reduce the attention focused on you." She finished as enthusiastically as she had begun.

"We?" he asked pointedly.

Hermione reddened and looked at her plate. "I just meant ... if you wanted help ..."

Severus fought a smile. She really was very engaging when she was embarrassed. He wondered just how ... lovely he could make her. "I'm curious, Hermione. Did you get caught up in all the speculation the way that, to hear you tell it, **all** the women in England did?"

Her head shot up, and she glared at him, her eyes burning. "You know very well that 'all the women' is an exaggeration. And no, I didn't join in all the talks about what your preferred position might be," she spat. "I knew you well enough that I would never be able to forget just how horrible you would be." She took a breath. "Nor would I have ever in my wildest dreams imagine you could be anything but."

It was an automatic response that Hermione instantly regretted. He'd hit too near the mark and she attacked out of self-defense.

Severus kept his expression empty. Her words stung, but he had hit some sort of nerve. She wasn't upset about the past...they'd already danced around that topic, and it had remained untouched. So ... what was it?

"And now?" he asked calmly.

Hermione sputtered, and her expression changed at least ten times before settling on indifference. "Now ... well, obviously, I've had a pleasant enough time. You've been ... very civil. Nice, even. Though I suspect it is largely due to guilt at my involvement."

Severus laughed. He looked at Hermione through smiling eyes. "Naturally, it's ridiculous to think I could be civil or nice without some underlying motivation."

Hermione set her jaw and frowned at him.

"It must be impossible that I could have ... enjoyed our time together. Difficult, though it may be."

She reddened again at that, and Severus felt an odd twisting inside him that was as uncomfortable as he had intended to make her. He hadn't felt that particular sensation since Well.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

"Yes," she said faintly.

Severus paid despite Hermione's insistence they split the bill. He argued that it was the least he could do considering he had kidnapped her.

"You mean rescued," she corrected, smiling faintly.

He nodded, a feeling of panic coming over him as her smile sent a jolt of longing through him.

They walked back. Severus had so many extensive wards on his flat that they would have only been able to Apparate a few blocks from where they were. He kept a moderate pace; it was no leisurely stroll, but he wasn't in a hurry either.

As they passed one street light and then another, the silence started to eat at him. He'd always been comfortable in stillness, but now, after their conversation, it felt strange and oppressive.

Perhaps she felt the same, because she spoke. "Severus ..."

"Hmm?" he replied, tilting his head to hear her better.

"About before. I was ... upset, with myself. What I would have said, had I been in a better mood, was that that I have been nothing but pleasantly surprised since we ran into each other in Florence. You've been kind and thoughtful, engaging me in interesting conversations It's been a very nice kidnapping experience, all around." She grinned at him. "Rescuing, I mean."

Severus was entirely taken off guard by her comments. The twisting in his gut became impossible to ignore, and he frowned at the sidewalk beneath his feet. What did she expect him to say? Something similar? Perhaps that he hadn't been able to get her off his mind since the first day, or that the thought of returning to his life as it had been before her grew less appealing every minute he was with her.

Desperately trying to think of something to say to fill the even more oppressive silence, divided between two paths, Severus remained silent for three blocks.

Finally Hermione sighed. "You don't have to say anything," she said, wrapping her arms around herself as though cold. Then, "Oh!"

He looked to see that her hair was quickly turning from dark brown to her natural color, and her curls were becoming visible. In moments, she looked like herself again.

He tensed. "Where is the bottle?"

She shook her head. "I'm not afraid. We're nearly there, and I trust that between us, we would be successful if anyone decided to bother us."

"All right ..." He trailed off, taking a mental inventory of his wand and his gun.

Hermione shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I ... I wanted to say what I said, and I meant it. You've been really wonderful in helping me through this crazy mess and keeping the real Rebecca safe. I'll never forget that."

Severus's heart clenched at the reminder that she would be leaving the next day. How was it possible he could grow so attached to someone in so short a time as three days? Was it really because of *her*? Or was it simply that she was *someone* from whom he didn't have to hide? Time was running out to discover the answer. He was to the point where he couldn't even truthfully say he was sorry she had been caught up the 'crazy mess.'

"It's unfortunate that we had to run into each other under such ... difficult circumstances," he said.

He didn't look at her, but he could feel the questioning gaze burning a hole in the side of his face.

The walk from the restaurant was so awkward, so tense, that before he knew it, they were standing outside the door to his flat. He stared at the number as though wishing he could change it to mean something else. Hermione was standing beside him, her hands clasped in front of her, waiting. She hadn't left, even though she'd had numerous opportunities. She had wanted to make sure he was all right, that he would be okay despite her interrupting his mission. She had stayed to help him, and soon she would be leaving.

There was no more time.

Severus turned and met her eyes, seeing a wealth of emotions in them, spinning and twirling and dancing with the lights on the street. She was so close, so real, so beautiful.

He stared at her long enough that she quirked an eyebrow and started to smile. "Are we going inside?" she asked softly.

"Hermione," he said, his voice rougher than he'd intended.

Her eyes widened ever so slightly as she watched him, standing undecided on the steps. "Yes?"

He didn't think. He had to know, had to see if there was something more he would be losing the next day. Not knowing would have been far worse. In a flash, Severus pulled her to him, bringing his lips to meet hers before she could conceivably know what was happening. He held onto her wrist, keeping her in place while he waited for whatever direction would come.

He simply wasn't prepared for what happened next, hadn't considered that it might be possible.

Hermione leaned into him, moving her free arm to wrap around his neck as she kissed him back. Severus was so surprised and consumed by her fiery tongue that he didn't notice when she turned him and pushed him firmly against the door. Only when he felt her flush against him did it register that pressure was being exerted on his back to hold him in place.

He needed his key. And why did he have so many wards on his flat? At least they required nonverbal passwords, as his lips and mouth were otherwise engaged. He had never tried opening his door with his eyes closed, at night, backwards, with his brain floating in a haze.

Finally, he felt Hermione smile against his lips as she pulled her hand from his grip. She reached around him, took his keys and unlocked the door on her first try. The thought that she seemed to have had experience with doors under such circumstances flitted through his mind before she moaned and all thought disappeared.

Once inside the flat, Hermione shut the door and then pulled him by the collar to kiss her again. He certainly made no objections and wrapped his arms securely around her waist. Severus had never been so turned on in his life as she continued to control the tempo and intensity of the kiss.

Suddenly, Hermione drew back, and Severus reluctantly opened his eyes. Hermione's eyes were lowered, the lashes obscuring the expression in them, and she was biting her lip. Confused, his body screaming at him to kiss her already, he said, "What is it?"

"I ... I'm really going to miss you."

He froze and the full weight of his reality, of her presence in his life, crashed around him. She said exactly what he had wanted to hear...something which indicated that she might feel the same as he did...but also the worst thing imaginable. She would be gone the next day; none of it mattered. He'd been such a fool.

She was puzzled by his sudden mood shift, and he took advantage of her inaction, putting a few feet of distance between them.

"Severus?"

"What?" he snapped.

She flinched at the anger in his voice. "What's wrong?"

In just a few seconds, he managed to build an entire fortress against her in his mind with stick, steel doors. "Nothing. Everything is exactly as it should be." He crossed his arms. "I suggest we get to sleep. You especially have a difficult day ahead."

She frowned. "What? That's ... it? I'm *dismissed*?"

"What did you expect would happen next?"

"I...I hadn't thought...I wasn't exactly thinking. I just went with it."

"You weren't thinking," he said bitterly. "I'm glad one of us was. Nothing can come out of this. How did that escape your notice?" The irony of his words astonished him. Moments earlier, he'd wanted to see what he was feeling and discovered that it was most definitely **her**, and nothing else, that he wanted. Now he was telling her that they had no future. How could they?

Hermione seemed at first hurt and then angry. "*You kissed me*," she said accusingly.

"Temporary insanity."

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously I gave you far too much credit. Goodnight."

She stalked up the stairs. Severus heard the glasses in his cabinets rattle when she slammed the bathroom door.

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading!

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story. This was my first sshg story and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. Many thanks to Bambu and Shug! :D

Six

Chapter 6 of 8

The mission.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 6

Hermione was unsettled when she woke up, and it took her a few minutes to remember why. Then she cried a few tears of frustration and humiliation. She couldn't believe how the evening had ended, nor did she understand what had gone wrong to make Severus turn so cold so quickly. Then she'd snapped at him because his rejection had hurt...he had kissed her, then lectured *her*, saying nothing could happen between them. It made no sense.

She wiped her eyes and listened; Severus was moving around downstairs. Hermione glanced at the clock. They were supposed to be in place at ten; it was eight. She groaned. Almost two hours of uncomfortable silence lay ahead.

Hermione took her time showering and getting dressed. When she finally had to eat breakfast, she walked past Severus...he was sitting on the sofa...without as much as a second glance and headed up the stairs.

Severus followed her. Hermione ignored him.

She sat at the table with a pastry; he sat facing her. She picked up a book and used it to block his face. He huffed. She smirked.

When she finished her breakfast, she set her coffee cup in the sink, giving only half a thought to the reality that she wouldn't be returning to the flat in which she had come to feel quite at home.

She sighed and moved toward the stairs. Severus followed her to the hall.

"Hermione," he called as she walked toward the other set of stairs.

She stopped and took a deep breath before turning around, a barely tolerant expression on her face.

He looked as though he wasn't sure what to say now that he had her attention. "I ... wish we could do that over."

Hermione shrugged. "It's nearly time to go, I think."

Severus frowned. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt. When he woke that morning, things hadn't seemed or felt so absolute. He should have let her speak; she had kissed him back, after all. "I'm trying to apologize."

"Why?" she said. "We're adults. We kissed. We fought. We go our separate ways. Can we go to meet Claire now?"

"Hermione, I'm not joking. Last night was..."

"A mistake? Yes, you made that perfectly clear. We have twenty minutes. I doubt we should appear in their midst; perhaps we should take a car."

"Would you **stop** being so difficult and let me speak?"

She looked at him for a moment and briefly thought about listening. But her pride was wounded, and she raised an eyebrow. "I need to brush my teeth."

ooo

"Have you gone over everything?" Claire asked, eyeing Hermione warily from across the room.

"Repeatedly," said Snape.

"Good. I hope so." Then quietly she said, "How is she handling everything? See seemed to pick up on things quickly the other day."

"She is doing fine. Rebecca is bright and very determined."

Claire nodded. "I'll see you at the extraction point." She checked her earpiece one last time.

"Claire," said Severus. "We've been through this mission once already. Why are you so on edge?"

"We're late," she snapped.

"Relax. Everything will go fine."

Claire removed her gun from its holster, unloaded it and reloaded it. "It had better, Clint," she said. "If that little meddler messes things up for us, we're going to be in a load of trouble."

"I realize that."

"Did you sleep with her?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Is that all you think about?"

"I need to make sure your head is in the game and your mind in the right place. The last thing we need is a distraction."

"Must we go through this with every mission?" Severus asked biting. "I assure you, there is no distraction."

Claire looked at him speculatively. "I suppose we'll see, won't we?"

He glared at her. "Indeed. If memory serves, you were late. Shouldn't you be leaving now? *Foyour* part of the exchange?"

She smirked. "Goodbye, Clint."

ooo

Hermione sat with her back a little too straight in her seat at an outside table at a café. In front of her was a cup of half-consumed coffee. Three sugar cubes sat on a napkin near the edge of the table, and she was half-heartedly turning the pages of a book she knew she had read once.

A piece of cold, hard steel was tucked safely into the bright yellow purse resting in her lap. She sub-vocally recited the step-by-step instructions Severus had given her for using the gun, and she hoped it looked like she was so caught up in her book that she was reading aloud to herself.

Before she knew it, a man with salt and pepper hair approached her table and sat down. In their planning stages, Hermione had come to call him Mr. X. Their eyes met; his were dark brown. Hermione did her best to keep her hand steady as she took one of the three sugar cubes and put it into the coffee cup, mirroring Snape's actions from such a short time before. She went through the next steps in her head, those which had been set in motion by her moving the first sugar cube.

Severus was inside the café, watching. By now, he would have radioed Claire who would then approach ~~her~~ own contact. Hermione referred to him as Mr. Y. They would exchange pass codes just as Hermione was about to do with Mr. X.

"I recommend the arrabiata," Hermione said, meeting her companion's eyes and hoping her voice sounded casual.

"I prefer the Bolognese," he said in a heavy Russian accent.

Hermione hid her surprise and moved the second sugar cube to her coffee cup. At this point, Severus would contact Claire, who would hand Mr. Y a briefcase. Inside was the main focus of the entire mission, the item Severus and Claire had kept from Hermione in order to protect her.

Mr. Y would inspect the item, and once satisfied that Claire had met all the terms of the agreement, he would contact Mr. X so the exchange would go forward.

Hermione nervously stirred her coffee and waited for what felt like an eternity. Her free hand wrapped tightly around a small, crumpled piece of paper, which she hoped would be her lifeline.

After a few minutes, Mr. X received a call and said two words. "Good. Thirty." He disconnected the call and made as though he were getting more comfortable, pulling a book from inside his jacket. He placed it on the table.

"*War and Peace*," said Hermione, feigning interest in the thick, gilded book. "May I?"

Mr. X nodded. "Of course. What are you reading?"

"*Romeo and Juliet*," she replied, slipping her piece of paper into the slim book as though it was a bookmark and setting it on the table. Mr. X took her book with a wary sigh, his questioning gaze locked on Hermione.

Hermione picked up *War and Peace* and glanced at the first few pages. She had read it and enjoyed it but could not remember a single thing that happened in it. Biting her lip, she skimmed the first few chapters before coming to a part of the book where a chunk of the pages had been removed. It began at chapter ten of Part Third, just below the letter from Napoleon to his soldiers, and went through chapter four of Part Fourteenth. A square two inches by two inches had been punched out of every page, leaving a cube-shaped hole in the book's interior. To anyone who simply glanced at it, the book looked perfectly whole.

Inside the hole was a small, black velvet bag. Hermione hesitated, then after a quick glance around her immediate periphery, she untied it and carefully emptied a portion of the contents into the hollowed-out space. Even though she had been told what to expect, she nearly gasped when five perfect, brilliant-cut diamonds, easily three carats each, tumbled from the pouch.

When she looked up, Mr. X's eyes were narrowed at her, though not in malice, and he was rolling a small ball of crumpled paper...the paper she had placed in her copy of *Romeo and Juliet*...between his thumb and index finger. "Is it true Juliet would rather die than live without her love?" he asked.

Hermione didn't know what she was supposed to say. She was on her own; her interaction with Mr. X was not something that could have been rehearsed with Severus and

Claire. There had been no way to predict how Mr. X would respond to her ploy. She hoped more than anything she would respond correctly and she hoped that whatever false information Severus had listed with her bio was enough to entice Mr. X.

Her bookmark had been a small piece of paper on which she had written: *Help me. I've been kidnapped and forced to do this.*

"It would have been no life," she responded after only a moment's pause. She flicked her eyes to point out the café. It was important that Mr. X believe that she truly wanted to leave with him.

Mr. X glanced in the direction she had indicated, and Hermione knew he would see Severus inside the cafe. Then he regarded her appraisingly, his eyes lingering just a little too long for casual inspection. "Juliet is welcome."

Hermione nodded, her heart pounding, and moved the third sugar cube to her coffee cup, indicating that the payment had been made and was acceptable. She resumed running through the plan in her mind. Severus would now contact Claire to confirm receipt of payment, and she would conclude her meeting. Mr. Y would again contact Mr. X.

"Keep the book," Mr. X said to Hermione, standing and tossing a few bills on the table.

"Thank you," she said.

Mr. X winked. "Romeo will be waiting."

Hermione nodded, feeling the bundle of nerves in her stomach tighten. **This** was it. She wanted to turn around and meet Severus's eyes, to be strengthened by his confident demeanor, but she knew it was too risky. After a few seconds which seemed to pass interminably, she packed the book in her bag, trying to hurry but not seem obvious about it.

She could feel Severus looking at her, eyes burning the back of her head. Hermione practically ran from the café and found Mr. X just out of Severus's sight. He put his arm around her and led her to a car that was waiting just one street over. Sweat trickled between Hermione's shoulder blades. It was uncomfortable, and she was more nervous than she'd been since the war had ended, but so far the plan was proceeding like clockwork.

ooo

As Severus watched Hermione leave, he pushed off from the wall where he'd been leaning. Paying no attention to the fact that he was the only one left inside the café, he started for the door.

Before he reached it, his way was blocked by a very large man, wearing nothing more than a black suit and a surly expression, appeared, outside the café and blocked his exit. He was one of those men who only have a few possible occupations in life: club bouncer or the bloke you call when you want someone hurt. Badly. He snarled at Severus, flashing a set of missing and broken teeth, and discreetly flicked his wrist to showcase the shiny, black weapon in his hand.

Severus blinked, stunned, every nerve in his body screaming that something was very wrong. He had been so intent on what was happening with Hermione that he hadn't noticed what was going on around him. Stupid, stupid mistake. He couldn't think about the possible consequences it would have for Hermione.

"In the back," the man in black grunted, his accent distinctly American.

Severus nodded and moved slowly toward the back of the café, only now becoming aware that there was no one else present. When had that happened? It dawned on him that he'd been betrayed, though by whom, he had no idea.

"Look at me," the American demanded after they had walked through the kitchen and into a small, windowless storeroom.

Severus turned around, ready to release his wand he'd sort out the consequences to Hermione after but the other man, who had crossed the room in less time than Severus would have thought possible, caught him off-guard and kned him in the gut. Severus fell to his knees, gasping for breath, but preparing to jump up and attack, when the door to the back room burst open, hitting the assailant in the back, and knocking him into a shelf.

"*Accio* gun!"

Severus whipped his hand around to hold onto his weapon, but nearly let his surprise at seeing a wand-brandishing Harry Potter, looking very much like an action hero coming to his aid, show on his face.

The American had no idea what was happening and watched, dumbfounded, as his gun flew out of his hand. Harry caught it deftly and emptied the clip while Luna Lovegood slipped into the small room and wrapped the large man in magical bindings, toppling him to the floor.

"What's going on?" the man asked, frightened, glancing from Severus to Harry to Luna.

Severus went to where the thick man lay struggling and pulled his gun, pointing it at the man's head.

"Snape!" shouted Harry, crossing the room, pointing his wand at Severus.

"Shut it, Potter," he growled.

"Who **are** you people?" asked their captive, his eyes darting between Snape's gun and Harry's wand.

Luna glanced around as though she were window-shopping. "Where's..." she started.

Severus clamped his hand over her mouth, muffling the name Luna spoke.

"If you two have half a brain cell working, I would suggest you **shut up**."

Luna nodded and Severus released her; Harry finally relaxed his wand arm.

"We can talk openly once we are free of unfriendly ears." Severus glanced down. "A bit of Veritaserum should loosen his fatted tongue." Touching his wand, he muttered, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" and then retrieved a small vial from inside his jacket and motioned for Harry to help. "Open his mouth."

Harry complied and Severus placed a few drops of the Truth Serum on the American's tongue. It took only a few seconds for his eyes to glaze over.

"Who are you?" Severus asked.

"Dylan Murphy."

"Whom do you work for?"

"I do not know," Murphy replied.

Harry cursed.

"What can you tell me about your assignment here today?"

"I was promised ten thousand euros for killing you. I would find you here, alone, at half-past ten."

Harry and Luna stared at Severus.

"Did these orders concern me, alone?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"I was given no other information. I received a third of the payment yesterday, and I will receive the rest when I kill the mark."

"Where's the money?"

"A locker at the train station. Termini. Locker number 713. The ticket for the locker is in my pocket."

Severus was satisfied that he would get no more useful information and fished for the slip of paper in Murphy's pocket. Once he had it, he *obliterated* Murphy and transformed his magical bonds into rope.

"You found no one when you arrived," Severus said, the tip of his wand fixed to the side of his Murphy's head. "You lost the locker ticket." A bright flash of light erupted from his wand and Murphy slumped over.

Severus stood. "He's unconscious and will remain that way for a few hours. As for your question, Miss Lovegood, I am headed to where Hermione should be. I assume the two of you intend to accompany me?"

"Yes," said Harry. "We want answers."

Severus resumed his path toward the door. "Of course you do. However, time is getting away from us, and it is a precious commodity." He used reverse Occlumency to insert an image of a wide-open concrete field into each of their minds. "See you there," he said and Disapparated.

ooo

After being searched for weapons and wires, Hermione had sat wordlessly for the entire thirty-five minute drive to the Ciampino airport outside of town. The only sound she made was a soft gasp when she saw the Colosseum appear as the car turned a corner through the crowded streets of Rome.

Before getting into the car, she'd cast a Charm to understand Russian, and listened as Mr. X spent the entire time in hushed phone conversation with his contacts. She learned that his name was Anton. Finally the car slowed.

"Rebecca," said Anton.

"Hmm?"

"We'll be boarding a small airplane which will take us to Versailles, where you will be able to meet with my superiors."

Hermione nodded, her mouth dry, glancing out the window to see a few small planes sitting on the tarmac. She felt nearly sick to her stomach, the same feeling that had been her constant companion during those months spent running from Death Eaters with Harry and Ron.

The car stopped beside the plane nearest the entrance to the runway. Anton opened the door and Hermione got out, glancing around her, trying to get her bearings and identify potential places where Severus might be hiding.

"Ready?" Anton asked with a leer.

Hermione nodded bravely, though she felt increasingly uneasy; where was Claire? She was supposed to be there, waiting to discover Hermione's 'betrayal.'

"Let's go." He took her elbow in his hand and led her toward the plane. "You're quite the little mystery, Miss Hammond. My employer is looking forward to getting to know more about you."

When they reached the short stair set which led to the plane, the hatch opened. Hermione felt the grip on her arm tighten as Anton cursed in Russian, muttering for Dimitri to hurry things along. The sun was so bright that neither of them could see who had emerged from the aircraft.

Anton didn't have time to say anything else. He sensed that something was wrong and pulled a gun, but before he could aim it, there was a sharp popping sound, and he fell to the ground, crying out in pain. Hermione gasped and looked down; Anton had been shot in the chest, blood bubbling from the wound.

Fear gripped her so forcefully she nearly lost her balance. She tried to focus on the door to the plane and the person she knew was standing there the person who had just shot her companion but could only make out the outline of a man with bright orange hair.

"Miss ... Hammond. It's a pleasure," he said in rough English, lithely descending the steps and taking her arm firmly at the elbow. "If you would come with me, please."

"Who are you?" Hermione asked. "Where is Claire?"

"My name is Shaul. Claire is on the plane."

"And ... Clint?"

Shaul chuckled, a soft, soothing, yet edgy sound. "He should be dead by now."

The words took their time sinking in. Hermione barely noticed Shaul speaking to her or pulling her onto the plane and tossing her into a seat. Vaguely, Hermione was aware that Claire was there.

"Did you get the book from her?" Claire asked, tightening the buckle across Hermione's lap, moving her captive's unresponsive hands.

"Haven't had time, yet. But it wasn't on Anton's body, which is being stowed below," Shaul responded, moving to his own seat.

Hermione felt the plane move and gazed, unseeing, out the small window beside her seat.

Hermione was numb.

Was it *possible* that Severus was really ... dead? She hated to think the word, to consider the reality. After everything he had been through: Dumbledore, Voldemort, surviving the horrendous wounds he'd suffered at the end of the war ... had he finally been done in by a *Muggle*? The idea was preposterous! But a gun was a gun; a man couldn't walk away from multiple gun shot wounds.

An image of Severus flashed in her mind: he wore tan linen pants and a loose button-down shirt, as he had the last time she'd seen him, and he was sprawled on the tarmac, his chest riddled with bullet holes, blood soaking the light grey shirt...

Severus was ... dead.

The man she had kissed not twenty-four hours before, she would never be able to kiss again. It hit her then like a wrecking ball to the gut that she wasn't mad at him, that she'd wanted very much to kiss him again, that perhaps she wanted a whole lot more with him. Their kiss had been the most incredible, tantalizing, breathtaking kiss she'd ever experienced, and she was desperate for her heart to race like that again. A picture of a future she could never have with him paraded before her mind's eye, and it was brilliant.

To make matters worse, it was her fault. If she hadn't accepted Ginny's dare and approached him...could it really have been only five days before?...Severus would still be alive. She would never have spoken a word to him, would never have kissed him, but he would be safe. Breathing. **Alive**. Not some meaningless casualty of Claire's deception.

Finally, Hermione realized that she was on her own. Severus wouldn't be coming to save her.

ooo

A sleek black car skidded to a halt as the plane lifted off from the runway. Severus cursed in all the languages he knew. When he stopped, the silence in the car pressed in on him, suffocating him. He wrenched the door open and got out, taking a few laps around the car.

Feeling only slightly better, he grimly drove back to the terminal to meet Harry, Ron, Luna and Ginny. Not ten minutes earlier, when he, Harry and Luna had arrived at the airfield, Ginny and Ron had been waiting. They'd watched the entire time, uncomfortable at seeing Hermione's predicament while doing nothing, but fearing that their interference could endanger her.

Upon his arrival, Severus had taken one look at Ginny's shocked face, then the plane, and had jumped into the nearest vehicle he could find.

"Now what?" demanded Harry as soon as Severus returned to the terminal and opened the car door.

"Now, we see where they're going." Severus took a small bag from his pocket, emptied its contents...items he had shrunk for ease of portability...into his hand, and sifted through them until he found what he was looking for. He returned the rest to the pouch and pocketed it.

"Where who are going?" asked Luna.

"Whoever has taken Hermione." Severus enlarged the item, his laptop, to its full size and turned on the power, setting it on the hood of the car.

"Shaul Silberman," said Ginny. "Ron and I saw him...his hair is hard to miss. And the unknown woman, of course."

Severus stared at Ginny hard. "Shaul? Are you certain?"

"Yes, we've been trailing him for days. Isn't he part of Red Fox?" Ginny asked.

Severus shut his eyes, a feeling of dread washing over him. "No. L'invisible."

Harry cursed then, and everyone save Severus looked at him, surprised. "They're just about the worst terrorist group in the world. Known for their high-risk jobs and violent behavior. Bloody awful, they are."

The laptop beeped, indicating that it was finishing loading. Severus inserted a wireless card which worked via satellite phone. He spoke as he typed furiously. "Describe the woman."

"She was tall, maybe five-ten, with dark brown hair," said Ginny. "Straight, pulled into a ponytail. She had on sunglasses, black pants and shirt. Why?"

Severus gritted his teeth. "It makes sense."

"What makes sense?"

"You just described the woman with whom I was hired for this mission. Her alias is Claire. She double-crossed Red Fox and me. She's got the device and the diamonds ... a nice payoff. Unfortunately, she and her employer will be grossly unimpressed with Hermione. Which means they'll simply kill her."

Ginny and Luna gasped; Ron snarled.

"I am going to break every last bone in your body if something happens to her, Snape," said Harry, moving to stand mere inches from Severus's face, looking down on his former professor. "This is **your** fault, **you** got her into this mess, and by Merlin, I swear, if even one hair on her head is touched..."

"Fascinating," Severus interrupted, almost sounding bored. "But not helpful. We've got to get out of here before the Carabinieri show up."

"How are we supposed to find her?" asked Ron.

"She has a tracking device on her."

Harry laughed spitefully. "Of course she does. They will look for it first thing."

"The primary electronic tracking device Hermione was given this morning was removed before she arrived here. Claire knows how I work and will easily find the secondary device as well. However, I am not referring to either of those."

Harry frowned. "They'll sweep her for bugs, wires, anything!"

Severus sighed impatiently. "Give me a little credit, Potter. The tracking device on Hermione is not something Claire or any Muggle would ever recognize."

Comprehension dawned on Harry's face and Ginny looked at Severus. "A magical tracer."

"Yes."

"What about her wand?" asked Luna. "Claire won't know what it is, but surely they'll toss out the stick they find on Hermione."

Severus smirked. "Her wand is well hidden. Claire will not find it."

"You sound awfully sure," said Ron, his eyes still glowing with rage and thoughts of committing bodily harm to his former teacher.

"I transfigured it myself."

"What is it?" Luna asked.

"A lock of her hair."

Ginny's eyes widened. "You Transfigured Hermione's wand into *hair*?"

"Yes. Brilliant, don't you think? Hermione has so much hair that a strand more would hardly be noticeable."

"How does this help us?" Ron asked. "And why aren't we rushing off somewhere or following them?"

"This morning Hermione consumed a potion, one I invented some years ago and have used many times. It contained a magical tracer, and only I can find it. The tracer temporarily binds with fat consumed and is absorbed into the lymphatic system. With my laptop, I will be able to find her."

"Let's get to it, then," said Harry, releasing Ginny and heading toward the car.

"We know where she is, Potter," said Severus. "The tracer will help us later. What we need to know now is where she's **going**."

Harry spoke. "They're in a plane, a small, short-distance plane. They won't be going too far."

"Exactly." The laptop beeped again, indicating that Severus had successfully hacked into the flight database for the city of Rome. Only one flight had variable take-off and landing times. He glanced at the destination, and he had to check it again to be sure he'd seen right. It didn't make sense; L'invisibile was based in France. Why would Shaul be taking Hermione anywhere but straight to his superiors?

"What is it?" asked Luna upon seeing the confusion on Severus's face. "What's wrong?"

He squared his jaw. "They're going to Venice."

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading!

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas, Bambu and Shug, enough for their help on this story. True friends, both of you!!!

Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

The action continues...

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 7

Shortly after the plane took off, Shaul left Claire and Hermione in the cabin and went to the cockpit. Claire watched Hermione intently as she stared out of the window.

"What's the matter with you?" Claire asked finally.

Hermione barely registered that she'd spoken. Then Claire grabbed her arm and shook her roughly. Hermione jerked away from Claire, glaring at her. "Bugger off."

Claire's eyes widened. "What's got your knickers in a twist?"

"I don't take kindly to being kidnapped," she said icily. She was angry...that was good. Maybe she'd get around to denial if she got out of her situation. Anger would help her far more than denial.

"Do you have a tracking device on you?" Claire asked. She scoffed before Hermione had a chance to answer. "Of course you do. Clint didn't trust anyone."

Hermione flinched at the mention of Severus's alias but kept her expression empty. She had no intention of speaking to Claire more than was strictly necessary, though she was ridiculously curious about what Claire was doing and why she had double-crossed the people who had hired her and Severus.

More than that, however, Hermione knew she needed to push her thoughts of Severus away for the time being and focus on getting herself out of the mess in which she'd landed. She couldn't Apparate off the plane...too much could go wrong. She would have to wait until the plane landed, and then ... she would Disapparate as soon as she could, though to where she didn't know. Wizarding Rome, so she could send a letter to Ginny and Luna.

Only ... that wouldn't get her completely out of the situation; according to Severus and Claire, she would still be hunted by various terrorist agencies. The last thing Hermione wanted was to live the rest of her life in constant fear. She would get away from Claire, make sure the real Rebecca Hammond was safe, and then figure out what to do.

"So. Where is it?" Claire asked.

Hermione looked at her blankly.

Claire's look became nasty. "Want me to dig around for it? I've got a knife or two on me somewhere."

"Fine," Hermione snapped and cautiously reached up to remove the earrings, which contained the tracking device Severus had planted on her. She'd been amazed that an advanced, technological device could be so small: the earrings were simple pearl studs.

"Thank you. At least there won't be any unnecessary injuries ...**yet**." She chuckled slightly to herself.

Hermione just glared at her. At least that charade had appeared to work.

Claire smirked at Hermione. "So ... *Rebecca*, if that's even your real name."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Of course it is; what are you on about?"

"Thing is," said Claire, now grinning smugly. "No one's record is **that** clean. I'm amazed Clint was so taken in, but then that must be part of your ... charms."

"What record?" Hermione gasped.

"*Yours!* I checked up on you ... rather, on Rebecca Hammond. I did my homework more thoroughly than most, because I saw your face when you claimed that you hadn't had so much as a parking ticket in your life."

Hermione frowned.

"You said you were a teacher. I found the school where you supposedly taught. I hadn't really expected to find anything, so you can imagine my surprise when I asked for you and was told to wait. Then, someone claiming to be Rebecca Hammond answered the phone, just sweet as she could be."

Hermione's eyes widened in horror. "Is she ... all right?"

Claire laughed. "Yes, yes. I didn't bother with her. I imagine her name isn't really Rebecca Hammond, that she is merely paid to say it is."

Hermione made a mental note to change her alias as soon as she returned to England. She would also need to create an alias for Rebecca and have her relocated.

"Tell me," said Claire. "Who are you **really**?"

Hermione defiantly met her expectant and probing gaze. "No one of consequence."

"Ha! You expect me to believe that? I've already told you that I discovered your alibi was false. Which means you are much, much more than you claim not to be. How can someone with such a seemingly airtight alibi...the woman claims to be the same person as you!...be anything *other* than someone with something to hide?"

Hermione shrugged, thinking quickly. No one in her own line of work would ever have cause to investigate the nature of her alias, but in this situation, she needed a plausible explanation.

"Well ..." Hermione began as if she were about to tell a very juicy secret. "I have to admit I'm rather curious about you as well. Why don't we try to work out an exchange of our own?"

Claire's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You want information, as do I. And since we have nothing better to do for a while than sit in each other's company, why not make the experience mutually beneficial?"

"What do you want to know?"

Hermione shrugged, as though what she wanted wasn't all that much. "I want to know what happened today, why you double-crossed Clint ... is he really dead, as Shaul said?"

Claire's jaw tightened, but Hermione could see she was considering the offer. "Then you'll tell me about yourself?"

"Sure," said Hermione, hoping she would be able to drag Claire's story out long enough to avoid having to explain anything about herself; though she had an idea or two.

It was obvious that Claire was very hesitant, but she seemed to decide that hearing Hermione's story was more important than the giving up hers. Or she simply decided she would kill Hermione, and no harm could come from telling her the truth. Hermione tried not to think about that option too hard.

"First," began Claire, settling comfortably into her seat. "Why did I double-cross Clint? Easy. I was presented with a better offer. It was nothing personal against Clint, I just couldn't have any leftover witnesses. After what happened during the botched exchange, with Clint possibly getting a good look at Shaul, I really couldn't have him reporting that information back to the people who had hired us."

Hermione's eyes widened. "So you killed him?"

Claire shrugged. "Originally, I'd wanted Clint to join me, but ... my superior was convinced he would not accept the offer. Shaul arranged the actual deed; I don't have the details. But like I said, it was nothing personal."

"The café," Hermione breathed, her heart pounding. "After I left!"

Claire looked at her suspiciously and with something else in her eyes ... triumph? "You're quick...and observant. Yes, once you were safely tucked into that black car, Clint met his demise."

Hermione fought against the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. Claire was so nonchalant about the death of her former colleague that Hermione was disheartened at the reminder that there were such hard, calloused people in the world.

"Did you know him a long time, then?" Claire asked, almost kindly

Hermione knew her face must have betrayed a portion of the inner turmoil she was doing her best to ignore. "A bit, yes."

"Were you in love with him? When he was your teacher, perhaps?"

"No," Hermione answered. "He ... he was a really good person," --she chuckled-- "but he didn't want anyone to know it."

Claire nodded, as though she knew what Hermione meant. "He was different than anyone I've met in this business. There were some things about Clint that I found very puzzling, one thing that stood out was his innate *goodness*. It's hard to reconcile that with what he did, because he was very good at what he does. As for your other question, about what happened today, that, too, is easy. Shaul was with me from the beginning. We met with my contact, and I convinced him that Shaul's presence was completely legitimate. Once he communicated with **your** contact that the deal had been carried off successfully, Shaul killed him, and we waited for you to show."

"So ..." Hermione said, frowning. "The others ... from Red Fox ... weren't in on it at all?"

"No. They were ... unfortunate but necessary casualties. I now have the diamonds and the device...an item highly sought after. We'll have no trouble finding a new buyer."

A small bubble of panic welled through the torrent of fear already filling Hermione: soon she would be required to answer Claire's questions, and she hadn't decided **what** she would say.

"Nice plan," she said appreciatively. "It seems to have gone off without a hitch."

Claire smirked. "I've got something of a knack for planning."

"I've gathered," Hermione muttered, looking out the window. "Where are we going?"

"Not so fast," Claire answered with a chuckle. "I haven't had my turn for twenty questions yet."

Hermione nodded, her stomach churning out of nervousness. "I work for my government." Claire stiffened across the small cabin, and Hermione felt her own small thrill of victory, if only for a moment. She glanced at the other woman. "Nothing to worry yourself over, I'm not in the international policing business. I don't even know your name. I was on vacation when I saw Clint and therefore have none of my usual resources available." She laughed. "Not that they would help at all. What I do is ... sensitive. Have you ever seen or heard of the old television show 'The X-Files'?"

Claire nodded, skeptical.

"That's basically what I do. I'm Dana Scully. Just without the really handsome partner with a mysterious past." She would apologize to Blaise later for lying about him.

It was clear that Claire wasn't ready to buy the story. "Why do you need Rebecca Hammond?"

"Everyone in the Department has someone similar. In the exceptionally rare instance that we come across something truly worth our efforts, it's good to have an alias that is normal, uninteresting, to fall back on."

"A little *too* uninteresting. That in and of itself is **interesting**," Claire responded, still frowning. She was silent for a few minutes while she considered Hermione's story. "You might want to think about revising your story. Not that I'm saying I buy it. There are still things that don't add up."

Hermione gave a silent cheer. She had nearly told Claire the full truth, just without the details of her existence as a witch, and Claire didn't believe her. That would mean Claire would still find her interesting and continue to want her alive. "What things?"

"Did Clint know the truth? Had he asked you to meet him in Florence?"

"No, he ... he was nearly as surprised to see me there as I was to see him. As for the truth, he knew ... nearly as much as I've told you."

"You should know I don't really believe you."

Hermione let out an exasperated huff. "What do you think? That I'm a spy, like you?"

Claire spread her hands out, as if apologizing, and Hermione kept her eyes trained warily on the gun in Claire's left. "This is all I know. It would make sense for me to see spies where there are none. It's better for my survival rate than the alternative."

Hermione nodded, understanding. "So what does that mean?"

"It means I'm going to find out the truth about you, one way or another."

"What different ways are there?" Hermione asked warily.

Claire smiled knowingly. "Many, Rebecca, whoever you are. The human mind is capable of vast creativity, and in the arena of information extraction, the possibilities are endless."

Hermione felt the color drain from her face and automatically shrank away from Claire. "T-torture?" she whispered, her mind conjuring, unbidden, flashes of scenes from the few hours she had spent in Malfoy Manor during the last stages of the war.

Claire shook her head and regarded her with interest. "So quick! And not new to the experience of colorful persuasion. You **still** expect me to believe you aren't a player in my world?"

Shaul entered the cabin then. "We're here."

"Good. Have you met our guest, Shaul?"

He gave a half-smile, half-sneer, and sat beside Claire. "Briefly. Charmed, I'm sure."

Hermione said nothing, just watched as the ground rose to meet her, feeling that with every inch the plane dropped, her time was nearing its end. As the plane landed, she scanned the runway through her window for ... exactly what, she wasn't sure.

When the plane came to a stop, Claire stood. "Let's go," she said after releasing Hermione's seatbelt.

"Coming," Hermione said grumpily.

Shaul laughed and grabbed her arm painfully, pushing her toward the door. Hermione took a deep breath and stepped through. The brightness immediately hurt her eyes after being inside, and she squinted. He nudged her, and Hermione cautiously stepped out of the plane and down the steps to the tarmac.

Her hopes of an inexplicable and unwitnessed escape were dashed when she saw the man in a black suit, crisp, white shirt and sunglasses standing at the foot of the steps, his arms crossed over his chest. It was Cole. He stood beside a black limousine with very dark, almost opaque tint on the windows.

"Claire, Shaul," he said, opening the door.

"Cole," Claire acknowledged and then turned to Hermione. "In."

Hermione complied. Claire, Shaul and Cole climbed in behind her, Shaul sitting beside her and Claire and Cole across from them. Cole tapped the window separating them from the driver, and the car started moving. Hermione glanced out the window and saw the signs they passed were in Italian. She wondered where they were for a moment and then saw a sign that read, "Venezia, 10km."

Venice. At least she had been there already on her trip with Ginny and Luna; she would know her way around when she finally made her escape.

"So, Rebecca," said Claire, emphasizing the name. "You remember Cole."

Hermione glanced warily at Cole's extended hand and then his face, his eyes still hidden behind sunglasses. Instead of shaking hands, she merely nodded. "Isn't he your boss?" Hermione asked Claire, ignoring Cole.

"He was," she answered. "Now we're equals. He's been working on his own exit strategy. The three of us work together now." She smiled smugly at Cole, who smirked, and then yawned. She turned back to Hermione. "That's what I would like to talk to you about."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Hermione after Claire remained silent for a few moments.

"Joining us."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "*Join* you? You've got to be kidding! I told you before, I'm not a spy! I meant it!"

Claire smiled condescendingly. "Even if that's true ..." She glanced at Cole. "We are willing to train you."

Hermione shook her head, incredulous. "Why?"

"Your creation of the Rebecca Hammond alias showed creativity and ingenuity ... I think you've got potential," Claire responded, suddenly almost ... friendly.

"I think you're wrong."

"I've never been wrong before."

Hermione tilted her head slightly. "And if I say no?"

Claire looked at her smugly. "I'm confident you won't."

"I need to know my options," Hermione explained coolly. "I prefer to have as many facts as possible before making decisions. Considering what you are asking, it seems only fair."

Claire glanced at Cole who merely nodded, appearing bored.

"I would hate for Shaul to hurt you," Claire said threateningly, turning back to Hermione. "But he will do what needs to be done."

Hermione nodded. "I thought as much. Join, or die."

"You know too much," Claire snapped.

"Excellent incentive," Hermione said sourly. "I fail to understand why you want me."

"We're here," said Cole casually, as though he was breaking the silence instead of interrupting a heated conversation.

Hermione looked out the window; they were surrounded by buses. The car stopped in front of a curb. Between a building on the left and construction, Hermione saw Venice. They were at the southern most Vaporetta station on the Grand Canal. She doubted, however, that they would be boarding the very public, very crowded boat that served as Venice's mass transit system.

Cole led the way up the waterside walkway to a small, fast-looking boat. Shaul held Hermione's arm so tightly she expected to have marks...and she had no chance of getting away in order to Apparate.

They boarded the boat, and without a word the captain, a petite woman dressed all in black, steered the vehicle away from the bank. Hermione glanced at the driver again and saw that she had bright blonde hair pulled into a tight ponytail underneath her black cap.

Hermione thought of Luna. Twelve days ... no, seventeen days ago, she, Ginny and Luna had taken the Vaporetta on a scenic ride down the full length of the Grand Canal. It had been sunset, and the light on the buildings had been beautiful.

The boat went much faster than the Vaporetta, and soon it had turned down a side canal, coming to a stop beside a set of rotting steps, which led to the door of an old, run down building. Half of the lowest floor was under water. Shaul prodded her onto the steps.

"You don't say much, do you?" Hermione muttered to her captor. He only squeezed her arm harder, causing her to suck in her breath so she wouldn't cry out.

Hermione was led into a very old, cold and wet building. The hallway was dark, only a few dirty windows letting in light through the grime. She paid careful attention to where they were going, in case she needed to run. The door at the end of the hall led into a room with very high ceilings and a cold, stone floor. It was empty save for three chairs. There were two doors on opposite walls and windows on one. The door to Hermione's back was the one through which they had entered.

Mentally shaking herself, she had to think fast. She didn't think anyone outside the room would hear a machine gun, much less a scream. She needed her wand, but she would wait for the best moment.

"What is your decision?" Claire asked, sitting in the chair opposite Hermione.

Cole sat between them, and Shaul remained like a sentinel by the nearest door. Hermione glared at Claire, drawing on the growing sense of hate she felt for the woman who was, in large part, responsible for Severus's death. Hermione glanced from Claire to Cole and back to Claire. She would go for her first. Cole may or may not be bluffing in his tired/bored act; she would take the chance that he wasn't. Hermione knew that Claire was alert and ready for anything. Shaul would have to cross half the room before he could do anything to stop her, and in the time it took for him to pull his gun out, Hermione would be able to Stun him.

"Well?" said Claire impatiently.

Cole chuckled and reached his hand to his face to wipe the hair out of his eyes. Hermione took advantage of his impaired view of the room.

Hermione casually reached a hand to her head and rubbed, as though she had a headache. As soon as her skin brushed a certain strand of hair, however, it was Transfigured to its original form: her wand.

She whipped her hand around to Claire, wand pointed. "*Stupefy!*"

The force of the spell sent the woman's chair tumbling and Claire sprawling, out cold as she hit her head hard on the floor.

Shaul moved as Hermione whirled to face Cole, who was out of his seat already and retreating. "*Stupefy!*" she called, and Cole went flying as well.

Hermione had misjudged Shaul's speed; before she faced him, he grabbed her wrist, squeezing hard enough that she dropped her wand. When he tightened his grip further, the bones in her wrist shifted, and she cried out.

"Little bi..." Shaul sneered, pulling Hermione roughly against him. His eyes flashed with anger and he kept an impossible grip on her injured wrist.

At that moment, the door behind Shaul burst open, slamming hard against the wall. Shaul whirled, crushing Hermione to his chest and pulling his gun in one swift movement. Hermione couldn't believe her eyes: Ginny stood in the door, dressed all in black, her hair...blonde; she'd been the boat captain!...pulled into a tight ponytail, holding a gun pointed at Shaul's head.

"Let her go," said Ginny. "And you'll walk out without any serious injuries."

Shaul scoffed. "You're in no position to offer conditions. I have her; what do you have?"

"Me." A voice spoke from directly behind Shaul, a fraction of a second before Shaul crumpled into a pile on the floor.

Hermione knew that voice. She turned, scared to trust the flare of hope, to find Severus standing there, perfectly unharmed. Hermione's heart leapt, and without thinking what his reaction might be, without a fraction of a thought to what her friend might think, she flung her arms around his neck, burying her face in his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer.

Hermione was sobbing now, the events of the day...of the last **five** days...finally catching up to her. The reality of what she'd been through washed over in waves. Severus held onto her tightly, murmuring encouraging words into her hair.

She could hear nothing but the steady pounding of his heart. She knew she was nowhere near finished crying, but she didn't want to stand in the cold room any longer. She willed herself to gain some control. "I ... I thought ... you ... were dead," she gasped out when the sobs finally slowed.

"You thought a Muggle could kill me?" he said and then asked urgently, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Except my wrist."

Severus lightly pushed her away and gently examined her now swollen and bruised wrist between his large, warm hands. Hermione winced when he pinched the sides. "Broken," he said and placed the point of his wand on the injured area. He muttered a spell, and Hermione's bones slid around, finally clicking into place with a sharp shot of pain.

"Better?" he asked.

Tentatively, she tried to bend her wrist. It was stiff, but it no longer throbbed with pain. "Yes. Thank you."

"Is it safe?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she recognized the voice and turned her head to see Ron and Luna coming through the door where Ginny had entered shortly before.

She gasped. "Ron! What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "Oh, you know. Saving the day, defeating the bad guys. The usual."

"Where's Harry?" Ginny asked suddenly, looking around. She spotted Cole's body and rushed to him. "Is he okay? Just Stunned?"

Hermione looked from Ginny's expectant eyes to Cole's still body. "Er ... Ginny? That's not Harry ..."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "*Ennervate*."

"What are you doing?" Hermione gasped.

Cole sat up groggily, rubbing the back of his head where he'd hit the ground. When his eyes landed on Hermione, he scowled; then he grinned at Ginny and leaned forward to kiss her.

"Ew, Harry, no!" Ginny cried. "I refuse to kiss you when you look like *that*!"

"Polyjuice," said Ron when he saw Hermione's incredulous expression.

"Of course," said Hermione, feeling somewhat faint. The room started to get blurry on the edges of her vision.

"Merlin, Hermione!" said Harry, standing now with Ginny's help. "A little warning would have been nice!"

"I had no way of knowing it was you!" she exclaimed. "Besides, you had a few seconds after I Stunned Claire."

"I was surprised you could move that fast," he said, shrugging. "I was terrified the whole time Shaul had you. I was here to *help* you!"

"I didn't know it was you!" she exclaimed. "You could have said something, done something..."

"I went for Shaul!" Harry cried.

"I...I thought..."

"It doesn't matter, Potter," Severus said with finality.

"Speaking of them," said Ron, making a face in first Claire's, then Shaul's, direction. "What do we *do* with them?"

"Prison isn't good enough," muttered Hermione.

"They'll need their memories modified." Severus bent down to disarm Shaul. He thought about hexing him with the most painful curse he could think of that was also legal, but decided against it; he had work to do.

"Harry, Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, rounding on them. "What are you doing here? And ... how did you find me? Or rather, why did you impersonate Cole? And..."

Severus chuckled deeply behind her.

Ginny laughed. "Hermione, calm down! We'll explain everything. We want to hear your story as well." Her gaze flicked to Snape as she said this.

"I ..." Hermione was suddenly more tired than she had been since the final year of the war.

"Need to rest!" said Luna brightly.

"Excellent idea," said Severus. "You rest. I will deal with Claire and Shaul."

Hermione nodded, moisture clinging to the edges of her eyes. Better to rest now and talk later when she could think clearly.

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading!

Beta Credits: I cannot thank my betas enough for their help on this story! Thank you Bambu and Shug!

Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

The end.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 8

Hermione woke up many hours later in yet another unfamiliar bed. Her eyes felt thick and heavy, and she remembered crying long and hard before finally falling asleep. She snuggled under the covers, not quite ready to deal with whatever awaited her on the other side of her eyelids.

Slowly memories of the day began to stroll through her mind. She knew her friends were probably somewhere in the rented Venetian flat, waiting for her. Was Severus with them? Had he disappeared back into his life, unconcerned for her and glad that she was safe so he didn't have to think about her anymore? Would he say goodbye? She had questions to ask ... Would she see him again?

Not wanting to think anymore, since her thoughts had turned to unpleasant things, Hermione opened her eyes to see Luna quietly humming as she sat on the sill of a large window, staring out at a bright blue sky. Hermione glanced around the room, unable to remember anything about its layout from the night before. On the wall opposite the bed was a dresser. The window was to Hermione's right and the door to the room beside the dresser.

"Hey," said Hermione hoarsely.

Luna turned around and smiled. "Hey, Hermione. How are you?"

"I don't really know yet. Okay, I guess. What time is it?"

"Nearly nine."

"In the **morning**?!" Hermione cried.

Luna laughed. "Yup. You've been asleep the whole time. Barely even moved for the first nine hours or so."

Hermione's mind raced. They'd found a flat to rent at six the evening before, and Hermione hadn't even changed out of her clothes before falling into bed. Harry, Ron, Ginny and Luna had pledged to stay with her.

"Where's Severus?"

Luna raised an eyebrow. "He left last night, soon after you fell asleep."

"Where is he? Where did he go? Did he say anything?" Hermione asked in a rush, sitting up in the bed.

Luna smiled. "He'll be here soon. He checked in later last night, around ten, and you were still sleeping."

"What did he say?"

"Not much. I don't think he wanted to be around us much ..."

There was a soft knock at the door then, and Ginny poked her head around. "Hermione!" she called, throwing the door wide and rushing in. "You're up! I knew I heard your voice!"

Hermione gladly hugged her friend. "Morning, Ginny."

"Hermione's up?" Ron questioned from the hall. Soon he and Harry had joined the women in the bedroom.

"Need anything?" Harry asked Hermione. "Hungry?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you."

He left the room, and Ron pulled in two dining chairs from another room. Ginny and Luna sat on either side of Hermione, chatting quietly.

Hermione couldn't believe everything that had happened. Her life had been ripped from its course and tossed onto a dangerous detour. Was it possible that only yesterday she'd been truly kidnapped, threatened, and first angry at Severus and then grieved by his supposed death? What was more, she couldn't believe how quickly the adventure was all over. The last few days had been a blur ... had it been *real*?

Her heart constricted at the thought of Severus. She desperately wanted to see him, to talk to him...to be reminded that he was really and truly safe.

She ate breakfast while her friends talked, and as soon as she put her cup of coffee down on the nightstand, Ron spoke.

"Ready to talk?"

"Ron!" scolded Ginny. "Give her a minute to swallow, at least!"

Hermione laughed, amazed at how normal it felt. "No, it's okay, Ginny. I'm ready."

She launched into her story, beginning with that first day in Florence when she'd approached Severus. When she told them about staying in his home in Rome, Ginny interrupted her. "He lives in Rome?"

Hermione only smiled and continued. She hesitated when she got to the night before the mission, not sure if she wanted to disclose the kiss. Would he mind? When Hermione remembered the fight that had followed, she decided it wouldn't matter anyway; he'd never be inclined to repeat the mistake.

"Wait," said Ron, utterly disbelieving. "Wait, wait, wait! You **kissed** him? As in, on purpose?"

Hermione blushed and nodded.

"*Snape*?" blurted Harry, as stunned at Ron. "*The* Snape. The man who despised us in school, who made our lives insanely hard. Him?"

"Harry, you don't hate him anymore," said Ginny softly, squeezing Hermione's hand.

"Doesn't mean I want him snogging her!"

"What was it like?" Luna asked scientifically. "He has a very ... prominent nose. Did that interfere?"

Ron groaned and covered his ears, as though it would ward off the images in his head. Everyone else looked at Luna, and Ginny burst out laughing. Finally Ron seemed to relax, and Harry followed suit.

"No," Hermione said, answering Luna's question. "It was ... fine. It was better than fine." She sighed.

Ron shuddered.

"But there's no need to worry or think about it. I doubt it will ever happen again."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"We fought about it. End of story."

"Did he hurt you?" Ron demanded.

"No! Of course not! He did nothing but protect me."

"Go on," prompted Ginny.

Hermione detailed the mission as it was supposed to have gone. Harry and Luna added their story of saving Severus at the café, then going with him to the airport.

"Wait," said Hermione. "You were there? Where? I didn't see you...or anyone!"

"We were too late, held up at the café," said Harry grumpily. "When we got to the airport, it took us a few minutes to find the runway, and by then your plane was already moving down the runway. Snape tried to get to you, but he had no chance, really."

"Ginny and I got there while Snape was chasing the plane down," said Ron.

"Why weren't you with Harry and Luna?"

Ginny and Ron told their story, and then Harry picked up with what they did next. "Snape hacked into the program that tracks flight plans and saw that yours was headed to Venice. He gave us Apparition coordinates, and when we all arrived, he started barking orders."

Ginny laughed. "Which Harry hated, because he likes to be in charge."

"So?" Harry replied, unapologetic.

"You argued too much with him! We were in *his* world."

"He acted like he was the **only** one who knew anything about Muggles!"

It was obvious to Hermione that they had been through this argument before. "Harry, there's no way he could have known about the work you do."

"I *told* him, though, and he refused to listen to me."

"I agree with Ginny. You were in his world." Hermione shifted her position to preempt her leg falling asleep. "What comes next?"

"Snape sent Ron and Ginny to secure a location for where I would eventually take you. He guessed that someone would be meeting you and Claire at the airport, and planned for me to take his place. Luna and I went to wait for Cole to show. Since Cole had no idea when to expect Claire, he arrived early."

"Harry stunned him and took some of his hair," added Luna.

"For the Polyjuice," Hermione noted.

"Then we waited for the plane. As soon as I saw you, I drank the potion."

"I drove!" exclaimed Luna. "Severus gave me brief lessons before you arrived!"

"Oh!" cried Hermione, wondering how many times her life had been in danger on the ride from the airport to Venice.

"The rest I guess you know," finished Harry.

Hermione frowned. "How did you fool Claire into believing you were Cole? Where was the ~~real~~ Cole? And the limo driver?"

Ron chuckled.

Harry looked somewhat reluctant to answer.

Hermione narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What, Harry?"

"Snape ... used Veritaserum on Cole to learn more about him; well, I asked the actual questions while Snape taught Luna to drive. The real Cole ... was in the trunk of the car the whole time. Stunned, of course."

"Harry!"

"Snape insisted!"

"There was no limo driver," said Luna. "Apparently, Cole had driven there and planned to keep driving."

"Oh."

"Meanwhile," said Ron, who had been anxiously awaiting his turn to speak. "Ginny and I secured that abandoned house, rented a speedboat, and maneuvered the Canals a few times to find the best way to the house. It was awesome!"

Hermione smiled. "Then Ginny waited at the Vaporetta station with the boat. Luna, what did you do then? Where were you, Ron?"

"I was with Snape," said Ron. "We waited down a side canal for Luna to call once she dropped you off at the Vaporetta station. We picked her up and headed to where we knew you would be. The plan was to stun Claire and Shaul and then get you. Snape would take care of the details. Harry was there in case things went badly before we

could get to you."

Hermione nodded, absorbing everything. "How did you know to find Severus at the café?"

Ron grinned. "Easy. We had Shaul Silberman's phone tapped."

Hermione shuddered. "What a horrible man. Severus told me about the people he used to work for, how awful they are."

Harry nodded grimly. "Even I had heard of Shaul's organization and knew how rotten they are. Scared us crazy when we realized he had you."

"Why did you tap his phone?"

Ginny recounted what she and Luna had done the day of Hermione's 'rescue': the fingerprints, talking to the restaurant owner, and giving all the information to Harry. "So we knew about Shaul, that he was the waiter who had run after you and Snape," she explained. "The Italians followed him to Rome and then so did we; found where he was staying."

"My friend at MI-6 placed the tap and sent up transcripts of all phone conversations," said Harry.

"And I found the one with details about the exchange," Ron finished. "The people talking, Shaul and someone who went by M.C., mentioned that the exchange would happen in two places, with two exchanges. So we split into two teams."

"Your basic spy stuff," said Luna casually, as though she did it every day.

Hermione smiled. "Wow, that's ... incredible. I can't believe all the trouble you went through to find me!" Tears pricked her eyes. "You could have been hurt, or ... or killed!"

Ginny pulled her into a hug. "We'd do almost anything for you, Hermione! I mean, we collaborated with ~~Snape!~~"

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, looking from Harry to Ron and to Luna.

A sharp knock sounded on the flat door and Hermione jumped.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Luna, unperturbed. "It's probably Severus."

"We'll get it," said Harry, standing. "Need to talk to him anyway. Come on, Ron."

As soon as the men were out of the room, Luna said, "So. Tell us how the kiss **really** was."

Hermione gave a pained smile. "I told you it doesn't matter. It's not going to happen again."

"We still want details," said Ginny.

"Of course you do," she replied with a sigh. "It was ..." Were there adequate words? "Perfect."

There was another knock, this time on the bedroom door. "Come in," Hermione said. She had expected Harry or Ron, but ... "Severus." She was surprised by the calm that washed through her. He was safe; he was here.

Ginny and Luna exchanged a glance.

"May I speak with you?" he asked Hermione.

"Sure. Yes. Come in."

He nodded stiffly. "All of you? Out here?"

Hermione hated that her heart plummeted at his words. "Right, yes. We're coming."

Severus nodded and closed the door behind him.

Ginny squeezed her hand and climbed off the bed. Luna followed. Hermione wasn't quite sure what to think, but was thankful that he was still around, that he hadn't disappeared.

Harry and Ron were sitting on a sofa waiting. Luna went to Ron and Ginny to Harry; Hermione took one of the armchairs. Severus remained standing.

"Thank you," he said, looking at Hermione. "I'll be brief. I thought you would like to know what happened after we parted yesterday."

"Yes," said Harry, scooting to the edge of his seat.

"I modified both Claire's and Cole's memories. Rebecca Hammond was killed at an airfield in Rome by ... me. Claire continued on her journey to meet Cole, upset about losing someone she thought would have been an asset. Word will spread of your ... death."

"That's ... great," said Hermione, her voice almost a whisper.

Severus frowned. "You should have no lasting effects from this unfortunate experience."

Hermione nodded, letting his words sink in. *No lasting effects* ... She wasn't so sure about that.

"What about you?" Harry asked. "Didn't you work for Cole?"

"In a way," Severus answered, dragging his gaze from Hermione to Harry. "He was my superior in that he received mission details and passed them along for a cut of the profits in those missions in which he did not participate. But I have been ... self-employed for nearly five years."

"So, basically, you'll manage," said Ron.

"Yes," Severus replied, his lips turning in just a hint of a smile.

"Well, that's good," said Luna breezily.

"What will you do now?" Ginny asked.

Severus shifted his weight. Hermione knew how reluctant he'd been to share that information with her and knew that her friends would get very little, if anything in the way of an answer. "I'm not exactly sure. I have a few options before me, as I won't be returning to my former employer."

Harry smirked. "I doubt you'd tell us anyway. My guess is that you'll disappear for awhile, just in case one of us slips and mentions you somewhere. You won't want to be

found. After that, you'll have no trouble getting work. People like you are always in demand, aren't you?"

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Do I detect a hint of malice in your tone, Potter? Already we're enemies again?"

Harry scowled. "No. I just ... won't be heartbroken if I never hear from you again."

"Yes, well. Be that as it may, I cannot make you any promises. What are your plans now?" he asked, turning to Hermione. "Return to Rome? Stay here?."

"We've been here already," said Ginny.

"And I've got to get back to work," Harry said, checking his watch.

"Game this weekend," added Ron.

"I'm up for whatever," said Luna.

"I would like to go back to Rome. We didn't exactly see much of it," Hermione added.

"None, really," said Ginny.

"So we'll finish our trip?" Luna asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "We can extend it a few days, to make up for this little side adventure."

Ginny laughed. "Is that what you're calling it?"

Hermione smiled. "It's shorter than 'the most terrifying experience I've had second to facing Death Eaters.' Besides, it turned out all right, thanks to all of you."

"We'd only just arrived in Florence," Luna pointed out.

Hermione nodded. "So, back to Florence, then Rome, then Pompeii?"

"Yes!" said Luna; Ginny smiled.

"Where will you be tonight?" Severus asked.

The women looked at Harry and Ron. Harry spoke. "I hate being late to work and it's already near eleven. Might as well stay."

Ron grinned and leaned back. "What's one more Quidditch practice?"

"We'll go to Florence first thing tomorrow," Ginny concluded.

"Good," said Severus, moving away from the wall toward the door. He looked at Hermione. "Would you grant me your presence at dinner tonight?"

Hermione hid her shock as best she could, but knew she failed miserably. "S-sure," she said, feeling more than one pair of eyes burning holes into her skin.

He made no show of emotion whatsoever, merely inclined his head once. "I'll return at seven to collect you. Good day."

ooo

The others were gone by six-thirty, and Hermione was grateful, though she loathed the half-hour of waiting. It passed much faster than it should have, and before she knew it, a knock sounded at the door.

Mentally forcing herself to relax for the twelfth time in an hour, Hermione went to the door and opened it.

Severus stood there, just as she'd imagined, and yet he was totally different than she'd pictured. He wore dark jeans and a pale blue long-sleeved, button-down shirt. Hermione felt underdressed, even though he was in jeans.

"Hi," she said, impressed at how calm she managed to sound.

He tried hard to keep an impassive expression...in truth he was anything but...and therefore failed. "Hermione," he said, swallowing. "Shall we?"

She nodded and shut the door behind her.

"Where are we going?" she asked once they were walking down the alleyway that led from the flat.

"I thought we might walk a bit before eating," he answered.

"All right." Hermione let Severus lead the way; he was in no hurry.

"How are you?" he asked after a few minutes. "Did you get enough rest?"

"Yes, thank you. Ginny and Luna refused to let me so much as get myself a glass of water. I'm surprised they didn't try to follow me into the loo!"

Severus chuckled softly.

"Severus, I'm so sorry about the other night," Hermione blurted out, worried that she would lose her nerve. "And the next morning. It never occurred to me that I might not get the chance to make things right. I hated knowing we'd been angry with each other..."

"Hermione," he interrupted, "it's all right. Please don't spare it another thought."

"But..."

"We both said things we later wished we hadn't."

"Yes, but you tried to make it right and I wouldn't hear it."

"You were still upset. It was unreasonable of me to expect you to get over it so quickly."

She wouldn't allow him to let her off the hook so easily. "I learned in the war that life is precious. I took for granted that I'd see you again, and we would be able to at least part on friendly terms."

He nodded, mulling over her choice of words and said carefully, "No need to worry about that."

They walked on in silence, Hermione feeling increasingly anxious. If he hadn't wanted to talk to her about their fight, then why had he asked to see her? There wasn't really anything else ...

"What did you do today?" Severus asked.

"Ginny, Luna and I introduced Harry and Ron to gelato first thing after lunch. Gelato is the most important meal of the day, you know."

"I did not know that," he replied in an interested tone.

"And you *live* in Italy!" she said with exaggerated incredulity. "Anyway, then we went to the Rialto Bridge, and Harry bought something ridiculously overpriced from one of the shops, even though we told him he'd find it cheaper somewhere else. Then we walked around, showing Harry and Ron our favorite spots. We fed pigeons in St. Mark's Square." She paused. "How about you?"

"I ... had an interesting day," he said, a sound of amusement in his voice.

"Do tell. If you can, I mean."

"Yes, I can tell you. Last night, as I said, I took care of Claire and Cole. Then I contacted The Nine and set up a meeting for today. It was prudent for my health that I act quickly."

"Why?"

"I had the device they wanted, and the required payment. In most circles of the world, that is considered unfair. I explained the situation, leaving you out of course. They were miffed that twice now the exchange had failed and that two of their people are dead. I offered the device and half the payment back."

"Did they accept?"

"Yes. Today I met with them at a train station in Milan." He paused. "They ... offered me a place with them."

Hermione nodded, curious about the change in Severus's voice when he mentioned the offer. "Did you accept? You are a free agent right now."

"I ... told them I had to think about it."

"Oh. I thought you wanted to continue." Even though he hadn't mentioned her, or them, or his future or hers thus far in the conversation, Hermione couldn't help but hope he might be thinking about it. Her heart rate increased, and she felt the pulsing nervousness that often accompanied hopeful anticipation.

He sighed and stopped walking; they'd reached the outer edge of the man-made island. Severus found an empty bench and they sat, watching the people, the boats and the gondolas.

"I've ... been thinking quite a bit today about my next step," he said carefully, measuring each word. "When I told you that I needed a few more jobs before I reached my goal, that was before this mission. The ... payment I kept is more than enough to meet my requirement."

"That's great!" Hermione smiled at him.

"Yes; it means I could stop now, if I want."

"It's a different perspective from here, isn't it?" Hermione said. "Before, this moment...when you could make a decision...was months, maybe years away. Now that it's here, the next step isn't so obvious, is it?"

"It was easy to say I would quit when the reality was in the future, you're right. Now that it comes to it ..."

Hermione waited expectantly, unable to quell the hope bubbling inside her, threatening to burst.

Severus chuckled to himself and looked at his hands. "I find it's easier than I ever imagined it could be."

"Making your decision?"

"No. Leaving."

Fireworks went off in her stomach. "Wow," was all she could manage.

"Yes. I phoned The Nine and thanked them for the offer, but said I was ready for my life to move in a new direction."

"Where will you go?" Hermione asked, daring to look at him. "What will you do?"

He met her eyes, his gaze burning into hers. "That I haven't decided. As much as I hate to admit it, what I do next depends. On you."

A wave of adrenaline swept through her from head to toe. In its wake, her heart pounded. "Oh ... me? What do you mean?"

"The other night, I told you we had no future. I am hoping I was wrong and that you would consent to giving us a chance."

Hermione wanted to jump up and down and shout; instead, she settled for grinning. He wanted something with her; an event she never imagined would come to pass. She was about to assure him that most certainly she wanted to give them a chance, when a thought occurred to her. He had been in love with Lily for so long ... Was he over her? Really and truly over her, enough that he could promise Hermione all of him?

Hermione's smile faded and she looked away. "Would you answer something?"

Severus took a long breath. "If I can."

"Tell me about Lily."

"I'm ... not quite sure I know what you mean."

"I would like to know where you stand with respect to her. You were in love with her for most of your life. What's the point of trying unless you hope to love with every single part, every piece of you? Even the ... wounded pieces."

He sat quietly, processing what she had said. Then, deliberately, he said, "You ... want to know what I feel for ... Lily ... now."

"Well ..." She trailed off. She knew she couldn't settle for anything less than what she knew he or any man was fully capable of. She didn't want half of his heart if she was going to give him her whole heart. "Yes. And I don't think it's an unrealistic request. Maybe from you, and I would understand that, but not in general."

"You don't even really know what you're asking."

She considered that and nodded. "True. I know nothing about your relationship with Lily outside of what Harry described from your memories."

Severus nodded. "Hermione, we've kissed once. We've known each other for just six days really, and you're already talking about love."

"It's the perfect time to, really," she said matter-of-factly. "Neither of us is all that invested, and we can save ourselves a lot of time, effort and pain by getting this over with now."

He raised an eyebrow. "How very ... practical, calculated."

"I see nothing wrong with it. If you can't tell me right now that it's possible for you to ever love me more than a woman who has been dead for twenty-some years, then we should go to dinner, have a nice time, and say our goodbyes."

Severus was quiet for a few moments. Hermione couldn't believe she had said all those things. But she wasn't interested in a dead-end relationship, no matter how strongly her heart was yelling the opposite. It said that she should try, that things might change down the road. He could fall madly in love, having never guessed it possible. Her head told her that he might never change, that his wounds went too deep to ever be healed.

"This is a long story," he said finally. "Would you like to eat first?"

As if on cue, her stomach growled. "Are you hungry?"

"Not especially."

"I'll grab a sandwich and you can talk while I eat."

He nodded. "I'll save our spot."

It didn't take Hermione long to find a sandwich shop, order a panini, and return to Severus, determined to be a good and understanding listener. He was going to talk about Lily, a subject she knew would be difficult and emotional. Simply thinking about how much of her heart was already invested made her uneasy; what he would say would either change her life forever, or destroy her image of him and hurt her deeply.

When she rounded the corner, Severus was still sitting on the bench, his legs stretched out in front of him and one arm on the back. He didn't seem to note her arrival, and she seized the opportunity to watch him for a few moments longer.

"Find something?" he drawled when she finally sat beside him.

"Yes," she replied, taking her food from the bag. "I'm eating now. You ... take your time."

Severus sighed. "There's no point. It's a long story, but I think I can shorten it adequately."

Hermione opened her water bottle and took a sip.

"Lily," he began, then hesitated, as though he hadn't figured out what to say next. "Lily Evans was my first friend. I cannot possibly describe to you how the friendship was forged, but she seemed equally as eager for a friend as I. Perhaps it was learning the truth about her nature; I was that conduit, and so she clung to me, wanting to know as much as I would tell her."

He took a deep breath and settled more comfortably against the back of the bench. "When school started, it made sense for us to spend time together. We already knew each other; the fact that we were in separate houses meant little to me and nothing to her. We were simply friends. As we grew older, that line started to blur for me, and I found myself fascinated by her in new ways. Of course I had always thought she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen; that sentiment only grew. No one else was like her." Severus chuckled. "You remind me a lot of her. She didn't let anyone tell her what to do, or whom she should be friends with. There was a time when It was a long time ago."

"No," Hermione interrupted. "What were you going to say? A time when what?"

He scowled at her. "I will tell you just as much as I want to tell you and no more."

Hermione glared back at him, then relaxed. "You know, I do understand what that feels like. I used to think Ron and I would be perfect, that we would end up together ... but we were so young. Now I can see that what we had was just a shadow of what the real thing could be."

Still scowling, he looked away from her, following the course of a Vaporetta through the Canal. "There was a time when I think she might have favored me over Potter, but she did not approve of the company I kept. Our free time was increasingly spent apart as I was drawn into the Dark Arts, and those ... *friends* encouraged me to do more than merely talk. They knew my talents, and they wanted me to act."

He looked at her, his expression severe. "I made my choice then. That is important to recognize." His gaze returned to the slowly passing boats. "I knew how Lily would react, but I thought it was excessive, absurd. I thought I should be able to have both. I had no idea that when I chose to meet with the Death Eaters, **Voldemort**, that I was actually choosing them over her. After all, what harm could come from meeting with these people to hear what they had to say?"

"Water?" Hermione asked, her heart aching at his voice, torn and laced with anguish

"Thank you," he said finally, taking the bottle and a refreshing drink.

"You're welcome."

Severus was quiet for a few moments. "You know the result of that meeting, in general at least. Lily was angry, as well as worried. She wanted me to quit...back when even I thought that was possible...but I didn't want to. I had always been drawn to those with power; I knew I was very powerful as well. I wanted more. The Dark Lord promised me exactly what I wanted.

"Can you really blame me? He was so cunning, so manipulative. He knew the perfect things to say to each of us ... the right enticement to offer so that we vowed a lifetime of servitude. I was blinded by my ambition."

"When did you go to him?" she asked. She knew the outcome of this part of the story, but she couldn't help but wish it would turn out differently when he answered.

Severus stared unseeingly at the water, giving himself over to the memories. "After Hogwarts. I was ... wary to pledge any part of my life while under the watchful eye of Dumbledore. And Lily was at Hogwarts, every day, serving as a reminder of a different kind of ambition. When I no longer had her presence to steady me, it wasn't long before I succumbed to the lures of my ... peers.

"I saw Lily only a few more times after she begged me to leave the Dark Lord. The last time ..." He took a deep breath and pinched his nose between his fingers. "She'd become engaged to Potter. I went to her, confessed my affections and told her to pick me instead. I would make her happy, I knew her better than anyone. **She** knew it too, but it had been a long time since her heart leaned toward me. My affiliations with the Dark Lord had effectively sealed it off. Nonetheless, she still cared about me and begged me again to repudiate. I refused."

Without making the conscious decision, Hermione took his hand; he was nearing the most difficult part of his story. He stared at their joined hands for a moment then

closed his hand around hers.

"When she rejected me, I was livid. There is something you must understand about the Dark Arts, Hermione. They corrupt as they are corrupt. I spent so much time immersed in learning and practicing Dark Arts that everything about me which had once been good became twisted. The feelings I had once felt for my friend true, pure feelings of tender love had been corrupted, mangled beyond recognition.

"I believed that Lily would have been better with me. I believed she belonged with me, that I alone had a right to her. The Dark Lord saw my distress, and when he learned of the reason, he promised that I would have her. 'No follower of mine should be made to feel so low by a Mudblood,' he said. I still hear that phrase in my nightmares." Severus's voice became hollow at the strength of the memory.

When he continued, his voice had returned to normal. "He would get her for me if I would prove myself to him. Never mind that I had done so more than any of his followers at that time and in my own way, on more than one occasion.

"I have no way of knowing if he would have kept his promise. I highly doubt it; if he had, and somehow captured her, I believe he would have put her under the Imperius Curse and given her to me."

"Would you have taken her?" Hermione interrupted, her voice taking on a curious but hard tone.

Severus smiled ruefully. "As much as I wish I could deny it, yes. I would have taken her in whatever form she was given to me."

Her eyes widened. "But ... how? Why? You would have *known* that she was only with you because of the spell! If you really loved her, you would have wanted her to be happy."

"Don't you see?" he said quietly. "It wasn't about love. She was happy with Potter; I never suspected she wouldn't be. However, I had grown to feel as though I had a claim on her long before she had ever laid eyes on Potter. I wanted her; she was **mine**, or so I had convinced myself. I wanted her for me."

"But ... I feel I'm missing something. You *were* in love with her, right?"

He sighed. "Yes, then no, though I can only see that after so much time has passed. At that time, I couldn't see the changes in me for what they really were. I had loved her, and wanted her, and I continued to want her. I didn't recognize when wanting came to mean loving in my mind." Severus stood and thrust his hands in his pockets. "Will you walk with me?"

"Sure," said Hermione.

They walked as close to the edge of the walkway as they could, watching the boats glide through the water along the canal. After a few minutes, Severus said, "Can you guess what I did to 'prove' myself?"

At first, she wanted to say no so that he would go ahead and tell her, but the look in his eyes was so pained that she tried to think of what task he might have done that would prove his loyalty to Voldemort. Then it hit her, so obvious it was painful in its irony.

"You listened in on a conversation at the Hog's Head," she breathed.

"Yes. The Dark Lord was very pleased with what I had heard. However, he soon told me that he believed the Prophecy spoke of the Potters and their young child. I asked the Dark Lord to spare Lily. At that time, the only reason he complied was because he could not find her; I knew he was looking. I went to Dumbledore and told him that the Dark Lord was planning an attack on the Potters and promised him my loyalty if he kept Lily safe.

"Though my natural leanings were toward the power the Dark Lord promised, part of me was loyal to Lily above all else. She had been my friend when I had no one else. She alone had liked me for ... me. I did what I needed to do in order to ensure her safety. Then Pettigrew betrayed their secret."

He stopped walking and looked into the dark water. "When I learned that she was dead, I was ripped in two. It was ~~my~~ fault; / had been the cause of her death. My desire for power, for *her*, had been my undoing! I went to Dumbledore shattered. He promised to help me in return for my loyalties, not only to him, but to Lily's child as well."

"It seemed as though you hated Harry from the moment you saw him," Hermione observed. "Why?"

Severus heaved a great sigh. "She gave her life for him. She traded her life for his; I did not agree with her choice."

"You think she should have let Voldemort kill Harry?"

He looked at her intensely, his eyes open and vulnerable. "How can I possibly say that? Lily's death was unforgivable. She was good and kind, one of the best people I have ever known. Potter had his faults, but Lily ... she breathed with the world, she loved life."

Cautiously, unsure if it was the right thing to do, Hermione slipped her hand into his. It was big and warm and completely covered hers. "Do you still love her?" she asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

Severus chuckled. "Haven't you been listening? I haven't loved her in a very long time."

"Yet you continued to protect Harry because of her."

"I owed her that much," he said simply. "Of course I would protect the child she had died to save with my life. It was my fault he no longer had a mother."

"Your level of devotion went far beyond guilt or friendship."

He sighed. "I was devoted to the memories I had of her, to the times when it was just the two of us, when her heart belonged to me. It didn't matter to me that we were only twelve at the time. I was responsible for her death, Hermione. Yes, I had loved her, and I would continue to show that love, the unblemished feelings I once had for her, by watching over her son."

They stood hand-in-hand, an awkward space between them, for what felt like hours to Hermione. She stared at the gently lapping water, the streetlights reflecting and dancing on its surface, as though in a trance.

"I hope you can see that I would never want to love you the way I did her," Severus finally said, jarring Hermione from her empty musings.

"I ... I suppose ..."

"I could never love you second best."

Butterflies exploded in her stomach and her vision became sharp for a few seconds. "That sounds just about right."

They stood there for another few minutes, this time the atmosphere between them one of understanding and anticipation and excitement. Finally Severus moved away from the water, pulling Hermione after him. "Come. I know you've eaten, but I haven't. There's a great restaurant up the street perhaps you could order dessert while I eat?" He kept her hand firmly locked in his.

"Dessert sounds fabulous," Hermione replied as they strolled leisurely amongst the hurried tourists. "What happens now?"

"That's up to you," he replied. "You've just heard the depths of my depravity. I wouldn't blame you for wanting to run as far away from me as you could get."

She smiled, pulled her hand free and slipped it around his waist. "I don't much feel like running tonight. Maybe tomorrow."

ooo

The End

End Notes: Thank you for reading! This was my first attempt at a Snape/Hermione story, and I had a blast and learned a lot from this experience. I truly hope you've enjoyed this!

Final thanks to my betas, bambu and shug! This was my first sshg story and I'm pretty sure it will be obvious. This story is infinitely better thanks to their help. True friends, both of you!!!