Hallelujah

by Ms_Anthrop

Summary

Eight years after the Fall of Voldemort, a mystery illness is stalking the wizarding world. Hermione Granger was the most brilliant witch of her age until she ran away. Even in death, Severus Snape was a reviled and polarizing figure. What happens when they return to face all they left behind?
Prologue- A Victory March

Disclaimer- Alas, I do not own these lovely characters. I'm just borrowing them for a little while. Say it with me- Not mine, and no money.

A/N- The inspiration for this story came from Jeff Buckley's wonderful cover of the Leonard Cohen song, Hallelujah. If you've been living under a rock since 1994, and somehow missed this version, get your bum over to youtube, stat.

Ohhh, that epilogue. Such a wonderful series, and it had to be ended like that?! Our erstwhile friends, having defeated the Dark Lord simply stroll right into the sunset. They marry their high school sweethearts, have two perfect children, and nothing dark and twisty ever happens again. fin.

Or... not. Trauma always manages to claw it's way out of the dark recesses of our minds; it will only play second fiddle to the events in our lives for so long. Trauma eventually interrupts the plot of everyday life because it doesn't fit what came before, or what happened after. It changes you in ways large and small, and it can take years to even began to detect those differences.

How would our friends deal with all that trauma?

I am musical and literary nerd; you will find that many of the chapter titles are references to songs or books. I will list them in the chapter notes when appropriate.

Many, many thanks to Muggle Jane for beta-ing these early bits.

Comments, questions, reviews and howlers all welcome.

"My yesterdays walk with me. They keep step, they are gray faces that peer over my shoulder."

— William Golding

Hallelujah

Prologue- A Victory March

Even at half past three in the morning, the Burrow was something less than quiescent. Tucked away in an upstairs bedroom, Hermione Granger listened to the myriad sounds of the house and its inhabitants, the sighs and murmurs that fell from rafters and coalesced into the hallways to form the nightly symphony of the Weasley home.

She knew it was a cowardly and despicable thing to run away, especially after all that had happened. As she gazed down onto the soft cream of the parchment in front of her, she wondered if she would ever find the proper words to explain what she was about to do. She wondered if they'd ever be able to forgive her.

I am so sorry

That was it; three hours of staring at the tabletop had produced a mere four words. Never mind that in years past, a similar late night sojourn would have meant at least two full rolls of parchment, conclusions annotated and highlighted with verbose precision.

I am so sorry
There had been a shining golden moment in the hours after Voldemort's death where it appeared that everything was going to be fine. Her heart and mind had flared with the giddy disbelief of victory; the possibilities of the future seem to stretch out in front of them with halcyon abandon. But then, as first streaks of dawn had illuminated the shattered stained glass windows in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, it became painfully clear that whilst they had won the war, they had also lost far too many battles.

Fred. Tonks and Lupin. Colin Creevey and Lavender Brown.... and Professor Snape. The list of names was long, and yet had grown yet longer still. As the overwhelming swirl of grief and sorrow from the people around her seemed to paint the very air around the castle, she had felt the first insidious trickle of ice ripple through her veins. That ice had buffered her, and allowed her press forward with the necessary tasks that happen after battle.

_I am so sorry_

As it turned out, it may have been Voldemort's last battle, but that certainly wasn't the last fight. Not even one week later, one of the surviving Death Eaters had proclaimed himself as the new Dark Lord. Many more battles were lost. The war raged on. To her surprise, she held up well over the ensuing twelve months of fighting and three succeeding Dark Lords. As the wizarding world had fragmented into a bloody morass once again, Hermione Granger had become well known for her glacial surety and grace under fire. Then, in a sudden and volcanic act of dark magic, someone- hitherto unknown- had used the dark mark to unleash an unbridled killing curse on the remnants of Voldemort's followers. With that, the fight was truly over.

Hermione had waited, rather prudently she thought, for an additional year before returning to the small suburban Australian town where she had hidden her parents. But the town was only a shadow of what it should have been. Under a canopy of sun bleached eucalyptus trees, she had learned that two years prior, wildfires had raged through the area and killed thirty-three residents. Monica and Wendell Wilkens were among the lost. Despite her best intentions and efforts, her parents had died in fear and among flames. In that moment, the ice within Hermione had shattered with an almost audible reverberation. It had been all she could do to get back to London.

_I am so sorry_

Everyone had been so wonderfully nice to her; sympathetic and understanding and all that could be asked for under the circumstances. After all, she was not alone in her loss or in her grieving. Much to the relief of all, Hermione seemed to rally. There was talk in several wizarding papers of an impending wedding to Ronald Weasley, and of her taking a high ranking position within Ministry.

It was all a lie. She felt like the ice running through her veins had transmogrified to minute shards of glass, and she was slowly bleeding to death from an untold number of infinitesimal, internal cuts. She knew that if she continued on much longer that she would well and truly break, and then there would be no fixing her. The only thing that she could think of was to run away.

In the ensuing weeks, she had quietly made plans; converted over her remaining money, bought several sets of Muggle identities, and sorted through her possessions to determine what she would take with her. Even with Crookshanks, it had been a small pile.

_I am so sorry_

There was nothing for it. No matter how long she sat there, the words would not come.

Slowly she got up from the table, scooped up her pack up from the floor, and headed downstairs. Twenty minutes later, a faint crack from a distant Apparation momentarily interrupted the customary
night-time sounds of the Burrow. Then the wind rustled through the hedgerows, and the home's sleepy noises began again.
The leaden grey of predawn made the precise arrangement of the stars somewhat harder to ascertain. However, it was the consistent motion of the waves muddling what should have been the horizon that finally rendered his celestial navigation skills moot. *Or maybe*, Severus Snape thought, *you are several fathoms away from sober*. Still, he was fairly certain that he was bobbing somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, possibly along the coastline of Chile. As the last thing he clearly recollected was being in New Zealand, he wagered that his lack of... situational awareness... was due more to alcohol, or some other intoxicant than any sort of deteriorating mental capacity. Then again, he might have lost his mind and corresponding mental facilities. One could never tell.

With a sigh, he rolled over and began swimming back to shore.

The drying salt had just started to itch uncomfortably on Snape's skin when he heard the soft swish of footfalls coming from the sand behind him. Turning his head ever so slightly, he eyed the slowly approaching blond man.

"You certainly have a liking for swimming in shark-infested waters. Did you know that there were several circling you?" Lucius Malfoy stopped several meters short of Snape, giving him a gimlet-eyed glance as he brushed bits of sand and beach rubbish off his formerly pristine robes.

"Yes." Snape turned back toward the waves. "One bumped my foot. Twice."

"Really, Severus, you must take better care. I have no wish to sit by your hallowed deathbed a third time."

"Neither do I." Pleasantries over, both men fell silent.

Ignoring Lucius completely, Snape turned his full attention back towards the incoming tide. In the water to the left he could see several fishing boats dropping long lines; to the right and further down the shoreline, he could just make out the sounds of a dog barking amongst children's laughter. He felt... content? Shifting to get more comfortable in the sand, he took a deep breath of the swirling salt air and let his mind wander over the sensation a bit.

Upon further examination, it did indeed prove to be a feeling of contentment; whilst he was not a wholly content creature, the emotion was still stronger than his customary trio of anger, bitterness, and regret that had flourished within him for so long. He would even admit- although only to himself- that this morning, watching the rising sun shift the colour of the water from the pearlescent mercury of early dawn and to the current bright and briny beryl, that he had been glad to watch the sunrise. *Well done, that. It only took you three years to get here. Lucius was right however; given your "liking for swimming in shark-infested waters" you really are lucky to even be sitting on this precipitous shoal.*

The sound of robes rippling in the breeze drew him out of his internal revelry, and he turned his head again towards the interruption. Raising a sardonic eyebrow, he stared questionably up at Lucius.

"Do you have some further inane commentary to make?" This drew a frustrated sigh from the other man.

"Are you ready to come back yet, or are we doomed to repeat this heartfelt scene again next month?"
Lucius' tone dripped with sarcasm.

"Yes."

"Yes... what?" Lucius asked. "...shall we be forced to repeat this charade, or will you finally return?"

Snape felt a smirk grow. How he did love nettling the man. There were distinct advantages to still being alive, although he did imagine that his shade would also be equal to the task if so impelled.

"I believe that I will return. Under one condition of course."

Lucius took a calming breath in. "Naturally. The condition?"

Snape let the smirk grow into a fully-fledged grin. "That I shall stay dead."

Glowering down at him, Lucius finally snapped, "That can be arranged." He stuck out his arm imperiously. Leveraging himself out of the damp sand, Snape grabbed the proffered arm as Lucius started to spin.

CRACK! In between moments, the beach became empty.
A Minor Fall and Major Lift

Aberystwyth, Wales- Four years later

The night shifted restlessly around Hermione as she struggled to locate the keys to her flat in her purse, all whilst not dumping the two bags of groceries in her arms to the ground. Muttering soft profanities as the first splatters of rain hit her face, she finally found her keys in the mess of her bag and slid them into the lock. Really, she thought to herself, she had no right to grumble over the weather; she had chosen to work in this woe-begotten corner of Wales over an equally favourable post-doctoral fellowship in Spain. She could be sitting in some sun-warmed piazza sipping a good glass of sangria rather than struggling through the never ending dark and dreary winter of Aberystwyth. No use whinging over her own freely made choice.

It took a shove of her hip to get the old door open, and as she stepped across the threshold, she could feel the wind gust around her legs as if trying to pull her back into the oncoming storm. Pivoting to slide the groceries onto the side table, Hermione reached for the door just as the wind snatched it out of grasp.

BANG!

"Shit!" She took a deep breath to counter the shot of adrenaline racing through her limbs. My goodness Granger, jumpy much? One would think that you were a Muggle with all of these histrionics. Dropping the keys in a bowl and shrugging the bags back into her arms, Hermione started for the kitchen.

"Crooks?... Crookshanks?" she called. But if the cat was downstairs, he remained well hidden. Good thing I picked up a can of tuna at the shop, she thought ruefully. If Crookshanks had been downstairs when the door slammed, it was going to take some serious coaxing to get him to come out and be social. The cold and damp of Aberystwyth appealed to him about as much as it did to her, and in a temper over being startled, he'd be even less amenable.

Hermione flipped the light to the kitchen on and began pulling items from the bags. Cheese and eggs went into the fridge; bread and cereal disappeared into the cupboard. As she reached for the bottle of red wine, she realized that her left arm was still... tingly. Oh no, not again she prayed. Let it be something else... the pressure from carrying the groceries perhaps? But as she stared at her arm in hopeful disbelief, she felt the tingle transform into a familiar burn, followed by the immediate rolling waves of tremors that chased the burn up past her elbow, and into her shoulder and chest. Forcing her head up and around, she started aiming her body for one of the kitchen chairs. The cool kitchen air suddenly seemed to be made of molasses for all of the effort that it took to move her legs, and the light... well she didn't think that it was actually pulsing in a horrible parody of a strobe light. Too late... she thought as the kitchen floor seemed swim up towards her face...this is going to be messy.

Sound came back to her first; the steady tick of the kitchen clock and the heady rumble of a cat purring. Slowly, the world unfolded around her as her sluggish brain responded to requests for information. The purring strongly suggested that the heavy pressure on her chest came from the cat, not an injury. That was... encouraging. That noted, she recognized hadn't gotten off scot-free. There were cuts on her backside as well as her legs, and her head throbbed mercilessly. Hermione could not only taste blood, but smelled the coppery tang of it melding with red wine. So I dropped the bottle then. At least it wasn't the eggs. Inhaling cautiously, she relaxed as all her nose detected was the blood and wine. And I didn't wet myself. Another good point. There had been that time, at university, when she hadn't been that lucky... Cracking her eyes open, she found herself on her back in the
middle kitchen; she could still see her legs twitching slightly, as if dancing to the earlier wind. Looking down again, she saw large green eyes peering at her from a tangle of ginger fur located on the middle of her chest. She stretched her hand out to the cat, resting her hand on his silky coat.

"Well fur-face... I've gone and done it this time, haven't I?" Easing onto one elbow, she looked at the mess around her. She had knocked over the chair, but thankfully the second bag from the shop had been left untouched on the counter. All and all, the physical damage wasn't bad.

Mentally, however... a cold sense of forbidding replaced the lingering burn in her muscles. Even she had to admit that it was getting worse. Numbly, she heaved herself all the way up, and pushed Crookshanks to her lap.

"I think it's time we find some answers." If anything, the cat's purr seemed to grow louder. "Let's just hope I know what to do with them."

It had taken almost four hours to get herself off the floor, get cleaned up, and into bed. She'd had several small attacks of tremors in the process; not enough to cause her to pass out, but enough that she was afraid of falling and really hurting herself. When Hermione had finally awoken the next morning, some time past 10, it was to bright sunlight streaming in her bedroom window.

Stroking Crookshanks, she had made a mental list of her options. **Option A: Continue to Ignore the Problem.** She had done so for the last three years with some success. The attacks, or spells, or whatever they were hadn't prevented her from finishing her doctorate in library sciences, nor did they impact her job. She felt relatively sure that she could continue on for some time yet before her hand was forced.

**Option B: Go Back To The Muggle Doctors.** Once- thank god- only once had she experienced an attack in public. It had happened shortly after presenting her viva voce, in the office of her departmental chair. The incident had been bad enough that she'd not been able to prevent them from taking her to hospital, and but the doctors had been able to do little other than recommend a battery of comprehensive tests. She wasn't sure if Muggle medicine could find or fix what was wrong with her, but it might be worth thinking about. She had some ideas about combining Muggle medication with magic...

**Option C: Get Magical Help.** As far as she could tell, none of her magical ability had disappeared. She'd wondered after her first attack if the problem might stem from not using her magic. With some caution, she had started to use little bits of magic, mostly non-verbal. It hadn't made any difference, but it'd come as relief that she hadn't reduced herself to a squib.

You could go back. They might not forgive you, but they will help you. Were you really planning to hide away as a Muggle forever?

The thought of going back to the Burrow, to her friends, to everything from before made her feel queasy. She shifted restlessly on her bed; Crookshanks nudged at her hand, and she resumed stroking his fur.

She knew now, with the hindsight of almost eight years, that leaving had been the only thing keeping her from completely breaking down. **But would that have been such a horrible thing? Would that have been as bad as cutting off the people you loved most in the world?**

**There is no use trying to answer that question. You can't change it at this late stage anyhow. What really matters is determining if you want to go back now, illness or no.** The faces of her friends slid through her mind; Harry, absent-mindedly pushing his glasses up his nose while working on
homework in the Gryffindor common room. Ginny's sharp grin as she magically threw peas at the back of Percy's head, and Ron, exultantly swooping to the ground after a last minute Quidditch victory.

*Yes. I want to go back. And if... and if they all hate me, I don't have to stay.*

Mind made up, she decided to leave the following morning. She could Apparate to London... at least she thought she could. *That's not the best idea. It's been long enough that you'd probably splinch yourself royally.* Instead, she decided to take the train to London and see if she could find one of the Weasleys at the joke shop. If she couldn't find anyone, she could send an owl from the Leaky Cauldron asking for a meeting.

Sunday also dawned bright and clear, and the countryside rolling by the train was pleasantly lush and green. The familiar rhythm of locomotion lured her into a half-doze, and she found her mind wandering back to that last night in the Burrow.

Rucksack on back, and Crookshank's cage in hand, Hermione had paused in the dark warmth of the Weasley's living room. Something niggled at her senses. Turning, she peered into the shadows of the far back corner.

"Lumos," said a tired male voice. The pale light illuminated the worn face of Arthur Weasley, long since stripped of any of the bumbling joy that she'd long associated him with.

"You've decided to leave?" Unable to say anything, she'd nodded once, incapable of meeting his gaze. Hermione had stared at her feet for a long moment until the rustle of robes had caused her to look up. Arthur stood before her, hand outstretched as if he wanted to touch her.

Dropping his hand, Arthur had taken a breath in and started speaking, "Hermione... please let me help. I know you can't stay here." His blue eyes, so like Ron's had gone misty, and he'd blinked a few times to clear them. "Molly and I... we've already lost one child. I don't think we could take losing another. Please. Let me help."

"I can get you better Muggle identities through the Ministry, get you set up somewhere safe. I wont tell anyone where you've gone if that's what you want. Just let me help... I'm begging you, Hermione."

She'd almost bit through her lip to keep herself from breaking down and crying. Not trusting her voice, she has resorted to nodding again. With that, Arthur had escorted her outside and down the path. They had Apparated to a Ministry safe house, where she sat numbly for three days as he sorted the various issues of disappearance out.

On the third day, he'd returned with a large stack of papers- birth records, school transcripts, everything a normal twenty-year old Muggle would have. After going through the papers, he pulled a small, pale crystal charm on a chain out his pocket.

Handing it to her, he said, "This was my Grandmother's. After Grandfather's death, she decide to travel... so one of my Uncles made it for her. It has some basic safety charms. Molly has the other half." Looking steadily at her, he continued, "It's also charmed to tell if the wearer is safe or not. It wont be able to tell us where you are, but we'll at least know if you are alright."

She'd worn it everyday since. Pulling out from under her collar, she examined the sparkling prism. The colours shifted mutely under her appraisal; a faint pink when closest to her skin, darkening with blue tones the longer she held it away. *Please, please don't hate me...*
It took five hours and a train change in Birmingham before she got to London; once there, Hermione decided to walk all the way to the Leaky Cauldron in hopes of calming her nerves. It didn't work. Standing at the brick wall that would open up onto Diagon Alley, she felt as if her guts were being squeezed, as if going through side-along Apparition.

Suddenly, the back door to the Leaky Cauldron banged open, and middle-aged witch with two children appeared. Smiling maternally at Hermione, the witch asked, "Forget which brick, dearie? Here we are, nothing to get worked up over!" Tapping, she opened the wall.

With a creak and rumble, the archway opened. "Come along now, don't dawdle. We wouldn't want it to close on you, would we my dear?"

"Uhh, no. Thank you." The witch gave Hermione a glance as she stepped through. "Now, do you know where you are going? Need any help finding a shop?"

"No, thank you. I know where I'm going."

Giving her a final pat, the woman smiled and started tugging her children down the street. Mechanically, Hermione started to follow. *Breath, don't panic.*

Several minutes later, she found herself in front of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. The shop looked much as she'd first seen it, complete with a rather flamboyant front window ad for "Fire Farts Tablets! See how many colours you can produce!"

Pushing her way through the front door, she looked around for a clerk. Finally spotting one restocking a shelf, she walked over to him.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Yes, I was looking for George Weasley. I'm an old friend. Is he in by chance?"

The clerk- a spotty-faced teenager she didn't recognise- gave her a sceptical look. "A friend you say?"

"Yes," she said mustering every bit of professorial gravitas she could manage. "He said he would be here today." *Don't let it be a lie... I don't think I can do this again!*

Apparently, her expression worked. "Yeah, he's in his office. Through that door, to the right, give it a good knock." Turning away, he resumed stocking the half-empty shelf. Wading through the masses of customers, she made her way to the back hallway. Finding the correct door, she gave it a rap with a shaking hand.

"It's open!" yelled a familiar voice. Cracking the door open hesitantly, Hermione stuck her head in.

George looked up from a desk piled high with paperwork. For a second his face went totally blank before his jaw dropped open.

"Blimey... Hermione, is that really you?" In a second, he leapt from the desk and opened the door wide. Sweeping her into a strong hug, he looked down at her.

"Come on in, then." Pulling her into the office, he shut the door.

"Hello, George," she said a little weakly. "How are you?"

"Good, fine... Hermione, we thought we'd never see you again. Where have you..." he stopped, grin
fading a bit. "Never mind. Not my business. Are you okay? Do you need something?"

"I'm... alright, well, sort of. That's why I'm here. I need to talk with your Dad about something. And..." taking a deep breath she continued. "I'll explain the rest later, I promise."

"Right then. Well, grab a seat. I'll send an owl for Dad. It shouldn't take too long, he's just over at the Ministry." Removing a stack of reports off a chair, he motioned her to sit.

Grabbing a quill and parchment, George looked up at her. "Is there anything you want me to say in particular? Or do you just want to explain it when he gets here?"

Quashing her sense of unease she said, "I've been... sick recently. And, well, it's gotten a bit worse."

"Wait... it's not a neural-musculature complaint is it?" Now it was her turn to stare in shock.

"George, how did you know? How do you even know what that word means?" She flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just that's a Muggle phrase and..."

George laughed. "I know... it's okay. I dated a Muggle paramedic for awhile. She ah... taught me a few things. " His face turned serious. "But seriously Hermione, is it a muscle thing? And you've had seizures?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"'Cause you aren't the only one having issues. Most of the people who got cursed by Dark magic during the second war with Voldemort are having problems. Mostly, it's little stuff, but not always."

"Oh." Hermione felt a sense of mingled sense of relief and unease spread over her. "So if I'm not the only one, the Healers know how to treat it, right?"

George looked away, and rubbed his face. "Well, no, not really. There are things that can help... but they don't really know how to fix it. Listen, you better just talk to Dad about it. He'll be able to explain better. And maybe..." He paused, looking at her appraisingly. "Hermione, how long do you plan to be back? There's some other people you should probably talk to, like Minerva McGonagall. She's leading a research team based out of Hogwarts. And, well, I know everyone will want to see you..." His voice trailed off.

"I don't know, George. A couple of weeks at least. And... I do want to see people. If they still want to see me." She looked at him, trying to guess how the others might feel based on his expression.

"Of course they will want to see you! Let's get this note sent to Dad, and then will get the rest figured out, alright?"

"Alright." George finished scribbling out a note. "Be right back. Have a cup of tea." He pointed to pot on the corner of the desk. Waving his wand, he summoned a second cup for her.

"Ha. Like I would ever drink something that you offered me," Hermione said, hoping he'd find the joke funny.

Pouring tea into the cup, he took a sip. "See, safe. Come on, Hermione, I wouldn't do that to you on your first day back. Tomorrow, however..." He grinned, waggling his eyebrows threateningly, handed her the cup, and made for the door. "I'm glad you came back, Hermione. For whatever reason, I'm glad." With that, he disappeared down the hall.
The next several hours were a blur. Arthur Weasley had come straight over from the Ministry, and
the three of them had Apparated to the Burrow. Upon seeing her enter the kitchen, Molly Weasley
had burst into tears. She found herself wrapped up in the woman's arms, sobbing as well, unable to
say anything other than, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Tumult over and feeling dazed, she sat in an overstuffed floral-print chair, clutching a mug full of
firewhiskey. Arthur and George sat to her right in similar chairs, and Molly was perched on the
armchair next to her, hand comfortingly stroking her shoulder as she explained why she'd come
back.

"I'm so sorry," she said, for what felt like the thousandth time.

"Nevermind all of that. What matters is that you've come back. The rest... well, we will deal with it
as it comes." Molly Weasley looked over at Arthur. "What do you think the first order of business
should be, dear?"

He thought for a bit before replying. "With your permission, Hermione, I'll send an owl to Minerva.
She'll know who we need to talk to at St. Mungo's." Taking a sip of his own drink, he went on.
"Where are you staying?"

"I... I hadn't thought that far ahead, not really. I live in Wales now, not London..." she trailed off
awkwardly.

"You'll stay here, then." Molly stopped for a moment. "That is, if you'd like to."

"Yes, I would." Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears again. "I'd like that very much. But what about
everyone else?"

"What do you mean, dear?" Molly asked

George stepped in. "We've all moved out, Hermione. Poor Mum has quite the empty nest." He shot
his mother a smile. "Bill, Percy, and I live in London of course, and Charlie is in France at the
moment. Ginny and Harry are in Edinburgh with Aurors, and Ron's in America, playing Quidditch.
No worries about not having enough space now."

"Oh." Hermione blinked, not quite sure how to respond to the information. She knew that she'd been
gone a long time, and that things were bound to change, but still, she'd not given thought to how
much things would have moved on. Regrouping for second, she went on. "I'd like to talk to
Professor McGonagall if that's possible. Beyond that... I do want to see everyone. I'm just...
she paused, groping for words. "Well, I'm nervous about seeing everyone, that's all."

"Arthur, why don't you send that owl to Minerva. Ask her to breakfast tomorrow. It's been a long
day for us all, and there's no need to jam it all in the very day of your return. We'll send out owls to
everyone else tomorrow. Can you stay for a couple of days, dear?" Molly asked.

"Yes, I have a couple of weeks off. The team I work for is giving a lecture series at a university in
Germany, and I asked for some time to deal with this."

"Well then, why don't we work on dinner, and you can tell me all about your job. George," Molly
turned to address her son, "...are you staying for supper?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Mum." With the details settled to her satisfaction, Molly rose from
the chair, and offered Hermione a hand up.

"Now, I must warn you, the ghoul has been all sorts of trouble lately..."
On the whole, it had been a peaceful- if not content- four years for Severus Snape since returning. He had, much to his surprise, even experienced a vestigial emotion he tentatively identified as happiness. He lived on the fringes of both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds, working anonymously and carefully under several unexceptional identities. Lucius had acquired a small stone cottage for his use, and Snape had slowly cobbled together a functional laboratory and library in the cellar. He survived rather nicely off the sale of not-quite-illegal potions and herbal tisanes. When the whim suited him, he published on a rather eclectic spectrum of research.

Still, Snape knew that his peace was a fragile one. Nightmares and stretches of insomnia were constant companions; moreover the years of stress and torture had left him with a rather extensive laundry list of physical and mental ailments that four years of expert potion making had hardly made a dent in. When he chose to think on his past- a very infrequent occurrence- it left him bitter and drained for days. Should he go so far as to dwell on certain aspects of his personal history... well, he really didn't fancy repairing and replacing his entire cellar accoutrement for a third time due to ill-placed rage.

"That's right, Severus...let the past slide away from you like so many grains of sand. Live only in the moment; take refuge in the zen path... Right. Bloody fat chance of that. Snorting softly to himself, he continued to stir a large bronze cauldron. Intently, he watched for the change of colour that would indicate that it was time to add the pickled heartsthorne. As the potion grudgingly shifted from a pale lilac to a robust violet, he felt his personal wards flicker as someone approached the cottage. Wonderful timing as always, and flicked a stasis charm over the brew. Wait for it... the strident tones of his doorbell echoed down the stairs. I wonder if he understands the significance of using the Imperial March as the tune. Hmmm, probably not. Perhaps I should change it to the Jaws theme? The doorbell started up again, and he could practically feel Lucius' impatience at being kept waiting. Alas, I think even that simple Muggle joke is beyond him.

Shucking off a dragon skin apron, he strode up the narrow stairs and into the lounge. Opening the front door, he smiled unpleasantly at his visitor.

"What a welcome surprise, Lucius. Given that you last visited this humble abode not two weeks ago, I am overwhelmed that you have chosen to once again grace me with your august presence."

The man glowered back at him, hand tightening on his ebony cane. "Are you quite done, Severus?"

"Would you like me to be?" He drawled in response.

"Are you going to invite me in, or must we conduct this... discussion... outside?"

Stepping back, Snape gracefully motioned his guest inside. "By all means, Lucius, please do come inside. May I offer you a cup of tea on this fine and blustery day?"

Brushing past him to enter the cottage, Lucius bit out, "No." Eying the sofa with some distaste, he finally settled on a somewhat less shabby end chair. He sat down with a maximum flourish of robes. Shutting the door, Snape followed the man, but rather than sit, chose to stand in front of the stone fireplace. Any discomfort standing created was far outweighed in the joy of looking down on upon Lucius Malfoy. They eyed each other in disagreeable silence.
"As you came here rather than simply send an owl, I imagine that you need something of great importance?" Snape inquired, noting the small signs of disarray on the man. His normally perfect hair was in need of a wash, as well as a good brush. He also looked as if he’d not slept recently, and several buttons on the man’s sleeves were missing. Interesting. Or not.

Lucius closed his eyes briefly. "Draco is in St. Mungo's."

"Again? How many times now is it?"

"This is the forth time... since January." Lucius tone was flat. "There also have been smaller attacks that did not necessitate being under a Healer's care."

Snape's smile took on a merciless gleam. "And to think, we've not even reached the Ides of March yet. What a pity. Have the healers been able to determine what the overriding issue is?"

"They think it pertains to the lingering effects of the Cruciatus Curse, among others."

"Have any of the potions I've supplied you with helped?" Snape leaned back on his heels slightly, feeling a only muted sense of concern.

"They have... assisted in Draco's recovery between bouts, but have not lessened the effects of the fits, nor decreased the number of occurrences." Lucius paused. Settling slightly into the chair, he continued. "Draco is not the only one suffering thusly. Several other people of mutual acquaintance are also being treated at St. Mungo's."

"And why, pray tell, are you providing me this vital information?" As if I give single whit for any of our former acquaintances...

"I want you to come to London and examine Draco. I will not lose the boy as I lost his mother." Lucius had abruptly gone white, and anger now tinged his tone.

"Absolutely out of the question."

"You owe the boy. Should you choose to remember it, he is still your godson, and he saved your life!" The last came out as a roar; Lucius worked visibly to lower his voice. "Hellfire, you still owe me when it comes to it!"

"He may have done, but that fortuitous accident only occurred after I'd rescued his skinny rump from Voldemort- several times over!" Snape felt his own temper rising. Dark eyes snapping, he hissed, "Draco found me by chance, while he was trying to make his escape. It's not as if he risked life and limb on a grand recovery mission. I'll not endanger everything now on the off chance I can help him."

"You selfish bastard!" Lucius rose and stepped closer to Snape. "Is your anonymity and simple life so precious that you'd risk Draco's life? I gave you all of this!" His arms shot out to encompass the house. "With a well placed word, I can destroy it!" The air around the two men crackled with fury.

"When have I acted anything other than the selfish bastard, Malfoy?" he taunted the man. "And you dare threaten me? You dare insinuate that I owe you something?" Snape uttered a short laugh, working hard to control his fury. "There are three people alive on this earth who carry the Dark Mark... myself," he pushed up a sleeve to reveal the fading tattoo. "You. Your son. I spared you. By my account, you still owe me." Almost breathless with rage he went on. "Bring the boy here if you so wish. If not, send me his medical records from St. Mungo's. I will do what I can, but I will not risk my freedom and peace of mind on a fool's errand!"
Glaring at him with impotent anger, Lucius swiftly moved to the door and flung it open. Turning around to face Snape, his fingers tapped restlessly on his cane. "I doubt the secret of your miraculous survival will survive much longer." Snape felt his heart dropped suddenly. Trying to mask the reaction, he pushed himself of the stonework of the fireplace. Lucius continued.

"I ran into the sainted Headmistress McGonagall at St. Mungo's. Some of her precious cubs are also in residence." Jeering slightly, he went on. "She had some rather pointed questions about the identity behind a certain potion maker that is becoming rather well known amongst the better connected..." He stopped, enjoying Snape's discomfort. "She knows full well that you are alive. Among other things, your portrait has yet to appear in her office. And if you think that she will leave any stones unturned in finding a solution for what ails her blasted students, then you are more the fool than I thought!" With that parting shot, Lucius Malfoy stepped over the threshold, spun and Disapparated from the porch.

Dimly, as his sight filmed over with red, Snape heard the distinctive chime of the front window breaking. Ah yes, Severus... you always were good at following the zen path!

It took several minutes to master his temper; by the time he had done, the chair where Lucius Malfoy had been sitting in looked rather... singed, but still usable.

Joints in back and right knee popping, he shambled over to the hallway and entered the lone bedroom. Easing himself down onto the bed, he stared tiredly up at the ceiling.

So... Draco is getting worse, he mused. Little surprise, given how quickly Narcissa went. And, truth be told, how you feel after particular days. Relaxing further into the mattress, he thought about the boy- well man, after so many years- and of debts owed.

He had not thought to survive the final confrontation with Voldemort. Hadn't wanted to, especially when he was bleeding to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, Nagini's venom racing through his blood like Fiendfyre. After twenty years as double agent, pacing the tightrope between two equally egocentric and Machiavellian masters, death seemed like a welcome kindness. Not that he had many memories of kindness and softness to pull from; it was not as if his public behaviour warranted any such favourable treatment.

He did have a rather strong code of ethics that he operated under, although few people recognized it under all of the sarcasm and bitterness. That last year at Hogwarts had shredded what little self respect he'd been able to muster... better not think on that, old man. Do you really want to see the faces of the students you tortured in your dreams? Students who, in all likelihood are still paying for others' delusions of grandeur?

Bitterly, he pushed that set of thoughts away, returning instead to that last night. It had been purely an accident that allowed for his continued existence after Voldemort's last stand. He had planned ahead somewhat by placing an anti-venom and several healing draughts in his robes; not for survival per say, but more as insurance to make sure that he could influence the final battle to his liking. Not that Potter and Granger had bothered to look for such items. No they just had to stand there, mouths agape and letting their ruddy Gryffindor emotions run riot all over their blessed little faces. He was fairly sure that he had actually died on that floor. At the very least, he had gone into a deep coma, and it was the unwelcome, pale-faced ferret Draco that had greeted him upon waking in a secure wing of the Malfoy Manor. The next several weeks had been touch and go as his body and fought the effects of the venom and blood loss. He had lost all of his hair, and what little body fat he possessed melted away. You looked rather like the Dark Lord for awhile. Pity you were good for little else.
The Malfoy's defection had not gone unnoticed amongst the remaining Death Eaters. Six months after the death of Voldemort, a group led be the first... or was it second? Pretender to the throne had attacked the estate. He had been safe in a secret kept room, but had the overwhelming pleasure of listening to Narcissa Malfoy being tortured for three days until he could figure out how to escape his room and mount an attack. That little bit of quixotic stupidity had set his recovery back a full half year.

It was by Narcissa's death bed that he learned just how futile his many years of sacrifice had been. Yes, He-Who-Was-A-Deluded-Blowhard was dead, but it was if the wizarding world was playing a demented game of whack-a-mole. Chop one head off, others appeared. He had sat, holding a dead woman's cooling hand as rage and bitterness created a caustic and powerful brew in his belly. The plan had come to him finally as dawn had broke over the house.

He understood the fundamentals behind the magic of the Dark Mark from when it had been placed on him and others. He had known of it's ability to link people together, had a rough knowledge of what a blood curse added to strong intent might be capable of. Merlin knew he had enough strength of mind to put toward the intent part of the equation; it had taken three additional weeks of scrounging through the Malfoy's admittedly impressive Dark archive to find the answers he needed.

Once again, he had fully meant to die, but this time to take all who carried the Dark Mark with him. Using the last of his life's blood as the geas he had unleashed a powerful incantation onto his Dark Mark. With every fibre in in battered and bitter soul, he wished it all over: wished them all dead. Once more, he woke up alive. *Your own personal groundhog day! Wasn't that a nasty surprise...* Although he'd never admit it to Lucius, he had been shocked to find the two Malfoys enjoying a similar state of corporal wellbeing.

In the dead of the following evening, he had pilfered a small sack of gold, and left the house. At first, he had stuck to the safe bolt holes holes he had created over the years. As his health gradually returned he began to travel further and test his tethers. It had been in a raucous and befouled dive bar, somewhere in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro that Lucius had found him.

He had been so completely pissed, working off a rather epic Carnival inspired bender, that at first he doubted the veracity of what he eyes were showing him. Lucius Malfoy had strode into the bar looking like an incongruously battered and fallen angel. Eying the surroundings with clear contempt, he asked, "Are you quite finished?"

Offering the man a filthy glass of what passed for cachaça, Snape had merely smiled and said, "No, I believe not." Lucius had glared at him for a heartbeat, dropped a bag of gold at his feet and left in swirl of disgust.

A month later, Lucius had found him again, this time eating a sweat-inducing bowl of laksa at curbside restaurant in Kuala Lumpur. His question, and Snape's response had been the same. After that meeting it had become a game; drag Lucius Malfoy to the most humiliating and uncomfortable places he could devise. *The Turkish Hamam was rather inspired... but the look on Malfoy's face as he waded through the shit to reach the poker table in the Parisian Sewer was, perhaps, one of your finer moments.* Despite what the elder Malfoy thought, he had not in fact spent all of his time in drunken debauchery. There had been a considerable amount of time spent in solitary contemplation, trying to wrest out the few shards of human that remained in his soul; trying to find a reason to continue on.

Abruptly, he stomach gave an irritated rumble. *Eat*, he thought. *Then repair the damage to the cottage and finish your potion. That stasis charm will only hold so long.* Rolling off the bed, he made for the kitchen. *No sense worrying over the long gone past, and working yourself into a lather over*
what's to come... Alas however, that damn man is right. If Minerva has finally started poking around, your time here is probably limited. Best start making plans. You can wait to be found, or you can arrange the finding to your choosing. Lighting the hob, Severus Snape started to make supper.

A/N- Again, thanks to my beta, Muggle Jane. Reviews and comments are like gold; this is my first work of fanfiction, thus I always appreciate the feedback.
Hungry Heart

Chapter 5- Hungry Heart

Dinner was a calm, if not surreal affair at the Burrow. The conversation and company were much as they always had been; in some ways it was as if no time had passed. They all carefully avoided several topics- namely her reason for leaving, as well as her impetus in returning. To her relief, she fell asleep quickly and woke up only when Molly knocked on the door the next morning.

"Hermione, dear, it's time to wake up. Breakfast is on, and the Headmistress will be here soon."

Sitting up, Hermione pushed the hair out of her face and started to dress. Looking around Ginny's old room, she was once again struck at how little had changed. Thanks to Mrs. Weasley, she knew the basics: Ginny and Harry had gotten married several years before, and both worked as Aurors.

The Headmistress was sitting in the kitchen, sipping tea with Mrs. Weasley when she walked in. Hermione was startled at the changes in McGonagall. Her hair had gone completely white, rather than silver, and she had far more wrinkles. For the first time, she looked... old, rather than merely formidable. Still, her posture was ramrod straight, and when her old professor turned her sharp gaze on to her, it still provoked an instant response to straighten up.

"Miss Granger, it is lovely to have you back."

"Thank you Headmistress." Silence fell in the kitchen, interrupted only by the sound of bacon frying. "Uh, how are things at Hogwarts?"

The Headmistress smiled. "Much as you'd recognise. We still have fewer students then in years past, but other than that, we find ourselves on an even keel. Molly mentioned that you work at a university in Wales?"

"Yes, I am a research librarian for small neural-biology department at Aberystwyth. I manage their collection, and do literature reviews and such for three of the professors. I also help out by teaching some of the lower-level lecture sections. I like it very much." Again, an uncomfortable pause filled the room. Before Hermione could think of a follow-up question to ask, Arthur and George Weasley entered the kitchen from the garden. Greeting the Headmistress in turn, both men sat down at the table.

Conversation remained scarce as breakfast was eaten; as Mrs. Weasley whisked the dirty plates away, Minerva McGonagall turned turned to Hermione, "Now, I understand that you have been experiencing some health issues?"

For the next twenty minutes, the Headmistress questioned Hermione about her symptoms and their severity. Hermione told her about her continuing balance issues, bouts of numbness in her limbs, and finally the three seizures that had alarmed her the most. Clearly coming to a conclusion, McGonagall said, "It does appear that what you've been experiencing fits the same condition as the rest. Tell me, were the Muggle doctors any help?"

"They weren't able to tell me what was wrong, no. But some of the medications they prescribed did
help to alleviate a few of the lingering symptoms. I think in order to truly treat the problem, the Muggle medicine will have to be combined with magic. I've done some research on the medication that helped me the most, and have some ideas, but the potion making is far beyond anything I can do. Mr. Weasley mentioned that you are leading a research project dealing with the illness?"

"Yes, of sorts. Madame Pomfrey was the first to theorize that the spectrum of health issues that students were facing were connected by their activities in the Second War- namely that all had been tortured with one of the Unforgivables. It took quite a bit of time for the Ministry to accept those findings. Once they did, however, extra funding was provided to St. Mungo's and several other research institutions to find a cure. I help to administrate and coordinate the various projects."

"Are any of the groups studying Muggle medicines?" Hermione asked.

"No, we don't really have anyone with enough of a background to do it safely. Given the complexity of Muggle medicines, and how they can react violently to even the most common of healing potions, it was deemed too unsafe to start experimenting with them. However, if you have had some luck with them, it might be prudent to open that line of inquiry again. Precisely how much research have you done?"

"Mostly theoretical. The lab that I work in does a bit a research into alternate treatments for Muggle diseases like epilepsy and multiple sclerosis, so I've been able to use that as a jumping-off point for treating my own symptoms. I don't have any potions equipment anymore, so I've not tried to combine anything with magic."

The Headmistress looked thoughtful for a moment. "There are several Healers at St Mungo's that I'd like you to speak with. If there is any help to be had, we should be using it, Muggle or no." She paused, eyeing Hermione with familiar intensity. "Hermione, are you planning on re-entering the magical world? Or is this just a visit?"

Hermione felt her face flush red with shame. "I don't know yet. I have a life in the Muggle world... and despite everything, I'm happy there." Looking at the carefully blank faces of the Weasleys, she went on. "I'm not planning on disappearing again, if that's what you are asking. I'd like to have my friends back. I'd like to be able to have a past again. But I don't know if I'll ever come back... not fully at least."

McGonagall gave a sharp nod. "Fair enough for now. If we were able to get you some laboratory space, would you be willing to test out some of your ideas?"

"I... well yes, of course. I would need help though. I haven't done any potions work in ages. Is there anyone that has any sort of background in Muggle chemistry, or medicine that I could work with?"

Shaking her head regretfully, McGonagall replied, "Not anyone with enough background to speak of..."

"What about that mail order potion maker, Simon Janus?" George interrupted. "He's worked as a consultant for us on several rather complicated healing potions that were based on Muggle medications. He's clearly got some sort of science background, and he's a damn fine potion maker."

McGonagall and Mr. Weasley traded a long look. Turning to George, she asked, "George, have you met the man?"

"Nope. We did everything by owl, or email. He works somewhere outside of Manchester, I know that much."
"You have email?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"I'm even on Facebook." George smirked. "Really Hermione, I'm not just a wizard, I'm a businessman. Email can be dead handy sometimes."

"More to the point George, do you think the man... Mr Janus, would be willing to lend a hand?" McGonagall leaned forward as she spoke.

"For the right price, sure. I can send a letter if you'd like." George shrugged. "Listen, I've never met the man, but I know of a good dozen people who have worked with him as an consultant, and he knows his stuff. If St. Mungo's doesn't have anyone who has the background that Hermione needs, then why not use him?"

McGonagall looked at Hermione questioningly. Hesitantly, Hermione said, "I think that would work. It'll take a couple of months to even get beyond the planning stages, anyway. Perhaps by then we can find someone else to work with."

"Very well. Hermione, I will arrange for you to meet with the Healers in the next several days. Send me a proposal of what you'd like to try, and we will go over some protocols. I will also send you copies of St. Mungo's findings. George, if you would send a letter to Mr. Janus, I would appreciate it." With that, she got up from the table. "Molly, thank you for the breakfast. I must return to Hogwarts. If you have any other questions, let me know."

After the Headmistress left, Hermione went out for a walk in the garden to clear her head. Molly joined her a short time later, clearly intent on having a serious conversation.

"Hermione, Arthur and I need to know how you'd like us to handle all of this. I don't want anyone to find out that you've come back via the Daily Prophet; if you are serious about wanting to patch things up, it's better to start working things out now." Taking a breath, she continued. "Would you like me to send owls to Ron, Ginny, and Harry letting them know that you are here?"

Feeling her stomach twist, she shook her head. "No. It would be easier, but I've got to do it. I'm just... I'm terrified, I guess. I'm afraid of them being angry- I deserve it, I should have at least explained things better- but I just couldn't find the words then. I'm not sure that I can explain why I left now. I just had to... " Feeling tears starting to run down her face, Hermione wiped them away with a sleeve.

Mrs Weasley looked at Hermione with some sympathy. "They will be mad at you. Leaving the way you did caused quite a few problems for all of us. More than that, it broke their hearts because they felt like you didn't trust them to help you with a problem." She sighed, "But you weren't the only one that went a little crazy Hermione. Almost everyone had one problem or another. You weren't the only one to run from it all. Even Arthur and I had a rough patch. Now, I don't know if you can fix things. I will say that for our part, Arthur and I are just happy to have you back."

She leaned over and gave Hermione a tight hug. Straightening up, she summoned paper and quill. "Write the notes. Get the worst of over, and then you can properly relax. The stress..." She smiled weakly. "...well, it can't be good for you."

George left for London, and Hermione spent the rest of the day in Ginny's old room, writing out the letters. Hermione, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had just sat down to dinner when the door banged open to reveal Ron, Ginny and Harry in equal states of dishevelment.

Every muscle in her body tensed, and it was all she could do to not run from the table. Mr. Weasley
stood up abruptly. "Why don't you all go into the lounge? You might as well have an uncomfortable discussion where the chairs are soft," he said. Hermione rose with shaking knees, making her way to the doorway. Mr. Weasley spoke again, tone surprisingly firm. "Ronald, Ginevra- remember what I told you." He gestured the three at the door in.

Walking into the lounge, Hermione struggled to corral her thoughts into order. She sat herself carefully into an overstuffed chair, hands clenching spasmodically in her lap. Raising her head to look at her friends, she was rendered still by the changes. Ron and Harry had lost what little childish softness had remained in their faces and forms at twenty; whilst Harry was still on the skinny side, Ron had quite a lot more muscles than she recalled. Ginny on the other hand... she looked...

"Ginny, you're pregnant!" The words fell out of Hermione's mouth before she could stop them. Ginny looked back her, lips pursing in a manner that reminded her of Mrs. Weasley in a snit.

"Yes, I'm due in several months." Her voice was hard. Harry put a comforting- or perhaps restraining- hand on her leg.

"Do you... do you have any other children?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry answered. "This will be our first." He looked over at Ginny, smiling. She relaxed slightly under his warm gaze.

"Do you?" Ron's voice came out of the corner, startling her.

"No, of course not. I'm single..." she trailed off, not really wanting to ask the expected follow-up. Looking up at Ron, she asked, "What about you?"

"No kids. I'm not single though. I live with an American witch."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear of it." Feeling her face once again flush, she struggled to say something that didn't come off as either inane, or terrified. Get it over with! Just apologize already!

"I didn't expect all of you to come so quickly... but I'm glad that you did." Closing her eyes for moment, she gathered up her courage and continued. "I'm so sorry that I left the way I did. I should have said something to you. I should have asked for help. It's just at the time..." She looked at Harry, who was the only one that didn't look angry. "Things just built up over time, and I didn't want to add to anyone else's burdens. And then, when my parents... when I found my parents were well and truly gone, something in me just snapped, I guess. I couldn't think. I could hardly breathe. The only thing that made any sense to me was to leave. And so I did."

"I shouldn't have stayed away so long either. I was just afraid that you all would hate me. I'm sorry, for all of it. I don't know if it's possible to forgive me, but I would like to be part of your lives again."

The last came out in a rush, and Hermione made a conscious effort to unwind her hands.

It was Harry who moved; rising up from the sofa, he knelt at chair and covered her hands with his own.

"Hermione, you held up so well during the worst of it, we never thought that you might be having problems. I'm sorry that we didn't ask enough questions to see that you were struggling." He gave her a grim smile. "You saved my life and supported me at time when I needed it. You were my best friend... and I hope that we can still be good friends. As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing to forgive."

She squeezed his hands, overwhelmed with gratitude and relief. Abruptly, Ginny's voice cut through her revelry.
"You almost got Ron arrested for murder, you know." Hermione swung a startled look from Ginny's furious face to Ron's embarrassed one.

"Ginny... I didn't get arrested. I got questioned." Ron stood up, rubbing his face.

"Ron, what... what happened?" Hermione asked. Again, it was Ginny that responded.

"The Daily Prophet ran a bunch of stories about your disappearance. They accused Ron of murdering you because you wouldn't marry him. That's why he went to go live in America!"

"Come off it, Ginny. I went to America because I wanted to play Quidditch. And it wasn't that big of a deal. They questioned me because they had too, not because they thought I had killed Hermione..." Ron looked awkwardly between the two women.

"Oh god, Ron, I'm sorry, I never thought..." Hermione felt a fresh wave of hysteria push up.

Ron threw up a quelling hand. "Listen, Hermione. I wont pretend that I wasn't really mad at you for a long time. What you did hurt. You weren't just my girlfriend, you were my friend. And you just walked away, without even..." Ron's body tensed as he spoke. "It's probably a good thing you did stay away. But I can't really jump on you for running away. I pulled a runner in the middle of the Forest of Dean. At least you did it once the battle was over." He gave short derisive snort. "I don't know if we can be friends again, but I don't hate you. Even when I was at my maddest, I didn't hate you."

"I cannot believe this!" Ginny hissed. "After all that we had to go through... I'm leaving before I have to hear another word!" Shooting Hermione a venomous look, she swept out of the room. They all jumped as kitchen door slammed.

Giving Hermione's hands a final squeeze, Harry stood. "It's going to take some time, Hermione. Ginny well... a lot of that was hormones. She'll get over the worst of it. She worried about you all the time." Giving Ron a quick hug, he said "I better go before I make it worse. We'll talk more later, okay?"

Molly Weasley walked into the room. "Harry, she's out by the back shed. Ron, have you eaten? I just made supper."

"No, I'm good Mum. I need to return anyway. It'll take me forever to get back, and I've got practice."

Walking to the doorway, he looked back at Hermione and said, "Take care okay? Will you be around for the holidays?"

"I don't know yet. I'll write you though, alright?" she replied quietly, and Ron left.
A/N- As always, I want to give many thanks to my beta, Muggle Jane. She is not just awesome at beta-ing, but she's a great writer too! Check out her story, "Lost".

And you, lovely readers, thanks for following this story, and sending all of the those wonderful reviews and PMs- they certainly motivate me to write faster. Please keep them coming!

Chapter 6 - The Baffled King

Snape spent the better part of two weeks considering his options and making plans. At this juncture, he knew that he would either have to pack up and cut all ties to the wizarding world for good, or somehow reintegrate himself back into the fold as Severus Snape. The decision wasn't hard to make. He was tired of hiding, sick of worrying if today was going to be the day that he'd be discovered. He wanted to be able to publish under his own name again, and be able to have a proper potions laboratory. He wanted... well, if he were forced to it, more than a half life, hidden among the weeds.

Whilst he was fairly certain that he'd not be thrown straight into Azkaban if he re-emerged into the wizarding world, he wanted to make damn sure that if he were to return, he would be doing so in a position of power. To that end, he started working in earnest on several targeted healing potions, aided by the voluminous reports that Lucius sent from St. Mungo's.

When the email from George Weasley arrived in the third week, he almost cackled with glee. As part of the Hogwarts-led research team, Weasley wondered if he would be interested in working for three months on several specialized healing draughts that included Muggle medicines in their formulas. He had included a generous offer- more than his normal consulting fee, all materials covered, and should any of the potions provide to be efficacious, credit for the work. Sending off his agreement, Snape waited to be contacted by the St. Mungo's researchers.

Any humour he felt in the situation disappeared when received an email from Hermione Granger with the project details.

The thought of working with that girl... just the sight of her name caused his blood pressure to soar, and brought back his final, painful, interactions with Voldemort. Her and Potter, standing over him, the world going dim as blood left his body in giant spurts...

It took him almost a full day to calm down enough to even read her email. You know her well enough to manipulate her into getting what you want. After all you did for her and her band of merry men, she'll feel honour-bound to help you. Come now, when have things ever been easy or enjoyable for you? Read the damn email and get on with it. Sitting down grudgingly, he began to read.

The email was long, and was replete with several attachments- hardly a surprise given the writer- but what shocked him out of his anger was the creativity found in the ideas.

The Hermione Granger he knew was brilliant, yes, but not creative. As a student, she had placed all of her faith in books, and almost none on intuition and experimentation. She had been competent in potions only because of her encyclopedic memory and slavish adherence to following directions. Granger had infuriated him, not just because of her relationship to Potter, but because she'd never truly grasped what stood between herself and greatness. It wasn't the talent that she lacked; rather it was the self-confidence in her own skills that held her back. She'd been so afraid of failure, so
terrified to be one foot in the wrong that she had never dared to stretch beyond the accepted boundaries.

But the email... what she proposed to do was exceedingly complex, and so utterly out of the box, that had he not been reading the research reports from St. Mungo’s, he would have doubted it as originally hers.

Muggle medicine could work on magical folk, as long as the injury or illness was non-magical in origin. Injuries or illnesses caused by dark magic—really, any complex magic—could not be subsumed by Muggle medicine due to it's non-metaphysical genesis. What Granger proposed to do was first use a series of charms on several different types of medications to... finesse them onto the magical plane, and then use the drugs as the foundation for healing potions. She theorized that, much like the Muggle drugs, they would have to be used in cycles, and in careful tandem with each other...

It was absolutely mad. It was also absolutely brilliant. Pulling out a sheet of paper, Snape began to take notes.

It took almost two months of constant emailing back and forth before Snape was prepared to start the first set of trials. They had finally settled on a Muggle steroid, prednisone, because of its effectiveness as an anti-inflammatory; St. Mungo’s researchers had posited that part of the reason the disease progressed in some patients was due to a cycle of inflammation constantly re-aggravating neural connections.

The email exchanges between himself and Granger proved to be rather... invigorating. Her knowledge of Muggle biology and chemistry far outweighed his, and she constantly challenged his personal ideas of what was possible in potions, as well as magic in general. She wanted the reason behind everything— but as she wanted the knowledge in order to experiment, rather than regurgitate the information at a later date— he found the trait far less annoying than in years begone.

Granger clearly had no clue who she was corresponding with, and the occasional personal aside gave him a brief glimpse into the adult woman. He gathered that she had been living as a Muggle, which surprised him almost as much as her continued creativity. Despite himself, he was rather intrigued by the changes, and found himself looking forward to her daily missives. Be honest. You've enjoyed having this bit of meaningful human contact. You weren't a born ascetic, longing for the life in a hermitage.

And so he sat, staring at the blank screen of an email; to invite her to the trial, or not? He knew that he would have to reveal himself eventually if he wanted to use her to gain a secure situation, but he found himself uncharacteristically unwilling to jeopardize the working camaraderie of their relationship. What the hell... she won't hate you any less if you wait. And seeing her in person might help break this unhealthy fascination with her mind. Mind made up, he began to type.

I may regret issuing this invitation, but would you like to assist me on the first set of experiments?

Hermione stared in shock at the screen. She knew precious little about Simon Janus other than he was a brilliant potions maker, and that he guarded his privacy assiduously. She had thought, somewhat fancifully, of asking to attend but had chickened out when it came to it.

But he had asked her to assist him... Oh, admit it, Hermione. You're being eaten alive with curiosity over the man. He's bloody brilliant, and you've been tossing ideas back and forth like candy. Of course you want to meet him!
When their correspondence had begun, she'd been relieved that he had made no comment about her name, or her rather inglorious and well-known past. The sheer joy of thinking about magic again, of being able to throw all of her ideas out on paper and damn the consequences, had brought far more enjoyment than she'd thought. Add that to the relief of finally dealing with her severed past, of trying to fix whatever was wrong with her, and she'd been positively giddy most days.

So, are you going to be all namby-pamby about meeting the man, or are you going to risk it?

As the 10:30 train from Manchester pulled in to Blackrod, Severus Snape cursed himself as the world's biggest fool. He knew now that inviting Granger had been a fit of sheer vanity and ego on his part. You should have waited until you had something foolproof to bargain with. Instead, you felt the need to show off. When has that ever worked out well for you? He would be exceeding lucky if she didn't try to hex him, and then get straight back on the next train to London. Standing under the clock that they'd agreed to meet under, he wondered if he could sneak away and claim unavoidable illness, like Spattergroit.

As passengers began to file off the train, he scanned the faces of the people walking by. It was her hair that gave her away. It was less bushy than he remembered, and darker, but the wealth of curls drew his attention all the same. She was halfway down the platform before she locked eyes with him, and it took her a couple of steps to realize just who was waiting for her.

Snape was prepared for an outburst of emotion; he didn't get it. Instead, he watched as every trace of feeling was wiped clean from her expression, turning the delicate curves of her face into stone. Her steps didn't as much as falter in their progress towards where he was standing. In a matter of moments, she stood in front of him, unreadable as the tea leaves in this morning's cup.

"Professor Snape." Her voice was lower than he remembered, and like her countenance, carefully blank.

"Miss Granger." He inclined his head. "Surprised to see me?"

She took a moment to answer. "No, not really. Had I thought about it, I might have guessed that it was you. After all, there are what... only three potion masters, including yourself, in all of Great Britain? I should have put it together." Her chin came up with a well-known flash of pique. "And it's Doctor, not Miss Granger. Sir."

"Doctor, hmm? And here I am, no longer a professor..." He jeered at her softly.

Her eyebrows creased at that. "Unless I very much misunderstood events, you were neither sacked nor did you resign. Thus, technically, you still are a professor. Headmaster, when it comes to it. Would you prefer that I address you by that?" Her gaze remained calmly upon his.

"Finally grew claws, did you?" He gave a short laugh. "No, I suppose Professor will do as well as anything." They stood in silence, breaths creating identical clouds of vapour. "Do you still wish to assist me?"

She nodded once. "As the results of this line of inquiry are rather important to me, yes, I do believe I will."

"You suffer from this collection of maladies as well, I take it?"

"Yes." Her voice conveyed a hint of frost.

"In that case, I'm parked over there." Pointing toward the commuter lot, he started forward.
As the black wool of his overcoat billowed behind him in the parking lot, Hermione fought off the sense of deja-vu that that evocative scene provoked. *Even in Muggle clothing, he has a flair for the dramatic. I wonder if the Muggles are just as intimidated by him as we were? And then, Oh, god... Professor Snape is alive!*

As she trailed behind him, Hermione started to catalogue the differences in hopes of staving off the panicked questions threatening to overtake her brain. So... he looked different. Not younger precisely, and definitely not older, just different. He wasn't cadaverously thin anymore; that helped. Rather, he had the lean frame of a runner, much complimented by the masculine fluidity that had always marked his movements. His hair wasn't hanging in lanky, greasy sheets around his face. Instead, it was pulled into a neat sable queue that oddly fitted his strong facial features.

He turned his head back suddenly to look at her, black eyes glittering with oft-familiar impatience. Registering that she was struggling to keep up, he slowed his pace somewhat. The turn of his head highlighted the large scars on his neck. Scars from Nagini... Pushing back that surge of memories, Hermione turned her gaze out to the parking lot. *So, let's guess which car is his.* There weren't many to chose from, and she immediately discounted the lone BMW, and several battered estates. The nearest car had a child seat, and she strongly doubted that he'd drive a lime green, lowered Mark III Jetta. That left a red Honda, or a blue Vauxhall. *The Vauxhall then?*

Professor Snape pulled out a pair keys and the lights on the Vauxhall blinked. *Points to Gryffindor,* Hermione thought wryly.

Snape used the excuse of checking an intersection to glance down at the woman sitting next to him. Miss Granger, *Doctor Granger,* he thought snidely, sat with hands folded in lap, idly looking out the windscreen. She hadn't asked a single question during the ride; had not said anything, in fact. He wondered what it would take to break her apparent composure. Marshalling his thoughts toward the day's work, he gave in and broke the silence.

"You have been living as a Muggle, correct?"

"Yes." Again, that slight edge of frost.

"Relax, Doctor Granger," he said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "I am not asking because I am curious, or because I wish to have a little chin wag." The last part he stressed with a heavy dose of scorn. "I am merely trying to determine what your level of magical skill is, and how much you can be trusted with."

"Any prep work, certainly. The beginning charms, and I should be able to oversee some of the potions work if we get that far. The serious magical work, no, and not the foundations of the potions. I have been too long outside of the magical world for that to be a good idea."

Silence.

"What is the plan for the day, sir?" Finally, Snape thought. *A question.*

"I have chosen ten different charms to try on the prednisone- mostly of the strengthening variety, but others to enhance different aspects of the drug as well. I want to see which will stick, and test them under different stressors to see if any will stay stable." He slowed the car down to turn onto the lane that his cottage was on. "Should any of the variants hold up, then we might see what affects adding them to potion creates. Today will be a day of trial and error, Doctor Granger."
At half past six, Snape finally called a halt to experiments. Of the ten charms that had been tried, only two had managed to stay somewhat stable while keeping to the chemical composition of the prednisone; four others had failed to make any sort of effect on the prednisone, and three had turned the liquid caustic enough to weaken the glass beakers. The last had unexpectedly exploded in a dramatic cloud of green flames.

Whilst she still resembled the inquisitive know-it-all from Hogwarts, Granger's manner had altered radically enough to make working with her not unpleasant. She didn't badger him with questions; she didn't overwhelm the room with her messy emotions and a need to please. Hermione Granger simply worked as requested, a small, enigmatic smile occasionally ghosting across her face.

Looking up from his notes, Snape eyed Granger, who was hand-washing beakers at the back sink.

"Will you be taking the train home?"

She looked back at him. "No, I was hoping to Apparate and save the journey back."

"The front porch is warded to allow it." She nodded, and resumed washing. Gathering up the last of dirty beakers, Snape walked over to the back table. As he sat the items down, his stomach gave a loud, and rather undignified rumble. Catching the noise, Granger began to smile, until hers responded quite emphatically in return. A light flush spread over her face, and embarrassed, she looked down at the glassware in her hands.

*In for a penny, in for a pound,* he thought with sour humour. "Would you care to stay for supper, Doctor Granger?"

"That would be much appreciated."

Granger ate with the economical grace of someone lost in thought. Watching her under half-veiled eyes, Snape caught the flicker of that small smile again. *What on earth has she been smiling about all day? Do I even want to hazard a guess at what she has been plotting?*

Abruptly she came to, as if sensing his increased attention. She focused on his face for a moment, and then put her fork down.

"I'm not going to reveal your whereabouts, Professor Snape. If that's what has you worried, you can breathe easy."

"I was not worried that you would disclose anything." *Little does she know I plan on her telling others...*

"Why the look then?" She kept her eyes on him, gaze placid.

"You've been smirking all day. It makes me wonder what you are planning, and if I need to hide my boomslang skin from you again."

She snorted at that. "Not likely. If I wanted to make a Polyjuice potion, I know where to buy the ingredients." Tilting her head slightly, she said in a soft voice, "You are alive."

"And...?" he queried at the non sequitur. At his response, she shook her head.

"I am grateful that you are alive. That's why I've been smiling. After all that was lost..." she looked down at her plate for a second, and Snape caught the faintest hint of grief as the meaning of her words penetrated his brain. "...after all that was lost, you are not dead. You risked more than most,
and it always seemed to be the cruelest sort of irony that you received no reward for what you did. I am grateful that you live."

Her speech seem to hit him with the effect of a full body binding curse. Snape struggled to control the riot of emotions that her words engendered; tongue finally loosened by rage, he spat the only thing that was coherent amongst his thoughts, "Grateful? Your noble little Gryffindor soul is grateful that I live? Yes, you would be, especially as I am once again working on your behalf!"

Anger lit her eyes a fierce amber as she struggled to hold back her temper. "This work has nothing to do with it!"

"Oh, no?" he drawled spitefully. "You certainly did go to great lengths to preserve my life the night Voldemort fell. Such an abundance of gratitude then!" For a bare second, the comment seemed to hit her with all of the physical force of a punch; shame, anger, and pain rippled across features. Dimly, he became aware that they were both leaning over the kitchen table, shouting at each other; Granger's hair resembled Medusa's locks as it crackled and shifted with the sheer force of magic spinning around them.

As quickly as it appeared, the passion that animated Granger's face disappeared. In a flat voice she asked, "Tell me, Severus Snape, what do you regret?"

The painful question hung in the air for a long moment before she went on. "More than anything in my life, I regret not attempting to help you. I regret that I did not stay with you. I regret not coming back to find you. I have relived your death as often as you probably have. It is profoundly humbling to find out that my fear and many mistakes did not cost a man his life." She straightened up from the table stiffly, resembling nothing more than a worn marionette.

"I know that the world is neither fair or kind. But knowing that you lived, and made a life for yourself... it makes me deeply thankful. Utter bastard you may be, I am still grateful that you lived."

In that moment, time seem to stop, and he saw her as a stranger might. She looked so perfectly ordinary in a dark blue jumper and jeans, softly illuminated by the dim light of his kitchen. Her words however... oh, they were so far from ordinary. He had no doubt that she meant them, those bloody Gryffindor words of gratitude and regret. Therein lay the rub; she saw valour in his actions, a reason to expect reward. He saw... a mountain of regret. A lifetime of atonement which had only produced more indemnity.

Then time started again, and he heard the sound of harsh laughter. It took him several beats to realize that it came from him. He had to give Granger credit: she didn't look confused or scared by his sudden outburst. She didn't bat an eye, just stood there with that same unreadable countenance that she'd displayed at the train station. And so he laughed at his folly, and hers.

He sat finally, muscles threatening to give out, and stared at her over the expanse of the kitchen table. "I am alive, Doctor Granger. Thus by definition I did not, in fact, risk more than most in our little battle. But you are correct about one thing. I received no reward for what I did. Do you know, I have ever only asked for three things; for the life of Lily Evens to be spared, for privacy, so that my motives would be unknown to all but Albus Dumbledore... and when those two were gone, death."

He gave a shallow copy of his previous laugh. "She was my first and only friend. The first person I learned to trust; the only person I have ever loved. And I... I am responsible for her death. Do you want to know what I regret, Doctor Granger?"

He paused, memories of Lily shining brightly in his memory for a brief moment. Vivid red hair and the scents of spring intertwining with sunshine; a girl's joyful laugh, and the discovery that he was
not totally alone in the world.

"I absolutely rue the day I became friends with her. Had I not..." he shook his head slowly, hands idly stroking the fine blonde grain of the table top. "Had I not, I never would have learned to care, or to wish for love, to long for friendship and trust. I could have gone my entire life without knowing the utter futility of regret." He looked up then. She hadn't moved, and her face was still impassive. But parallel tracks of wet tears ran down her face, unchecked.

Voice painstakingly gentle, he went on. "I don't want to care, Doctor Granger. I don't want to live, when it comes to it. But every time I've tried to end it, I wake up the next morning, infinitely more worse for the wear, still damned, still alive. I seem to have little choice in the matter. My only hope is that should I be forced into battle again, it will be my last."

"Go. Please."

Granger picked up her plate, and lightly put it in the sink. Turning back around to face him, she said carefully, "Thank you for supper, and for letting me watch the first trials. I'll email you my notes in the next several days." She walked out of the kitchen, and Snape heard the front door opening followed a scant second later by the crack of her Disapparation.
"Tell me, Severus Snape, what do you regret?"

After Granger left, he remained sitting at the kitchen table, all emotions drained from as if the last conversation had been a sieve. Dully, he watched the clock, registering as it struck seven-thirty, and then eight.

He had just started making plans to get up when he felt the wards flicker, and heard the crack of someone Apparating onto the porch. Granger wouldn't dare come back, would she?, he thought with some dismay. Then, a single knock. Not Granger, then.

The person didn't wait for a response, and he heard the sound of firm boot heels on the wood floor. Shifting slightly, he gazed at the doorway. Minerva McGonagall stepped into the kitchen.

"Good evening, Severus," she said.

"Minerva." He tried to conjure up some curiosity at her presence, some anger at her presumption. He failed.

She hesitated slightly before speaking. "You look like you could use a cup of tea." Her Scots-brogue was more evident than he remembered.

As Minerva waited patiently for a response, it dawned that she was waiting for him to respond. Reluctantly, he pointed towards the sink. "Right cupboard. I'm out of milk."

Opening up the cupboard, she rummaged through the selection teas before settling on a ginseng and rosehip mixture. Deftly she lit the stove, and put the kettle on. Rather than speaking, she peered abstractly out the dark kitchen widow while the water heated up, lost in her own thoughts. He merely watched her. The intervening years had not been kind; she looked tired, and old.

As the kettle started the rumble that was prelude to the whistle, she pulled two cups out of the drying rack and placed them onto to the table. Taking a small silver flask out of her robes, she poured a healthy splash in the mug closest to her. Looking questioningly at him, she suspended the flask over his cup.

Snape raised an eyebrow at the flask. She sighed, and said, "We all have our ways of coping, Severus. I am not the first Headmistress of Hogwarts with a weakness for drink. I doubt very much I'll be the last. Yes, or no?"

"Yes." She put the same amount in his cup and fetched the kettle. Pouring the tea, she sat down at the table, delicate hands encircling the warm cup. He took an experimental sip of his tea and grimaced.

"Whiskey and rosehip are not a good paring."

She shrugged her shoulders philosophically, and took a measured drink. "Oolong would have been worse." The both sipped at their tea halfheartedly, silence punctuated only by the clock.

He was staring to wonder if she would ever get to the point of her visit when she spoke. "I have just come from Miss Granger's. She did not give you away, incidentally. Somewhere in her travels she learned to lie, and lie well."
Snape just stared at her, drink and exhaustion making it almost impossible to make sense out of her statement.

"She emailed George this morning to inform him of her plans to visit you." Extracting a small crystal fastened to a sliver chain from out of her robes, she gently sat the item on the table. It swirled a shade of deepest violet, edged here and there with a heavy black or oxblood red. He found the fragile object strangely compelling, and without meaning too, reached across the table and brushed his fingertips across the prism.

A piercing sorrow enveloped him, flavoured with undercurrents of guilt and icy fury. Cautiously, he removed his fingers, and the feelings disappeared, rendering him once again numb. He touched a second time, and he picked up on a forth feeling: bone-deep wariness. He withdrew his hand totally and looked up at Minerva.

"It's a rather lovely bit of charms work, isn't it? Aldrich Weasley made it many years ago. It allows a window into another's feelings, provided they are wearing the second half of the necklace." Regard steady, she went on. "Hermione Granger is wearing the other half; Arthur gave it to her six years ago. I asked Molly Weasley to keep an eye on it today. Apparently it's gone through quite the rainbow. She called me almost two hours ago when it turned completely black."

"Yes, I imagine it would have done." Snape said.

"Unfortunately, it only tells the feelings of the bearer, not the location. I waited at her flat for almost an hour before she arrived, very much a mess. She said that she was crying because she had made a mistake during Apparition. I didn't press the subject, just gave her a drink and put her to bed."

"And having given me tea, will you now be putting me to bed, Minerva?" Snape said, trying for his normal level of scorn.

"If you asked," she said gravely, "then yes, I would." She poured more tea into her cup and offered seconds to him. He shook his head, the feeling of internal disengagement at last subsiding.

"Why are you here?"

"Severus, your existence is all but an open secret now. I've done all that I can to ensure your privacy, but between Lucius' supercilious comments and your potions work, people are starting to talk in earnest. Have you made any plans?"

"I had planned to manoeuvre Doctor Granger into helping me gain a secure position by threatening to halt my part of the potions work," he said somewhat acerbically. "Perhaps I can blackmail you instead?"

"Do you wish to come back?" she returned simply.

"No, not particularly. I have very little interest in the wider wizarding world." He sighed, feeling an echo of the necklace's wariness. "But I'm tired of hiding, and have no wish to live out the rest of my life as a Muggle. I'm tired of playing the waiting game, Minerva. If I am forced to continue this mortal coil," he said, finally managing to inject a fair amount of sarcasm into his voice, "then I shall damn well do it as Severus Snape, and do as I please."

For a second, Minerva's eyes glittered with strong emotion. "Good for you. I can offer sanctuary at Hogwarts, should you so want it."

"Under what conditions?" He couldn't manage a sneer. He had not ever imagined that he would ever be invited back to that place... the one place that had felt like home.
"None." Her reply was absolute. "If you want to teach, I know Horace will gladly bow out. The man might as well be a ghost for all of the life he has left in him. If you would prefer to have no contact with students, and not participate in castle life, then we shall arrange it thusly. I will, of course, provide you with a potions lab, and you will have full access to the Library and anything else you need. You will not be required nor requested to do anything that you do not wish to do. I will swear it under an Unbreakable Vow, if you so desire."

He sat back in the chair, completely stunned at her offer.

"Kingsley and several others have pushed through an irrevocable pardon for you in the Wizengamot; there will be no further problems from the Ministry concerning your previous actions." She said that last bit with quiet relish.

"Who else pushed the pardon through?" It was the only question he could think to ask, as the rest of his mind was busy spinning with the possibilities of returning to Hogwarts.

"Arthur, and Horace also used his influence with the Slug Club to good effect. Mr. Potter, of course."

"Naturally." Snape said. "What is the situation at Hogwarts?"

"As I said, Horace is in dire need of a replacement. He does the Slytherins no favours by remaining. However, I have not been able to find an acceptable long-term replacement for him, either in potions or as Head of House. We have fewer students than in other years, although enrollment has been increasing gradually for the last five. Given the number of students who left the school early because of the troubles, we decided to reinstate the practice of apprenticeship so that those who wished to finish N.E.W.T. Level qualifications could do so without having to return as a student." She paused to think. "There are several new staff members, including an American. Filius and Pomona are still heads of house; Neville has taken over for Gryffindor."

At this he laughed. "That must have stung, Minerva."

Pursing her lips, she said, "He is not the child you remember, Severus."

"No, none of them are the children that I remember." He spoke the last with some self-deprecation, and pointedly glanced down at the crystal necklace sitting on the table between the two of them. A faint smile crossed Minerva's face at that admission.

"I'll not lie to you Severus. I would prefer to have you back at Hogwarts as a professor, and head of house again. You are the best man for the position."

"It sounds as if I am the only man for the job," he interrupted.

"There are others. None who have the qualifications and talent that you do, and none who will fight for the Slytherins as you would. There are also none who I trust as much as you."

He felt nascent roll of anger begin in his gut. "Ah, shades of my conversation with Granger... "So you trust me now? How very... convenient."

She ignored the withering comment. "I am well aware that you do not like to hear about feelings of others, so I will only say this; had I known what Albus was planning to do- in regards to the sacrifices that he expected from both you and Potter- you would not have had to kill him." She suddenly looked very mad, and every inch a Scot; even her tartan scarf seemed to glower fiercely in the muted light of the kitchen.
"No, had I but known what Albus was planning, I would have gladly killed him myself." Green eyes vehement, she intoned the next words with care and precision. "It was wrong. Very wrong. He had no right to leave you alone like that, and not in the mess that he did."

She gave him a grim little smile of satisfaction. "Do you know, it took his portrait almost three years to work up the courage to come into the office when I was in it?" At that comment, she stood and picked up her cup.

"I would welcome you back to Hogwarts in any capacity, Severus. We will make do, regardless. Please let me know what your decision is, or if there is another way that I can assist in your transition." She walked over the sink and placed her cup on top of Granger's plate.

"Good night." Giving him a firm nod, she walked out of the kitchen. He heard the front door open, then shut, and her Apparition.

Twenty minutes later, he had managed to drag himself into bed, and was struggling to pull the covers up when he heard a gentle whoosh. He sat up quickly, wand in hand. At the foot of the bed stood the silvery form of a Patronus. It was a large tabby cat with spectacle markings around the eyes.

The cat paced up the length of the bed, and imperiously head-butted him back down into the mattress. With a condescending flick of its tail the Patronus walked to where the blankets were puddled and started to pull them up to Snape's shoulders. Relaxing into his pillow, he could only think, *Merlin, what a day*, before falling asleep to the sound of purring.
Sleeping to Dream

A/N:

_Trauma always manages to claw it's way out of the dark recesses of our minds; it will only play second fiddle to the events in our lives for so long before resurfacing. Trauma eventually interrupts the plot of everyday life because it doesn't fit what came before, or what happened after. It changes you in ways large and small, and it can take years to even began to detect those differences._

_How do you pick up the pieces when you are still breaking?_

**Chapter 8- Sleeping to Dream**

Hermione lay in the filthy earthen passageway beneath the Whomping Willow, shivering with terror and panic. She had to get to the Shrieking Shack. If she didn't make it in time, everything would all be for naught... She crept forward, fear making every millimetre a struggle. After what seemed an interminable distance, she finally made to the end of the tunnel. Above the frenzied sound of her beating heart, she could hear a terrible gurgling, a faltering rasp of breath coming from the room beyond her. It had to a be a person, and those noises... those horrible noises scared her so badly... Pausing at the small opening, she worked to control her breathing, not to give away her location. Could she wait for those sounds to cease in the room beyond, or should she risk peeking out to see?

"Look... at... me..." said a ragged, insistent voice. Professor Snape.

The realization of who lay in the room propelled her forward, half-stumbling over dusty crates and broken furniture, almost slipping face first when her feet hit the large puddle of crimson blood. Professor Snape lay sprawled in the middle of the floor, throat ripped open wide, hands spasmodically clenching at the gaping wound, blood running through his fingers like water running out of a hose.

His ferocious black eyes fastened on hers as she fell to her knees in front of him; as she struggled to remember a healing charm, CPR, anything to help, his body gave a final jerk and went still.

"No. No. No no no no no!" she chanted frantically, rolling him to his back, her hands gone slick with his blood. There had to be something she could do...

A scream from farther in the shack lit the air with a new terror. Ripping her gaze from the dead man, she stared at the closed door on the other side of the room. A second yell sounded, this time male. Urgent.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" she whispered to Professor Snape. "I waited too long. I should have hurried. If I go now, maybe I can help them!" Scrambling to the door, she flung it open. A man in a dark robes stood in front of her, laughing maniacally. Crying out, she stepped back. But the man didn't step into the room. It wasn't a man after all, but a life-size portrait hanging in the hallway.

The portrait laughed again and it hit her who it was: Martson Mortaine. The first man she had ever killed.

"Too late Mudblood! You're too late to help them!" he cackled with glee. The screams sounded again... and they were familiar to her.

Then she was running down an impossibly long hallway, catching brief glimpses of other laughing,
taunting portraits. Other dead men and women that she had killed.

Faster and faster, and the end of the hallway appeared; the shaft was illuminated with a shifting, flickering, malevolent orange light. *Oh god, fire!* She felt the terrible pressure of the heat first, felt it singe hair and suck the air right out from her lungs. And then she saw into the room, and saw who was crouched in the corner, unreachable through a wall of flame.

Her parents. Clinging hard together, giving as much comfort as possible whilst fire danced over their clothes, melting skin and hair into masks of pain and horror.

"Not long now, my darling... it won't be much longer.." her father coughed out, stroking her mum's back in that familiar way.

Then her Mum looked up and saw her, stretched a charred and clawed hand out in supplication.

"Help us, please, oh please help us! It hurts so much..." The air smelled of eucalyptus and burning flesh and Hermione was on her knees again, begging, trying to find a way though fire.

"Mum! Dad...! Just hold on, I'm coming! Just... please!"

Her father had stopped moving; as her Mum's head melted onto his shoulder, she looked straight at Hermione and asked, "Who are you?"

Hermione woke up screaming, sheets twisted tightly around her legs. Feeling her stomach heave, she frantically clawed at the bedding to free herself. Finally hitting the floor with a painful thump, she made it to the loo just in time to retch up the remains of supper.

She continued to gag long after her stomach became empty. When the spasms eventually ceased, she found herself shaking and sweating on the cold tile floor, sides aching so badly that she wondered if she'd broken ribs. Hauling herself up to the faucet, she rinsed her mouth out and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Utterly blank face, wild, fulgid eyes. Taking deep breaths in, she fought hard to regain some semblance of composure.

It took twenty minutes for the person in the mirror to look like Hermione Jean Granger. It took almost as long again to get her thoughts back in order, to get everything tucked back in the proper boxes and bins in the recesses of her mind. Finally releasing her death grip on the edges of the sink, she stepped back and made her way unsteadily towards her bedroom.

Her night terrors had been a nearly constant presence for the first three years after she'd left the magical world; only after she'd completely failed a bio-chem exam for a third time at the end of her senior year had she sought help from a university counsellor. She had been forced to lie, and leave out much of what haunted her, but talking about matters had helped somewhat with the panic attacks and dreams. Better yet, the counsellor had given her several books on treating PTSD, and from those beginnings she'd managed to cobble together a facsimile of mental stability.

Returning to the wizarding world, to the Weasleys, and all she'd left behind hadn't brought the expected re-emergence of the night terrors. That had been a happy surprise, but she had known that eventually she would have to make peace with the entirety of her memories. Even without their fight, seeing Professor Snape would have been enough of a trigger; he had been a frequent nocturnal spectre in years past. Little wonder she'd had the dream again...

She knew without a shadow of a doubt that she'd not be able to go back to sleep, despite it only being a quarter past four. Casting her eyes about for a distraction, she saw her notebook sitting on the bedside table. *I might as well type up my notes from the trials now... but will it do any good?* She
saw Professor Snape's expression as she'd left him; defeat carving bleak lines into his face, dark eyes dead and flat. *Do you really think that he'll continue to work on the project after that delightful bonding session? Jesus, will I even get him to speak with me again?*

The day had gone ridiculously, surprisingly, well. After the first awkward hour they had settled into their respective tasks, and she'd enjoyed not only working serious magic again, but watching Professor Snape's deft and confident castings. She'd caught herself more than once just staring at him in downright awe, his Muggle clothes standing in clear counterpoint to the complex magic that he was weaving. Indeed, he was as much a scientist as he was wizard, and when they'd stopped for afternoon tea, they'd launched into a roaring debate over the use of medical charms versus potions in the terminally ill. Oh, he'd still been Professor Snape; still sarcastic, biting, rapier wit ready to skewer at her first misstep. His attacks hadn't been personal, however, and he'd even given in on several of her finer points. Until dinner, their shared history hadn't even really come up.

And then she'd been a consummate idiot. "I am grateful that you live."

After that pleasing bon mot, she'd compounded the monumental error by letting her emotions get the best of her. Her question concerning regret had been deliberately cruel, given what she'd seen of his memories and knew of his life. How she'd got out of there without being torn to bits...

"I could have gone my entire life without knowing the utter futility of regret."

She had run away from her friends and life because her emotions had threatened to break her into a million useless pieces. But even on her worst day, she'd not wished those friendships, those bonds, gone. She could not, did not, want to think about how bad things must have been for Severus Snape if he wanted to erase memories of his only friendship. Just the thought of it caused her breath to catch, and she resolutely pushed the gut-wrenching thoughts away. So, the notebook; she needed to work on something productive. Even if Professor Snape refused to work further with her, the notes from their experiments would be important.

Snagging her laptop from the desk, she walked over to the window seat and sat down. Since she was up so early, she might as well watch the sunrise while she worked.

Snape dreamed of Hogwarts. Good dreams, of his first properly clean and comfortable bed, laboratories and libraries where everything was possible, of space and blessed silence. Bad dreams where everything had been defiled by his own hand, of being pursued down long, cold, stone hallways and mocked endlessly by a stag, werewolf, dog, and rat. He dreamt of killing Dumbledore. Then he sat with Lily in a tree, watching the sun set over the lake. Happy.

He woke with tears running down his face, the lingering scent of a spring evening, blooming willow and Lily perfuming the air. He stared at the ceiling of his bedroom for a long time, remembering. The tears were dry by the time he got up and threw on a pair of old sweat pants and a t-shirt. Once in the kitchen, he pulled on a pair of battered trainers, shivering slightly in the pre-dawn chill.

Exiting out the garden door, he made for the gate that led to the bridle path. He set off at a slow jog, navigating by the dappled silver light of the full moon falling between the hedgerows. As his back and legs loosened up, he ran faster, and faster still as the whispers of his memories were drowned out by the steady pound of feet and heart.

He let the cold night air flow over his body, air so heavy with damp that it almost felt like water caressing his skin. He ran until the moon set and the sun rose; until silver and black had been replaced by bright yellows and verdant greens. Finally, he stopped and sat on the sandy shore of the Lower Rivington Reservoir, the tumbled ruins of Lever Castle at his back.
The sun was warm on his face, and the breeze coming of the dark waters of the reservoir seemed to push the last fragments of his dreams away.

He was greedy man; he'd not decline Minerva's offer of going back to Hogwarts. For all of the bad that had happened there, the memory of his first steps onto the Hogwarts grounds remained firmly etched in his mind as irrevocably wonderful. He'd stepped out the little rickety rowboat, soaked from the lake and cold rain coming down in sheets, sick with worry over his forthcoming sorting... and felt Hogwarts welcome him. Magic, warm and comforting, had embraced him, had danced over his skin in recognition and joy. Despite the horrid September weather, he would have sworn that he'd felt a warm breeze touch his face and smelled sweet flowers and spice. In that instant, Hogwarts wasn't just home, it became his lodestone.

So yes, he would return. What needed to be decided was if he'd resume his teaching and Head of House duties. The thought of living at Hogwarts, being able to research and brew without the constraints of teaching, of not having to deal with dunderhead students, was incredibly tempting. But that possessive part of his mind, the part that would not let him part with Hogwarts, pressed at him. He knew that there was no way he would be able to stand back whilst some else made decisions for his House, or erred in teaching Potions. And to have the luxury of running Slytherin the way he wanted, without having to cave to external factors... the sheer covetous feelings evoked by that notion made his decision an easy one.

Water lapping at his feet broke his reverie. *No time like the present then*, he thought, and sent his Patronus to Minerva requesting a meeting.
Excrement and Oscillators

Snape had made it back to the house and showered by the time Minerva sent her response; somewhat to his surprise, she indicated that she was free currently and would be happy to meet him at the cottage. He had just started cooking French toast when she knocked; upon opening the front door, he saw that she looked no better than the previous evening. Worse even. Minerva McGonagall was one of the most precise and fastidious people he knew- which was little surprise given her predilection for transfiguration- but this morning, everything about her was just a little... askew. From her hair to her robes, there were signs of not just a long night, but many such evenings.

Opening the door wider to admit her, he spoke flippantly. "Looking at you, I am so pleased to not be Headmaster any longer." She grimaced at his words and walked in.

"About that, Severus. As you did not resign or die, technically..."

He gave a curt laugh, and threw up his hands to interrupt her. "Spare me the lecture, Minerva. Doctor Granger already pointed out that salient fact yesterday. It does not bear repeating. Believe me when I say, you are more than welcome to the job. I have no wish to usurp your authority."

"More's the pity. I wouldn't mind watching you eviscerate a certain pair of Hufflepuffs who decided that the full moon was the perfect time to go swimming with the giant squid. The grindylows almost had quite the feast before Hagrid waded in."

"Merlin save us from idiots..." he examined her appraisingly. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I have not."

"In," he said, pointing towards the kitchen table, and walked towards the hob. "I have French toast, and a proper pot of tea."

She sat, and he poured her a cup of tea. Looking at him musingly, she spoke. "French toast is my favourite breakfast."

"I know." He flipped the first slice over and did not look back at her. Dipping two more slices into the egg batter, he fussed over the breakfast until the French toast was done. Placing them carefully on two plates, he walked over to the table and sat.

She was sitting in the chair he had occupied last night, and he felt a momentary flicker of apprehension concerning how quickly things in his life were shifting. Pushing the feeling back, he picked up his fork and began cutting the french toast.

"I would like to return to Hogwarts, and would be willing to do so as both a professor and Head of Slytherin House." She relaxed at his comment, and began eating in earnest. "However, I am giving you notice now that I will make your life a living hell should you attempt to meddle in my affairs, or my House, as Dumbledore did. Do not expect a brand new man; my temperament hasn't changed all that much in eight years. And I meant what I said last night, Minerva. If I am forced to do this, then I shall do it my way or not at all. If you found me frustrating before, you will find me doubly so when I am not walking a fine line between two deluded bastards."

"I am not Dumbledore, Severus. I think that you will find my leadership style..." she parsed words for a moment, "both more inclusive, and less divisive. I do not encourage or support the House
rivalries to the same extent he did, for example. You have other conditions?"

"Although I would prefer to return to Hogwarts sooner rather than later, I think it best for me to take up the position at the start of next school year. Other than the necessary forays into the village to pick up supplies, I have led a very... retired life, shall we say. Bluntly put, I am rather unsocialized. Should I jump straight into teaching duties and Head of House, I am liable to kill a student within the first week."

"You are welcome to start residing at Hogwarts immediately. As we've only three and half months left in the term, I see no issue with waiting until the fall to start your duties."

"Will I be required to take an apprentice?"

"No, not at all. That will be entirely up to you." Putting down her fork, she looked at him calculatingly. "Will you be continuing your work with Miss Granger?"

"Yes," he said dourly. "Assuming, of course, that she can abide by certain ground rules that I will make painfully clear."

"Do you..." at this query, she paused, "... suffer from the same series of maladies? I don't mean to pry, but forewarned is forearmed."

"No, I do not. While there are some mornings that I feel like utter shite, my health complaints are of a more general nature."

"Well, that is a relief." She rubbed her face tiredly, and pushed the last piece of French toast around on her plate. "However, working with Miss Granger may prove to be a bit more complicated than you think."

"In what way?" he drawled impatiently.

"She may be unwilling to come to Hogwarts." That surprised him, and he waited for her explanation.

"I don't know how much you heard about what happened to Hogwarts after Voldemort's death, but the school was attacked several more times by the remaining Death Eaters." Minerva pursed her lips, and a familiar anger coloured her tone. "The last time, Miss Granger was caught by Martson Mortaine while trying to evacuate students. He, and his followers, took her to the Great Hall, broke her wand and proceeded to torture her for several hours."

She swallowed, and visibly worked to keep her emotions at bay. "In the face of three hours of torture, despite being tied up and wandless, she somehow managed to strike back. I don't know the details; she has yet to speak to what exactly happened, but she struck them all down with a variant of Sectumsempra." Again, she worked to control her composure.

"When she walked out of the Great Hall, it looked like an abattoir... and she has yet to return to the school."

Snape sat, for the second time in as many days, absolutely stunned.

"She killed seven Death Eaters using Sectumsempra... without using a wand? After being tortured?"

Minerva nodded. "All were entirely decapitated. We think that it occurred simultaneously. She may not be the dualist that you or I are, but back her in a corner and she is as powerful of a witch as I have ever met."
He sat and thought about the implications found in Minerva's recitation of events. *Sectumsempra* was one of the dark curses that he'd created, and he understood better than most how much rage and magical energy it would take to merely decapitate someone with the spell. Seven people, with no wand... *No, she definitely is not the child you remember.*

"Is that when she left and became a Muggle?"

"No, there was several months' more fighting, and she comported herself admirably. She left a little over a year later, after she discovered that her parents had been killed by wildfires in Australia."

"Yes, I can see why you speak of complicated matters." Looking at the clock, he thought quickly. "It's early yet, and this conversation would be better served with Granger actually present. Do you think she would be willing to join us to discuss going forward?"

Minerva pondered his question for a minute and then spoke. "We won't know until we ask." Closing eyes in concentration, she sent her Patronus flying from her wand.

Snape rose, and returned to the hob. "Do you want more French toast?"

"That would be lovely."

Several minutes passed in silence before Granger's reply came: "I'll be there in twenty."

She arrived in fifteen minutes, and looked even worse than Minerva had. Her hair, scraped back into a ponytail, resembled a hexed poodle. Waxen and pale, it was obvious that she had not slept much, if at all. Still, she was coolly composed; he could detect no hint of the previous evening's tempestuous emotions in her bearing.

"Good morning, Doctor Granger. I trust you slept well?" he said, deadpan.

She didn't falter under his regard, waiting a measured five seconds before responding. "Just Granger, or Hermione. You needn't call me Doctor."

"As you wish." He motioned towards the kitchen. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No."

"I have French toast and tea, should you so wish."

"That would be much appreciated," she said, echoing her response of the previous evening; an intentional mockery he was sure. *Last night's discussion certainly didn't serve to scare or cow her, did it? At least she didn't come bursting in with apologies and explanations. Perhaps there is hope for working together after all...*

Greeting the Headmistress, Granger looked questioningly at the table, which held only two chairs.

"Sit," he said shortly. Leaning with his back towards the sink, he stared down at her for a moment before speaking. "Am I correct in assuming that you have not changed your mind about working with me on this project?"

"I still wish to work with you, yes."

"Very well. There will be several provisos going forward. First, I will not tolerate a repeat of last night. I am not interested in discussing or reminiscing over the past. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."
"Second, there will be no questions of a personal nature. I am not seeking to becoming friends, nor am interested in your private life, or feelings. This relationship is to be of a purely academic sort. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"The last point is not strictly a proviso, but rather a request." Moderating his voice, he went on. "I will be returning to Hogwarts in the near future, and will be resuming teaching and Head of House duties come the fall. Would you be willing to come there to continue any laboratory work?"

At this, Granger glanced at Minerva, who shrugged slightly and said, "I told Professor Snape that you might be reluctant to return."

Granger looked out the kitchen window for a long moment before transferring her gaze back to him. 
_Not fun when others bandy about your private history for public consumption, is it?_

"As long as I can stay clear of the Great Hall, I don't foresee an issue." She sipped her tea, emotionless. _Seven people, wandless..._

"Have we reached an agreement then?" Minerva broke in. He started to voice an affirmative, when Granger spoke.

"I will have your word that you will remain polite and civil at all times." Looking at her, he detected a hint of anger under her words. _And never satisfied unless you have the last say-so..._

"That should not be a problem... for me," he said, letting the barest flicker of a smirk cross his face.

"Then the agreement is acceptable to me." Granger put a slice of French toast of her plate, and began to eat.

"Excellent," Minerva said. "I would like an update on how the first run of experiments went..."

They were interrupted some time later by the arrival of a Patronus. It took Snape a moment to place the silver weasel; he remembered the identity as Arthur Weasley's voice issued forth.

"Minerva, Molly and I are headed to St. Mungo's. Harry just sent word that Ginny has had several large seizures in the past hour..." Fear thickened the next sentence. "There is some concern over the baby. Could you send word if there been any progress with Hermione's project, or any of other the research groups?" The Patronus dissolved.

"I didn't..." Granger looked emotional for the first time all morning. "I didn't know that Ginny was sick too. Have any of the other groups had any success?"

Standing, Minerva placed her napkin on the table. "No, unfortunately not. Do you wish to accompany me to St. Mungo's?"

"Yes. Ginny and I haven't mended fences yet... but yes, I would." Both started for the door.

"Severus, thank you for breakfast. You will let me know when you are ready to return to Hogwarts?"

He stared at the two women, wondering if he was ready to swim in shark infested waters once again.

"Wait." He sighed, and pushed a few strands of hair back from his face. "I have some potions that I made for Draco that could prove to be efficacious. How far along is she?"
It was Minerva who recovered from surprise first. "Almost seven months."

"The potions should be safe then. Give me a moment, and I'll come as well."

Minerva stepped back into the kitchen. "Severus, you don't have to..."

"I can't just send you the potions with a set of instructions, Minerva. I need to be on hand to administer and adjust them." He headed towards the cellar stairwell, scowling back at her, voice biting. "Don't argue with me. I've made up my mind about coming back, and there's no use putting it off. Might as well get the worst over with. It won't be enjoyable regardless."

When Professor Snape emerged from the cellar a scant five minutes later carrying a large basket, he looked like the intimidating teacher from her memory. His Muggle clothes were completely hidden by familiar billowing black robes, and his face was grim and set. He fairly crackled with impatience, and Hermione wondered what on earth had motivated him to not just come back to teach at Hogwarts, but re-enter the wizarding world in such an abrupt fashion. Even the Headmistress appeared slightly taken aback, as if she'd like to argue the point further with him.

He glared back at Minerva, a clear challenge in his flashing black eyes. "Shall we depart, or are we going to stand here for the remainder of the morning?"

"Very well, Severus. Are you familiar with the Healers' entrance to St. Mungo's?"

"Yes," he replied brusquely, and made for the front door.

"Then I shall take Miss Granger, and meet you there."

They found George first, sitting in a private waiting room and looking quietly anxious. His gaze lingered on Professor Snape until Hermione tentatively touched his arm. With a start, he looked down and gripped her hands with his own.

"How is she, George?" Hermione asked.

"Not good. She's had several more seizures since she got here." He looked back to Snape. "Simon Janus, I presume?" There was a slight edge of sarcasm in his tone.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley... I've brought several potions that might stabilize your sister's condition."

"Right then. I'll go grab the Healer, and tell Mum and Dad." He made for the door, but stopped before completely exiting. Looking back at Snape, he said, "Thank you for coming."

Several minutes later, George reappeared with the Healer, a short, stocky man with vivid blond hair; and Arthur.

"Hello, Severus. Minerva, Hermione," said the older man tiredly. "George said that you've brought something that might help?"

"Yes. I've been working on several potions for are not healing draughts per say, but should stop the seizures and help her to recover more quickly."

Arthur nodded. "Harry has given permission for treatment, and Molly and I certainly won't argue."

The Healer spoke. "I'm Richard Brightbrook, Mrs. Potter's Healer. What types of potions do you
"Propose using?"

Before Snape could do more than stare icily at the man, he went on. "I'm not questioning your skill as a potions master, Professor Snape, nor in choosing these particular formulas. I ask as Mrs. Potter's Healer; I need to be sure that what we've already given her will not react poorly, and would like to be able to plan for any complications that might arise."

Hermione heard the deep, measured voice of the professor respond, but could not make out the words. Looking down slowly at her left hand, she saw as if from a great distance the digits flex and pulse, could feel similar twitches and muscle spasms go up her leg.

Oh, god. Not here, not now! Leave, Hermione, find somewhere else to do this...

"Pardon me for a moment..." The conversation paused, but did not falter, and she quickly went out the door.

Hermione had clearly recalled seeing a bathroom on their way to the waiting room, but whether it be from panic or simple misdirection she found herself wandering down an unfamiliar and empty corridor, trying not stumble as cramps periodically rippled down her left side. Please, oh please, I just need to find a quiet room! I do not want to lose it in the middle of St. Mungo's! Seeing a set of engraved double doors that led to an outside space, she made for them. Perhaps if she could see where she was in the grand scheme of the building, she'd be able to find her way back?

She entered a small herb garden, and to her relief, saw that it had several benches tucked amongst the various plants. Making for one in a corner, she started to relax... until she heard the door open behind her.

"Why, if it isn't Miss Hermione Jean Granger," a sickly sweet female voice cooed. Hermione turned, and saw the strong-jawed, bejewelled form of Rita Skeeter advancing towards her. Oh, no... you have got to be kidding me! A flash heralded by a loud, sizzling pop came from her right; Rita was accompanied by a photographer. The flash from the camera seem to linger and fragment in Hermione's vision, creating a kaleidoscope of falling stars in the garden. The spasms abruptly worsened, and she involuntary gasped from pain as she felt a finger of icy fire travel up her spine. Then the garden doors banged open again, revealing a large group of people led by a figure in Healer's green.

Qwik Quill at the ready, and beaming with satisfaction at her sudden audience, Rita simpered, "Tell me, Hermione... is it true that Ginny Potter lost her baby because you've been having an affair with Harry Potter? And he is leaving her for you?"

Hermione's world darkened to narrow band of black, and she felt her knees start to buckle.

The Healer had finally given his consent to administer the potions when Snape realized that Granger had yet to return. Fighting a sense of unease, he moved to the hallway and looked for her bushy-haired figure among the milling people.

Looking at Minerva he asked, "Did you see where Granger disappeared to?" He hadn't missed the muscle spasms in her hand, although he doubted that anyone else had seen them.

Minerva shook her head, "No, I didn't. Arthur, did you see which way Hermione went?"

Snape walked out into the hallway without waiting for his response. Bollocks. She would wander off rather than just admit there is a problem. One would think she would have enough common sense...
we're in a hospital, not bloody Gringotts. Strange medical conditions aren't exactly unheard of here.

A growing rumble drew him over to a bay of windows; looking down onto a herb garden he saw a large crowd... and Rita Skeeter at the helm, advancing towards Granger. Skeeter's grin was all reptilian anticipation, and Granger... Granger looked about two seconds from passing out.

Fuck.

There was a loud crack, and Hermione could see nothing but flowing black. She fought for balance, and her right hand struck something hard and... woollen. Through the ringing in her ears, she could hear a man's voice, absolute fury not at all disguised by the silky-smooth timbre.

As she was wracked by shivers, she realized that her vision hadn't stopped working after all; it was merely blocked by a wall of fabric. Someone had Apparated directly in front of her... Professor Snape?

Robes swirling around him in a most menacing fashion, Snape let the full weight of his anger settle on Rita Skeeter; the woman stumbled back and seemed to be on the verge of collapse herself at his precipitous entrance.

"You... you," was all she managed gasp out, doing a credible impression of a freshly-caught wide mouthed trout.

"Yes, me." The crowd behind Skeeter pressed backwards into the garden walls, looking like nothing more than terrified livestock. "You and I need to have a little talk about a certain book that you wrote... but that will have to wait for another time." He could feel Granger's hand at the small of his back, trembling.

"Unless things have changed, which I very much doubt, reporters are not allowed into St. Mungo's. And yet here you are, harassing people to get a story..." He flicked his wand at the photographer, who yipped as the camera turned red hot. The camera made a rewardingly loud noise as it hit the ground and shattered; absently, he noticed that the man had also wet himself.

In a flash of tartan, Minerva appeared alongside him. She had her wand out, and it appeared that she wanted badly to hex Skeeter.

"Lucky for you, it won't be I who decides your punishment." Reaching backwards, he secured Granger's arm within his grip and Apparated back to the waiting room.

It was an awkward landing. He heard Granger hit the floor with a thump; turning to assess her condition, he found that she was on her knees. Hyperventilating and sweating, her skin had gone alternately blotchy and pale. Her eyes were nothing more than dilated pupils, and shivers raced up and down her body.

"Granger," he said, but she didn't acknowledge his words. Crouching, he grabbed her chin and brought her head up to look at him. "Hermione... look at me!"

At those words, she shuddered and gazed up at him. Taking advantage of her wide-eyed stare, he pushed into her mind.

Battered by too many sensations, Hermione struggled to keep hold of the single thread of conscious left to her. She wasn't in the garden anymore, that much she could tell. She was cold. Freezing. Felt
like she had been dipped into a arctic lake, nerves screaming. She had no control over her body or her thoughts.

Points of heat on her face; strong fingers guiding her head up... then his voice, echoing in the maelstrom of her mind. "Look at me..." Black eyes fierce upon hers. And with a jerk, there was something blazing and unyielding in her mind.

Flashes of memory; his death, blood. The dream, her parents and fire. So much death... "Look at me!"

The presence grabbed at her thoughts as strongly as the fingers on her chin had, and she found suddenly that she could breath again. She felt as if that solid woollen wall from the garden was in her mind, creating space between the memories and her thoughts. The ice melted away. Her body gave a shudder, and began to calm.

Professor Snape's face swam into view, a less than a metre away. She blinked, and could slowly feel various parts of her body come back under her control. Finally the presence pulled away from her thoughts, and she acutely felt the lack of heat in her mind.

"My apologies. I shall endeavour to not use that particular phrase around you." He spoke quietly.

She couldn't read the emotions on Professor Snape's face, could just tell that they were intense. Then the emotions were gone, and he was rising stiffly off the cold stone floor.

He loomed over her for a moment, and then extended a hand down to her. "Do you think that you can stand?"

She reached up. "There's only one way to find out." His hand was a warm contrast to her own. She wobbled for a second before her balance found an even keel. He released her.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Legilimency. It was the only way I could think to calm you down." His tone was wary.

"Oh." She thought about that for a beat. "Better than passing out, I guess."

"Indeed." This time, his tone was rather drier.

She flexed her hand, finally noticing that the muscle cramps had ceased as well. "The spasms stopped as well. Could legilimency work on Ginny?"

He shook his head. "No. You were conscious, and she is not; besides which, some of what you were experiencing," he chose his next words carefully, "was emotional, rather than purely physical."

"I was having a panic attack, you mean."

"Yes."

A commotion at the door interrupted the conversation. Minerva, Arthur, George and several Healers all crowded in; it was the Headmistress who got the first question in.

"Hermione, are you alright? What happened?"

"I'm fine..." She stopped when Professor Snape put up a quelling hand.

"Might I suggest that we postpone this conversation until after we begin treatment on Mrs. Potter?"
Healer Brightbrook stepped forward. "What do you need to start?"

"Several of the potions need to be heated and mixed, in addition to the dosage measured." He picked up the basket containing the brews of the table.

"Right this way," the healer pointed to door across the hallway.

Professor Snape turned back to her. "Do you wish to observe?"

"Yes," she said.

"Come along, then." In a flourish of robes, he strode out the doorway.
Denial is Just a River in Egypt

A/N: Two steps forward and one step back... or is it one step forward and two steps back? I can never remember...

It was almost half past three in the morning by the time Snape was finally prepared to leave St. Mungo's. The day had only become more trying after the incident with Granger. Word had clearly gotten out around the hospital about his return from the dead. When he had ventured out of the potions laboratory, it had been to poorly hidden gawking and stark fear amongst the staff and patients. The stares had put him on edge; a chorus of his own second guessing had progressively muddied his thoughts as the day wore on.

Minerva had arrived along with dinner, bearing the wonderful news that his return - along with Granger's - was to be front page news. She had been apologetic, which had only served to make him more angry. Miracles of miracles, Healer Brightbrook had at least been a decent enough sort to work with; he had the added advantage of not being a former Hogwarts student, being from Canada.

It had also taken most of the day to get Ginevra Potter stabilized. She was still unconscious, but the Healer was cautiously optimistic that she would continue to improve. Other than that pronouncement, Brightbrook was unwilling to make any predictions about her or the baby's eventual health.

Granger had finally been dragged from the laboratory by George Weasley around eight PM; she'd continued to have muscle spasms for the rest of the day, although they remained relatively minor.

With a sigh of relief at the now empty corridors, he made for the Healer's Apparition Point. Turning the final corner, he sighted a man standing in the shadows. At his approach, the man stepped into the light. It was Lucius Malfoy.

"Fancy meeting you here," the man all but hissed. Two spots of red coloured his cheeks, giving a clear hint to the rage all-but-erupting-underneath.

"Lucius." Damn the man. He couldn't wait until a decent hour to have this little conversation?

"I understand that congratulations are in order." Malfoy's hands, he noted, were balled into tight fists. "I will be returning to Hogwarts in the fall, yes."

"Funny how that works. I ask you to help Draco, and the answer is no. You cannot possibly bestir yourself to help your godson, should you risk your precious freedom. But the second Potter's little witch is ill, what do you do? You come running like a proper dogsbody, eager to throw yourself onto the altar of martyrdom once again..." His voice trailed off, dripping scorn.

Snape couldn't help it; he laughed, albeit bitterly. "You think that all this has to do with Potter? How little you know me, Lucius. My days watching over him ended when Voldemort died. He will sink or swim with no help from me, I assure you." He walked forward, robes rustling softly. "And have I not been assisting Draco? Have you not received several new potions in the last week alone?" Anger crept into his voice.

"Admit it, the reason for your anger is that you no longer have the illusion of control over me. You cannot use me for your own gain anymore. And we both know that being outmanoeuvred has always rendered you rather tetchy, hasn't it? But listen well: I will only say this once." He let his
"My life is my own, Lucius. I owe you nothing. I owe your son nothing. Whilst I will continue to provide Draco with whatever medicinal help I can provide, should I have the least little sense that you are plotting against me, or trying to use me, I will not hesitate to kill you." He smiled then, a feral and nasty grin of promise.

"Mark my words: my days of being a plaything for others are over. Stand in my way at your own peril." With that, he Apparated back to the cottage. Opening the door, he summoned several boxes and began to pack his things.

Three days later, Snape stood at the gates of Hogwarts. A rare March sun brightened the air, and the earth around him practically vibrated with fecund anticipation of the coming spring. From somewhere within the grounds, he could hear the sound of children's laughter, and caught a faint whiff of peat smoke.

Peering up at the castle, he registered the differences; there appeared to several new wings built off the main keep, and there were many more small bastions lining the outer walls. All in all, it seemed that changes had been made with defence in mind, rather than any sort of beautifying theme.

He knew that Hogwarts, long the repository for so much magic, was near enough a sentient thing as made no matter. The castle could, and had, protected it's inhabitants in ways large and small. From the moving stairways to the more obvious defensive structures, the castle had ways of making people feel welcomed or not.

As a student, he had often felt the comforting brush of magic, had found secret rooms and many a disused passageway in times of need. As a professor, the magic was more subtle; he had an awareness of where students were, and when they were up to mischief. When he brewed particularly difficult potions, he could feel the castle augmenting his own wards... and on the nights that he had returned from one of Voldemort's excruciating interrogation sessions, his dungeon rooms would be warm, and the solid walls seem to lend him the strength to block out the world around him. During his short and painful turn as headmaster, he had found it easy to manipulate the castle to in order thwart his fellow Death Eaters. From perpetually locking doors, shifting stairways and freezing drafts that no amount of warming charms or wool socks could combat, the castle had assisted him in making life difficult for Voldemort's minions.

What would his reception be this time? He had tortured students as headmaster; had allowed Death Eaters within the protective walls to do the same. Whilst he had Obliviated memories and covered up for the student's rebellious actives when at all possible, there were many occasions when the only way to insure his cover was to inflict damage. Ginevra Potter, for example, had been a frequent visitor to his office.

And so he stood at the gates, afraid to take the three steps forward that would bring him onto the grounds. *You'd better move before someone comes out and sees how long you've standing here, dithering like an old woman. Think; you have the blessing of current headmistress to come here. You won't be thrown out on your arse... hopefully.*

The sound of children coming closer finally propelled him through the gates. For the first two strides, he felt nothing. Then, like a giant wave, he felt the magic of Hogwarts hit him. For an moment it enveloped him so strongly that he couldn't see beyond the nascent runes obscuring his vision; he could hear voices echoing about him... or was it memories? It was as if he were listening to a half-remembered language, body and mind straining to catch that all-important word that would lead to understanding.
Slowly, the magic around him ebbed, leaving him with a feeling of warm acceptance, of joy and homecoming. He found that he was standing on the steps to the castle, and the air carried hints of sweet clover honey, saffron and orange blossom. He blinked back tears, and the vivid recollections of his first moments at Hogwarts so many years before. The creak of the front door opening gave him enough warning to bury his emotions before Minerva's confused face appeared.

"What on earth was all that?" She open the door wider, and he could see down the dark length of the long hallway.

Voice a little husky, he replied, "I believe Hogwarts was saying hello."

"Oh." Her posture lost a bit of tension, even as her tone turned ceremonial and crisp. "As Headmistress of Hogwarts, I offer you sanctuary and protection within our walls for as long as you wish it; I ask only that you stand with us in times of need, and do not violate our rules of community. Do you accept these conditions?"

He looked at her, nonplussed to hear the formal address of sanctuary. "I do, and so swear it." He felt again the press of magic, this time like a gentle caress.

"Then be welcome within our walls, Severus Tobias Snape." She stepped back and smiled at him, clearly picking up on his surprise. "Come up to my office. We have some time yet before lunch, and I would like to get you settled in before the hallways get too chaotic." She started forward.

He didn't move. "Why, Minerva?"

She peered back over her shoulder at him. "Offers of employment can be rescinded by the Governors of Hogwarts. Formal and sworn offers of sanctuary made by the Headmistress, on the other hand, cannot. As I am sure you are aware, a certain member of the Board is none-too-pleased with you. I merely wish to ensure that your stay here lasts longer than a fortnight."

Several hours later, he found himself comfortably ensconced in a tower suite, unpacking the many boxes that the house-elves had fetched. The suite was spacious, larger in fact than the cottage, and far more luxurious. Located in one of the new north-facing wings, the apartment possessed a sitting room with a compact kitchenette, bedroom, office, and bathroom; a corridor opening off the main room led to a sizeable workroom, and a second, smaller set of quarters, "should you want to take on an apprentice," according to Minerva. He had balked at that suggestion, but she had simply thrown up a placating hand and told him all of the new tower suites had similar accommodations.

The sitting room, bedroom and office all had large windows that looked out over the castle. His first act of ownership had been to change the view; rather than the northerly aspect of the Castle, he charmed it instead to feature the southern view of the lake, hills and forest. He spent the remainder of the morning transfiguring the furniture to his taste. Several more bookcases were needed, and he got rid of two armchairs in favour of enlarging the dining table.

He fell into a easy rhythm shelving books until it struck him rather forcibly that he was... happy. Not content, nor at peace, but happy. The sheer absurdity of that notion... *You have utterly destroyed the peace that you have enjoyed over the last four years, have willingly re-entered the public sphere, and will soon be front and centre in what will, in all likelihood, be a giant shit-storm ... and you find yourself happy? My, haven't we become a masochist in our old age...*

He sat down heavily on the sofa, and the flood of what-ifs, memories, and fears that the last several months had generated nearly unmanned him. His thoughts roiled like a Pensieve on high heat. Minerva and her bloody Patronus, the truth in Lucius' pointed comments... and the cold and terrible
grief of Granger's mind. The magnitude of what he had done made him want to howl. He had purposely made himself vulnerable, had started to reach for things... had wanted things. *Not things*, he amended. *You want people, and... relationships. What were you thinking? You couldn't manage your temper and desires as a student, nor later as a member of staff. What makes you think that you can waltz back in now, with ever so much more baggage, and not fuck things up again?*

Want. Need. Those two intertwining feelings had been at the root of his downfall time and time again. He had wanted impossible things from the time he had been a small boy. Had been taught endlessly about the futility of wants, but had not learned from the many times his unsatisfied desires had blown up in his face.

His problem, he knew, was that when he wanted things, or people, he wanted them far too strongly. His intensity, his overpowering love for Lily had been the true reason that she had never forgiven him; their fight, and his use of the hated word 'mudblood' had only been a convenient excuse. She had cared, and cared deeply about him, but had not loved him in the same way he had. The depth of his feelings had scared her, and she'd ran... straight into the arms of James Potter.

His desire for control and power had led him to study the Dark Arts as a young child; his thirst for vengeance and need for personal acknowledgment had been behind the decision to side with Voldemort and become a Death Eater. His interactions with Dumbledore on the night Lupin had nearly killed him had shown him that the Headmaster had thought him a lost cause, and his life a negligible loss over that of his chosen Gryffindors. Voldemort had been the only person to want him, to value him in anything other than an abstract, genial fashion.

In return, he'd given Voldemort everything, including his soul. Under the Dark Lord's tutelage he had indulged all his wants and needs for brief period of time. But it had not made him feel better; it had only made him want more. Then it had come time to pay the piper, and the price was Lily. So he'd gone back to Dumbledore, had beggared himself in an effort to save her. For all that they had not spoken in years, and that she had never forgiven him, he loved her still. He had gladly bartered his soul a second time, knowing that Dumbledore would never see him as anything other than another weapon in his arsenal.

Unfortunately, he had been right about how Dumbledore viewed him. And sometime after Lily had been murdered, he had started to think of himself as a weapon as well. Weapons were useful, after all, and weapons didn't have feelings about the tasks that they were asked to perform. It had become easier to deny himself the things that he craved after that. He had told Granger the brutal truth; had he been able to completely sever that part of him that cared, that part of him that wanted others to care about him, he would have done it in a heartbeat.

You don't get to live. You only survive; it's one of the few things that you excel at.

And now... now he wanted so much. Again.

With that thought, Severus Snape did the one thing that he abhorred more than anything; he ran, and he hid.

As Hermione peddled her bicycle up the main street, she exhaled with the uncomplicated joy that came from feeling like herself. After spending several months shuttling back and forth between the Muggle world and that of Magic, she had spent the last week living almost entirely within the non-magical realm. The constant shifting between selves had left her exhausted and unsettled; the kicker had been, of course, her day in St. Mungo's.

Today, however? It was the first day of spring. There were two bright daffodils standing tall and
proud in her flower box, and she had several friends from the department coming over for dinner and games. It struck her then, how much easier her life was as a Muggle. It was cleaner, and free of the many gradients that resulted in her magical life being rendered into grey, rather than the clear blacks and whites of her Muggle existence.

However, she could hear like a tiny clock in her head, an insistent countdown to a decision. She knew that she would have to make a choice between what world to live in, and soon. She couldn't keep shifting back and forth; it would mean constantly shorting one side for the other and remaining perpetually out of balance.

Her life in Aberystwyth was one of simple pleasures and pursuits. It gave her space and silence, and it was safe. As a witch? There was the duel-edged sword of having her past and friends back. And oh, how she loved working and thinking about complex magic. It made her blood sing; it was like watching a picture go from the page to real life. But there were monsters standing in the shadows, and even the shadows...

She didn't have to decide today. Or tomorrow, for that matter. Tonight, she was cooking fresh lamb chops and eating with her friends. Everything else would wait.
Snape spent the next two weeks absolutely pissed, vacillating between fear and anger. Drunken oblivion, however, did not quiet the twin voices that taunted him. What have I done? and What are you going to do now? rang out endlessly in his head. He did not leave his suite, and amazingly enough, Minerva and the rest of the staff let him be. Other than the furtive presence of cleaning house-elves, he was left to do exactly as he pleased. So he drank, and when he ran out of alcohol, he started to raid his potions stores.

Accordingly, he woke up naked on the floor; or rather, he re-gained consciousness sometime midday to a blinding sunlight branding him with what was surely to be a wicked sunburn. Crawling over to one of his unpacked boxes, he fished out a phial of hangover cure out and swallowed in one go. Proceeding to drag his sorry corpse to the shower, and sat under scalding hot water until he felt marginally alive. After dressing, he downed a second phial of the hangover cure, and summoned a house-elf for food.

Basic needs taken care of, he sat numbly at the kitchen table, debating if he could make it to the bed to sleep, or if the sofa was the safer bet. Slowly, it dawned on him that duelling voices in his head had finally gone silent. Taking that as a hint, he made for the sofa. Unconsciousness quickly followed.

When he woke again, it was the ripening purples of dusk and an insistent knocking at the door.

Flinging the door open expecting to find the Headmistress, he was startled to find a student and hastily bit off the scathing greeting on his tongue. He stared, wondering if the boy was some sort of drink-induced hallucination. He would have sworn that Minerva had told him that the floor had been warded to prevent students from entering...

"Are you quite finished?" the dark haired child drawled, his manner and tone such a spot on reproduction of Lucius Malfoy that he was reduced to blinking stupidly down at him.

The boy's robes proclaimed him Slytherin. Whilst he wore a prefect's badge, his face still had the soft edges of youth; he couldn't be more than fifteen. A fifth year perhaps?

"Children," Snape said, placing heavy emphasis on the first word, "...are not allowed on this floor."

"And yet, here I am." the boy stated flatly. "To repeat: are you finished hiding in your rooms, or will I be forced to go to the Headmistress for help?"

He glared down at the boy, feeling the oncoming weight of responsibilities bearing down upon him. What are you going to do, Severus Snape? taunted that damnable voice again.

"In." He ground out, and opened the door wider. The boy walked past him with a satisfied swish of robes.

Snape followed him in, and lowered himself back onto the sofa gratefully. The boy chose to stand with his back to the windows, the fading twilight granting his countenance a nimbus of mystery. He had the smooth cheeked appearance of a child well-loved and cared for, and his strong and symmetrical face held the promise of forthcoming masculine beauty.

"Who are you?" he finally asked.
"Aelius Greengrass. I am the Slytherin Prefect."

"The Slytherin Prefect?" he queried.

"There are only thirty-six of us. There are no Slytherin seventh years, and only two sixth years, both of whom wanted nothing to do with House Duties. The girl that was made prefect along with me left at the start of the year. Thus, I am the only Slytherin Prefect."

"And the Headmistress did not see fit to promote another in her place? Professor Slughorn did not step into the breach?" His head started to pound, and he could feel the beginnings of anger stirring.

"There were no suitable fifth-years to take her place; I convinced Headmistress McGonagall that we should be left to handle our own matters. She allowed it." Snape noted that Greengrass did not address that matter of Slughorn.

"And clearly, that was a wise choice as you are now at my door, requesting aid." he said with no little sarcasm.

Anger flickered in the boy's eyes. "We were perfectly fine until you decided to return. Given that you are the reason the entire House is in a state of disorder, it only seemed fair that you be part of the solution. Unless, of course, you would prefer to continue hiding. In that case, I'm sure the Headmistress will be more than happy to assist Slytherin House..." Greengrass matched his sarcasm with equal snideness.

"As you have pointed out several times, I have not left my quarters. I fail to see how I could have been the cause of any sort of petty drama or House issues." Snape rose from the sofa, fighting the urge pace. To run.

"Oh, really? Let us think: Seven years ago, you unleashed a killing curse on the remaining Death Eaters. Do you know how many current Slytherins lost a parent or close family member to that little bit of magic? More than half of us!" Rage darkened the boy's treble tone to a deeper baritone. "For some reason, the Slytherins are are rather afraid of what will happen once you take control of the House. I can't imagine why!"

The boy's words were like a bucket of cold water, effectively dousing his temper. Drawing up the cold shields of Occlumency, he pulled his flailing thoughts inward and submerged them into the far depths of his mind.

The urge to pace abruptly disappeared; he found himself looming over the boy in a intimidating pose that would familiar with countless generations of Hogwarts students. He stayed silent for a long moment, until the ire in the boy crystallized into fear. Finally, he spoke.

"You will call a House meeting in the common room an hour from now. Everyone will be present; I will tolerate no excuses nor absences. Is that understood, Mr. Greengrass?"

Pale faced, the boy nodded. "Go." Greengrass made for the door. "And Mr. Greengrass- do not make the mistake of forgetting... you requested my assistance."

Snape stood at the window for a moment, looking out into the placid depths of the lake. Aware he was doing nothing more than stalling, he pushed away from the window and walked to the bedroom. Opening up the wardrobe, he selected a set of his more formal robes. At first glance, they appeared to be nothing more than his normal black wool. Under candlelight however, the fabric shimmered with a faint dark green sheen. Let them not forget that I too am a Slytherin...
As he stripped off his t-shirt, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. The two previous weeks had not been kind. He had lost weight, and so long without running meant that he looked skinny rather than merely lean. His complexion, never a becoming shade of white, was yellowed-tinged, and his upper body was littered with various scars and hex-marks. Most prominent, of course, was the vivid remains of Nagini's bite and the faded Dark Mark. Well, at least you don't have to do much to look the part of a monster.

Casting a quick cleaning charm on the robes, he pulled on a white undershirt and began to button up the many fastenings of the frock coat. He could of used a charm for that task as well, but he'd found over the years that the mechanical, repetitive act of buttoning served to mentally re-enforce the public persona that he wished to project; it was like strapping on armour. Lastly, he pulled his dragon-hide boots over wool socks.

He looked at the mirror a final time. Gone were the Muggle clothes. Gone were any fears, doubts or vulnerabilities. Professor Snape had returned to Hogwarts.

Snape strode through the dark stone hallways of Hogwarts as if eight years had not eclipsed. He came upon several groups of students in the corridors; the first, a group of Ravenclaws, had frozen in place with identical looks of silent terror, appearing for all the world as if they had been petrified. As he passed three Hufflepuffs near the Great Hall, one student screamed and ran other direction while the others huddled together in a tight ball. He gave the group a look of withering scorn, and continued down to Horace Slughorn's quarters and office.

He knocked on the door perfunctorily; without waiting for an answer, he opened it and walked in. The wards were so poorly cast that even a first year would have no problem entering. Indolent, stupid man! Stepping through the wildly disorganized office to the private rooms beyond, he found similar chaos. The rooms had been decorated in Slughorn's typically ostentatious style, and there were small piles of paper, books and miscellanea stacked on every available surface. The house-elves had managed to keep the rubbish under control, but it made little difference in the grand scheme of things.

Slughorn was dozing on the sofa; his red and blue striped pyjamas clashed horribly with the plaid chintz of the cushions. He stirred when Snape pushed a pile of books from a straight-backed chair to the floor and sat down.

"Severus..." Slughorn slurred. Merlin, are there any professors left at Hogwarts who haven't taken to drinking? Next I'll find that Flitwick has a long standing drug habit. "I wondered when you'd be down to see me. I don't mind telling you, I was right chuffed when Minerva told me that you'd be coming back..." The man's eyes drooped from half-mast to mostly shut as his voice trailed off. Slughorn was as bad off as Minerva had described; indeed, he had aged even worse than she had.

"Undoubtedly," Snape intoned, voice causing Slughorn's rheumy eyes to focus again on him, "You will be doubly pleased then when I tell you that I will be taking over Head of House duties from this point onward."

"Oh... you will? Bless you, Severus." Slughorn smiled, looking as if the weight of the world had been taken off his rounded shoulders. "I don't suppose that you've reconsidered picking up the teaching load as well?"

"No. That will be yours until end of term."

"No harm in asking, is there? Still though, you will find that there is little to do. Shouldn't disturb you at all. There are so few Slytherins, and the Greengrass boy takes care of most everything. Why, I
can't recall the last time I even had to deal with any students outside of office hours..."

The man chuckled a little sleepily, the siren call of unconsciousness clearly winning. "Any problems you have will come from the other Houses... but you already know that. You should have seen the reactions to the news of your return. Minerva announced it at dinner several weeks back. Put everyone off their chow, it did... The students sent out so many letters that the Owlery was empty for a week. And the headlines of the newspapers! Calling for Minerva's head, each and everyone of them."

"And how did the Slytherins react to the news?" He kept his voice uninflected.

It took Slughorn several seconds to reply. "Not a peep amongst them. Just kept eating. No one's come to me with a problem..." His head started to nod into the armrest.

Snape rose and watched Slughorn, fighting the urge to hex the sleeping man. *Little wonder Minerva was willing to welcome me back with open arms. The utter neglect of the man! As if any Slytherin would be so open as to display emotions of that sort...* With that thought, he turned and walked out of the room.

Snape did not run into any other students during his second sojourn down the halls of Hogwarts. Instead, he turned a corner and found Minerva waiting for him. Anger crackled through him at the sight of her.

"Do you have anything to say to me, Headmistress?" he fairly snarled.

She gazed back him, face calm except for the stubborn tilt of her chin. He found the gesture oddly reminiscent of Granger. "Only that I trust you, Severus."

"Any other placating words before I go in?"

"The password is *victis honor.*" She stepped back, hands decorously clasped together. A picture of demure, uncomplicated womanhood if there ever was one. *Not as manipulative as Dumbledore my arse!*

"Honour to the vanquished? How... appropriate." Sparing her a final glare, he swept past her and made for the entrance to the Slytherin Dungeon.
Snape fought off momentary déjà vu as the stone wall that marked the passageway into the common room dissolved. *How many times have I walked under this snake carved lintel? A thousand times? Two thousand?* He could hear no noise issuing from the end of the corridor; the only signs of life came from the flickering illumination of torchlight at the end. He marched forward, footfalls creating an echoing counterpoint to his beating heart. Abruptly, his sense of the absurd re-asserted itself; he fought the desire to hum the Imperial March.

*Playing the role of Darth Vader tonight is Severus Snape...*

The common room was much as he remembered it. New chairs and tables, but the Gothic arches and green light remained unchanged. The students were a pitiful mass to one corner, with Greengrass standing shield at the helm. The boy's face was still ashen, but his expression was set in a mulish tint. *Good on him. At least one Slytherin has some fight left.* Counting the assemblage gathered behind the prefect, Snape was relieved to see that all were present, such as they were. He recognized about half of them, either from meeting them as small children, or in their resemblance to wider family relations.

A stranger walking in would have only seen a group of bored and haughty youths; Snape easily saw behind the façade to the jumble of emotions underneath. Fear was foremost, seen clearly in the remnants of sleepless nights, in fingernails bit to the quick and still bloody. Anger projected from squared shoulders and balled fists. Exhaustion, and sorrow... *How in hell am I going to fix all this?*

Snape moved again, robes rippling after him. The combined weight of thirty-six accusing eyes followed him as he positioned himself in front of the fireplace.

*So... where to begin? Might as well give them a common enemy.*

"Mr. Greengrass, take a seat." They may have elected him as leader, but I'll not have him thinking that he has any right to challenge me.

The boy didn't move; if anything his expression hardened further in obstinacy. Before Snape could do more than narrow his gaze, a mousy girl in the second row of students drew her wand and summoned a chair directly behind Greengrass. He sat with a fastidious twitch of his robes.

*Make that two Slytherins with fight. All the better.*

"Your name, girl." She didn't flinch.

"Meredith Farley."

"Year?" The prefect shifted slightly in his chair; Greengrass neither liked his line of questioning, nor the target. *You didn't really think I would let you win a power contest, did you?*

"Third." the girl answered. *Young. But not too young to become the second prefect.*

He broadened his regard to encompass the entire group again. Without glancing down, he began to unbutton the fastenings on his left sleeve. The students stirred uneasily at this; more than a few were openly clutching at wands. Snape rolled up the sleeve, exposing the faded Dark Mark. He turned his arm outward so that all could see the livid scar.

*I joined the Death Eaters gladly, and of my own free will. I wanted power, as well as vengeance upon those who had wronged me. I received none of those things. Instead, Voldemort murdered the person I cared most for."* He kept his voice flat. The words were far too blunt, and carried too many
emotions as it was, but the children deserved some sort of explanation.

"That is why I betrayed Voldemort, and why I killed the remaining Death Eaters. It was retribution. I do not regret it; I do regret that I lived through it, and for the pain my actions brought. It will be cold comfort to those of you whom the final curse affected, but I meant to take my own life, as I am just as guilty as those I condemned."

Methodically, he unrolled his sleeve and began to button it anew. The room was silent.

"Should you have any further questions or commentary regarding my actions, you will come to me and we shall discuss it in private." May no one take me up on that particular offer...

"Now, as you all are aware, I will be returning to my previous position as Potions Master in the fall. I have just finished speaking with Professor Slughorn about matters; it has been agreed that I will resume Head of House duties immediately." A barely visible stir went through the students at that last comment.

"I do not care who your parents are, or were, or what side they fell on during the wizarding wars. I am also not Professor Slughorn; your connections or blood status mean nothing to me. Slytherins have always prized the traits of leadership, determination, fraternity and cleverness; these are the only things that will bring favour in this House from now on." There was no reaction to this, other than faint whiff of disbelief.

"There will be regular office hours, and my door will always be open should you find yourself in need of guidance. If you are not comfortable coming directly to me, speak with Mr. Greengrass, and he will promptly bring any concerns to my attention."

"I will also be holding meetings with each of you individually to ascertain where you stand academically. These meetings will happen as soon as I have finished settling in. There will be a weekly assemblage to go over House matters as a group."

He fixed his gaze on Greengrass for a long breath. "Do you have any further issues that need be addressed tonight?"

The stubbornness in the prefect had been replaced by a thoughtful wariness. "No, sir." Smart boy. I only hope that you continue to recognize where our true battles lay.

"Very well. Mr. Greengrass, you will come to my quarters tomorrow night after supper. I assume you can manage that feat again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I bid you all a good evening." He got up, and left the common room without a backward glance.

For a third time that evening, Snape found himself moving through the dim corridors of the castle. The hallways were completely empty, lacking even a spectral presence. He had meant to go to Minerva's office and bawl her out, but instead found himself standing outside the hospital wing, dithering yet again. A solitary lamp pierced the dark of the main treatment room, and he found himself drawn its light like an allegorical moth. As he drew closer, he could see the small form of Poppy Pomfrey bent over her desk, quill gently scratching in an oversized leather book.

He ghosted closer, stopping just shy of the comforting circle of lamplight. Even in repose, Poppy exuded a maternal warmth that transformed her unremarkable features into something extraordinarily
lovely. Moreover, she possessed a rare duality of both tenacity and circumspection; whilst she was unwavering in her devotion to healing, she also understood when it was best to let questions lie unanswered. It was the latter trait that had finally convinced Snape to place his trust in her so many years prior.

As a student, he had had spent countless evenings in her ward recovering from various ailments. Poppy had always been able to read him; had known when he'd allow mothering, and when he needed to be simply fixed and allowed to scurry away into the dark. Most memorably, she had sat by his side on the endless night after Lupin had nearly killed him in the Shrieking Shack, her smooth hands stroking his forehead and arm, vainly trying to project comfort through the implacable wall of his terror.

He had not been surprised when Dumbledore made it clear the following morning that it was his Gryffindors that he cared about, and that Sirius would face no real consequences for luring Snape into Lupin's path. No, what had come as a surprise was watching Poppy call Sirius into the ward and oh, how the boy been cocky and self-sure- and proceeded to deliver a ruthless and shockingly personal denouncement of his behaviour. Something had broken in him that night, however, and combined with Lily's loss of friendship, he had stopped coming to Poppy for succour. It had been simply too painful to accept any type of care.

It had been well into his final year at Hogwarts when Poppy had ultimately caught him limping around the castle. Her blue eyes were sorrowful as the diagnostic charm had uncovered the totality of his half-treated wounds. "If you won't come to me for aid," she had said, with a fleeting touch to his shoulder, "...then I will teach you the most useful healing spells." And so she'd done exactly that; had even taken him to St. Mungo's to practice with a group of apprentice healers until she was satisfied that he could adequately mend himself.

Snape, as a professor, had little contact with her until Voldemort had risen again. Voldemort's thorough and frequent torture sessions had quickly outstripped his healing abilities, and on some nights, hers. But what little rapprochement that had developed was destroyed when, as Headmaster, he had sent a student to her after Alecto Carrow had 'questioned' him about his affiliations. His shame had been so great that he could not bear to look at her; after that, he had made a conscientious effort to stay well clear of the Healer lest she repudiate him as well.

He had almost decided to leave the ward when she stirred, free hand idly reaching up to rub the back of her neck as if finally registering his proximity. Turning to face the darkness, she saw him. Eyes widening, her mouth formed a perfect 'oh' of astonishment before she rose in flurry of lavender-scented fabric. Quite suddenly, he found himself being fiercely embraced by the diminutive witch. Then he was hugging her back, the battle to keep his emotions at bay completely lost.

It was like being embraced by the magic of the castle all over again. He felt the same feelings of wonderment, of joy and homecoming. Mostly he was just overwhelmed that Poppy wasn't mad at him, the unambiguous greeting making her emotions perfectly obvious.

"Oh, Severus..." she said as they finally pulled apart. Tears ran freely down her face.

He didn't trust his voice just then. Instead, he pulled a snowy white handkerchief from his pocket, and carefully wiped the moisture off her cheeks. Reaching down, he tucked the cloth into her hand and squeezed it shut.

"I am so grateful that you are alive." Smiling, she drew him forward into her office and pushed him down into chair.

"Do you know," he started, then stopped to clear his throat, "... that you are not the only person to
say that to me recently?"

She chuckled a little, and started to fuss with a teapot and cups. "Minerva?"

"No, actually." He accepted a cup, noting that she had remembered that he liked two sugars and a splash of milk. "Hermione Granger. She came to see me several weeks ago about a potions project. She shared an nearly identical sentiment over dinner."

Poppy's eyebrows rose at that. "Dare I ask how you handled that delicate situation, Severus?"

"I bit her head off, naturally." She laughed, and he found himself smiling back at her. "How else was I to respond?"

"A thank you might not have been amiss." Her eyes were gently chiding over the teacup. "Did you apologize?"

"No, I did not." He paused, waiting to see if he could get a rise out of her. But she only looked knowingly at him, a faint smile lingering on her face. "I did one better. I agreed to continue working with her," he grudgingly admitted.

She looked like she wanted to laugh again. "I'm happy to hear that you haven't lost all manners or good sense. Just bear in mind, Severus, that people- women in particular- like to hear words every so often, not just benefit from actions." Shadows briefly dimmed the light of her face. "She's a woman that has lost more than most. Don't be too rough on her."

"I won't be." The sat in contemplative silence for several minutes.

"I've come to you about the Slytherins."

"So you didn't just come up to the ward to have a visit with me?" Her voice was dryly teasing.

Snape looked down at his empty cup, and then back at her, willing her to understand the depth of feelings running through him. He must have succeeded, because her gaze grew misty once again. His tone was unequivocal when he answered. "I came to see you. Consulting about my Slytherins is just a stroke of fortuitous efficiency."

"They are mess, each and everyone of them."

A little bitterness crept through. "Aren't we all, Poppy? Tell me what you can."

It took almost two hours to go over the histories from the thirty-six members of Slytherin House. Poppy walked him back to the door of the hospital ward when they were done; both were grim faced and tired.

"Now, you won't be hiding from me again, will you Severus?" she asked.

"No, Poppy." He looked up and away before continuing. "I'm too tired to run any more. I want some of sort life. I want... many things. I have spent far too many years of my life being used by others. This time, I intend on things being different."

Her hand, golden and perfect, came out of the dark to cup his face gently. He felt the wordless embrace of her magic imparting a blessing upon him. Then she lean forward and hugged him again, all lavender and soft warmth. He returned the gesture, and gratefully let his chin rest on the top of her head.
Author's Postscript: Awwww... So I must admit, this was not the ending that I had planned for this chapter. Snape was going to find Minerva and read her the riot act; then he would go back to his rooms and pout more. Imagine my shock when he refused to do as ordered, instead handling his feelings in an adult and productive manner...

It's such a lovely surprise when the characters you are creating seem to come to life, and the story takes you down unknown paths. I can't tell you how much joy that the act of writing and posting has brought me. The impetus for this story came from reading other, very excellent pieces, but wishing that things had happened differently. I finally decided that I'd just write the story that I wanted to read... and now you are 12 chapters in. So for you dear readers that haven't taken the plunge into writing your own stories and want to, just do it! From a rather rough and cliché start, this grown into something that I am rather proud of.

And for those of you who would have rather seen Snape and Minerva duke it out... write your own story! Or, keep reading. I promise you, the two will have it out in the near future.
Waiting to Exhale

It was nearing the end of April when Hermione received an email from Professor Snape asking if she would come up to Hogwarts and assist with another trial run of charms. The idea did not fill her with any joy; although she had agreed to work with him at the school, she wasn't at all keen on returning and facing down her memories of the place.

They had slowly resumed their correspondence over the previous month; she learned from Neville that Professor Snape had returned to the Castle, and in a sudden and unexpected move, had taken over Slytherin Head of House duties. The man in question, naturally, had not mentioned any of these things in his emails. Indeed, there had not been a single whit of anything personal in his letters.

She should have been grateful, she supposed, that he was even writing to her in the first place. But she couldn't help but miss the more open and freewheeling discourse that had occurred in their original missives. Part of problem lay with her, she knew; she couldn't forget that she was writing to Professor Snape, and as a result, was more hesitant in putting forth ideas and arguments. Their debates had also reached the limits of her potions knowledge, and while she was spending as much of her spare time as she could reading the potions selections he had recommended, the fact remained that she could not make up for eight years of disuse in a matter of months.

Hermione spent the next several days wavering in a state of ambivalence over whether or not she would take Professor Snape up on his invitation. Finally, late on Thursday night, she sent him a short email agreeing to meet him in Hogsmeade the following Saturday morning. Just get it over with; you have as many good memories there as not. Surely it won't be as bad as all that...

She spent Friday night at the Burrow; it had become her custom to have supper with the elder Weasleys once a week. George joined them on occasion, and twice, to her great surprise, Percy arrived just as they were sitting down to eat. He was not the pompous youth that she recollected. While he was still prone to monologues, he had, at some point, developed a dry sense of humour that made his company pleasant rather than something to be endured.

Her relationships with the rest of the Weasleys had otherwise not altered. She and Ron had started up an awkward, if regular correspondence; Harry had met her for lunch several times in London. But Ginny... Ginny had refused to budge on the topic of Hermione's return. No one, including Hermione, had been willing to press the issue give her delicate health.

Ginny was still at St. Mungo's. She had spent a week in a Healer-induced coma before being allowed to regain consciousness. It had been decided that, as the cause of her seizures was unknown, it would be best to keep her at hospital until the baby was born; she had almost two months left until her due date.

Hermione watched Molly Weasley move easily about the kitchen preparing breakfast; the woman had been in full-on mothering mode since her arrival the night before. She'd even offered to accompany her to Hogwarts. Hermione had seriously considered the idea, before deciding that the bigger fuss she made of her return to the school, the harder it would ultimately be.

The meal was a quiet affair, with Arthur and Molly carrying most of the conversational load. Finally, to her relief, it was time for to leave. Molly gave her a brief squeeze at the back door; Arthur, from the table, simply said, "Let us know how everything goes, will you?"

She nodded. "I will. Thank you for breakfast, Molly." Walking to end of the garden path, Hermione
Apparated to Hogsmeade.

Despite the early hour, the Three Broomsticks held a lively and large crowd. It was like stepping back into time, so little had changed amongst the dark beams and wooden tables; she had to stop herself when she found that she was scanning the faces not for Professor Snape, but for Ron and Harry. Eventually, she spotted him sitting with Madame Pomfrey in a back corner. She noted, as she manoeuvred through the crowd, that there was a full row of empty tables between the pair and the rest of the patrons.

Madame Pomfrey was telling a story, if the bright expression on her face and smoothly gesticulating hands were any indication. Hermione turned her gaze to Professor Snape, and nearly stumbled. He looked utterly changed, the differences going far beyond any modification in wardrobe or hairstyle. For one thing, he was not wearing the dour expression that she remembered seeing in many of his former interactions with Hogwarts staff. Rather, he wore a faint smile, and there was something in his dark gaze that spoke to a strong interest in what the Healer was saying. More than that, he appeared to be... relaxed. She had never seen him thusly; as student he always seemed to be radiating between extreme rage or icy derision. There were no lines of tension running through his tall frame, and he displayed none of the hallmarks of exhaustion or wariness that she was accustomed to.

He turned then, eyes focusing in on her through the jostling crowd, and she saw a subtle shift in his posture; he lost an element of openness that had been there seconds before. Still, his countenance remained calm and polite, and both he and Madame Pomfrey rose when she at last approached their table.

"I wasn't expecting you to save me an entire section's worth of chairs," she said, trying to cover up her uncertainty and nerves with a joke. "Really, one chair would have sufficed."

Her comment earned a laugh from Madame Pomfrey. "I do believe the students are afraid of sitting any closer. They must be worried that they will catch a case of scrofungulus from me; I've been treating it all week in the hospital wing."

"Of course, Poppy. It must be that the students are terrified of catching something from you." Professor Snape said, dryly. "Surely, there is no other reason for their fear." He still wore that slight smile.

At that, Madame Poppy reprovingly tapped him on the arm. "I am quite sure, Severus, that it has to do entirely with my presence. When have you known me to be wrong?"

"As you say," he intoned gravely. Turning to Hermione, he inclined his head. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," she responded in kind. Madame Pomfrey leaned over then, and gave her a warm hug and kiss on the cheek.

"It's lovely to see you again, Hermione. How have you been?"

"Well enough, Madame Pomfrey. Yourself?"

"It's been a most joyous spring, although as busy as ever. And call me Poppy, please. We are far too removed from your student years to keep with all that formality."

"I'll try to remember." She pointed towards the clusters of students in the bar. "Although it doesn't seem like it's been that all that long since I was a student. I almost feel like I could find Ron and Harry somewhere in here."
"Perish the thought," Professor Snape said. "I assure you that for some of us, we cannot be removed far enough from your collective student days."

"Manners, Severus," injected Madame Pomfrey teasingly. He shot Poppy a faux-stern look, leaving Hermione once again astounded at the alterations.

Professor Snape indicated to the third chair at the table. "Would you like something before we go on to the Castle?"

"No, thank you. If you are finished, I would prefer to get started." With that statement, Hermione could feel the nerves in her belly ratchet up another notch; she wasn't altogether sure if she could have kept anything else down if she tried.

He nodded. "Very well. Poppy, would you like me to take some of your packages back for you?"

"I would appreciate that. However, if you've no objections, I'll walk back with you. It's just about time to check on several students on the ward."

Professor Snape looked at her. "Do you have any issue with walking back to the gates, rather than Apparating?"

"No, the walk will do me good," she said. Professor Snape put several Galleons on the table as Poppy drew on a cloak. After picking up the wrapped packages, the trio made their way to the door. Hermione couldn't help but notice the silence that fell over the students as they exited; she wondered what the reception was like for Professor Snape in the school proper.

They were stopped just past the door by young student; he was a handsome lad, and showed a confidence and composure that she couldn't recall Ron or Harry ever possessing at that age. Come to think, she wasn't sure they had it presently...

"Good Morning, Professor Snape, Madame Pomfrey," the boy said, and gave her a polite bow.

"Mr. Greengrass, allow me to introduce you to one of Hogwarts more illustrious alumina, Doctor Hermione Granger." Professor Snape turned to Hermione. "This is Mr. Aelius Greengrass, Slytherin Prefect, younger brother to Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, and soon to be brother-in-law to Draco Malfoy."

Hermione started slightly in surprise- Draco, getting married? Greengrass spoke, "It is a honour to meet you, Doctor Granger. Both Draco and my sisters have mentioned you."

"I'm sure that they have." She couldn't help but let a hint of sarcasm into her voice, polite manners be damned.

But the boy just grinned at her comment, his mirth appearing genuine and not at all condescending. "I believe that Draco said you were a most frustrating year-mate, and entirely too much a Gryffindor for his liking. Astoria, on the hand, said you were the most brilliant witch during her time at Hogwarts. Draco and Daphne, alas, could not argue against that particular point."

She laughed at that, charmed by the boy despite herself. "I hardly can believe that Draco would let that that comment stand, but as it's been a morning for surprises, I shall take your word for it." She heard Poppy's quiet chuckle, and was certain that the Healer had caught the veiled meaning behind her words.

"And which of your sisters is marrying Draco?"
"Astoria, thankfully. He and Daphne would kill each other long before making it to any ceremony."

"Enough cheek, Mr. Greengrass. Do you require something?" Professor Snape cut in.

"Yes sir," he returned smoothly. "Meredith Farley would like to speak with you at your earliest convenience."

"Is this an urgent matter, or an merely an important one?"

"Important, sir. It concerns Quidditch." Greengrass said the last with a gravitas that was belied by his cheerful expression.

"Small mercies, then." Professor Snape sighed. "I will be working with Doctor Granger for the duration of the day in my laboratory. You may bring Miss Farley to my office at either the lunch hour, or after supper. Is there anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent. Be off with you, then."

Before the boy could walk away, Hermione spoke. "Please convey my congratulations to Astoria and Draco, Mr. Greengrass."

He bowed again. "I will do so. I wish you every success in your endeavours today, Doctor Granger." Bestowing a second, equally graceful bow to Poppy, he turned and walked over to a group of chattering students.

They headed to path that led to Hogwarts, all three content with silence. About halfway back to the school, however, Hermione couldn't help but voicing her thoughts.

"Since when have Slytherins been that charming, Professor Snape? I can hardly believe that he learned that trait from you."

Poppy burst into a gale of laughter, and Professor Snape glared at her for long moment before he grudgingly acknowledged the truth in her sally.

"Call me liar if you will, but I have been told that he learned much of his manners from Draco."

She shot him a disbelieving glance. "I can barely credit that. If Draco had been half so engaging when we were students, I might have liked him."

"People change, as you well know..."

Any reply that she might have made to his words was cut short by the appearance of the black, wrought-iron gates of Hogwarts.

She felt a sweat breaking out upon her brow, one that had nothing to do with the exertion of their walk. Breathe, Granger. There was a comforting hand on her elbow, and she realized that she had stopped moving forward. Poppy stood at her side, serene and solid.

Professor Snape looked back at the pair of them, face carefully blank. "Stiff upper lip, Granger. If the Castle saw fit to welcome me back, it will scarcely do less for you."

"Hogwarts has never been the problem," she said softly, memories pushing at her like bits of ice. He stared at her, and then shifted Poppy's packages to one hand. Offering his free arm to her, he...
spoke almost gently. "Nevertheless... I have found that things get easier only when we try."

She accepted his proffered arm, aware that she was trembling but unable to mask it. The sensation of warm black wool under her fingers steadied her enough to start walking again.

As they approached the Castle, Poppy began to point out the recent changes in a soothing, even voice; Hermione was only required to make infrequent non-committal noises. The majority of her focus was on putting on foot in front of the other, and not hyperventilating.

In that fashion, they made it to one of the back entrances of the building. Poppy opened the large, wooden door and they stepped inside. In a quick second, the bright warmth of the sunlight was blotted out by the thick stone walls; the abrupt transition from light to dark jolted her badly.

Hermione could hear laughter reverberating in her ears; not Poppy's joyful tones, but cold, mocking cackles of a group gone past madness. She could feel the bindings that dug into feet and arms, blood trickling down her face. Every nerve burned, and all she could see from her trussed position was the ceiling of the Great Hall. Lighting cleaved the boiling mass of clouds, echoing the tempest outside. *I am going to die tonight,* she thought...

She was never sure how they got her up to Professor Snape's quarters; one minute she was standing in the dark hall, and the next she was standing in a sunlit living room. Hands were pulling her hair back from her neck, and then a heavy weight was settling over her shoulders and chest. *Someone is putting an apron on me.* Strong hands spun her slightly, and then she felt the dragon-hide tighten about her body as the strings were tied.

Her sight and mind cleared enough for her intercept a long look between Poppy and Professor Snape; then there was a cutting board and pile of ingredients in front of her. Professor Snape placed a pestle firmly in her hand. She blinked up at him, startled.

"These items need to be ground." He pointed a second pile, a knife next to them. "Those items need to be chopped. Do keep them straight, Granger. And try not to cut off a finger. I don't want to interrupt Poppy's morning any more than we already have."

The cool, caustic remark washed over her like a wave from the lake, and she found her lungs loosening and her heart calming.

She took a deep breath in. Let it out. Took one more...

"Yes, sir." Turning to the makeshift workspace, she began grinding dried shrivelfigs.
Gentlemen's Clubs and Quidditch

It took her the better part of an hour to get through the items that Professor Snape had laid out for her; meanwhile, he was working unseen down the hall in the laboratory. At some point, Poppy left, and the room went quiet except for the faint sound of music coming from the direction of the hallway.

Washing her hands in at a small sink, she looked around the room for the first time. It was a generously proportioned space, with high ceilings and gothic arched windows running the length of the outside wall. L-shaped, the spot she was standing in contained a full kitchenette, and large table. A low bookcase separated the dining area from a deep leather sofa, and she could just make out a sizeable floor to ceiling bookcase and stone fireplace on the other side of the room.

Unlike the cottage, it appeared that some care had been taken in decorating. While items were generally in earth tones and featured clean lines, Hermione could see pops of colour here and there. The view was the true scene-stealer however; the lake seemed to stretch out in front of her, stopped only by the low mountains at the far shore.

Cautiously, she walked to the open doorway that led into a darker corridor; the sound of music grew stronger and she followed it until she was standing at threshold of a large potions laboratory. Windowless, it was nevertheless brightly illuminated by mage light. Seven high stone tables were arranged around a main workstation; Professor Snape was standing at the workstation, similarly garbed in an oversized apron.

She knocked lightly on the doorframe, and he glanced up.

"I've finished. Would you like me to bring everything in?"

"Yes. Place the ground items on that table there, and bring the chopped items to me." He went back to stirring a small bronze cauldron, intent on the contents within.

She was greatly relieved that he seemed just as disinclined to bring up her earlier hysterical state; whether it sprung from some inherent better tendencies as a gentleman, or a Slytherin distaste of acknowledging overt emotions, she didn't care. Resolutely shoving the thoughts away for a later analysis, she went back out the main room and retrieved the cutting board and ingredients.

Placing the items where requested, she looked to him for additional instructions. He pointed at the sink full of dirty glassware. "Why don't you start in on those; I can brief you on today's agenda while you wash."

She was talking notes some time later when it hit her that the music they were listening to wasn't anything ever featured on the Wizarding Wireless Network; it was Led Zeppelin. It hadn't seemed at all odd to hear something in the background- she always had music on while she was working- until she found herself humming along with When the Levee Breaks. Placing her pen down- and that suddenly struck her as odd too, as it was a pen not a quill, and they were at Hogwarts- she started to look around the room, spotting several other objects of clear Muggle origin. Finally, in a far corner, tucked behind a pile of books, she saw the familiar square shape of a laptop attached to a set of small speakers.

"How did you get that in here?" she asked in astonishment, pointing to the computer. "I thought Muggle electronics couldn't work at Hogwarts."
"It came in a bag, along with the rest of my things," he said sardonically. "There is nothing at Hogwarts per se that would prevent electronics from working. You do run the risk of utterly ruining it if you perform certain types of spells around it. I also don't take it out and about, given that magical outbursts are regular occurrence. But otherwise it's perfectly safe. How else did you think that I maintained our email correspondence?"

"I hadn't given any thought to the details, truth be told. It's completely normal for all of the other professors that I work with to be on email and the like." She made a face. "How come you are comfortable with technology, anyway?" Too late, she realized that her question most likely fell under the 'personal question, do not ask' category.

He didn't answer right away, and only reluctantly gave in. "I am a half-blood, Granger. You know that. I grew up in a mostly non-magical household. There are certain Muggle things that I prefer over wizarding. Music is one of those things."

"But... how?"

"How, what?" He was starting to sound annoyed.

"How do you get it to work here? You can't exactly find a wall socket in every room. And internet?"

"Half-blood I may be, but I am still a wizard... and this is an enchanted castle. I have my ways."

She couldn't stop her next question. "But, how?"

Visibly annoyed now, he waved his wand. The music stopped. He gave another, more complicated swirl and twist. "Virtus, et vitae," he said clearly. The sound of music filled the room again.

"Virtus, et vitae... power and life?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is that a spell of your own design?"

"Yes, Granger. Any further questions, or may we continue to work?"

She picked up the pen, and resumed writing. "I'm sorry... it just struck me all at once as rather odd. For me, the Muggle world and this one," she waved her free hand about, encircling the room, "...are completely separate. I sort of assumed that it was like that for everyone." Thinking for a moment, she went on. "It's... oh, I don't know... like seeing St. Nick at a gentlemen's club."

He snorted, and slanted her a hard look. "Really, Granger," he drawled in his silkiest, most dangerous, Professor Snape voice. "What would you know about the clientele at a gentlemen's club, anyway?"

Hermione found herself suddenly blushing fiercely from the tips of her ears all the way down to her toes. "Uhhh, nothing."

"Then may I once again humbly submit that we return to work?"

"Of course."

They worked for almost two more hours before a knock interrupted their progress. Professor Snape looked at the clock, and swore softly. He quickly placed three of the cauldrons under a stasis charm, and started to unwrap his apron.
"Give that one," he said, pointing to a cauldron on her left, "seventy counter-clockwise turns, and then place it under stasis. If it starts to turn grey- not silver, but grey, yell. When that's done, why don't you order some lunch from the house-elves?" The knock sounded again. "That will be Mr. Greengrass with Miss Farley. This shouldn't take too long."

In three quick strides, he left the room and she thereafter heard the sound of a door opening. The conversation in other room could be heard quite clearly, and for an uncomfortable moment, she wondered if she should close the door. He left the doors open, so whatever the problem is, he couldn't have thought it warranted full privacy. And he can't hear me yell through closed doors, and dubiously looked down at the bubbling a sigh, she stirred the requested cauldron, mind only half on the counting. She was curious to hear how he dealt with his students.

"What can I do for you, Miss Farley?" Professor Snape's voice fell again in the polite, if formal register.

"It's about the Slytherin Quidditch team, sir. Our beaters- Gaul and Jones- want to resign given that their O.W.L.s are only a month off. They only agreed to join the team because there was no one else who could play... but they're not very good. I'm sure that you've noticed..."

"Yes, Miss Farley. I did observe the lack of the usual blood-thirsty mayhem during the match with Ravenclaw."

"The thing of it is, sir, we still have a chance to win the cup. I mean, we're in third place, but mathematically, we haven't yet been eliminated."

"What are you proposing I do? I can hardly prohibit them from quitting, especially as it is to focus on exams."

"Oh, no, Professor Snape. That wouldn't do. They'd just play worse, and then we'd lose for sure. Umm... I have a more creative solution to the problem." The girl sounded distinctly uncomfortable for the first time.

"Go on."

Her next words came out in a rush. "I want to let two Hufflepuffs take their place."

"You want a pair of Hufflepuffs to play for Slytherin, Miss Farley?"

"Jessica and Josiah Otterburn. They're my neighbours, back in Brighton. They're good, really good as a matter of fact, but Hufflepuff has a set of sixth years that made the team instead of them. We could win with them on the team, I just know it."

Silence fell in the other room, and Hermione abruptly realized that she was almost at seventy turns. Laying a stasis charm, she almost missed Professor Snape's next comment.

"Have you spoken with the two Hufflepuffs in question?"

"Yes, sir. They just want to play."

"And, Mr. Greengrass, what do you think the reaction of the rest of the House would be should I chose to allow the substitution?"

"I do believe that the House would rather win than lose; the how of it is of less importance." The conversation went quiet for a moment, and Hermione wondered how Professor Snape was going to handle the odd request.
"On your heads be it then. I do have one condition, however."

"Sir?" Hermione heard a rustling, then a clink as something metal hit a table.

"Whilst I have total confidence in Mr. Greengrass's abilities to continue serving as prefect, it has come time for us to have an additional person in the role. I highly doubt that the rest of girls are as comfortable coming to him as they would be another female."

"But... sir... I'm a third year."

"A fact that did not prevent you from being elected Quidditch Captain. Are you declining, Miss Farley?"

"No, sir. I'll do it."

"Good. I'll speak to the Headmistress and Professor Sprout this evening; you should have your new members by practice tomorrow."

"Thank you sir. For allowing it... and for making me a prefect."

"Do not let the House down, Miss Farley. I shall expect a complete evisceration of Gryffindor on next Saturday's match. Is there any else that needs to be addressed?"

"No, sir." Twin voices responded in unison.

"Then you are both dismissed. Mr. Greengrass, show Miss Farley how to get through the wards before you leave the hall."

They ate lunch mostly in silence; Hermione was too busy trying to catalogue the morning's surprising events to do more than eat. Finally, however, she recollected herself and spoke.

"This isn't where the teachers apartments were before, is it?"

Professor Snape turned his gaze to her. "No, it's not. This is one of the new towers that was added to the north end of the Castle."

She blinked, nonplussed again. "How can see this view of lake then? It's from the south side ..." He merely raised a condescending eyebrow at her in lieu of a verbal answer.

"Right. Wizard. Enchanted Castle. Got it."

"Ah, and it suddenly becomes clear why they called the you the smartest witch of your day..."

She resisted the urge to do something childish, like throw a vegetable at the man. He must have caught the drift of her thoughts, because he he tapped his wand lightly in warning.

Smirking, he picked up his wand. "Observe and learn, Granger. Ex electione." The view changed, morphing into the bulk of the castle. With a swish, and another murmured Ex electione the lake returned.

"I can see why you prefer the lake."

"I am so glad you agree. Now, are we done playing twenty questions?"

"Perhaps." Hermione put down her fork, wondering if she dared to bring up something that had been
bothering her since the day at St. Mungo's. "I've been thinking..."

"Words that strike both fear and anticipation in me..."

Now she did glare at him. "I'm being serious."

"So am I."

With a huff of exasperation, she went on. "I think our approach has some flaws."

"In what way?"

"I feel like we can't see the forest for the trees. If this were a Muggle research project, we wouldn't be jumping into the straight into the solution stage; we would be gathering evidence about how, why and when people are experiencing symptoms."

She paused, watching his reaction; he was listening with all apparent consideration, any trace of earlier sarcasm gone. "I mean, we all assume that the health issues everyone has been facing are related to the after effects of the cruciatus curse, but what if it's more complicated than that? What if it's due to a combination of curses? What if there are environmental or genetic factors? For all we know, we could be completely wrong about all of our suppositions!"

He leaned back in his chair, looking at her with a carefully veiled expression. "So what do you suggest? Stopping our current work? Branching off in a different direction?"

"No, I don't think we should stop the applied part of this research. I think that work has enough merit outside of the project to not abandon it... I've been corresponding with Healer Brightbrook since that day at St. Mungo's; he has case files detailing the treatment plans of everyone that's come through their wards, but not full patient histories, and not a whole lot of data from those who have chosen to go elsewhere, or have not elected to seek treatment."

He nodded, and she went on. "What I'd like to do is create a detailed patient survey; get a full biographical and health details, do in-depth interviews about their symptoms, trauma history, and possible triggers, and then analyse the data by way of cross checking in a database. I'd also like to do something similar with a control population that isn't experiencing issues as a way of testing any hypotheses."

"What prompted this line of thinking, Granger?" His voice was thoughtful.

She gave a little laugh. "Frustration, mostly. When we started this, I was able to contribute far more; I had the greater knowledge of Muggle medicines and current treatments. But you have almost as much of science background as I, and you've easily caught up on that front. And then there is the matter of spending the better part of my twenties living as Muggle... If I studied potions exclusively for a year, or even two, I still wouldn't be able to even approach your level of practical or theoretical knowledge. That got me thinking; if this were a Muggle research project, how would it be designed? How would I handle this in my other life?"

"Did you ever finish your N.E.W.T.S?"

"No. I had started to study for them... and then things got in the way." She felt equal parts wistfulness and bitterness. "I wanted to. Ironically enough, I now appreciate the 'subtle science and exact art of potion-making' like I never did as a student. I really enjoy what we are doing; I'm just incredibly frustrated that I can't be a full partner in this work."

"And have you given any thought about returning the wizarding world full time?" There were no
emotions either in his voice or expression to give her a clue about his thoughts, or why he was asking the particular questions.

"I thought we weren't going to discuss our personal lives, or thoughts," she said, testing him.

"I have answered a litany of questions from you today, Granger. At least my questions have to do with the project, however tangentially. Humour me."

She thought about her answer for half a minute. Deciding that she had nothing to lose by being honest with him, she spoke. "Yes, I have. But even disregarding the reasons that I left in the first place, it's complicated... I am happy as a Muggle; I have good friends, and a job that I love. The people around me appreciate the same things I do; they don't blink an eye if I spend all weekend at the library. I don't have any close friends in the wizarding world anymore, and even when I did, they didn't understand why I studied so much, or shared my love of knowledge. And then there is the matter of my doctorate- if I came back, all of that would mean nothing. Even the Weasleys don't know how much time and effort goes into getting a Ph.D. I don't want to throw all of that away."

She scrubbed her hands over her face, feeling the incipient tendrils of a headache start. "If I sound like a whinging, self-absorbed youth, I apologize. I can see no easy answers in all this."

He didn't appear to be annoyed by her monologue. "I can't answer most of your questions, Granger. I will say, however, that should you chose to return, there are plenty of research institutions where you could find a similarly academic and congenial bent. There are plenty of likeminded sorts, you just need to know where to look. The wizarding world isn't only made up of Ron Weasleys and Harry Potters."

"Thank goodness for that!" she said with some feeling, and he gave her a wry smile.

"For what it's worth, I agree with you about a need for a detailed patient survey; for one thing, it will make testing out any potions far safer and less a matter of guesswork. Here is what I propose; let's see if we can get Minerva and Poppy to join us, and you can run your idea by them. I assume you have more worked out than a vague outline?"

"Yes, I've already got a patient questionnaire mocked up, and a detailed breakdown of how we can design the overall project as well as what our database needs will be. If I can use your computer to access my email, I can get into real specifics."

"Go. You know where the computer is. I'll see if Minerva and Poppy are available."
Tea Among White Elephants

In short order, Poppy and Minerva had joined them in Professor Snape's suite; to her surprise, the Headmistress had also brought Healer Brightbrook. She hadn't recognized him at first, attired as he was in the earnestly Muggle garb of Doc Martins, jeans, and a brown long-sleeved flannel shirt. The Healer even sported the beginnings of dark blond beard. As he smiled down at her, she noticed he had two small dimples on either cheek... and was rather handsome when she wasn't seeing him filtered through the twin lenses of fear and panic.

His appearance was so incongruous next to the robe clad figures of Poppy, Professor Snape and Minerva that she couldn't help but ask the question foremost in her mind. "Please pardon me for being so impolite, Healer Brightbrook, but are you Muggle-born?"

He grinned broadly, understanding her query. "No, I'm Canadian. We tend to be a much less formal lot, and don't sequester ourselves from the non-magical community as happens so often here. In any case, I'm from British Columbia. I'll wear my formal Healer's Greens at work, but the second I'm off, it's back to these," he said, patting his jeans.

Minerva spoke. "Severus, where would you like us to sit? Or would you prefer us to move to larger quarters?"

"No, moving rooms would be a bother. I need to keep watch on several potions we've going." He swept a dramatic hand in the direction of the dining table, and sarcasm laced his tone when he spoke. "Why else would I have gone to the trouble of expanding my table if not to receive guests?"

"Why, indeed?" Poppy looked at Professor Snape expectantly, eyes twinkling. "This will even provide you with an excellent opportunity to use the brand new tea service I gave you."

He glared at her for a moment, before stalking into the kitchenette and beginning the preparations for tea. Hermione was deeply amused to note that the pot that Professor Snape pulled from the cupboard took the form of a white elephant, with the cups also a miniaturized version of the animal.

The rest of the party sat down at the table, which could accommodate eight easily. Hermione looked back at Brightbrook. "Healer Brightbrook, how is Ginny doing today?"

"Other than supremely irritated at being kept at St. Mungo's, very well. Arthur and Molly were with her when I left. She was trying to convince them to allow her to go home. Molly was having none of it." The Healer laughed, a merry sound, and she found herself responding in kind. "It was quite the clash of titans. And call me Richard. Given the volume of our recent correspondence, it only seems right."

Hermione was about to reply when she felt the brush of woollen robes against her arm. She glanced up as Professor Snape placed a tea cup and saucer in front of her. He loomed above her for instant before moving on to place cups in front of Poppy and Minerva.

"My goodness, Granger, have you started yet another correspondence? Little wonder you have been so busy as of late." His tone was snide.

She couldn't help but needle him back, especially given his earlier innuendo about gentlemen's clubs. "Worried that I might neglect our work because I've been writing to another man, Professor Snape?" she said sweetly.

Reaching the opposite side of the table, his dark gaze effortlessly held hers. "Au contraire," he shot
back in that silky voice, "...I am merely concerned for your health. It can be rather exhausting to juggle so many in-depth and lengthy... conversations."

"Severus!" Minerva's exclamation stopped just short of condemnation.

"She is not my student, Headmistress. She hasn't been for quite some time. Besides which, she started it." The last was a touch defensive, but he still hadn't looked away from her.

Before the Headmistress could form her reply, Hermione cut in. "And she is perfectly capable of speaking for herself." She shifted her regard to Minerva. "I have fended off far worse than Professor Snape's repartee. Besides which," she said, intonation perfectly matching his, "...he agreed to remain civil and polite in all of our interactions." Deliberately, she softened her expression into one of trusting innocence and looked over to Professor Snape. Widening her brown eyes, she let her voice go breathless and feminine. "You wouldn't go back on your word, would you, Professor? I mean, you wouldn't get that hard on me, right?"

Minerva looked astounded; Poppy gave a sputtering laugh, covering her mouth belatedly. Professor Snape stared at her for a endless moment, and she wondered if she had taken it a shade too far. Then she saw something flash through his expression- satisfaction? pleasure? - before his normal mask of cool indifference hid his thoughts.

"You've made your point, Granger." His voice was droll. "Now we are just being unforgivably rude to our guests." He picked up the teapot; the white ceramic elephant was a whimsical counterpoint to his black robes. He smiled mockingly, and held it out. "Shall I be mother, or would you prefer to pour?"

For the first time in the exchange, she felt a blush race over her cheeks. "By all means, you pour."

Minerva finally regained her composure, and gave her a no-nonsense look as she took her first sip of tea. "I understand from Professor Snape that you have a rather large proposal to present?"

She felt a flutter of nerves. As far as she knew, a comprehensive health survey had never been completed amongst any wizarding populations, and she wasn't sure how the Headmistress would receive her idea. The privacy concerns alone... I haven't been a Hogwarts' student for over nine years. Why do I suddenly feel like I'm sitting for an exam? At the end of the table, Professor Snape refilled the pot, and placed it in the middle of the tea service. Rather than sit down on the chair nearest to him, he walked back to her corner and took the open chair next to her. She felt again that light brush of fabric on her arm; his presence had gone from challenging to comforting in the space of five steps.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled the first page of her proposal from the stack of papers. "I believe that we are missing some vital information in our endeavours..."

Indeed, the following two hours proved to be as gruelling as any end of year exam. The Headmistress had led the questioning, but Poppy and and the Healer were equally as relentless on points of concern. Unexpectedly, Professor Snape had spoken up in favour for her cause several times, his clear support had giving the proposal the extra push needed. It had finally been agreed that Minerva would speak to the Ministry, and Brightbrook to St. Mungo's; they would all meet again briefly on Saturday next to start finalizing plans and began implementing the project.

Hermione sat at the empty table, tiredness dulling her surroundings into monochrome when Professor Snape re-entered the room.
"You look done in," he said. "I've things pretty well wrapped in the laboratory; all that is left to do is finish up the notes and wash up. Why don't you go back?"

She was sorely tempted, but she had been drilled far too often by her mother to always help with tidying. "No, I'll stay and assist if you think that I can still be trusted with cleaning the glassware."

"Would more tea help?" His expression was mild, but there was something in the arch of his eyebrow that hinted at earlier comments.

"No, I believe that I've had my fill." She could help but smile self-deprecatingly at him. "Anymore and I'm liable to burst. Speaking of such...

"Down the hall, last door, go to the right."

Hermione ended up staying for supper as well. They had begun discussing some of the privacy concerns inherent in the project, but the conversation had quickly turned to a broader debate of the role of government in health matters, and finally, philosophy. Professor Snape followed Muggle politics as well as wizarding, and was well versed in philosophy; it was wonderful to have a debate without worrying about saying something that was either forbidden or not understood. The excellent conversation made her loath to cut the evening to an end despite her exhaustion.

She yawned deeply, the last of many such movements. He yawned in return, looking vaguely annoyed as his jaw popped. "That's it, Granger. I'm sending you away before you become too tired to find your way back home. Come along," he rose and gestured imperiously at her bag. "Gather your things, and I will walk you back to the gates."

"Yes, sir," she said, in a mock-dutiful tone. He rolled his eyes at her reply.

Then they were walking down the cool stone hallways before she could get worried about a repeat of the morning's hysteria. Twice, they ran into groups of pupils; both times the students either shied away or flinched in outright fear. She had to cover up a snort of laugh with a cough as one student, a Ravenclaw, ran smack headfirst into a statue in his haste to get away.

"Not so smart after all," she murmured. "I certainly hope you've learned to enjoy that sort of response from students. It would be otherwise supremely irritating."

"It has some uses. I do not expect much in the way of discipline problems next year, for example."

She made low noise of disgust. "And we were little better, I imagine."

His voice was sardonic when he answered. "Believe it or not, you were easier... at least in that respect. You and your little band of merry-men never recoiled away in fear. If memory serves, you were more likely to creep after me in hopes of catching any misdeeds. I find suspicion far less frustrating than utter terror."

"Was that a complement, Professor?"

"You may take that statement as you wish, Doctor Granger."

They reached a pair of large double doors. Professor Snape opened one side and held the door open for her. Full dark had fallen, and as she stepped out she inhaled deeply, the air still redolent with smells of spring, of rebirth. The lake was nothing more than mass of darkness to their right as they made their way down to the path; the sickle shaped moon gave off only enough light to illuminate the general shapes of objects. God, it is a beautiful evening. Something in her, long frozen, finally
loosened in quiet dark. She took another deep breath.

Then her robes caught on something and she stumbled slightly; Professor Snape turned, offering his arm, face nothing but an indistinct blur in the night. Accepting, she marvelled at the events of the day. *Despite the rough start, the day turned out far better than you could have thought. You cleared another hurdle... and it was almost fun. Who'd ever guess that you would flirt with Professor Snape in front the Headmistress and others?* The recollection of their banter caused her to blush again, making her glad for the cover of darkness. She wasn't normally that... cheeky, but his earlier unspoken assumption that she'd be easy to silence by mentioning topics of a sexual nature had irked her enough to strike back. *And now you know that he has a sense of humour under all of that posturing.*

She had a vision of him standing at the table, ridiculous elephant teapot in hand, eyes ablaze. *He lets Poppy bedevil him... I wonder if he'd let me do the same?* Her sensibilities finally caught up with the direction her thoughts were heading in, and firmly quashed the idea. *Belay that, Granger. It is Professor Snape that you are thinking about; he was rather clear about the limits of this relationship. Do you really want to risk losing him as research partner for the sake of some verbal banter?*

"Here we are." His quiet voice rippled through the air, displacing the slight chill. They stood at the gates; with an easy wand movement, he unlocked the wards surrounding the metal so she could exit.

"I'll see you next Saturday?" She meant the words to be a statement, but it came out as question instead.

"Yes, Granger, you shall. However, I will be unable to conduct any research on Saturday. The Slytherins have a Quidditch match in the afternoon."

Hermione stepped away from him, and through the gate. In the distance, she could see the small flickers of candlelight illuminating the sundry windows of the Castle. Emotions bubbled up suddenly; relief, for the most part, but also gratitude towards the man standing in the dark with her. She remembered what had happened the last time she'd tried to express her feelings to him, and didn't care to have a repeat of that scene. And yet, she couldn't just let all of his... gentle handling? help? go unremarked.

"Thank you... for everything today." Her statement was soft.

The pause was lengthy before she heard his voice again. "You're welcome."

"Good night, Professor Snape."

"Good night."

She turned and Apparated away before she could say anything else foolish.

He stood in the dark for several minutes before starting back down the path.
The week passed quickly, and Hermione found herself back at Hogwarts. This time, she Apparated straight to the gates, and was surprised to find Percy Weasley and Minerva in the middle of an intense, if quiet discussion. The conversation stopped as soon as she arrived and she wondered who, or what, precisely had been the topic under debate.

"Good morning, Hermione," Percy said in an overly bright voice. *I really hope it wasn't about me*...

"And a good morning to the both of you," she replied. "Percy... I didn't know that you would be joining us today."

Minerva silently motioned the two forward, and they set off quickly towards the school as a group.

"I am here as the obedient Ministry representative." He wasn't particularly happy about it... *from the sound of that comment, the conversation wasn't about you, after all.* "Before we go in, tell me about about your project. I've heard a bit about it from the family, but not any proper details."

She thought it was a little odd that he didn't want to wait for meeting, but complied with his request. As they approached the Castle, she felt the familiar knot of panic take hold in her stomach; thankfully it did no more than make her go sweaty and make her feel terribly uncomfortable.

Percy kept up the line of questioning until they reached a first floor classroom that been transfigured into a conference room for their use; then he went abruptly mute. There was a small crowd. Poppy sat with an older witch in one corner, Healer Brightbrook was standing with two other Healers getting tea, and Professor Snape stood with his back to the door, looking out the window.

"Let's get started, shall we?" The Headmistress' voice cut through the babble and everyone took seats. "Now, why don't we go around and give introductions..."

Percy interrupted. "I think we need to settle the issue of Ministry involvement before all that, Minerva."

The Headmistress looked exceedingly displeased, but it was Poppy that spoke up. "What issue is that, Percy?"

"I don't think that the Ministry should have any part in this project." He glanced over to Hermione. "Listen, I agree with you completely about needing patient histories, but I think that it's extremely foolish, as well as short-sighted, to have that type of information anywhere near the Ministry."

"You almost sound as if you don't trust the Ministry, Mr. Weasley." Professor Snape said, mockingly.

"I don't. He eyed Professor Snape challengingly. "Allow me to phrase it this way: in your position at Hogwarts, you work under Minerva. Do you completely trust her?"

That earned him a hard glare from the Professor... and the Headmistress. "And yet, despite any misgivings you may have, you still chose to return. For similar reasons, I stay in my position. We may not have Death Eaters running the show anymore, but there are plenty of unscrupulous and power hungry people who would try to use the data for their own ends. In the Wizarding World, that sort of knowledge is true power."

"Mr. Weasley," Minerva sounded thoroughly vexed. "...without Ministry cooperation, how are we to..."
get the basic population statistics we need to even start the project? How are we going to disseminate the survey to people without leaning on their resources?"

"It will be more work; I am aware of the additional challenges it will present for the project. But the Ministry does not have adequate protections in place to keep the information safe, Minerva. It's not St. Mungo's." Percy's voice was unexpectedly firm when he went on. "If you really want to push the issue, you will have to go over my head to do so."

Richard Brightbrook joined in the fray. "I agree with him, Minerva. Privacy was my main objection to Doctor Granger's plan. St. Mungo's has always had the utmost enchantments and protections in place to preserve patient confidentiality..." He sent Professor Snape a questioning glance. "...and as far as I know, the protections were not breached during either the first or second wars with Voldemort."

"They were not." Professor Snape said shortly. "Even infiltration proved to be almost impossible. It's not just the people and items within that are kept safe by the protections. Much like Hogwarts, the entire building is a magical construct capable of warding off those who wish it harm."

The room went mum. "It sounds as if I am being outvoted in this matter. Poppy, where do you and Dorcas stand on the matter?" Minerva asked.

"We agree."

"Professor Snape?"

"Agreed."

"Richard, are the three of you in accordance?"

"Yes, we are."

The Headmistress turned her regard to Hermione. "And, you, Hermione?"

She thought hard before answering. "I will have to abstain on this issue, Headmistress. I don't know enough of the particulars at this point to form an educated answer. I will say, however, that the challenges of not having Ministry help are not insurmountable. Indeed, not having the Ministry in on it might lend the entire project some legitimacy in the eyes of the public." 

"Very well. If that is where we stand as group, then we shall follow Mr. Weasley's recommendation." She looked over to him, mouth still pinched in lines of disapproval. "How would suggest proceeding from here on out?"

"I shouldn't be here; the less I know officially, the more plausible deniability I can have about the scope of the project. I would suggest," he said, voice taking on a dry quality, "...that someone insult me strongly enough to warrant storming out. On Monday, I will proclaim to anyone who will listen that this is nothing but a bunch of overly complicated Muggle nonsense; we have never needed to take such measures in the past, and there is little reason to do so now. We should be focusing instead on potions work, something that will actually help people, not just useless rehashing of old history. In several months, when the project attracts enough attention from the press or public, I shall call for an inquiry. You, Minerva, as well as Healer Brightbrook," he inclined his is respectfully in the man's direction, "...will come. I will be pompous and pedantic in my questioning, and you both will be utterly furious at the sheer presumption of the Ministry to step into private research matters. The both of you should borrow the more complicated Muggle boffin speak from Hermione; make it so we can't figure out hide nor hair of the project. Naturally, the work will be dismissed, as no one on the
committee will understand the true nature or value of information being sought."

Hermione wanted to laugh, stunned as she was at Percy's... cunning? She wasn't alone in her feelings, either. Poppy was smiling, and Brightbrook and the Healers with him all looked highly amused.

"My, Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape said, tone mocking once again, "...you could almost be mistaken for a Slytherin with that sort of logic."

Percy eyed Professor Snape, a faint smile lingering in his expression. "And if that is your current idea of an insult, then the rumours of you going soft must be true." With that, he swirled around and left the room.

Hermione did laugh at that, along with Poppy. The Headmistress only sighed, and stood to get her own cup of tea. "I believe I was speaking of introductions before we were interrupted..."

The meeting went more smoothly after that. It was decided that they would pilot the project first by taking histories from currently admitted St. Mungo's patients, and then gradually expand out to previous patients, those from other institutions, and finally the general public. Brightbrook also suggest using second-year apprentice healers from St. Mungo's as the survey takers; it was an idea everyone liked.

"It does present us with two problems however," Brightbrook noted. "The apprentice healers will need to be educated in the art of survey taking, as well the foundations of this inquiry. While there are similarities to the way we train them in interviewing patients, there are some rather significant differences. There is also matter of them working out the Dark Magic curses used in individual cases..." He trailed off.

"Hermione, what sort of course work did you take for this type of project?" Poppy asked.

"I took a semester long seminar on research methods; it ended with with a practicum of a mock study."

"Is that something you could scale down and teach?" Minerva inquired.

The request flummoxed Hermione. She taught several courses a year at Aberystwyth, but they were nothing more than general lecture sections. This... well it would be a lot more complicated. On the other hand, being able to bring some of knowledge that she valued, methods and scientific notions of thinking to wizarding researchers...

"I believe so. I would need a couple of weeks to come up with a syllabus. I could only teach it at night... and probably only once or twice a week, given my other commitments. But, yes, it is something I could do."

Minerva nodded. "Good. Richard, just how much training do the Healers provide around the Dark Arts?"

"Unless the person is going into curse breaking, not much beyond N.E.W.T.S level Defence Against the Dark Arts. It's limited to basic symptoms and treatment for the most common curses."

Minerva looked thoughtfully at Professor Snape. "At the risk of being incredibly crass, you would be the obvious choice for teaching that section. You have the most... personal knowledge of the curses used by Voldemort and the Death Eaters." Her statement hung in the air, and Hermione couldn't help but wince at the cold expression that had slid over Professor Snape's face.
"That would be one way of phrasing it."

"There are several curse-breakers that could do as well, Minerva." Brightbrook said quietly, ending the long look between Minerva and Professor Snape.

"I will consider it." Professor Snape said flatly. Poppy appeared to want to say something to him, but in the end, she subsided back in her chair unhappily.

A brisk knock at the door brought the proceedings to a halt. After a pause, Aelius Greengrass stuck his head in.

"Pardon the interruption, but the match is starting in twenty minutes."

Professor Snape rose swiftly. "My presence is required elsewhere. Is there anything else of importance that cannot be debated via owl or email?"

Minerva stood as well. "No, I think that we have covered enough ground for one day. My apologies, but I need to be at the match as well." Addressing the Healers, as well Poppy's guest, she said, "Please do feel free to stay and watch. It should be rather interesting; not only is it my old house against Professor Snape's, but his team will also be featuring two new players that were recruited from another house. It's the first time in Hogwarts history that there has had a mixed Quidditch team."

Hermione was gathering up her papers when a young voice sounded at her elbow. Looking over, she saw it was Aelius Greengrass.

"Will you be staying for the match, Doctor Granger?" he asked hopefully.

She smiled back. "I hadn't planned on it, no. I am not a huge fan of Quidditch. But it does sound interesting..."

"It will be! Besides, you can sit with us, and tell me all the dirt about Daphne and Draco." The relish in the boy's tone made her smile again.

Professor Snape and Poppy stopped at the table. "Mr. Greengrass, are you quite done pestering Doctor Granger, or must we be late to the stadium?"

"Sorry, sir. I was only trying to convince her to come to the match..."

She glanced up at Professor Snape, trying un成功地 to divine his thoughts. He said nothing, and she realized that those old lines of tension were back.

It was Poppy who finally spoke up. "Stay, Hermione. I too am no fan, but it will be a lovely day to sit in the stands."

"Alright then, that does sound nice." She wondered what Poppy's motivation was in getting her to stay.

Then Richard Brightbrook walked over, and clapped Aelius on the shoulder in greeting. "I believe I'll stay as well, and see this pitch you've been bragging so long about."

"Brilliant!" The boy broke into a full grin. "Wait until you see our new beaters..."

"May I once again suggest that we make our way to the stadium?" Professor Snape interjected sharply. He didn't look pleased, she could now see. Was it Minerva's earlier suggestion about
teaching, her continued presence, the Healer, or a combination therein? They made their way to the door, and then the outside exit.

The path to the Quidditch pitch was crowded with students, and Hermione was momentarily flooded with vivid memories from her student years. *How little this has changed...* About halfway down, they were met by a larger group of Slytherin students; Hermione was immediately struck with how much more reserved they were as compared to the other Houses. They weren't carrying banners, or singing chants. She watched as Aelius warmly greeted each student in turn, his charm seemingly knocking off a bit of the frost they carried; the group, including Professor Snape, seem to relax into some of the cheerful joie de vivre that the boy exuded.

She glanced over to Richard Brightbrook, who was observing the students with keen interest. "How do you know Mr. Greengrass?"

"Through Draco Malfoy; I am the Healer in charge of his case as well."

"Draco is in St. Mungo's?" That was a shock; she had assumed, as he was getting married, that his life had proceeded fairly uneventfully after all of the conflict had ended.

"I'm sorry, you didn't know?" His smile faded a bit.

"How is he faring?"

He looked at her apologetically. "I afraid I can't divulge patient information without prior authorization."

"Oh, of course." It was an awkward and obvious faux pas as they had just spent all morning debating the various aspects of patient privacy.

"I can say, however, that should you chose to visit St. Mungo's, he would be happy to see you."

That made her laugh. "I doubt that very much, Healer Brightbrook. Draco and I were never friends, despite being year mates."

"It's Richard, please. And you might be surprised. I've told him about your project, and he's been rather interested. You may not have been able to be friendly as classmates, but times... and people change."

"There is some truth in that..." she said, and felt the weight of memories again. Taking a breath, she banished the thoughts. "And I do prefer Hermione as well."

"Very well, Hermione. Tell me about the different Houses; I need to know who to root for this afternoon," he said in a lighter tone.

"Well, you are wearing green, so the natural choice would be Slytherin... Let's see, Slytherin's have always been known for their cunning and intelligence- they have produced more prime ministers than any other house, for example." She pointed to green sweater in front of them. "Their mascot is the snake. They are playing the Gryffindors today- that would be the red and gold lions- and they are known for their bravery. The Headmistress is a Gryffindor," She quirked an eyebrow. "...as was Albus Dumbledore. Over there," she pointed to a student in the bright yellows of Hufflepuff. "...those are Hufflepuff colours, represented by the badger. Hufflepuffs are stalwart and loyal; I believe the two new members of the Slytherin team came over from Hufflepuff. Finally," she said, searching the crowd for any hint of blue, "...there are the Ravenclaws, where 'wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure'. They are brains of Hogwarts..."
Hermione was badly startled by a high-pitched yell. As she swung around to locate the cry, a Gryffindor student bearing a large flag whipped by, nearly pushing her to the ground. She was saved from falling face first by the timely intervention of two pairs of hands; that of Brightbrook and Professor Snape.

"Thank you," she said a little shakily, fighting off the sickening lurch of adrenaline the yell had aroused in her.

"Are you alright?" The question was asked simultaneously by the two men. Ahead of them, a loud and long cheer went up as the flag-bearing Gryffindor ran through a crowd of his House-mates.

"Yes," her voice was rather more curt than she intended; she was embarrassed to have been seriously rattled in front of so many people.

"The Gryffindors are quite a... spirited bunch, are they not?" Brightbrook said in the silence. It didn't come out as a complement.

"That might be one adjective to use." Professor Snape's tone was cutting. "I have several others that I prefer. Alas, they are not appropriate for juvenile ears to overhear."

Trying to regain the earlier feeling of levity, Brightbrook asked another question. "What house were you in, Hermione? Let me guess... Ravenclaw?"

Yet another raucous cheer went up; they were at the base of the stadium. She felt her face flush. "No. I was a Gryffindor."

"Oh." Now it was Brightbrook's turn to sound awkward.

Poppy, bless her, stepped into the breach. "Shall we go up and take seats? It sounds like the match is about to start..."

Somehow Hermione ended up sitting between Professor Snape and Healer Brightbrook. It should have been amusing- she was aware of the their subtle jockeying for her attention, even if they yet weren't- but instead, it only annoyed her. She really wasn't a fan of Quidditch, and had long ago tired of sitting between two bickering boys... or in this case, men.

The warmth of the sunshine did feel nice, however, and they seemed content to ignore each other for the time being. Looking around the stands, she was amazed to see how empty the seats around them were. She turned to Professor Snape.

"I am surprised that more of your House isn't here, sir. I would have thought that a match against Gryffindor would have drawn a larger crowd."

His eyes swept over the section appraisingly, and then down at her. "Every Slytherin is here, Granger."

She looked again in some confusion. Even counting the small groups of Hufflepuff's scattered amongst the Slytherins, there were so very few students. "But there can't be more than forty Slytherins here!"

"Including myself, there are only thirty-seven." She knew that enrolment numbers were down overall at Hogwarts, but still. It appeared that Gryffindor and Hufflepuff numbers were about where they should have been...

"Why is the House so small?"
He glared down, voice low enough to only be heard by her. "Think, Granger. What happened seven years ago?"

For a second, she saw a flash of the ceiling in the Great Hall... but, no, he couldn't have meant that. Given his gentle handling of her last weekend, it was unlikely that he'd deliberately bring the incident up, and what did that have to do with the Slytherin House numbers? She thought, a little frantically, and then it came to her. Seven years ago, the remaining Death Eaters had been felled by a spectacularly powerful curse... one that had left only three people carrying the Dark Mark alive. The Malfoys... and Professor Snape.

She froze and he felt her sudden stillness, pressed together as they were. It had to have been him. He had killed over sixty people with one spell... and many of those people would of been the parents, or the extended family to this current batch of Slytherins. No wonder there are so few... and why earth did he return, knowing that he would have to face their children?

Hermione wasn't sure if she'd call that courage, or something else- like very large stones- but it still, the thought of it filled her with a sense of awe. She, whose first choice had been to run away, whereas he... he had chosen to come back. She could feel his cold stare on her, practically counting on her to flee from him screaming bloody murder, and scrambled to come up with something, anything to say.

She was was interrupted by a Slytherin goal. When it quieted down enough for him to hear her, she leaned back to him. "Well, that certainly puts the seven I offed in one go into perspective, doesn't it?"

He stared down at her and for one moment, his face was completely unguarded. She saw shock, and amazement... and something else she couldn't quite identify.

"Was that a joke?" he hissed, incredulous.

Please don't let him be mad, don't let think that I'm mocking his actions! Please, please, just let him understand why I said it... god, I am so crap at this! "A very poor one, and one in even poorer taste given the circumstances... but yes," she whispered back.

Out of the corner of her vision she could see Poppy's face, clearly concerned but not understanding the situation; she held her breath, waiting for his reaction.

And then he laughed. It was a short, bitter sound. One that hurt, because she knew then that if he laughed, really would have laughed, it would have been such a beautiful sound. But this one was so full of bitterness...

"Christ, Hermione..." he muttered, "...only you and your bloody Gryffindor courage would dare to joke about that." He scrubbed a hand over his face, pushing tendrils of his dark hair out of the way. Still unmasked, he looked lonely, and tired... and a little lost.

She was just about to reach over and touch him when Brightbrook leaned over and made a comment in a loud voice that all but proclaimed his obliviousness. "Your new Beaters aren't half bad, Snape. Your Chaser is wonderful!"

And just like that, his emotions were gone. "Meredith Farley, Team Captain and Prefect." He pitched his words so that the Slytherins around them could hear. "She's a third-year. If she keeps it up, she's talented enough to make a professional team when she graduates. Many people have the physical skills to play well, but it's a rare person that has the mental strategy to be truly good at Quidditch. In one so young..." his next words were dry. "By seventh year, she'll be an utter terror, on and off the field."
"I bet." Brightbrook said approvingly. "Dare I ask who you are rooting for, Hermione? It looks like your Gryffindors are in for quite a fight."

Her heart was still pounding hard in her chest, but her voice was as sunny and cheerful as she could make it when she spoke. "It's just as you said earlier, Richard. Times, and people change. Tonight, I'm rooting for the Slytherins."
Another Brick in the Wall

The day started well. It appeared that summer weather was finally on the near horizon; the spring term had ended two weeks prior, and the Aberystwyth campus was mostly deserted except for the researchers. Hermione rather enjoyed the month of June; not only did she like the feeling of having the college to herself, but the days were long enough that she could still get out and enjoy the daylight after finishing her work.

She was just starting a pot of coffee when her department head, Angus Jones, came in with a rather strained look on his normally genial face.

"Good morning," she called out. He nodded to her, and then went into his office and shut the door. Over the next hour, the two other professors came in and joined Angus in his office. *This can't be good. There must have been some sort of major dust-up... so the question is, was it research or bureaucracy related?*

She was busy cataloging new books when Angus finally stuck his head out the door some two hours later.

"Hermione, can you do me a favour and ring Brad and Aditi for an emergency department meeting?" he asked. Brad and Aditi were her fellow post-doctoral researchers; unlike her, both worked primarily in the lab, whereas the department library was her sole purview.

"Yes, sir," she said, looking at him questionably.

"I had a budget meeting with the Chancellor this morning." He looked at her apologetically. "It didn't go well. No one will lose a position... but it's not going to be pretty."

"Oh." She had just finished her first year on her fellowship; she'd assumed there would be at least one more before she would have to make any major decisions about what direction she was going to take her life in... "I'll give them a call then. I think that they are both downstairs in the lab. It shouldn't take them too long to come up."

"Thank you." He shut the door again.

Brad made it up first; a stocky red-headed American, he reminded her much of Ron, at least in looks. His temperament, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. Quiet and as studious as she was, he made for an excellent research partner. He also had sardonic sense of humour that meshed well with hers, and the two of them had gone hiking together quite a few times around the Nant-yr-Arian Forest and surrounding areas.

"Hermione, what's up? Any idea why they want to talk to us?"

She wasn't sure if Angus had wanted her say anything, but wasn't going to lie either. "It's budget-related. They've all been in Angus' office all morning."

"Great. Is there no end to this economic collapse?" he asked rhetorically.

Aditi Kapoor walked in. Hearing Brad's lament, she looked at Hermione sharply. "Don't tell me we're all about to get the sack!"

"No, Angus said we'd be safe there, but it doesn't sound good."
Aditi flopped down into the chair next to Brad. "I blame you Brad. Or rather, you bloody Yanks. It's not enough that you've started two wars, but now your country is on the verge of tanking the entire world economy because you all had to have shiny new McMansions in the suburbs." She softened her harsh statement with a smile and reassuring pat on the shoulder.

From Hounslow, the woman was a study in contrasts; fiercely proud of her Indian heritage, she wore salwar kameez to work most days, and loved to blast bhangra music while working. But she had openly defied her family by marrying a Welsh mathematician, and then had moved away from London in pursuit of her own Ph.D.

"I blame Canada." Brad murmured.

"What's Canada have to do with it?" Aditi asked in some confusion.

"Ever watched South Park?"

The rest of his comment was cut off the re-emergence of Angus. "Are we all here? Good then, into the conference room."

They filed in and took seats, and he spoke. "Listen, there's no easy way to say this, so I'll just get to the point. Our budget was tight enough with all of the recent retrenchment policies, but we've found out yesterday that the NHS declined to renew our grant."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he went on warily. "The Chancellor is firm that the any budget shortfall will have to be adsorbed by the department. What that means, for the three of you at least, is that starting in September we will only be able to offer you part-time fellowships. I'm sorry."

He turned to Brad. "I know your visa is a major concern, but I think we should be able to manoeuvre things enough so you won't have any issues." He gazed at the group again. "I know the timing of this is terrible- it's too late in the year to find any good positions elsewhere, but I, as well as Jack and Annie, will do whatever we can to assist you. If you want to leave your contract early or can find another position mid-year, we will fully support you in doing so."

"Is there any chance that there might be a last minute windfall?" Aditi asked.

"Doubtful. I will speak with some of the other department heads to see if there are any open positions that you might be able to slide into, but I think things are going to be bad for everyone in the college."

Angus sat back in his chair. "I know this comes as shock, and I really am sorry. I want you three to take the rest of the day off." He pulled several bills out his pocket. "Go have lunch, and a drink on us."

The mood in the pub was gloomy, and not helped by the fact that they were the only patrons. All three had ordered food, but only Hermione and Brad had gotten drinks.

"So, what's the verdict, then? Will the two of you stay?" Aditi played with one of her chips before wiping her hand on a napkin.

Brad took a sip of his Guinness. "I don't know, Aditi. I mean, I had kind of resigned myself to being poor for the two years of the fellowship, but I don't know if I can make it on half that budget." He took another deep drink, grimacing. "But it's not like I am going to be able to find a job in the States right now. I think if they can keep my visa, I'll stay. I could probably get some tutoring work once the fall term starts to make up the difference."
Aditi nodded, face full of sympathy. "Thank god Rhys' job pays well enough to support the two of us..." Her voice wavered. "But it's not going to be the two of us for very much longer. I wasn't going to say anything yet, but I'm pregnant."

"Aditi, that's wonderful!" Hermione said, smiling at her friend. "When are you due?"

"Mid-January. For that reason, I guess being shifted to part-time isn't all bad, is it? But Hermione, what about you?"

She looked down at her cider, wishing that she didn't have to lie... or at least, be reduced to half-truths. "I have no idea what I'm going to do. You both know I've been doing a lot of side research related to my health issues... the group that sponsors the scientists I work with might be able to offer me a position. But I don't know if I want to go back."

"Go back where?" Brad asked.

"It would be in London... or maybe Scotland."

Brad and Aditi both were eyeing her with evident questions; several months before, she had given them a vague explanation about freelancing for a private think tank as cover for her Hogwarts research. It wasn't precisely a lie- she just hadn't mentioned that she was being funded by the Ministry of Magic, rather than the Muggle Ministry of Health. However, she knew it was a flimsy story, and from the look on Aditi's face, she was about to face a raft of questions.

"Hermione..." The woman paused, looking unsure of herself. "Are you with MI-5 or something?"

"Am I what?" Hermione was so stunned for a moment, she could hardly get the words out. Aditi glanced over at Brad, and then back to Hermione before continuing. "It's the only thing I can think of that makes any amount of sense." Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Aditi just put her hand up to stop her. "I've known you for what, five years now? You don't have any past to speak of. No family. No connections but recent ones. You are much better now, but sweetie, when I met you, you were a hot mess. You've got PTSD books all over your house, and now you've been working on some sort of super secret project that you can't give any details about. Hence, MI-5..."

Her mind was racing; it wasn't a bad guess, given how little she'd actually told Aditi. And it wasn't that far off from the facts, either... "God, I wish I could just tell them the truth!" She answered slowly. "It's something like that, Aditi." She stared across the table, and decided to try to give them some sort of longer account.

"Eight, almost nine years ago I was involved in... in something dangerous. There was a lot of fighting..." she looked down, only then realizing that she was shredding her napkin to bits. "My parents died as a result of what I was involved in. So did a lot of other people. When it was over..." she stopped, feeling a tear run down her face.

"When it was over, I had to leave the... organization, and people that I was with. Everything was just too much for me to deal with. I ran away." She laughed bitterly. "I ran away, with a little help from a friend. It took time, but I finally put myself back together. Everything was alright... and then I got sick. I had to go back... no, that's not quite true. I wanted to go back to see people, and my health problems gave me the excuse I needed to do so."

Both Aditi and Brad watched her with sympathy. Their quiet acceptance, their belief, warmed her for a moment before the push of her emotions overwhelmed her again.

"The timing of this fellowship reduction couldn't be worse. If they knew there was a problem..."
they’d find a place for me. I know they would. And I could be happy there. I love the work, and truly, the people aren't all bad. They would take care of me, and they know my past... I just thought I had more time to decide to what life I wanted." She was crying in earnest now, and Aditi stretched a hand out to her.

"I feel like I'm being forced into something... and I don't know if I can handle it all. I can do a day there, a weekend. But go back to that life full time?" She wiped her face. "I'm terrified."

Hermione felt that old touch of ice, felt the broken bits and shards of memories within her press forward, seeking a way out. The urge to run, to flee filled her."I'm sorry. I know this makes no sense, and I sound like I've gone nutter..."

She stood, and Aditi and Brad immediately rose with her. Aditi came around the table, and gave her a hug. "Sweetie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry. Come home with me. I'll show you how to make aloo gobi, and tikka masala, you don't know those dishes yet, right? Then you'll be able to make a full Indian dinner all by yourself..."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Aditi, thank you. I just... I just need to go home an have a good cry. That'll help. I've got something with the other research group tonight, anyway... Maybe tomorrow?"

"If you're sure. Ring me if you change your mind?" Aditi gave her another hug.

"Brad, I'm sorry about all the tears. I know being around crying women is no fun..."

He stepped forward and gave her an easy kiss on the forehead. "No worries. That's what friends are for, right? Regardless of me being a man... How many times do I have to tell you not to go all gender normative on me, Granger? Why am I the always feminist of this trio?" He gave her playful swat on the shoulder, and then his expression grew more serious. "I think I understand a bit of what you are saying, Hermione. My two older brothers are in the Marines... and they talk about their jobs just like you do." He gave her a gentle push towards the door. "Thanks to Angus, we don't have worry about the bill. Go home and have your cry. If you need us, just call."

She wiped her face a final time. "Thank you. I'm... I'm sorry I can't explain more. I'll see you tomorrow, alright?"

"Assuming we don't get the sack in the mean time, sure." Brad grinned. "Now go. You're really pretty, Hermione, but not when you've been crying."

She went home and cried.

Once, about six months after starting counselling, she'd gone to a group therapy session. The facilitator had talked about how one needed to identify the emotions that had ruled past behaviours in order to have successful future behaviours; it might take several weeks, the woman had noted, to determine the dominant feeling amongst the bunch. For Hermione, it had required no thought to figure out what emotion drove her behaviour. It was fear. It had always been fear.

As a child, she's been afraid of disappointing her parents; not that they had ever been anything less than perfectly supportive of her, but that had almost made it worse. They were proud of her, loved her so very much... what if she couldn't live up to all that hope? Later, at Hogwarts, she was fearful of not fully capitalizing on the amazing gift she'd been given. How many children dreamed of having magical powers, only to abandon those dreams when the magic never appeared? When Voldemort had begun his insidious infiltration into their lives, she been terrified that she would not be able to find the answers that would save their lives...
When Harry appeared cradling the lifeless body of Cedric Diggory in the aftermath of the Triwizard Tournament, Hermione had learned the bitter truth that it didn't matter how much one studied- you could be prepared and still lose everything. That realization had only driven her harder... and hadn't provided any comfort when she'd lost friends, or her parents.

The deaths of her parents, coming after she had done everything in her power to protect them, had been the final straw. She had started running, from the pain and the fear and everything that was tangled up inside of her. Muggle life had been so much safer. Bad, horrible things happened there too, but not like in the wizarding world.

And now? Now she felt like she was being pushed back into that life, and she was afraid that she'd fail once again. Hermione could feel herself sink into that old depression... and screamed, as ten, needle sharp claws sank into deep into her thigh.

She looked up from her pillow into the furious, hissing, squished face of Crookshanks. Slowly, he flexed his claws again. Get up! his expression clearly said, or I'll do it again! The pain, as well as the militant look on her familiar's face was enough impetus to sit up. She took a deep breath, and pushed the panic back enough to gather her thoughts.

I have options. Even if I lost my job today, I have enough money saved up to take care of things until I can find something else. And if I do back to the Wizarding World, it will be because I chose to. It will be okay... Crookshanks gave an irritated yowl and she looked up again. She saw the clock; it was almost five PM.

"You want your dinner, don't you, Crooks?" The cat marched to the end of her bed with a peeved swish of his orange tail. Hopping off the bed, he walked to door, still grumbling non-stop. She swung her legs off the bed, and got up to follow.

It will be okay. You don't have to make any decisions right now. You have just three tasks tonight... another angry yowl punctuated the quiet of her flat. First, feed Crooks. Then, teach your class at St. Mungo's... and pull yourself together so that the Headmistress and Professor Snape can't tell that anything is amiss. Easy peasy.

Crookshanks got a whole can of tuna rather than his normal dry kibble, and she showered until the hot water ran out. Hermione dressed painstakingly, taking extra care with her hair and make-up. All the while, she pushed her fears away into the dark corners of her mind, built a wall up around her thoughts so that nothing could peek through but calm. Her fears were still there, like a snarling dog at the end of a chain, but for now she was safe.

Hermione Granger was an excellent teacher; that should have been no surprise, given how she'd tutored at least half of the Gryffindors during her time. Still, Snape was impressed at just how good she was at lecturing. Granger did far more than present the material in an interesting manner- she broke it down into manageable sound bites, and designed activities that allowed the students to demonstrate their mastery of the concepts.

Three weeks they had been teaching this class together, to twenty-odd apprentice healers; three weeks of her lecturing about Muggle research methods, and him Dark Magic Curses. And tonight, for the first time, she was off.

It didn't show in her presentation ('Going Native: Understanding Subjectivities and Perspective in Ethnographic Work'). She was as personable and charming as always. She even made jokes- funny ones. But still, something was off. There was a distance, a coldness underneath her skin that he'd never seen before. During their break, he'd thrown several conversational gambits out with the hopes
of getting her to talk. It hadn't worked. He glanced over to Minerva, who was sitting in the front row of the class. Ostensibly, she was there as student, but Snape thought it was more likely she was there to see what kind of teacher Granger was. He was certain that the Headmistress had plans for the woman, whether or not Granger realized it. Minerva's current expression was carefully neutral; she clearly had seen that something was wrong too.

A flash of golden hair caught his eye. Brightbrook slipped into the classroom, fresh from rounds if his robes were any indication. There was another person with plans for Granger; personal ones if he had read the heated look in the man's eyes correctly. Good luck with that, he thought. At least he's a better fit than Ronald Weasley.

The thought stung a bit. He liked Granger. He wasn't sure if he fancied her in that fashion... but he was fascinated by her mind, by the woman she'd become. There had been that bit of verbal... nonsense between the two of them at the table. It had been enjoyable. She hadn't backed down, which had pleased him almost more than her wordplay had. And the next week, at the Quidditch match, she'd made that joke. She'd not been horrified by the knowledge that he'd taken out the last of the Death Eaters; there had been that flash of something, of... understanding between them.

All of which made her extremely dangerous. The realization, one week prior, of the direction his thoughts had been flowing in had stopped him cold. He had duly reviewed his behaviour, and seen clearly that he'd not even been playing by the rules that he had carefully laid out when they'd agreed to work together. Accordingly, he had made bloody well sure that he had kept every bit of the personal out of their thrice weekly interactions. Laboratory or classroom, it did not matter; he had exponentially increased the space between them.

His recent coolness might be an explanation for hers; maybe she was also shutting the door on any sort of friendship between the two of them. Maybe.

They walked back together to the Healer's Apparition point in St. Mungo's in silence. The remainder of the class had been uneventful, and gave him no further clues as to the mystery of Granger's apparent chill. Brightbrook had asked her out, he had noted. She had accepted, with grace and apparent interest.

He wasn't jealous.

She got to the flat macadam pad first. She started to shift towards him- to say good night, perhaps?- when he grabbed her arm and swung her all the way around to face him.

He looked down at her. Granger had finally grown into her curly mass of hair, into the dark and arched eyebrows that had so overwhelmed her features as a child. Her face was a delicate collection of curves... smooth and serene, and apparently without any curiosity as to why he had so rudely just touched her.

"Granger. What is the matter?"

Whiskey-coloured brown eyes met his without hesitation; there was nothing reflecting in those depths but calm.

She smiled. "I'm fine, Professor Snape. The class went well. What could be wrong?"

Gently, she disengaged her arm from his hold.

"Good night. Until Saturday?" she queried.
"Saturday." He stepped back.

Granger spun, and with a loud crack, Disapparated into the dark night.

_Minerva was right_, he thought as he started his own turn. _She did learn how to lie._

Three hours later, he was playing chess with Minerva in the Headmistress' office. They played chess several times a week, usually in the wee hours of the night. Minerva was as much of an insomniac as he was, and playing chess with her was more appealing than laying in his bed, not sleeping, _Nothing like getting beat in my old office..._ She glanced up at him over the chessboard, almost as if she had heard that sarcastic thought.

She finally moved her rook. "Do you know what was wrong with Hermione tonight?"

He snorted. "Funny, I was going to ask to you that question."

"She didn't mention anything to you?"

"No." He shifted a knight, wondering if Minerva would take the bait.

"I floo'd Arthur earlier. He and Molly don't know anything either." She leaned back from the board for moment, and opened a drawer from the desk behind her. She pulled out a small velvet bag, and dropped the small crystal necklace on the board. He remembered the item...

It was yellow this time. Not a happy, sunny sort of yellow, but a yellow that called forth notions of panic and fear. Vomit yellow. Here and there it was shot through with bits of red and black.

He touched the delicate crystal, and snatched his hand back almost immediately upon feeling the heaving morass of emotions.

"So. Something is definitely wrong then."

"It would appear so." She put the necklace back into the bag, and moved her bishop. _Damn. I thought had her with that one._

They played for several more minutes before she spoke again. "I want to make some rather large changes to the curriculum next year."

"Such as?"

"I want to modify Muggle Studies; make it mandatory for all third years, and have the class be basic Muggle science and methods rather than history. I would also like to offer some higher level science classes- chemistry, biology- eventually."

"Those are some rather large changes. What brought the idea forth?"

Now she snorted at him. "Hermione. Listening to her over the past two months talk about the gap between Muggle science and Magical theory has only highlighted certain longstanding notions of mine. Times are changing, and if the Wizarding World wants to keep up, it will need working knowledge of science and technology to do so."

"Now, those are fighting words."

"You disagree?"
"Did I say that?" He slanted her a hard look. "No. I agree, for all the good it will do you. You'll have a hell of battle on your hands if you try to make those changes, however."

"As it happens, I have already spoken with several key members of the Board of Governors. They are willing to back me."

"Lucius?"

"Yes."

"Wonders never cease. Check."

She sent him a pointed stare, and moved her queen. "Check. And it's not surprising the least. He would do anything if it might bring help to Draco."

"What are you suggesting, then?" He moved his king, annoyed that he had fallen for her scheme.

"Have Scheherazade move over from Muggle Studies to History of Magic. Given that Professor Binns has missed the most recent fifty years of History on account of being dead, it makes sense to bring in someone who can teach to more relevant areas other than the Goblin Wars of four hundred years ago."

"I doubt Binns would notice if classes stopped showing up."

"Precisely." She moved her her queen again. "Checkmate."

"Damn, woman. Will you ever let me win?"

She smiled faintly at that. "I played Albus for almost thirty years. Perhaps once you've played me for that long, you too can enjoy the taste of victory. Until then..." She knocked over his king with pleasure.

"I shall have to console myself with the cold, hard comfort of the Quidditch Cup then. It's such a shame that the Gryffindors lost it this year, wasn't it? And by such a small margin... Maybe next year?" Snape drawled, enjoying the look it put on the Headmistress' face.

She made a rude Scottish noise. "See if I don't prohibit you next year from stealing players from other houses, Severus. You would have lost had it not been for the last minute addition of those Beaters."

"And miss the chance at promoting inter-house fraternity? I think not." The mocking tone left his voice as he gazed at her. "So you will move Scheherazade over to History. Who will take her place and teach all of those fancy new classes?" He knew the answer, but wanted to hear her explanation.

"Hermione, of course."

"What about the little matter of her lack of N.E.W.T.S? Her Muggle doctorate does not qualify her to teach here." He eyed the bag with the necklace appraisingly.

"That is where you might assist in matters."

"Let me guess. Take her on as an apprentice."

"Yes. She could teach as an apprentice; given her intelligence and study habits, it would probably only take a year or so to pass all of her exams, and then another two years for her mastery."
"Why me?"

She gave him a hard stare. "It makes the most sense; the two of you are already working together on mastery-level work, and it appears that she now has a strong potions bent. If you don't want her as an apprentice, I'll gladly take her on. Flitwick and Septema have also expressed interest as well."

"What is the real reason that you want her back here, Minerva?" At her look of annoyance, he went on. "Beyond the obvious. I understand wanting to make the course changes, but why Granger? It doesn't have to be her. If you wanted someone with a science background, one could be found." He gave a little shudder of distaste. "We might have to go to the Americas to find someone, but it would be possible."

Minerva looked away for a long moment. She was staring at Albus' empty portrait, he realized. When she finally spoke, it was with sorrow and exhaustion colouring her words. "We broke her, Severus. She was a child when we asked to her fight; worse than that, she was a Muggle, with no real understanding of our world and the hazards therein."

She touched the velvet bag softly. Regretfully. "She lost everything."

"So did many other people."

"I know, Severus. Believe me when I say, I know." He could feel the weight of her sadness at this. "She was always one of my favourites, Severus. You know that. And if I could just help her... it would make up for so many other things that I can't fix."

"You can't fix people. They're not like broken cups or chairs; they have to do it themselves."

"No. You can't." She looked at the empty place in Albus' picture again. "That's why I'm asking your opinion. I don't like manipulating people. I'm not Albus; I know what he would have done. He would of thought that he could have fixed her. The gormless git would have made sure that she ended up back here, even if meant forcing her hand to do so."

She sighed. "Before tonight, I was almost certain that coming back here, returning to the magical world, was the correct choice for her. She could heal, grow. I would have bet money that she would want to come back. Now? Now, I am not sure. Is it just wishful thinking?"

Snape thought about the emotions that he had felt in the charmed necklace, and the memories he had seen in St. Mungo's during her panic attack. He thought what he hadn't seen in her eyes that very evening.

"I don't know, Minerva. I only know you can't fix people."

Author's Postscript: Big changes occurring in this chapter, and the next several are just as jammed packed.

Several story notes- for those of you who are not familiar with British lexicon, MI5 is the UK's domestic counter-intelligence and surveillance arm of the security services; the American equivalent would be something along the lines of a FBI/NSA hybrid. There was a rather lovely show on several years ago called 'Spooks' that takes places within a unit at MI5; the first several series in particular are worth a peek.

Also, if you are a swotty little student like I am and want to take Hermione's section of the lecture, start by reading Paul Rabinow's excellent book, 'Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco'. It is much less dry than it sounds, and is fascinating examination of the perils and questions of doing in-depth
ethnographic studies. It was one of my favourite texts during my graduate work.
No Limits on the Words

The following week sucked, for lack of a better word. The weather, always a fickle and temperamental thing, decided that it would bring a frigid and relentless rain rather than June sunshine. There was no change in the situation at work, and Hermione had been plagued by nightmares every night. They were not her normal nightmarish dreams— a minor blessing—but rather vague and disquieting landscapes that left her unsettled and red-eyed each dawn.

She greeted Friday with relief. The day had been passable, and she went home a bit early. She was sorting through the post on her end table when she felt a lance of pure fire run up her spine... and then there was nothing but utter darkness.

"Hermione?! Hermione, wake up! Wake up now, dammit, or I'll call the ambulance!"

There was a voice echoing about in the remains of her head. She tried to open her eyes, and groaned. It felt like her skull had been cleaved in two.

"Please... please Hermione, just wake up!" It was the fear in that voice that finally broke through the pain. She opened her eyes. Aditi was sitting on the floor beside her; a looming shadow slowly resolved itself into Aditi's husband, Rhys.

"Aditi?" she said weakly. "What... what happened? Why are you here?"

"Your cat. About an hour ago Rhys heard him at our door, yowling. We let him in because of the rain, but he just wouldn't stop..."

"Like bloody Lassie, he was," she heard Rhys say.

"So we walked over... and we could see you on the floor through the front window. Rhys remembered the spare key. We couldn't wake you up. You hit your head on the table, I think. I don't know if there is anything else wrong."

"What time is it?" she asked, trying to dispel the muzzy haze lingering about her thoughts.

"Almost nine-thirty. Hermione, should we call for an ambulance?"

"No." She pulled herself up off the floor, searching her memory. She had been sorting through the post, and she'd felt that pain... what time had that been? Five. It had been almost five. Which meant she'd been out cold for over four hours. The jolt of adrenaline brought by that fear-bourn realization cleared her the rest of her thoughts.

"Oh... shit! I should have known that this was going to happen..." Little wonder it didn't happen earlier, considering how stressed you've been. Cautiously, Hermione ran her fingers over the bump on her head. There was a small cut, but all in all it didn't seem too bad.

"Should have know that what was going to happen?" asked Rhys.

"I think I had another seizure." She kept her tone flat and free of the fear that what bubbling up inside her.

"I really think you need to go to hospital, Hermione. Seizures... that's not something you mess around with," Aditi said.
She stared at Aditi, trying to project competence, not her terror. "No. I understand your concern. But... I know what's wrong with me, and there is nothing that the doctors can do. Besides which, I think that I'm alright." She tried to shift to knees, and hissed as something in her hip twinged. "Mostly alright. Nothing worse than fall off of a bike. Truly," she amended, looking up at her friends.

Aditi gave in with sigh. "What do you want us to do? Do you want to call those... other people in London?" The last was said hesitantly.

Hermione considered it for a moment. She could call Richard, as a matter of fact. She had his number since he'd ask her out, and she was certain that he'd come if she asked. But a visit from him would generate far too many complications. "No. If it gets any worse, I'll call. But it's not necessary right now."

"What would you like us to do Hermione?"

"Well, let's start by getting me to the sofa..."

Eventually, Rhys carried her upstairs to her bedroom; Aditi spent the night. It felt wonderful to have someone curled in the bed with her; Aditi's warmth and soft, even breathing seemed to hold the shadows at bay. She slept, and for the first time all week, didn't dream.

They'd both been woken a little past eight by a hungry Crookshanks. Aditi went downstairs to feed him as Hermione made her way slowly to the loo. She had the makings of a truly spectacular black eye, and her hip was still sore; otherwise she felt decent enough.

As she changed out of her pyjamas, it occurred to her that it was Saturday, and she was due at Hogwarts in less than an hour. Well, that's not going to happen. Even discounting the knock on the head and bruises, I just don't think I'm up to Apparating today. When she returned to her room, she sent Professor Snape a short email saying that she was sick and would be unable to assist him. I hope he sees it sooner rather than later...

Aditi already had chai and plate of toast ready when she came downstairs, and wore a look of stubborn determination.

"Thank you for checking on me last night, as well as staying. I appreciate it," Hermione said, wondering how long it would take for Aditi to say what was so clearly on her mind.

"You're welcome." Aditi paused and looked at her consideringly. "I think that I should stay with you today." Her friend appeared to be ready to argue her point, but Hermione only nodded.

"You aren't going to fight me about it?"

"No, Aditi. To be perfectly honest, I'm not keen on being by myself today. I was going to ask if you would stay."

"Well, I'm glad that we don't have to start the morning with that particular fight."

Hermione laughed a little. "Me too."

"Then I'm going to run home and change clothes, and then pick up some food at the shop. Hermione, do you know that only have a bottle of mustard, mouldy green cheese, and some applesauce in the fridge?"
"I've been busy!"

"Too busy to eat?" At Hermione's silence, Aditi shook her finger at her. "No wonder you passed out."

"Aditi, it's a little more complicated than that..."

"Pish. No arguments. When I come back, we're going to do some cooking. Or rather, I'm cooking, and you're eating!"

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The early morning sun glinted sharply off the lake, almost blinding Snape as he ran along the shoreside trail. He rarely ran in the daytime; for one thing, he preferred running at night as a final resort to his frequent bouts of sleeplessness. Mostly, though, he hated jogging at Hogwarts when the students were about. They didn't need to see him all sweaty and in battered trainers; they did not need to see beyond the persona of 'Professor Snape' to the actual man who lived within the billowing black robes. For those reasons, he mostly ran at night when there was no one to see him and wonder. Accordingly, he had greeted the end of term with relief; he could go and do as he pleased without dealing with the stares and whispers of the student body. For today, that meant running at dawn and watching the sunrise over the grounds and lake in all of its storybook perfection.

Snape wondered as he neared the castle how the Slytherin students were handling the summer holiday. Several, he was positive, would not be returning for a seventh year; given that he had murdered their parents, he was disinclined to blame them. Still, the year hadn't ended in a total failure. Thanks to Greengrass and Miss Farley, the House had for the most part accepted his leadership. They did not come to him with problems, but the other students trusted the two prefects as intermediaries and he was able to assist with matters in that fashion. It was an uneasy truce, and Snape questioned if he'd be able to build any further relationships with the current crop of pupils.

*September is weeks off; you can change nothing at the moment. Best spend your holiday actually taking a rest so when you face the Mongol Hordes, you will be in top form...*

Rather than remain in his rooms after showering, he decided to stick his head in the infirmary and see if Poppy wanted to have breakfast with him. The Healer was an early riser; as he entered the hospital ward, he saw that she was already up and working. Balanced on a stool, she was checking the potions stores in the supply room. *Perfect,* he thought. *I can help her sort, and confirm how many of the potions are acceptable and which of those came from inferior brewers.*

"Poppy?" he called, Poppy gave a little jolt, and twisted backwards on the stool. To his horror, he saw her begin to fall. As she fought for balance, her hand grabbed at one the top shelves, and it cracked, sending the large glass potions bottles raining down upon her in a series of sickening cracks.

He sprinted past the rows of beds to the back of the room, reaching her side just as the sounds of the glassware shattering ceased. Unconscious, Poppy sported several very deep lacerations on head and arms, and he could smell the spilt potions she was laying in beginning to combine and react violently. Seizing her under the arms, he dragged her out of the closet and placed her on the nearest bed.

Spinning back to the storeroom, he hit the area with a quick *evanesco* charm and then scourgified the room for good measure. Quickly examining the broken shelf, he confirmed that no other jars were in danger of falling and rushed back over the bed.

Part of her dress had been burnt away by the mixture of potions; he decided that it would be best to use the Scourgify Charm on her as well to stop any further reactions. The spell cleaned her up, but
only for an instant. Blood welled up rapidly from her wounds, running down her head and left arm in a terrifying rivulets.

He started a mental triage list; she was breathing without a problem, and he could feel a weak pulse, but as far as circulation went... The cut on her arm appeared to be the most serious injury. He was fairly certain she had nicked the brachial artery; he could see the blood flow wane and surge with the thready rhythm of her pulse. Abruptly, he realized that he was shaking like a leaf and in real danger of falling over himself. Summoning a stool over, he sat and began casting a raft of healing spells over the comatose witch.

It took almost twenty minutes to repair the worst of the damage; he was just closing up a long cut behind her ear when Poppy's eyelids began to flutter. He held his breath as her eyes opened and her gaze began to focus.

"Severus?" she murmured in confusion.

"Stay still," he said. "I scared you, and you took a bit of fall."

Her befuddled gaze swept over her blood covered form, and then over to his. "It looks like a lot more than a simple fall."

"It was. You took about half the potions storeroom down with you." Reaching over to one of the phials that he had placed on the bedside table, he helped her sit up. "Here, drink more of the blood-replenishing potion."

She did as she was bid without further questions, and another ten minutes passed as he continued to work quietly on the various cuts and burns that littered her torso.

He was examining her right leg when she reached down and touched the top of his head.

"Severus, I am fine."

Looking into her steady blue stare, he let himself start to relax. "I'm sorry, Poppy. I didn't mean to startle you..."

"This wasn't your fault. It serves me right for working with my back to the door and not paying proper attention."

"I know, but if I hadn't..."

Both her voice and regard sharpened considerably. "Severus, stop. I will not have you blaming yourself for something that was not your doing. I was the one badly balanced on the stool, and I've known those shelves needed replacing ages ago. Did you mean to hurt me?" she queried suddenly.

"No, of course not!" he said, sitting up straight in indignation.

"Then, obviously, none of this was your fault. Moreover, you appear to have done a wonderful job of healing me." She put her hand up, clearly seeing the protest in his expression. "Not your fault, Severus," she intoned firmly. "You will not take responsibility for this, is that understood?"

He opened his mouth to debate the point, but closed it again upon reflecting that he didn't really care about winning the argument. He had been at fault, no matter what she said. If he hadn't scared her half to death, she wouldn't have fallen...
She read his thoughts easily. Placing a gentle hand under his chin, she nudged his head up until he was looking her in the eye. "Oh, Severus," she sighed. "You can be such a glutton for punishment sometimes. Come, help me up so I can go to my rooms and get changed." Glancing over to the clock, she spoke again. "Isn't almost time for Hermione to arrive, anyway?"

He didn't even spare the clock a look as offered his arm. "She can bloody well wait. Are you sure you can walk?"

---

Snape hovered uselessly in the hallway while Poppy changed in the washroom; she was pale-faced and sweaty when she finally emerged. Helping her into bed, he tucked her firmly under the covers and sat down on the edge of mattress.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, trying to keep his voice smooth. His thoughts, however, were anything but; he kept replaying the moment of her fall. The potions bottles breaking upon her...

"I want you to stop blaming yourself," she said with some asperity. "However, as that appears to be a Sisyphean endeavour, let us speak of something else." Her manner shifted from mildly irritated to coolly assessing in a flash. "Hermione. What have you decided to do, Severus? Are you going to take her on as apprentice, or let Minerva offer for her?"

Clamping down on the sudden spurt of temper her words provoked, he stared at her for a long moment. "I don't want to talk about it, Poppy."

She didn't flinch under his growing ire; instead her face took on the stern, no-nonsense look that he well remembered from his youth. "Are you going to walk away from me then?"

"No," he ground out, seeing that she meant to force the conversation.

"Then it seems we will be discussing the topic, doesn't it?"

He scowled at her in silence.

"One would think you were five, not almost fifty with that pout."

"I am but forty-six, Poppy. Not fifty."

Her mouth lifted in subtle humour at his ready protestation. "Oh, don't get all tetchy with me, Severus. You are wizard, not a Muggle. Fifty is hardly a drop in the bucket." Narrowing her gaze, she continued. "And don't think to avoid the question. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said in frustration. Walking over to the window, he let his eyes travel blindly over the landscape. He heard her huff of exasperation, and turned back around to face her. "Truly, Poppy. I'm not trying to be difficult. But do you even think that it's wise for Granger to return here?"

"I don't think that is the problem that you need to concern yourself with. After all, Hermione is an adult and can make up her own mind about whether or not to return."

"You don't think it's an important consideration?"

"For you? No. Minerva, possibly. But you? No, not at all; what you need to decide is if you want to give her the option of apprenticing under you." At his scoff of disapproval, she explained. "For what it's worth, I do think that coming back to the wizarding world, at least temporarily, is the correct thing for her. She needs to put some of her demons to rest, and she can't do that hiding out as a Muggle. Moreover..." she sighed softly, sadness infusing her voice, "...I don't think she really has a choice. If
her illness progresses along the norm, she will worsen in the next year or so. We are better equipped to handle that part of the problem, at least."

"Wouldn't her increasing illness be a good argument as to why I shouldn't offer her an apprenticeship?"

His question earned him a stern glare. "The two of you are working on the very solution to her problem, and are the most likely to come up with a cure. Really, Severus..."

She shook her head at him in censure. "I kept repeating the point, and you kept trying to weasel your way around it. All you need to worry about is if you want to offer for her or not. That is all. The rest... well, the rest is for others to parse out."

"I'm not being deliberately obtuse, Poppy." He sat down upon the mattress next to her again. "You know why I'm hesitating. I'm content with things as they are..."

Poppy reached over and took one of his hands in her own. "You need to let others into your life, Severus. I don't mean to be morbid, but what if something did happen to me?" As his start, she tightened her grip. "You would be alone again, and breaks my heart to think what you would do to yourself if that happened. But... it's more than that. You really are a glutton for punishment. You ever only let yourself have these little tastes of freedom, of felicity." Leaning forward, her tone grew vehement. "The war is over, and you atoned for your sins a long time ago; it's time to let yourself be happy. You need friends, positive relationships for that to happen. And I think taking Hermione on as an apprentice will be a huge step in that direction."

He wanted to pull away from her, from her words. She made it all sound so easy..."Why Granger? Why can't it wait awhile?"

"Because you know her, and on a certain level, you do trust her. Hasn't your work together during the last four months shown that? Besides which, she knows enough of your life to not be a complete idiot; whilst she respects you, she doesn't hold you in either awe or fear."

She squeezed his hand. "Answer me these: have you enjoyed working with her?"

"Yes."

"Is she not the brightest student that you ever had?"

"Other students far exceeded her abilities in potions."

"Oh, don't be pedantic, Severus. You know what mean. She's bloody brilliant, and the only person who could possibly be your equal in theoretical potions work."

"Yes, she is." He said it grudgingly.

"Final question: Do you really want to see her as Minerva's apprentice? Because I assure you, if you aren't smart enough to snatch the woman up, Minerva will have no compunction in doing so. She's been searching for a replacement the last five years."

Poppy raised an arched eyebrow at his silence and fulminant glower. "If you are ever going to trust me, trust me on this subject. Go talk with her."

Granger wasn't in his rooms when he entered. Walking into the laboratory, he made his way over the computer and checked his email. Sure enough, there was a brief message from her. "My apologies
for the short notice, but am sick and will be unable to assist today. HG". Snape felt his temper finally break, and he contemplated sending her a harshly worded reply in return. Hah. All that meddling of Poppy's is for naught! Still... he was in no mood to wait until Tuesday's class to have the discussion with her. Sick, is she? More like avoiding me. She was hiding something last Tuesday, and it wasn't any better on Thursday...

He tapped his fingers on the desk, impatience and anger rolling through him. Making a sudden decision, he reached into the desk for his mobile phone. She's not getting off the hook that easily. Come hell or highwater, we are having a discussion today if I have to go to Wales to do so.

When Hermione's mobile rang for the third time in as many minutes, she almost didn't pick it up out of sheer annoyance. Figuring that not answering would only send Aditi off into a panic however, she flipped open her phone and started talking.

"Aditi, I'm fine, you can stop calling! I haven't gone into convulsions and swallowed my tongue. A subdural haematoma is not currently overtaking my brain, and I've yet to fall down the stairs and break my back! I haven't even moved from the sofa..."

"Are you in some danger of swallowing your tongue, Granger?" The voice on the other end wasn't Aditi's. It was highly irritated, and male. She looked down in confusion at the screen on her mobile; it was an unknown number from Manchester.

"Professor Snape?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor for that sterling deduction. Now, I repeat, are you in some danger of swallowing your tongue?"

"Clearly not, as I am currently speaking with you. How did you get this number?"

"I rang George. Did something happen?"

"I had a seizure last night... Wait, you called George? On a mobile?"

"Yes, Granger. I do believe that I have previously demonstrated my ability to utilize modern technology."

She shook her head, bemused and nettled all at the same time. Why on earth would he call me? "Did you receive my email?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"So why did you ring?"

"We need to discuss several things." She felt a sharp lurch in her belly at his statement; he didn't sound much happier about whatever it was, either.

"Can it wait until Tuesday night? I'm not feeling well at the moment." It was the best excuse she could come up with.

"No. Where are you?"

She took her time in answering. He isn't really proposing to come out here, is he? "My flat."

"Can you be a little more specific than that?" Maybe he won't want to come all the way to Wales...
"6 Cae'r-Gog Terrace, Aberystwyth SY23 1EP." She rattled off her address.

"Thank you." A heavy dose of sarcasm inflected his tone. "I will be there in a half-hour."

"Lovely." She responded, matching his vitriol. He hung up without another word, and she fought the urge to fling her mobile across the room.

Let's hope he is here and gone before Aditi returns!

In the twenty-nine minutes it took for Professor Snape to arrive, Hermione had worked herself into quite the temper. Dimly, she recognized that it was that or reveal her fear; she wasn't up to concealing her emotions from him on this day.

When she opened the door, it was to find him in Muggle clothes, holding a stainless steel travel mug. He looked so effortlessly normal-Muggle-that it momentarily shocked her out of her anger. His hair was pulled back again, and he wore the long black woollen overcoat over a grey jumper and jeans.

He finally raised an eyebrow. "May I come in? I'm getting wet."

"Of course." She stepped back and he walked in. "Grab a seat," she went on, motioning towards the living room. She started to make her way back to her favourite chair, but he stopped her by handing her the travel mug.

"Here. Drink this." His gesture as he shoved the mug at her was curt.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'm hardly going to poison you, Granger."

His snide tone provided the spark that rekindled her temper. She snapped back at him, "And I wasn't insinuating that you were. As my friends have already seen me with this black eye, it behoves me to ensure that there is nothing in this potion that would require me to make any further complicated explanations."

His mouth tightened. Good, she thought. I'd really hate to be the only one annoyed right now. A man who had endured more punishment than she could even begin to contemplate...

"It is a mild analgesic and muscle relaxant. Any bruising will remain unchanged."

"Thank you." She took the mug from him and limped over to her chair. Sitting down gingerly, she unscrewed the cap and knocked back the concoction in one swallow. "Uggg. This tastes atrocious, FYI."

"And yet, I somehow manage to get it down every morning without complaining."

"Which only proves that you are a glutton for punishment!" The second the words escaped her mouth, Hermione clasped her hands over her mouth, absolutely horrified at what she'd said to Professor Snape, of all people. A man who had endured more punishment than she could even begin to contemplate...

The air in the living room suddenly vibrated with the force of his rage, and Hermione braced herself for the outburst that was sure to come. In between the space of one heartbeat and another, however, he contrived to shove all of his visible emotions... elsewhere. She found his complete blankness somehow more terrifying than any possible loss of control.

He did not say a word, and she held her breath, waiting. Finally, his gaze slide to point somewhere to her left, and then slowly back to her. When their eyes met again, she felt like a pinned rabbit under the weight of his fierce stare.
"Forgive me." She spoke to him softly, carefully. "That was incredibly rude, as well as uncalled for. I've had a crap week, and I should not have taken my temper out on you."

When he finally spoke, it was in a voice so ruthlessly controlled that it sounded almost mechanical. "Do you wish to return the magical world, Doctor Granger?"

"I told you... I don't know yet," she whispered. He didn't so much as blink. She scrambled to come up with a better answer; loath as she was to disclose her fears, she knew that she had to say something further, especially given her monumental blunder.

Hermione closed her eyes, finding that words came a bit easier when she didn't have to see his empty expression. "I am happy here. If... if I weren't ill, I think the answer would be no. But I am sick, and it is becoming increasingly clear that I need to deal with whatever this is in a more proactive manner." She opened her eyes, searching for anything human in his black gaze. "The thought of going back terrifies me. I don't know if I can face all of my memories, not to mention my choices... like sending my parents to their deaths." Her voice broke, and for a horrible moment, Hermione thought she was going to start crying. "I erased their memories and then I sent them to place where they would burn to death." She barely got her final words out, aware she was on the verge of babbling. "I just don't know..."

She couldn't look at him, so she stared at her hands. In the silence that followed, she heard the soft sound of Crookshanks padding down the stairs and across the living room. A second later, he jumped onto her lap, and she wound her fingers through his thick orange fur seeking comfort.

"The Headmistress would like to make some rather large changes to the Hogwarts curriculum." Professor Snape's tone hadn't altered or softened. "Specifically, she would like to modify the Muggle Studies courses, and make mandatory for third and fourth years. Instead of the traditional teachings, she wants it to focus on the fundamentals of science; geology, biology, chemistry. A survey course, if you will. Eventually, she would like the later years to align with upper science A-levels. She would like you to teach the courses."

"I don't have any N.E.W.T.S," she said, shocked into finally meeting his eyes. "Doesn't that render me ineligible to teach?"

"Ordinarily, yes. However, exceptions are made for those who enter an apprenticeship with a member of staff. The Headmistress has said that she would take you on, as would Flitwick and Septima. Or..." his words trailed off.

"Or?" she asked.

"Or, you could become my apprentice." Oh my, she thought with dismay. I really bollocks this entire conversation, didn't I?

He continued."You would still have to sit for exams within the first two years. More than likely, it would take an additional two to three years to gain your mastery."

If he had anything further to say, it was cut off by the sound of a key in the front door. With a whoosh, the door opened, and Aditi's cheery greeting rang out. "Hermione, I'm back! Wait until you see..."

At the sound of Aditi's entry, Professor Snape had risen and whirled; for a moment, all Hermione could see was his back, standing as he was between her and the door. She struggled to her feet, and stepped around him so she could see her friend.
Aditi stood frozen in the foyer, a grocery sack starting to slip from her grasp. "Aditi, come in," Hermione started. "This is..." she stopped, not sure how to proceed. Should she even introduce Professor Snape?

"Severus Snape," he said with a stiff bow. Aditi moved into the living room cautiously, placing the groceries on the end of the sofa.

"Sir," Aditi acknowledged cautiously.

"And this is one of my colleagues, Dr. Aditi Kapoor," Hermione finished somewhat lamely.

"I should be leaving." Professor Snape responded, and turned back to Hermione. "Minerva will want to know your answer as soon as possible; she wants someone in the position before September."

"Dr. Kapoor," he said, giving her a shallow nod, and swept from the room.

The front door shut again, and both Hermione and Aditi collapsed onto the couch.

"That was one of your London people, wasn't it?" Aditi asked in a small voice.

"Yes," she replied weakly.

"He gave me such a scare when I opened the door..."

"He's... not normally that bad. I said something rather unforgivable to him right before you came in," Hermione admitted, feeling her face flush with remembered shame.

"Still..." Aditi gazed her questioningly. "He's a dangerous man, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. But he also saved my life several times over. He's a good man, Aditi."

Crookshanks jumped onto the sofa with a disgusted grumble, and began to rub his head on Aditi's outstretched hands. "Yes, kitty," she murmured. "I brought you paneer. " She looked back to Hermione. "He was offering you a job, wasn't he?"

"Yes." She saw the empty travel mug then, sitting on the coffee table. Groaning, she buried her face with her hands. He'd not only come all the way out to her, but brought something to make her feel better, and then offered her an apprenticeship. She... well, she had been ill-mannered and in the middle of a completely self-indulgent fit.

"He offered me a brilliant position as a matter of fact, and I was a bloody idiot to him the entire time."

"What are you going to do, Hermione?" Aditi's question was soft, and full of concern.

"Well, I think I'll start by quitting this little pity party I've been throwing myself." She laughed a little unsteadily; it was that or start crying again. "I think cooking some curries would be the best way to start the process, don't you think?" She got up off the sofa and gave her hand to Aditi. "Tomorrow, I'll go visit some old friends in Devon and see what they have to say. Beyond that? I don't know yet."
Slowness

Poppy was fast asleep when Snape returned to the Castle, which was a fortuitous turn of luck given his infuriated and rapidly worsening mood. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, should the Healer try and speak with him on the topic of Hermione Granger again, he would well and truly lose his temper. Accordingly, he had renewed the monitoring charm that he'd placed over her and spent the rest of the day in his quarters. Worry nagged at him endlessly however, and he finally broke down at half past eight and went back to her rooms.

Poppy appeared much better, and the monitoring charm showed that she was recovering well from the morning's misadventures. She was sitting up in bed reading a book, or at least attempting to. She looked up at his bellicose entry and smiled.

"You shouldn't be reading this soon after a concussion," he stated, glaring.

"I'm bored," she responded with a shrug. "As you healed me so well, it's hardly a risk."

Summoning a comfortable chair from her living room, he sat down. "What is it that you always told me as a student? Ah, yes, I remember now..." Shifting into a bossy tone, he went on. "You need quiet and rest, Miss Pomfrey. No reading, and certainly no homework!"

She looked at him dryly. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander, eh?"

"In our case, I believe the saying should be 'what's good for the gander is good for the goose', but yes. Now hand over the book." He stuck his hand out in a clear command.

"Severus, really. I am perfectly fine, only bored. I need something to do... unless you would rather have me get up to find a task," she said, the last coming out in a wheedling plea.

He just smirked down at her, and continued to hold out his hand. "Manipulation will not work on me, Poppy. I will tie you down to the bed should the situation require, and I reckon Minerva would back me in this case. Now hand me the book." He raised an eyebrow in warning at her when she did not comply. "If you give it to me right now, I will consent to read it to you."

She gave in with an unhappy sigh. "It's in French."

"Je parle français, comme vous le savez bien." He read the title, and then rolled his eyes. "Le Rouge et le Noir, Poppy? I suppose I should be grateful it's not Les Justes."

"That's on the third shelf from the right, should you prefer it instead," she responded with an evil grin.

"Don't test me, witch," he grumbled. Summoning a glass of water to go with the chair, he began to read. "La petite ville de Verrières peut passer pour l'une des plus jolies de la Franche-Comté..."

Snape read out loud for almost an hour before Poppy fell back asleep. Putting the book down carefully, he examined her. He didn't think she would have any scars from the incident, but she was still covered in a myriad of small lacerations and bruises that neither had bothered with. Idly, he wondered if he could find a spell that was a bit more refined to heal the remaining wounds; the castings he had used that morning would be akin to dropping an anvil on an ant. Surely, the Healers have come up with something a tad more efficient...
Twisting in the chair, he started to search her bookcase for textbooks. Several minutes later, he found what he wanted; *Episkey Epidermis: A Practical Guide to Healing The Most Common Skin Ailments*. Snagging it from the shelf he began to flip through the table of contents with interest, getting neatly derailed by a chapter on hexed-based scars and boils.

Eventually, Poppy gave a restless twitch and he recalled himself; he could borrow the book later, he knew, but had only a limited amount of time to try and fix the leftover damage before she woke. Going back to the table of contents, he found a likely section and started to skim the text. About halfway through the chapter, he found the spell he was looking for: *Emaculo Integer*.

*Emaculo Integer*, the book said, is specialized healing spell that 'cleans' the entire epidermis of recent non-magical damage such as cuts, abrasions, minor lacerations and burns. Its efficiency is restricted to the upper two layers or the dermis, and has little positive effect on damage done to the stratum reticulare...

He read through the instructions and warnings carefully, and then cross-checked the alternate spells listed to make sure that *Emaculo Integer* was indeed the best choice. Deciding that it was better to test it on himself, he took a deep breath and emptied his mind of all thoughts but that of the spell. Murmuring the incantation, he imbued the words with both his magic and intent.

It felt like cool, moist wind blowing on his skin, which glowed with green undertones; he watched in fascination as the scratches on his arms faded to nothing, and the lingering soreness turned into a mild tingle that had an almost minty quality to it. *Huh*, he thought. *That certainly worked well enough. Should I try it on her, though? Better ask first, or I'll have further repairs to make on my own skin."

"Poppy... Poppy, wake up," he said softly, touching her shoulder.

"Mmmm, yes?" was the sluggish response. After a moment of silence, her blue eyes met his, and her gaze widened as she took in the open text book on his lap and his accompanied expression.

"Wanting to making a guinea pig of of me, Severus?"

"I was curious," he replied. "And bored, as I had no audience. So I started to raid your books."

"What spell do you want to try?"

"*Emaculo Integer.*"

"That's a good choice, although not without limitations. It can't fix underlying structures for example, but is lovely when you have a lot of little, minor wounds. I used it last year when a pair of snogging Hufflepuffs fell through a first floor window. Have you tried it on yourself yet?"

"Yes," he said. "I once had a rather demanding instructor that insisted on first hand knowledge when at all possible as to better facilitate patient care..."

She snorted lightly at his words."It is vital to understand the patient's point of view and be able to validate their experiences and trauma; personal knowledge can do much to bridge the gap between healer and patient." Giving him an arch look, she continued. "As you well know. Now, this is a spell that works best when done non-verbally, applied through a combination of touch and visualization. It's always looked a bit like a blue mist for me, but it might be different for you. I found it best to let the spell settle over the entire body, and then focus it on specific areas one by one."

"It was green when I cast it."

"Once a Slytherin..." she stretched her hand out to him, and he took it. "Centre yourself and proceed,
"Yes, ma'am." Wiping the smirk from his face, he took several measured breaths to clear his thoughts again, and then brought his focused intent to heal her to the forefront of his mind. Exhaling, he mentally said the incantation, and watched through half-lidded eyes as she began to glow a bright green. He followed her instructions, allowing the spell envelope the Healer fully before pushing his magic onto each area gently. The green darkened as he increased his magical concentration; exhaling again, he finally ended the spell, which hung in the air briefly.

They sat in silence for a moment; he enjoyed a lingering feeling of peace. For once, it had been nice to clean his mind not in preparation for the hard shields of Occlumency and locking the world away, but instead to cast a healing spell and reaching out to someone.

Poppy looked bemused when he met her eyes. "Minty. Interesting. It's vaguely floral when I cast it." She gave his hand a squeeze, and he saw that her skin was again flawless. "That was deftly and thoroughly done as ever. Should you ever fancy a second mastery, I'd gladly take you on as an apprentice. You are an excellent healer."

He sat back in the chair, releasing her hand. "Severus Snape, Healer? That would be the day..."

"I am being serious. I have always thought you had the talent for it."

Voice full of exasperation he asked, "Poppy, do you know how many people I've killed? Because, truthfully, I do not. Many, I know that much. And you propose making me a healer?"

"None of that negates the fact that you have both the talent, and unless I'm very much wrong, the calling for it."

"What are you going on about?" The feeling of peace fled in the face of the oncoming rush of his anger.

She caught the emotions running through him, and her face assumed the stern lines of earlier in the day. "You have always tried to fix situations and people, Severus. You may have attempted it in a sneaky and all together Slytherin fashion, but all the same, that intent, that inherent need improve matters has always been there. Take your potions work, for example: the best of it has always centred on healing draughts or potions."

"Which I needed to fix myself, Poppy. I certainly wasn't doing it for the betterment of wizarding-kind," he snarled.

"And yet, the vast majority of those potions found their way into my sickrooms, and the formulas were shared with St. Mungo's." Her sternness had been replaced by an ire that matched his. "Tell me, how many more healing spells did you teach yourself after I instructed you on the basics?"

Lowering the level of her voice, she spoke again. "How many Slytherins did you heal over the years? Many, I know that much," she said, purposely echoing his earlier phrase. "I wasn't blind; I saw that the majority of your students, especially in the later years, were loath to come to me so you healed them instead. I also know that you taught many of the students the same spells I showed you, just in case they too were left alone and without help." She leaned forward and cupped his cheek in her palm.

"Severus, just because you are not comfortable with the term 'healer' doesn't mean that you haven't been acting as one all of these years."

Her regard was unwavering as she stared at him. "Yes, you have done evil things. But that fact alone
does not make you an evil man, just as doing good acts does not make one a wholly good person.” She swallowed visibly. "You are like rest of us; a work in progress whose sum value can only be measured at the end."

"Why do you have such faith in me, Poppy?" His voice came out in strangled whisper, and he couldn't bear to look at her expression.

He heard the rustle of the bedcovers, and then Poppy was forcing his head back up to meet her gaze. "Because I love you, Severus. Because despite the fact you have been thrown to the wolves more times than I care to count, you still act out of love, out of loyalty. Time and time again, you put yourself in harm's way, full well knowing that any possible reward you might receive would not began to cover the cost."

This time, it was tears running down his face, and Poppy's voice that had gone rough. "Do you think me an evil person?" she asked.

"No. Never!" he said fiercely.

"Then what if I told you that you weren't the only murder in this room? During the Second Battle of Hogwarts, I didn't just act as a Healer; I was full combatant, and believe you me, I have no issues with casting killing curses when the lives of students are at risk."

"That is not murder, Poppy. That was defence."

"You think so? What say you about this..." One hand slid down his cheek to take his hand. "When Hermione... after she killed that group of Death Eaters in the Great Hall, we were finally able re-secure the building. It was Minerva who came across the the single remaining Death Eater. They duelled, and he lost, badly. He was brought up here for treatment; she hit him with the Entrail-Expelling Curse at the end. The ward was in utter chaos. We were trying to transfer people to St. Mungo's and... well, it was easy to manipulate things to my liking."

She sighed, and looked down at their entwined hands for a moment. "He was bound to the bed, and in enormous pain. By far, he was the worst injury and should have been treated first. But as bad as they were, his injuries were not fatal. However, I did not treat him, or send him onto St. Mungo's. Do you know what I did? I turned around, and went to work on the others. When I returned to his bedside an hour later, he had just died."

He stared at her, feeling like he had been hit by a Bludger. "I broke every single Healer's Oath I ever swore that day. And do you know I felt when I stood over his bed, looking at his cooling corpse?"

She paused, and the emotions in her eyes were intense and compelling. "I felt pleasure at his death. I took great satisfaction that he had died slowly, painfully and alone."

She intoned the next statement carefully, and firmly. "I feel no regret at that man's death. Does that make me evil, Severus?"

"No."

"Why not?" Her voice had softened, as had her continence.

He swallowed, searching for the words. "Because you've done so many other good things. And that action... It was in the middle of a war..."

Poppy finished his statement. "Yes, we were at war. But ultimately, it comes down to this- I am only human, Severus, and thus a flawed and imperfect creature. Some days, I will triumph over my baser nature, and some days I will not. It is as I said... we are but works in progress. Think on this: you too
were in the middle of the war. I wish you apply that same logic to your self-hatred."

Closing his eyes, he whispered the next words. "I am afraid. Poppy. Everything I do... in the end it always goes to shit." He opened his eyes. "I don't know how to do any of it properly. And now you want me to apprentice Granger... you make it sound like it should be so easy!"

"It won't be." She gave a giant sigh. "But you won't be alone, either. What did you tell her, the day that she first returned to Hogwarts? 'Things get easier only when we try'. It was excellent advice. You should take it yourself."

Poppy patted his hand, and stood. "Come, I feel the need for tea."

"Just tea, or Minerva's notion of tea?"

She rubbed her face. "Minerva's version isn't a bad idea."

He sat quietly in her living room while she brewed the tea and poured. "So," she said, "What happened today with Hermione?"

"She had a seizure last night, and wasn't feeling well enough to come."

The Healer's face wrinkled in concern. "Just how bad was it?"

"I didn't really get all of the details. She looked well enough when I saw her."

"You saw her?"

"I went to her flat in Wales," he grumbled.

"She invited you?"

"No."

"You went all the way over to Wales, uninvited, and you didn't bother to inquire any further about her health?" she asked him with familiar asperity.

"I took her a healing draught."

She slanted him a challenging look over the rim of her tea cup. "And then, oh-man-who-is-not-a-healer, what happened?"

"She yelled at me."

"About coming over?"

"No. She called me a glutton for punishment." He sat his cup down on the saucer with a firm clink, and glared at her.

"She didn't..." Poppy's expression was suddenly one of barely suppressed mirth. He said nothing, just continued to scowl. She chuckled, and then seeing his expression, began to laugh in earnest. Finally wiping tears from her face and gathering up her composure again, she went on. "Oh, bless that woman. I liked her as I child, but I must say, she has matured into a most delightful adult. So, she yelled at you... did you yell back?"

"No."
Poppy waited for him to go on.

"I restrained myself from yelling, hexing or otherwise harming her. Although it was a very close thing." He sent her a look of disgust. "Despite her childish behaviour, I explained Minerva's plan, and offered to apprentice her."

"And what did she say?"

"We were interrupted by a friend before she could give me an answer."

"In other words, you took the first opportunity to storm off and did not give her the chance to apologise or respond."

"One might construe the situation that way."

The last traces of mirth disappeared from the Healer's face, and she grew serious. "How did she look, Severus? Behind all of that anger and bravado."

He recalled Granger's face as she had first opened the door to her flat. There had been anger, yes... "She had the look of someone being boxed into a corner, and fighting it every step of the way."

"She is being forced into a corner, Severus. On some level she understands how sick she is, and knows that it is rapidly limiting her choices. You, of all people, can appreciate how that particular sentiment might make her feel. Little wonder she picked a fight with you when you invited yourself over for a chat."

"She said as much." She smirked a little at his reluctant admission.

"Almost fifty years experience as a Healer rarely steers me wrong."

"And what, oh-woman-who-has-an-answer-for-everything, should I do next? Somehow I doubt very much my invitation to return to Hogwarts and work as my apprentice was very well received."

"So you do admit that you want her as an apprentice?"

"I asked her, didn't I?"

Poppy tapped her finger on the table. "Say it, Severus."

"Yes, I want her to be my apprentice," he spat, scowling deeply. "Happy?"

"Now that you are finally admitting your wants, yes." She smiled at him. "You will see her on Tuesday night, correct?"

"If she bothers to come."

The Healer sent him a chiding look. "She will. It's not as if she hasn't seen your temper before. Give her a few days to think matters over, and apologise to her after your class," She sent him a firm look. "...yes, Severus, you need to use words this time; you can't just do something nice. Then hear her out. I imagine she will have a thing or two to say in return. I don't know if she will accept your offer, but you at least are giving her a choice."

Hermione went to Devon the following day as promised, and discussed the situation with Arthur and Molly. To her great relief, they seemed to understand her reluctance to return fully to the wizarding world, and did not press her to take up the position at Hogwarts.
She spent most of the day with Molly in the kitchen, canning the season's first strawberry rhubarb jam. A soothingly domestic chore, the task helped to work out some of her physical and mental knots. When they finished the last batch of jam, Molly spread it thickly onto two slices of bread along with butter. Handing the bundle to Hermione, she pushed her through the backdoor to the garden.

"Take a slice to Arthur; strawberry rhubarb jam has always been his favourite." Molly smiled softly. "I'm surprised that he hasn't been in here already begging for some. Go, while it's still warm." She gave another push, and Hermione obeyed the gentle instructions.

The sun was warm, and Hermione was lulled into a feeling of peaceful contentment as she meandered through the comfortably overgrown paths and pots, hearing the buzz of bees and giggles of gnomes. She finally found Arthur at the near the back wall of the garden, sitting on a bench. Some of her peace dissolved as she saw the clear grief written upon his expression; she was struck anew with how changed he was from the man she had met so many years before.

When he saw her and what she carried, however, all traces of sorrow disappeared. He patted the empty spot next him, and eagerly took the piece of bread she proffered. They ate in companionable silence for several minutes, and she felt her eyes start to grow sleepy.

Arthur licked the final bits of jam of his fingers. "I am lucky man, am I not?." He gestured towards the house. "She can't stand rhubarb, but she's always made my favourite jam first. Thirty-eight years, and she still seeks to make me happy." Arthur looked down at her, his love for wife and family etched into the many lines of his face. "I hope that you can find someone who does the same for you, Hermione."

"Me, too," she said, feeling a pinch of loss; her parents had been in love much like Molly and Arthur.

After a moment, he shifted slightly on the bench to better face her. "I might be able to make your decision to return a bit easier. Have you heard of the Kentigernus Institute?"

"It's Muggle medical research centre in Aberdeen, isn't it?"

"It is another name for St. Mungo, yes, and is affiliated with St. Mungo's. They perform medical research there, but it's also a cover for those witches and wizards that have to go back and forth between the Muggle and magical worlds. I'm friends with the director. If you wish, we could get you on the list on employees. Should things not go well, or you find that you prefer one life over the other, you would not be stuck with hard-to-explain gaps in your CV."

Her mind raced with possibilities as she thought through the ramifications of having so neat an out; she considered what it would mean for the various relationships in her life.

"Arthur... do you know why Ginny is so mad at me?" She'd wanted to ask the question for sometime, but never had the courage.

"I wondered if you would ever ask." Pausing, he stretched and she heard the joints in his back pop. "I believe that part of it is just as Harry said; pregnancy hormones can make the most reasonable woman stubborn as a mule. And Ginny's never been one to exactly forgive and forget." Laughing he went on, "You should have seen Molly when she was pregnant with the twins. I thought that she was going to kill me many times over. So did she."
"It is. I think some of relates to the final year battling Voldemort; she was stuck at Hogwarts doing nothing while you and the boys searched for Horcruxes. I don’t think I have to tell you how hard that was for her. Then, after the fighting was done, Harry held her back so that he could deal with his problems, and that hurt. You were her best friend, and in the end, you also pushed her away." He gave a quiet sigh. "Combine that with all of the fuss after you left, and she's been stewing too long in a soup of resentment, jealousy and hurt."

She thought about his answer. It made sense; best of all, it gave her hope that Ginny might someday forgive her. "What happened with the Ministry after I left? Ginny... Ginny said there was an investigation, and Ron got in trouble."

At her question, Arthur rubbed his forehead warily. "The night you left, I told Molly that you needed to leave, and that I was going to help you." He looked at her apologetically. "I know I said I wouldn't tell anyone, but I couldn't kept that kind of secret from her. I didn't tell the children that we knew anything more about your disappearance until almost a year later. The Daily Prophet- well, Rita Skeeter- started to write these long articles about how Ron was 'a person of interest' in your disappearance. The Ministry knew that you were alive- Kingsley was the one who helped get your new documents in order- so they ignored the public furore at first. But... after awhile, they were forced to make a token investigation, or risk being accused of covering something up. Ron was questioned, nothing more." He closed his eyes briefly. "Molly and I made the decision after that to tell the children that we knew you were alive, as well as my role in helping you leave. Ron and Ginny were infuriated; they both felt I should have stopped you, and wanted to know where you were. I refused to tell them. Ron left a couple of months later for America, and Ginny took a posting in Scotland. It took a couple years to get back on good terms with the both of them."

Hermione bit her lip, feeling tears well up. "I'm sorry. I wish... I could have been stronger, handled things better. Or at the very least, not left with more than a few words."

Arthur placed a reassuring hand over Hermione's. "I've told you this before, but it bares repeating: Molly and I don't blame you for what happened. You were a child when you dragged into the mess, and still far too young when it ended. Hermione, you saved the lives of Ron and Ginny, and you did what you had to do to stay sane. We do not begrudge you leaving. Besides which, if Ron can forgive you- which he has- then Ginny will come around too. It'll just take a bit more time."

Silence fell over them once again, and she let the gentle pleasure of the garden and Arthur's presence work a soporific charm upon her. She was roused sometime later by Molly's call; it was supper, and from what sounded like, both George and Percy had joined them.

They both rose from the bench, and for the first time in several months, Hermione felt at peace. Not the cold calm that came from pushing her fears to the dark corners of her mind, but a true serenity that sprang from accepting her fears. She tilted her head up to catch the last rays of the setting sun, and then smiled as she caught Arthur in a similar pose.

"A good kip does wonders, doesn't it?" he asked rhetorically.

"That it does." They started back to the house. "I would like to take you up on your offer of cover with the Kentigernus Institute. And... I'm also going to accept the position at Hogwarts. I don't know if going back there will serve to finally complete a chapter of my life, or be the start of something new, but it's time I dealt with all I left behind."

He looked sincerely pleased with her statement. "Molly will be so happy to hear that you've come to a decision, and so am I."
As they mounted the stairs to the house, Hermione felt the small crystal necklace that Arthur had given her shift on her throat. Touching it, she turned back to Arthur.

"Would you like your necklace back? I keep meaning to ask..."

The man gave her a light kiss on the forehead that felt like a benediction. "No, my dear. It seems to me that you are still yet a traveler, and might need it's protections."

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**Author's Postscript**

Some notes for this chapter... for those you who don't read French, Snape's comment, "Je parle français, comme vous le savez bien" would translate to "I speak French, as you well know." The two books referenced, 'Le Rouge et le Noir' and "Les Justes" are worth a read in either language. 'Le Rouge et le Noir' by Stendhal is about the rise and fall of a country-bred young man who is ultimately undone by his passions. 'Les Justes' by Camus is a absolutely wonderful play that explores the moral landscapes of murder, terrorism and spycraft during the Russian Revolution in 1905.
Snape stepped into the classroom at St. Mungo's, scanning the inhabitants. Most of the Apprentice Healers were already present, even though there was a full ten minutes before the lecture was scheduled to start. Several gave him friendly nods of acknowledgement; he had found teaching the class not to be the chore nor trial he expected. The Healers were far more intelligent than the normal lot of dunderheads he typically taught, and like Brightbrook, none had been former students of his. He found it to be rather pleasant to deal with a group of... well, not precisely youths, but younger adults, and not have the weight of seven years of painful instruction colouring the interactions. Being older, they also possessed a bit of that elusive thing called discretion, and knew to cease asking questions when dealing with sensitive subjects.

Granger and Brightbrook were standing at the front of the classroom. Brightbrook was clearly mid-tale, making a horrible face while miming sticking his hand into something obviously disgusting. At his woeful expression, Granger chuckled, a rich, sympathetic sound that had Brightbrook melting like nothing more than a man-shaped popsicle.

As he cleared the final row of desks, Granger glanced over and saw his oblique approach. The warmth didn't leave her face, although it was tempered by faint unease; she was clearly uncertain as to what his mood might be. Reaching the front table, he gave her slight smile in greeting and she relaxed, relief clear in her eyes.

"Good evening," he said, and the pair returned his greeting.

"Richard was just telling me a story about being a first-year apprentice Healer," Granger informed him, voice bright. "He had to stick his hand in these horrible boxes..."

"Flobberworms, and the like?" Snape asked, amused despite himself.

Brightbrook nodded, grinning. "How did you know?"

"Poppy dragged me down here often as a seventh year. Alas, one of those afternoons featured the blindfolded box test."

Brightbrook continued his tale."Well, unfortunately for me, I am part of the two percent of the population that is highly allergic to flobberworms; a fact I did not discover until several hours later... long after I had managed to touch pretty much every part of my body." His next words were said deadpan. "And I do mean, every part of my body."

Snape winced, letting his some of his amusement show. "And that particular affliction would require the frequent application of fire of wormwood lotion, would it not?"

"Yes," the Healer stated, eyes gleaming. "I'm not sure what was worse, the symptoms or the cure."

They shared a glance of manly comprehension and affinity; Granger stood neatly flanked between the two of them, giggling madly, the earlier worry gone. Looking down at her, he felt a rush of... affection. Her normally cool and collected demeanour was nowhere in evidence. Instead she appeared to be lit from within; her joyful vivacity elevated her appearance from merely lovely to something far more stunning.

He jerked his head up at that thought, and settled his gaze on the Healer. They made quite the pair of opposite bookends; Brightbrook in his bright green robes, hair shining golden versus his own dour black garb and hair. The other man's face, infinitely better arranged than his own, held an expression
of one who’d just been unknowingly poleaxed. *Popsicles,* he thought with some reluctant humour. *We are both but popsicles, and I doubt Granger even realizes it.*

The Healer’s thoughts had been clearly mirroring his own; when he spoke it was in a voice an octave lower than any of his previous statements. "You look particularly lovely tonight, Hermione."

She pinked at his compliment and Snape felt old, not to mention extraordinarily *de trop.*

"Save the flattery for after hours, Healer Brightbrook," she said, the flush finally subsiding from her cheeks. "Any more of that, and my ego will require a deflating draught." Granger made a gentle sweeping gesture. "Be away with you; my class is about to start."

Brightbrook made a graceful bow. "As the good doctor wishes."

Granger fumbled with her papers for a moment before meeting his eyes. "I’m glad you arrived early, Professor Snape. Would you have time to speak after we finish? I have some... questions."

"Yes, that would be fine. There are some things I would like to discuss with you as well," he replied. *So, she’s made her decision then. What will it be?*

"Will the Headmistress be attending tonight?"

"No, she has school business to attend to tonight. The Hogwarts acceptance letters have just gone out, and she’s briefing the families of our newest Muggle-born witches and wizards."

"Oh." She shuffled her papers once more, and glanced at the clock. "Well, that might be for the best. Shall we get started?"

Snape spent the majority of the class furiously trying to decode her enigmatic statement. Did she not want to see Minerva because she planned on declining the post? But if that was the case, why would she want to speak with him after? With a mental sigh of disgust, he focused on his presentation notes. After what seemed to be an interminable amount of time, they finished their lecture. Naturally, there were several rather swotty students that just simply *had* to question Granger about her portion of the class; he set his face in forbidding enough lines that no one tried to engage him.

She was polite in her answers, and good-naturedly humoured the last several banal questions put forth by a spotty young man. Just as the boy opened his mouth to speak again, Snape sent him a look that had sent better men running for their lives. The boy choked out a hasty farewell and scurried out of the empty classroom. She turned to him and rolled her eyes in exasperation; with that, the bubble of ire that had been growing in him all evening popped.

"Thank you for that. Next time, feel free to step in... oh, about five minutes earlier." *So, there will be a next time...*

"Might I remind you, Doctor Granger, of how many times you have likewise accosted your poor teachers?"

Granger deflected his sarcasm with a self-deprecating shrug. "Have you eaten yet? I had a late lunch, and could do with a bite."

"No, not yet. I tend to keep much later hours in the summer. Food would be appreciated."
She looked up him, gaze opaque. "Do you have a preference of a Muggle establishment or not?" She wrinkled her nose. "Although I suppose we could stay here. The cantina isn't all bad."

"We are not going to the hospital cantina," he said firmly. "I would much prefer somewhere Muggle."

His comment surprised her. "Do you like Greek food? I know of a good place about six blocks away."

"Promise me that it's not named Zorba's, or something equally as cliched, and I am sure it will be more than acceptable." With that, he took out his wand and quickly transformed his robes into something less attention gathering. She watched him with some amusement, and then picked up her bag as he stowed his wand his waistband.

She was still shaking her head slightly as they exited the classroom. "What, Granger?"

"It's just uncanny, that's all."

He sent her an exasperated stare. "What's uncanny?"

"In robes, there is no mistaking you for anything other than a wizard. And yet... you look equally at home in a t-shirt and jeans. It's just uncanny how easily you can slip between the two."

"I was a spy for almost as long as you've been alive. If I couldn't shift registers, so to speak, I would have been dead long before you ever reached Hogwarts."

Her gaze darkened at that. "I know. It's just..."

"Like seeing St. Nick at a gentlemen's club?"

"Precisely." She smiled at his use of her erstwhile rejoinder.

The rest of their walk to the cafe was conducted in silence; by unspoken agreement they postponed any further discussion until after their food arrived.

She cast a furtive *Muffliato* Charm over them as the waitress departed. They both dug into their food, and Snape found that he had much more of an appetite then he'd both eaten more than half their food before he decided that conversation could be attempted. Putting down his fork, he looked at Granger levelly. "How are you feeling?"

She likewise put down her utensil, and he saw the first hint of nerves dance through her expression.

"About Saturday..." she reached for her bag, and pulled out his travel mug.

He held up his hand. "Don't apologize, Granger." Her chin firmed at that, but he went on. "You have apologized once already, and I do not require a second explanation as the first was so clearly sincere." That shut her up, and he almost smiled. "I owe you an apology of my own. Whilst what you said was undeniably rude, it was also unfortunately true. Indeed, I am a glutton for punishment. Poppy had been nagging me not two hours earlier around the same topic; when you hit upon it, I lost my temper. For that, I apologise."

"I..."

He let her flounder for a moment and then allowed his voice to contain the barest hint of sarcasm. "I believe this is where you thank me for the apology, and we move on."
Granger's jaw snapped shut; when she spoke it was with grudging humour. "That last part sounds like something Poppy would say."

"It bloody well should," he grumbled. "The woman has been lecturing me on my manners since I was eleven."

"I'm pleased to see that all of her hard work is finally taking root." That earned her a glare, and she smirked back at him, unrepentant. "Thank you for your apology, Professor Snape." Her smirk transformed into a smile as she said it, and her tone had nothing but the utmost respect and sincerity. However, it was the warmth in her brown eyes that discomforted him the most; Snape found that, much like the Healer, he was not entirely immune to her blandishments.

He took another bite of food, and she followed suite. "You didn't answer my question."

"Hmmm?" she asked, before recalling his prior query. "I'm feeling much better. Still sore..." with a quick murmur she lifted the charm on her face to reveal her black eye. "... and this is turning the most entertaining shades of colours. I've forgotten how fun it can be watch it change."

He looked at the bruise with open admiration as she recast the charm. "That truly is impressive hue of green. Almost a Slytherin green, wouldn't you say?"

"Still a bit bright for that yet, don't you think? More of a... Healer green, I think." Her lips quirked, and he fought the urge to laugh at her quick response.

 Damn, the woman is quick... and not as oblivious as I'd like. I'm really going to have watch myself. "You said before that you had some questions for me?"

"On Saturday, you brought up the possibility of me becoming your apprentice. I would like to know what it would entail, as well as your conditions." Her mien grew serious. "How much do you know about apprenticeships?" he asked, taking on the familiar didactic tones of teaching.

"Apprenticeships served as a way to pass down specialized schools of thought, and most lines have rather long genealogies. I know that there there is some sort of binding ceremony involved, and as well as a contract, which last for three to five years leading to a mastery at the end."

"That is correct; the binding was set up in the middle ages to protect both the master and apprentice from harm. It prevents the apprentice from taking work that is not his or hers, and also obligates the master to protect and provide for his or her apprentice."

"What is contained in the contracts?"

"That would depend on individual contract. You would find any contract I put forth none too onerous. I would not require you to present me with fourteen unicorns horns a month for example, nor provide me a half litre of your blood every week for sacrifice."

"The unicorn horns would have been a sticking point."

"I surmised as much given your earlier work on behalf of the house-elves and other non-human magical creatures." His tone was dry.

"You would have conditions, however." She said the last quietly.

"Yes. I would ask that Poppy be our mediator, should we have any major disputes. In terms of work,
very little would change; what we are doing now can more than suffice for your mastery. However,” he stated, and gave her a firm stare, "...If you thought I was tough when you were a student, you will find me even more demanding as my apprentice. I know how much you are capable of, and will accordingly expect more in return. Is that clear?”

"Very."

"You also would assist me in grading and proctoring, and would be present for the sixth and seventh year potions courses; nominally, you be in the class to help, although in actuality it would serve as more of a refresher course for you. Should I be ill, you might be called upon to cover my courses. Likewise, if something took me away from the Castle, you would temporarily take over my duties as Head of Slytherin House."

"That could prove to be highly entertaining... or not."

He rolled his eyes. "If they haven't killed me in my sleep yet, Granger, they are unlikely to do so to you."

"I know that. They are children, not little monsters."

He tapped the table for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "That they are. Slytherin House is a mess; most of the students are suffering from some sort of serious depression or PTSD; if possible I would appreciate your support in working with them."

"You would have it." Her reply was unequivocal.

"Minerva will have to provide you with the details about your other teaching duties. You would, of course, have quarters in the teachers' wing of the Castle; you've seen what the apprentice suite is like. Should you want more privacy than the section attached to my rooms, it can likely be accommodated."

"And what of... other boundaries?"

He gazed at her steadily. "Those would be framed more as a request. I would still prefer not to discuss the past as much as possible; while that policy does occasionally prove to be problematic, it is also my way coping. I believe you know enough of my history to understand the sentiment?" She nodded.

"I would like us to be friendly, or at least 'civil and polite' as you requested. I will be honest; I do not know if I can mange any more than that, nor am I sure that I would want to. It is nothing personal- at all- but Poppy is the only person I would gladly call a friend, and that is chiefly due to the fact that she has been bandaging me up since I was eleven and has seen me at my worst more times than I care to think about."

Her mouth gave that little quirk again, and he saw both sorrow and humour collide in her eyes. "What?"

"It's only... if that's your idea for the foundation of a friendship, then I'd say we are halfway there." At his raised eyebrow, she went on. "I too have know you since I was eleven, and you've saved my bum from the fire several times over. You've certainly seen me at my worst- such as my regrettable feline phase, and have been responsible for patching up me up on more then one occasion... you were the one who prepared the petrification draught during my second year, for example. If my guess is correct, you also healed me after I was hit by Dolohov’s curse."

His response was reluctant. "Yes, that was me. There weren't enough curse-breakers on duty that
night at St. Mungo's, so I... assisted."

She watched him for several seconds. "I understand what you are saying, Professor Snape."

"Do you?"

"Yes." A group loud group of students entered the restaurant, interrupting their conversation. Once the din died down, she spoke again. "If I... come back, I will likely be a hot mess, to borrow a phrase from Aditi. I can't guarantee that I will always be pleasant to be around. And then there is the little matter of my continued health problems..."

"Granger, if you can deal with my temper, than surely I can do the same for you. As to the... emotional repercussions of returning," He stopped, trying to find the correct words, "...I spent my first two weeks back at Hogwarts getting completely pissed, and still have my moments. You will find no judgement from me on the score. I would recommend that if you do agree to this that you move to the Castle in August and give yourself some time to settle in before the fall invasion of students."

"And what if my... health issues do increase?"

"Then we will deal with it."

"Alright."

"Do you have any further questions, Granger?"

"Just one... why? There are very clear advantages for me in all of this, but not so much for you."

This time, it was she who put up her hand to forestall his comment. "I'm not asking you for all of your reasons, but I am asking for one."

"Would 'Poppy told me to' suffice?"

"No." She picked up her fork and began to eat the rest of her eggplant with relish, content to give him the space to think.

He could almost feel Poppy nudge him; she would urge him to be open about his motives, for once. Granger had been forthcoming in many of their previsions interactions, and should she agree to become his apprentice, he would have to learn to be comfortable in trusting her.

So... how much to say?

She had finished her plate and was scoping out the dessert rack when he answered her question. "I enjoy working with you." Her head snapped abruptly back to him, and he smirked at how quickly that had gotten her attention. "You have matured greatly beyond the pedantic know-it-all that entered my classroom some fifteen-odd years ago. You spoke to me several weeks ago about how important your work was to you, and how very few people understood it's importance." He let his sardonic mask slip a bit. "I am the only potions master in Europe under the age of one hundred; accordingly, there are very few people who understand or truly appreciate what I do. I would like very much to have someone to work with, and I think that you could be that person."

Her emotions had effectively been hidden after his initial statement, but he saw her posture relax minutely as he continued his explanation. When he finished, she nodded and asked, "Would you find me terribly rude if I took some time to think over what you said?"

"Not at all."
She pointed to the sweets. "Would you care for anything else?"

"A cup of coffee. Black."

She got up and walked to the counter, and entered in a brief discussion with waitress. When she came back, it was with the coffee he had requested and large piece of honey-smeared baklava.

"Would you like some?" she offered.

He shook his head. "You have a sweet-tooth?"

"Always have, much to my parents' disgust."

"They were dentists, were they not?"

Her smile was bittersweet. "Yes, they were, and rather strict about permitting me treats like this. They always made be brush immediately after eating something with this much sugar."

Granger ate the dessert with care, not bothering to hide her pleasure. She pushed her plate away at last, and stared at him over the table solemnly.

"I would be very much honoured to be you apprentice, Professor Snape."

He spoke his next words with care. "I would prefer that you use my Christian name in private." He extended his hand across the table to her.

"Very well, Severus," she said, slender hand meeting his, and they shook on it.

Author's Postscript: I've been seriously remiss in thanking my wonderful beta, Muggle Jane, for making this story far more readable than that if I'd left it to my own dubious SPaG-y skills. Likewise, dear readers, thank you for all the comments, kudos, and subscriptions.

As promised aeons ago, here is the full list of references made in chapter titles-

Prologue- A Victory March- line from 'Hallelujah', Cohen/Buckley

Ch. 1- Of Sharks and Men- play on Steinbeck's novel, 'Of Mice and Men' detailing the wandering of two men in the aftermath of the Great Depression.

Ch. 2- 'All that you can't leave behind', U2

Ch. 3- A Minor Fall and Major Lift- line from 'Hallelujah', Cohen/Buckley

Ch. 4- 'Hungry Heart', Bruce Springsteen

Ch. 5- The Baffled King- line from 'Hallelujah', Cohen/Buckley

Ch. 6- Castles Gone to the Constant Sea- line from "Long Way Off", Gungor

Ch. 7- 'Sleeping to Dream', Jason Mraz

Ch. 8- Excrement and Oscillators- reference to the 1980 movie, 'Airplane'

Ch. 10- 'Help Yourself', Amy Winehouse

Ch. 11- 'Dark Don't Hide It', Jason Molina
Ch. 12- Waiting to Exhale- line from 'Shoop, Shoop (Waiting to Exhale)', Whitney Houston
Ch. 15- 'Cast No Shadow', Oasis
Ch. 16- 'Another Brick in the Wall'- Pink Floyd
Ch. 17- 'No Limits on the Words', Songs: Ohia/Jason Molina
Ch. 18- 'Slowness'- Calexico
Shelter

Hermione wasn't sure what urge was strongest; the desire to burst into a hysterical fit of giggles, or the dire need to vomit all over her brand new, sherry-coloured dress robes. As either option appealed about as much as cuddling a raging Blast-Ended Skrewt, however, she strove to push all of her nerves far enough back that she wouldn't come across as the village idiot during the forthcoming binding ceremony. She must have been faking it sufficiently, because Arthur and Molly paid her scant attention, and instead looked about the remodelled Hogwarts halls with mild interest.

Matters had moved quickly after her impromptu dinner with Professor Snape; the following afternoon she had sat down with him as well as the Headmistress to iron out the exact details of her contract. As he had promised, it had been rather uncomplicated. It had spelled out her duties, hours and expectations as an apprentice, as well as his. The contract was for an initial three years, with re-agreement due every year after that. Minerva- for she had also requested that Hermione use her given name- had also produced a teaching contract for Hogwarts that had been equally as straightforward. She would be teaching three sections of Muggle science, in addition to the two upper level classes with Professor Snape; she was required to assist with evening rounds every eleventh day, and serve as chaperon on Hogsmeade weekends at six week intervals. She was not, blessed be, expected to attend any school events- meals or otherwise- in the Great Hall until such time that she felt ready to do so.

Minerva had expressed her great happiness in having her join the staff, although the faint shadows in the woman's eyes had told Hermione that it was not without some reservations. Upon parting, she had given Hermione a leather-bound book that detailed the ritual of the binding ceremony, as well as historical background to the entire practice. Thanks to her careful reading of the slim volume and a through questioning of Arthur, she felt comfortable with physical procedures of the rite; she could only wish to face the rest of it with a similar equanimity.

She felt dazed at the speed at which everything else had fallen into place; she had given notice at the University, and was in the process of packing up her flat in Aberystwyth so she could be out by the first of August. Now, a bare two weeks after being offered an apprenticeship, she was to bind herself to one Severus Tobias Snape, Potions Master, for the next three years. At that unreal thought, she hastily choked off a giggle. But she must have made some sort of sound, because Arthur turned around to glance at her in concern. Before she could do more than stare back, a heavy wooden door opened, and Minerva gestured them in.

Hermione stood stock-still in shock upon entering the room. Really, a calling it a mere 'room' was a grave misnomer. It was a proper chapel, and a breathtaking one at that. Borrowing heavily from the original gothic tradition of the Castle, it had a rectangular nave and high, arching ceilings supported by exposed columns ending above in a delicate pattern resembling a fan. The clerestory windows were made out of large panels of crystalline glass, while the windows at eye level were made from more delicately worked stained glass. On the left side of the room, the window designs revealed themselves to be the crests and colours of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, and to the right that of Ravenclaw and Slytherin. The central window at the end of the room featured the Hogwarts heraldry encircled by the livery of the different houses.

With the rich, warm and highly hued sunlight pouring through the various windows, the air seem to spark with promise. Taking a deep breath in, she felt her fears dissipate as the magic of the space wrapped her in a reassuring embrace. Hermione stepped forward, and focused on the people in the room rather than just the beauty around her.
At the head of the space stood Minerva and Flitwick, with the former holding several sheets of heavy vellum in her hands. The vellum appeared to be the contracts, and the Headmistress was giving them a final once-over while Flitwick stood gazing absent-mindedly at the main window. As Hermione looked up to the window that he was watching, she realized that the stained glass was enchanted, and the patterns and shapes were shifting; their slow motion made her feel as though she was standing in the middle of a giant kaleidoscope.

Under the Slytherin window stood Poppy and Professor Snape, whom he was having a quiet but very intense discussion with. She wasn’t arguing directly with him, but there was a subtle look of distress on her face at his words. Before Hermione could give their conversation much consideration, the Headmistress called her up to the front of the nave.

"Hermione, please examine the contract a final time before we begin." Minerva handed them to her, and she began to check them. As she read the clauses, she could hear the discrete whispers from the others in the nave, and gave the pair under the Slytherin window a side-long glance.

"They are as agreed, Headmistress," Hermione said quietly. Minerva gave her a sharp nod, and then spoke loudly enough to get the attention of Professor Snape and Poppy.

"Unless there are any further issues, shall we get started?"

"I do have one problem, Minerva..." Professor Snape started to say, before the Headmistress interrupted.

"Severus, you wouldn't be backing out now, would you?" Minerva's voice was impatient, and held an edge of incredulity.

"No." His retort was unequivocal, and Hermione felt a rush of relief at his ready answer. "It has not to do with the contract, but rather an aspect of the ceremony. I have been forced to bow down for far too many people; I'll not have Hermione do the same for me." He turned and addressed her directly.

"You will have no complaints with my support and guidance, nor will I shirk any of my obligations to you, but I won't have you take a knee, nor will I be your master in that fashion. Do you understand what I am saying, Hermione?"

She was stunned by his words, and they appeared to have caught the others in the room likewise off-guard. The binding ceremony was fairly simple, as well as routine: she was to lay her wand at his feet and kneel, demonstrating her obedience and fealty. They would recite the oath of apprenticeship, and he would give her back her wand as an act of munificence. Finally, they would both sign the contracts, and they would be bound as master and apprentice. The submissive nature of the rite hadn't bothered Hermione all that much; she had accepted as just another example of archaic workings of living in the magical world.

"You went through this same ceremony yourself, Severus. It's not as if this isn't a common-place ritual; taking a knee is rather insignificant in this case." Minerva sounded slightly confused at his protest.

"Tell me, Minerva- would you bow to me right now, in this room? No contract, nothing on the line, just a quick a bend of a knee?" Professor Snape wasn't quite... angry, but whatever emotions he had on the topic were strong ones.

The Headmistress stood rendered mute at his question, but the look on her face said quite clearly that even a faux act of submission would make her uncomfortable.
"It is no little act, you must admit." His tone was once again firm, and his gaze slid from the Headmistress's face to hers.

"I am not being forced to kneel, Professor." She bit her lip, wondering if any words from her would reassure him. "I trust you in this."

"Hermione," and he paused, closing his eyes for a moment before continuing. "This isn't a matter of trust." His regard was all consuming when he looked back to her, and she caught a beseeching plea in his stare. She thought about his objection, and the various ways that must have had to humble himself over the years. To Voldemort, certainly, but also to Dumbledore... she remembered the feeling of being forced to kneel in the Great Hall as the Death Eaters tortured her and three students... and she had an inkling as to why he considered it no little or insignificant act, and why he wanted no one to bow before him.

"I understand," she whispered.

"Severus, how are we to complete the binding if you won't perform the ritual?" Minerva still seemed befuddled by his response, and the space was suddenly filled with an awkward silence.

Hermione cast her eyes about the room, looking for inspiration. Her gaze fell upon one of the stained glass windows, done in the bright yellow and brown heraldry of Hufflepuff. Words formed, and the centre picture changed from the badger to a pair of linked hands. **AMICITIA AEQUALITAS** it read; *friendship is equality.*

"Could we hold hands instead?" she blurted, and immediately flushed, feeling stupid.

It was Poppy that gathered her wits first. "It is the intent that matters the most, not the actual physical motions. Linking hands should serve just fine."

"That would be acceptable substitution to me," Professor Snape said, and Hermione fancied that she caught a hint of relief in his expression.

"Very well." Minerva spoke crisply. "Come here," she went on, and waved to a spot in front of her, spreading the contract onto the long table next to her.

Both she and Professor Snape walked forward; as she reached the spot indicated, she looked down at her wand.

"What should I do with this?" she asked, holding it out.

"If we are really going to meddle with the ceremony, we might as well change it all the way," he said. "Why don't we both put our wands on top of the the contract, and after the oath taking, you can hand me mine, and I will do the same." He gave her a faint, if sardonic smile. "Amictia aequalitas, no?"

She felt a milder iteration of her earlier blush spread across her face; he must have seen the Hufflepuff window and had figured out her inspiration. "That's fine by me."

Minerva was checking the scroll with the oath on it a last time when he leaned down and spoke to her in an low undertone. "You should have seen what the Slytherin window was suggesting..."

"Shall we begin?" Minerva said, looking at the two of them with some asperity. "Well? You both had the bright idea to change the ceremony, so make your adjustments now."

Hermione stared up at Professor Snape, non-plussed. **Right. So we decided to hold hands... but how?**
Placing his wand on top of the contract, Professor Snape extended both his hands out, palms up. Setting her wand next to his, she clasped his hands and they stood facing each other. Their position was a familiar one, but harkened to different type of binding ceremony. *Mawwage*... she mentally heard in the wobbly voice of the Impressive Clergyman from the Princess Bride, *Mawwage is what bwings us togeva today...*

His mouth quirked in perceptive humour, easily reading her thoughts. As one, they looked towards Minerva, and she couldn't help the smile that blossomed over her face.

"Let us begin," the Headmistress spoke in formal tones. "We are here today to witness the binding and contract..."

As she held Professor Snape's hands within her own, Hermione became aware of several things all at once. First, while he had regained his equilibrium, his earlier strong emotions were still present; she could feel the barely checked tension radiating out through his long fingers, and she was struck with a sudden urge to comfort him. Without pausing to think about her actions, she gave his hands a gentle squeeze. He took a measured breath, and then his hands returned the pressure, gaze warming on hers.

As she took the sensation in, she realized that he wasn't wearing his customary black robes. Instead, he wore robes of a deep, cerulean blue. Perhaps it was the colour of his robes, or maybe the sunlight streaming over them... or just the fact that they were standing so very close, but she saw with some amazement that his eyes were not black, as she had always thought, but a dark, chocolatey brown. *Oh my...*

"Who represents the institution of Hogwarts?" she heard Minerva ask.

"I, Filius Flitwick, Holder of a Mastery in Charms, Head of Ravenclaw House and Deputy Headmaster, do."

"Who represents the Ministry of Magic?"

"I, Arthur Weasley, Ministry employee and Head of the Office of Muggle Relations, do."

"Who represents Severus Tobias Snape, and pledges to fulfil this contract in his stead if he is unable to do so?"

"I, Poppy Pomfrey, Holder of a Mastery in Healing, Matron of Hogwarts and friend to Severus, do"

"Who represents Hermione Jean Granger, and affirms that she has entered into this contract in good faith and with competent ability?"

"I, Molly Weasley, Order of Merlin, Second Class, and friend to Hermione, do."

As they recited their name and titles, each person stepped forward and surrounded them in a semi-circle, with Minerva at the apex. Flitwick and Poppy stood to the right of Professor Snape, and Arthur and Molly alongside her. She could feel the beginnings of magic stirring in the air around them; a frisson of nerves danced up her spine as her fears and doubts loomed large. This time, it was Professor Snape's hands that squeezed and sent her the calm needed to concentrate on the Headmistress' next words.

"Severus Tobias Snape, before you..." Minerva paused in her recitation, and substituted the next word. "...stands Hermione Jean Granger, who seeks to become your apprentice. Do you wish to present her with a contract of indenture?"
"I do, and have."

"Do you pledge to share your knowledge, guide her in the ways and methods of potions, provide for her from your hearth and offer her your protection for a period of three years?"

"I do so swear."

"Hermione Jean Granger, you stand before Severus Tobias Snape, and have petitioned him to serve as your Master in the area of Potions. Will you agree to the indenture and terms he has stipulated?"

"I do agree."

"And do you swear your obedience and complete fealty to him, and promise to keep good faith in all work and practice?"

"I do so swear."

The magic around them had strengthened to form an ever tightening circle, and Hermione fought against the pressure that was threatening to nudge her closer to Professor Snape. She met his eyes again, and saw that he was fighting the same compulsion; she could also see that he was just as uncertain as she was. Looking down at their intertwined hands, she realized that they were both gripping each other hard enough that their fingers had gone white from the lack of circulation.

"Having heard and witnessed their solemn oaths, do any here object to the creation of this apprenticeship?"

None of the others moved, and Minerva waited a full half minute before speaking again. "Then as Headmistress of Hogwarts, and a Holder of a Mastery in Transfiguration, I declare this contract to be valid and binding."

There was a split second of utter quiet, and then the magic around them exploded into a burst of colours. Hermione had the sensation of being the middle of a whirlpool of emotions, and something almost like memories; it was all she could do to stay upright under the pounding of that much sentiment. Slowly, the magic coalesced and separated, and she became conscious of a shock mirroring her own, of fears and curiosity, possibilities and doubt... and a bone-deep, bitter, loneliness. It was the last emotion that made her realize that not all of what she was feeling came from her own thoughts.

Her vision cleared somewhat, and the dark brown eyes of Severus Snape came into view once more. She recognized that second mental presence as his; whilst he wasn't in her mind, nor she in his, they were quite clearly sharing in each others' emotions. She felt him jerk, physically and mentally, as he came to the same conclusions as she had. Hermione was abruptly aware of being pressed into the long, lean line of his body, of her left and his right hand still clasped together and being crushed between them. Her other hand was clutching at the front of his dress robes for stability, and he was gripping her upper arm hard enough that she knew there'd be bruises. At her wince, his hand loosened, but did not let go; they were staring at each other in astonishment. Swimming in the pool of their shared feelings, she tasted that horrible sensation of loneliness again.

Reaching out, she offered what comfort, what acceptance she could in the face of his pain. It will be alright, she thought fiercely. There are two of us now. His sudden spurt of feelings momentarily overwhelmed her own, and she was awash in a such a flood that she could not identify nor categorize his response to her avowal. Then the obscuring shields of his Occlumency came up, buffering her, and in what remained, she recognized three clear feelings from him: gratitude, wariness and longing.
Softly, she heard his hesitant voice in her head. *Yes, I suppose that is true.*

As she stood looking up at him, she wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh, cry... or reach up and kiss him. His shields had muted the link between them sufficiently, preventing from knowing his exact thoughts on the matter. If the downward tilt of his chin was any indication however, he felt the same rush of attraction that she did.

His body stilled, and she saw a flash of regret in his eyes. Slowly, his hand loosen upon hers, and without breaking their gaze, he reached down and plucked her wand off the table. Stepping back, he gave her a formal, deep bow before proffering her wand. She took it, carefully picked up his wand, and repeated his motions. As she handed the ebony rod to him, she felt their... connection, or whatever it had been, snap, and she was again alone in her own thoughts and feelings.

A sudden whoosh had them both swivelling in the direction of Arthur and Molly; a silvery stag had appeared, and she heard Harry's voice.

"Ginny's gone into labour. So far everything is fine, but she's progressing quickly. Come as soon as you can."

Minerva's voice issued from behind them, sounding strangely grim. "You'll need to sign the contracts before Arthur and Molly can leave. Quickly, now." Handing them both quills, she pointed to the vellum sheets. "There are copies for the two of you, for the school, and one for Ministry."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Severus sign his name on the first copy, the spidery, narrow script intimately familiar to her. His face had gone completely white, she noted. Looking down at her own trembling hand, she knew that she had to be beet-red from her own suppressed emotions. *What on earth happened? That was not... that was not how the book described the ceremony!*

With another brusque wave, Minerva summoned several more quills and handed them to the Weasleys, who bent over the contracts. Signing the fourth copy, Hermione finally looked up from the table into the faces of the others. Flitwick wore genial, blank expression, but Hermione saw the covert speculation in his gaze. Poppy was notably lacking her usual serenity, but otherwise appeared calm. Minerva's countenance, on the other hand, did not invite any questions, and Arthur and Molly were distinctly worried about Ginny.

Watching the flow of people past the table, she noticed that no one was meeting anyone else's stare. *So, she thought to herself, Clearly, that little burst of magic wasn't normal. And it's either serious enough, or strange enough that no one wants to discuss it. Instead, we will follow in the proper and time-honoured English tradition of pretending that nothing out of the ordinary has happened. A bubble of frustration welled up at the thought. No, I think not. Something happened, and I will not simply ignore it.*

She swung her gaze to Severus, who had regained most of his colour, she was relieved to see. He stared back at her for a moment, and then gave her a faint shake of his head; *Later,* his expression clearly said. *We will talk about this later.* Subsiding reluctantly, she turned back to the wall of enchanted stained glass, and began examining the panes for clues.

Snape watched as Molly murmured something to Arthur. Patting her shoulder comfortably, he shooed her towards the door. "Go, Molly. I'll be right behind you," he said. As she turned to leave, Molly Weasley shot him an incomprehensible look. *You and I both,* he thought with no little confusion. *That certainly wasn't what happened when I took my apprenticeship oath.*

The welter of emotions that thought dredged up was enough to make him draw on the cold
blankness of his Occlumency until he no longer felt like a gibbering pillock. It was with an easy dispassion that he acknowledged Arthur as the man approached him.

"I have a favour to ask of you," Arthur said. "Will you walk with me?"

"As you wish," he responded, and they made their way to the exit. Arthur held the door for him, but did not move forward as the heavy rune covered door shut behind them with a sigh.

The man opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it, clearly flummoxed. He stared at Snape for a moment, and then finally thrust his hand into his robes and withdraw a small, velvet bag.

Extending it, Arthur asked, "Do you know what this is?"

"I believe so."

"I think... I think that it's best that you keep this for a little while. Perhaps it will help you understand your apprentice a little better."

Snape hesitated; the charm used on the necklace was a limited variant of Legilimency, and he wasn't keen on having the item in his possession without Granger's explicit permission. On other hand, all he had to was accept the bloody thing and shove it into a drawer; it wasn't as if he had moon over it constantly. And if Granger did start having problems... He took the small bag with a solemn nod, and carefully stowed it in his pocket. "Is there anything else you would like to speak about?"

"Yes, actually." Arthur rubbed his forehead in a familiar gesture. "If something starts to go wrong, if... Ginny has issues, would you be willing to come to St. Mungo's and consult with Brightbrook?"

His question came as complete shock, and Snape said the first thing that popped into his thoughts. "I'm no Healer, Arthur." Seeing the quick flare of disappointment on the older man's face, he realized that he had inadvertently insulted him. Regrouping, he spoke again. "My answer isn't no; you just caught me by surprise. If you believe that I might be able to provide some sort of assistance, then I would be willing to oblige you."

Arthur relaxed. "Thank you. Both Molly and I wanted to ask you, given that it was your potions that were able to stop the seizures the last time."

"George has my number, or you can send your Patronus."

"Right." Arthur gave him a distracted, if sincere smile. "I'm off, then. Thank you again"

"Not a problem. I hope you have no need of me."

That earned him a dry laugh. "Likewise." With that, the man turned and hurried down the hallway.
Beast of Burden

She was peering at the Slytherin window when Severus' voice sounded from behind her.

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?" His expression was scrupulously empty, but his tone wasn't... unfriendly.

"I was hoping to move my things over from Aberystwyth. I also have some furniture that needs to go back to my parents' house in London."

"Do you still wish to do so?"

"Yes." She offered him a wry smile. "I need something to do, or I'll lose the plot completely."

"That would be rather unfortunate, given the contract you just signed." Glancing around, he nodded towards the Headmistress. "Let us tell Minerva; she can modify the wards to allow us to Apparate your items here. If all goes well, we should be able to get your other things to London as well."

"Alright." She had assumed that it would be the house-elves helping her transport her things, and was a little startled at his apparent equanimity in assisting her with such a mundane task. Still, she wasn't going to argue, especially as she fully intended on grilling him on the events of the previous fifteen minutes.

They walked over to the Headmistress, who was putting her final signature on the contracts. "Will you be moving in today?" Minerva asked, manner still on the wrong side of curt.

"Yes, I had hoped so." Hermione answered, surprised at the Headmistress' mood.

"And do you recall how to shift the wards?" Minerva stared down the bridge of her nose at Severus as she issued the question, even though the wizard was a good head taller than she was. Hermione wondered if she'd ever be able to replicate that formidable glare; it would come in handy during the forthcoming school year, especially given her own short stature and non-threatening appearance.

"Yes, I do." Severus told her.

"Then I shall let you handle the details as you see fit." She handed them the completed contracts, and her expression briefly thawed. "I congratulate you both." With that, she swept away in rustle of tartan and temper.

"I find myself delighted to not be the only one who was discomfited." Hermione mused, belatedly realizing that they were the only two left in the room.

"You weren't, I assure you," he said dryly.

"Yes, I do seem to recall something along those lines..." she teased, relieved that he had retained his sense of humour despite the preceding events.

His mouth turned up at that, and he gave an inelegant snort. "There is no end to your cheek, is there?"

"Well, it certainly helps that I know you are now magically prohibited from doing me serious bodily harm."

"Why would I resort to such a crude method to make a point when I have bucketfuls of horned slugs
that need to be dissected? As my apprentice, it is only logical that you assist me by preparing ingredients."

It was her turn to snigger. Changing her mien from sardonic to wide-eyed innocence, she went on. "Sounds like the upcoming detentions for all those new first-years will be brutal."

"First-years clean cauldrons by hand, Granger. Second-years and above are tasked with the dissection of ingredients. Don't stress yourself too badly trying to remember."

There was no venom in either his voice or gaze, just a lazy amusement that she had never seen from him before. *Oh, my...* she thought for a second time that morning.

Thinking of the ceremony, she asked softly, "What just happened?"

"I don't know." He looked down at his copy of their contract, and then back up at her, humour gone. "If I had to wager a guess, I would say that it was a combination of circumstances. We did meddle with the ceremony quite a bit; my apprenticeship binding was nothing like that. I don't think that we did anything... unwanted, or irreparable, but it was rather different. I also think that Hogwarts also added it's own... stamp to the proceedings, hence all of the pretty colours. More than that..." He paused, shaking his head ruefully. "Do you have any ideas?"

She blinked at him, surprised that he had bothered to ask her opinion. "Beyond yours? No. Minerva gave me book on the ceremony, but I don't recall it mentioning anything like what happened. I'm sure that I can find something in the library..." she said, trailing off as she thought about possible avenues of research.

"Tell me, Granger... has there ever been a problematic situation when your first thought hasn't been 'must go to the library'?"

"No, none that come to mind. It's all a matter finding the correct book." She smiled up at him smugly.

"Well, if you want any time to poke about the dusty tomes today, then we better get to moving your things, shouldn't we?" he drawled, moving forward. "Why don't we meet back at your flat in an hour?"

She nodded at him. "The living room is mostly packed up, so if you want to Apparate directly, aim for the front of the staircase."

"Very well. Shall we?" Holding the door open for her, they started down the hallway together.

He was pleasantly surprised to find that Poppy wasn't lurking about in his rooms; still, it wasn't as if the Healer would need to go far in order to locate and interrogate him. Snape knew that there would be many eventual questions from that particular quarter, and was grateful that she'd at least had the kindness to wait until he'd had time to composed himself and ponder the situation.

*Bloody Fucking Nora, what did we do?*

He sat down on the first chair he stumbled across, allowing himself a moment to sprawl against the kitchen table and indulge his flailing thoughts.

It hadn't been until he'd been dressing that morning that he had given any thought to the details of the apprenticeship ceremony. All cognitive function had accordingly frozen, then utterly rebelled at the notion of Granger submitting herself to him. Later, he had only been able to articulate a half-arsed
explanation to Poppy in the Chamber of Binding; when Granger had lit upon the idea of holding hands, of *amicitia aequalitas* and all that entailed, his hindbrain had finally caught up to his more rational thoughts, and it had dawned on him why that specific aspect of the ceremony had been so abhorrent to him.

*It will be alright. There are two of us now.* Granger’s voice rippled through in his head... *Hermione,* he thought to himself ruefully. *You might as well get used to calling her Hermione, if only in your thoughts. It’s not as if your previous attempts to keep her at a distance have been successful.* Truly, that vow of hers had been what had thrown him for a curve. It hadn’t been the fact she’d somehow understood a good deal of his reluctance at the start of the ceremony, or that they’d so blindingly, obviously, changed their attempt at an apprenticeship binding into something so much more...

No, it had been her pledge that had shifted matters so irrevocably for him. There had not been a trace of pity in her thoughts, nor had there been the expected and altogether Gryffindor compulsion to ‘fix’ him. Amidst the roiling abyss of his feelings, she had surrounded him with acceptance and offered fellowship. Moreover, inherent in her thoughts had been the information that she just wasn’t presenting herself up to him, one-sided, but that she likewise found him to be a source of safety... and of comfort.

Forty-six years, and nobody had ever considered him a source a comfort.

*I do believe this would fit the definition of being hoisted with one's own petard...*

Severus was late. She’d lost track of the time packing up the last of her bedroom, and it wasn’t until she received a text from George that she saw that it was almost a half an hour past their agreed upon time. Hermione bit her lip, wondering if she should text him to find out if everything was alright, and then vainly tried to dismiss worry fermenting within her. *Just because he's never been late in your entire acquaintance doesn't mean something is wrong. Honestly, stop being such a ninny!*

She spent the next ten minutes dithering between outright concern and a grumpy frustration. As much as he had mellowed and accepted her presence, and indeed, even her impertinence, she knew without a doubt that he’d not tolerate her fussing or quizzing him on his whereabouts like she had Ron or Harry. Besides, it wasn’t as if he wasn’t perfectly capable of looking after himself...

She had just started down the stairs when he Apparated neatly at their base. He no longer wore his formal robes, but instead a pair of battered track pants and a green t-shirt; his expression had reverted into an incommunicative mask.

"Oh, there you are," Hermione said, mentally cursing herself at the readily apparent relief in her statement. *Oh, well done... that was smooth.*

"My apologies. The wards took quite a bit more finessing than I had estimated. Minerva neglected to mention that she had reinforced them in some rather complicated ways."

"Yes, I do believe that we annoyed her today."

"You think? Minerva may lack Albus' more Machiavellian tendencies, but she is just as much of a control freak as he was."

She started down the stairs, contemplating his response. "Have you eaten? Aditi brought some curry by last night. It's spicy, but wonderful."

"If you have enough to share, then yes, I'll gladly eat." He moved out of her way, and followed her into the kitchen.
Putting out a pot, she lit the hob and started to pull food from the fridge. "I thought changing the wards of Hogwarts was strictly a prerogative of the Headmistress or Headmaster."

"It is." He gave her an arch look. "As you noted months ago, I neither resigned nor was sacked."

She raised an eyebrow at him in return. "If she is such a control freak, then why have you retained your privileges as Headmaster?"

"You would have to raise that question with her. I am sure she has some nefarious plan behind it all, but I've not bothered to inquire." Severus' airy tone was dismissive, but given his natural state of suspicion she had a feeling he already knew the answer to the mystery and just didn't want to discuss it.

The kitchen went silent except for the sounds of her stirring the curry, and she jumped when he spoke again. "Hermione, why do you think that I did not want you to bow to me?"

She stopped stirring and turned fully to look at him. He was lounging against the archway, but the causal lines of his body language were contradicted by the odd light in his eyes.

"I would think that your primary reason is because you yourself have been forced to kneel and call so many people 'master'. I can understand that much, at least." She took a deep breath. "When Martson Mortaine and the remaining Death Eaters took over the school... they made me kneel, forced me beg for the lives of several students. Made me ask for a lot of things, as a matter of fact." Faces, horrible screams, swam up from the depths of her memory, momentarily assaulting her. She took another deep breath, and the spicy smell of the curry recalled her to the kitchen. "I don't ever want to be made the vulnerable again, and I would guess that you don't either."

He nodded slowly, and she went on. "Despite your reputation as a Dark Wizard, I don't think that you want that sort of power or control over anyone."

"I don't. Ever." His baritone was raspy as he said it. "But there is another factor as well. I have never had the luxury of a relationship that wasn't based on an imbalance of power, one way or another." Pausing for a long second, he began to count off names with his graceful fingers. "Lily. Lucius. Dumbledore and Voldemort. Draco... even Poppy." He glanced down abruptly, and his hair covered his expression.

"Ironic that I ask this of my apprentice... but for once in my life, I would like a relationship that is based on equality and respect, not on debts owed and obligations." His gaze met hers again, and what she saw knocked her nearly breathless. "Let me rephrase that. I know that I will cock things up eventually, but hopefully, it will not be permanently. I just... I just want you to understand my thoughts on the matter."

Hermione could feel the hand holding the wooden spoon tremble, and reaching down, she shakily switched off the hob. He had had just humbled himself more thoroughly to her than any amount of physical prostrations ever would, and the only thing that she think to do was match his painful honesty with her own.

"I have been afraid for so long that I don't know how to stop. This..." she gestured with the spoon, "...coming back, the apprenticeship... all of this, absolutely terrifies me."

"I rather picked up on that." His response was wry, but gentle.

"Now who's being cheeky?" she asked, smiling despite everything. "But I meant what I said,
Severus. We are not alone in this, either of us. I think that if I can restrain my more foolhardy and nosy Gryffindor tenancies, and you can manage to view the world a little less through the lenses of Slytherin suspicion and mistrust, we will do just fine together. And... and if not, that's what Poppy is for, correct?"

"So you a little less of a lioness, and me less of a snake? That would render us into what... Hufflepuffs?" His eyes crinkled as he smiled.

"Amictia aequalitas." She spoke the phrase softly, formally. "Friendship isn't a bad way to start things off, is it?"

"No. It is not."

The meal was eaten in silence, which was surprisingly comfortable. Finishing at last, she briefed him on what needed to be moved where, and they had made for the living room to begin sorting boxes. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes when a knock at the door interrupted them.

The door opened with a grudging creak, and Aditi's head poked through. "Hermione? I've come to see if you wanted to borrow my luscious piece of man meat to help lift all your boxes."

She heard Severus muffle a laugh with a cough, and felt two twin spots of colour bloom on her cheeks. "I've my own, thanks."

Aditi shut the door behind her, and waggled her eyebrows suggestively at the two of them. "Yes, indeed, I can see that..."

A quick glance towards Severus revealed that she wasn't the only one sporting a blush, and she could all but see the wheels spinning in the other woman's mind. "Aditi..." she intoned warningly.

"Oh, really, Hermione... don't get your knickers all into a twist. I know better than to tease," Aditi responded with a theatrical sigh.

"Since when?" Hermione shot back.

Aditi adjusted her dupatta more decorously around her shoulders. "As I am to become a mother, it behooves me to act in a more adult and proper manner."

"When pigs fly."

Her friend sent her a playful glare, and then advanced into the living room. "Right then, what still needs to be done? Rhys has prohibited me from lifting, but I can help pack or clean."

"Well, this complicates things. Still, Aditi's timing could have been worse. Five minutes later and we would have been in the middle of magically shrinking the boxes... it occurred then to Hermione that their wands were laying in full view of her friend, and she glanced around in mild panic. I really, really, don't want to Obliviate my best friend! Hers was not longer on the sofa, and she couldn't see his, which had been lying on top of the pile of boxes he had been stacking. Giving the room one more desperate look, she found both of their wands sitting on her desk by the window. How did he manage that?"

"Ahhh," she finally answered. "...we were sorting things into piles. Most of it is going to Scotland, but some of it needs to go back to my parents' place in London."

Aditi looked around the living room. "Do you have everything packed upstairs?"
"Yes, I finished most of it last night. What's left to do is what you can see here, as well as the kitchen." She paused, thinking. "Why don't you help me with these bookcases?"

As Aditi grabbed a box, she saw a mixture of resigned amusement and a smirk cross Severus' face before he spoke. "Which leaves myself, as the titular 'luscious piece of man meat' to carry said boxes from upstairs, does it not?"

Her blush had just started to fade, but with his comment, Hermione was completely positive that there wasn't anywhere on her entire body that wasn't burning a bright red. She buried her face in her hands, groaning. "It figures that the two of you would delight in trying to mortify me."

"When it's so easy to accomplish, yes," he said smoothly, clearly enjoying himself.

"Come on then, I'll show you what needs to be brought down..." She started up the stairs, and she could feel his warmth at her back as he followed a mere half-step behind. Shooting him a quizzical glance as they climbed, she watched as his evil smirk deepen; then he began to whistle the familiar notes to 'Beast of Burden'. By the time they reached her bedroom, she was laughing so hard that she had to clutch at the door frame for support.

Finally catching her breath, she poked him in the chest. "Now you're just being deliberately being unfair."

The smirk hadn't abated any. "Fairness was not on the list of qualities that you requested that I work on. I believe that you specified 'suspicion and mistrust'." The lazy humour had returned to his eyes, and their very intensity made her gut clinch with sudden desire. "I've walked for miles my feet are hurting, she heard the Rolling Stones song play in her head... All I want is for you to make love to me..."

A whisper of a thought occurred to her as she stared into his chocolate-hued eyes. "What did the Slytherin window say, Severus?" Her voice was husky, and caught on his name.

Something, some unknown emotion, flickered through his expression so quickly that she only had a chance to register its presence before it was gone. "Only you would ask about that at time like this..." He shook his a touch ruefully. "Ask me that question again in twenty years, and I might tell you. Now, show me the boxes, Granger." She nearly shivered at the silky tone, and with effort, tore her gaze from his.

"I've labeled everything with either L or S," she told him, fighting to keep her reply from being too breathless. "Why don't you place everything that is going to London by the kitchen wall, and the items to Scotland by the front door."

"As you wish." He made a shooing motion with his hands. "Go. I can handle this."

"I am sorry, really. I didn't know she was coming over. It certainly wasn't my plan to have you haul my things about sans-magic."

"I did volunteer. Besides which, I can extract my revenge later, never fear. Now, go."

Deciding that she'd heed his advice, Hermione fled.

Snape listened to Hermione travel back down the stairs, and leaned against the vacated door jam, more than a trifle weak-kneed. He could still smell her, a pleasant mixture of verbena and spice that had the ability to linger in the air for hours after her departure. But it had been sight of her, whiskey-coloured eyes reflecting a combination of heat, humour and affection that had nearly been his
undoing. And then she'd had enough wit to ask about the window... it had taken everything in him to not press her further into the door frame, wrap his hands amongst the wild abandon of her curls and kiss her until they were both senseless. That they were standing mere metres from her rumpled bed had not helped things...

A grumpy, flat-faced orange cat emerged from underneath her duvet. Shooting him a disgusted glare, the bandy-legged fur ball leapt from the bed and sauntered over to him. Delicately and deliberately, the cat stretched, laying one razor-tipped paw on the toe of his trainers. Eyeing him square on, the cat flexed his nails and yawned, displaying an equally ferocious set of teeth.

"What are you, her duenna or some such thing?" he muttered, and bent down low enough to stroke the creature's back. The cat gave a grudging, if loud purr. "I'm not an idiot, don't worry." Well, he thought to himself, not that much of an idiot. Alas, this time it wasn't your own petard that you were hoisted from...

She was still breathless when she rejoined Aditi at the bookcase. The woman gave her a gimlet-eyed stare, and grinned. "I like your pirate."

"My what?" Hermione asked.

"Your pirate. That's what he reminds me of, what with that long hair, and smile. A rather wicked pirate..."

"Oh, god, Aditi. Don't say things like to me. I have to work with him. I don't need to be picturing him in a ruffled shirt and leather trousers..."

"Sounds like you just did."

"Dead. I am so dead," she groaned. Pressing her hands to her hot cheeks in a futile attempt to cool them, she contained. "It's not like that, truly. And he's definitely not mine, regardless of how this may look."

"So your 'colleague' came all the way from London on a Saturday morning to help you move, and you are telling me that there's nothing else going on?"

"Yes. That is exactly what I am saying." She gave her friend a pleading look. "Please, just drop it for now? Tell what's been going on in the department..."

It took Severus about twenty minutes to bring all of her boxes down; as he set the last one on the floor, she couldn't help but notice that his track pants did a rather nice job of displaying his surprisingly firm arse. Yeah, I'm dead. Or mental... being attracted to him was not part of our contract or any plan, and even if it was... well, it's not exactly a smart idea given the personalities and histories involved.

"Hermione, do want me to start clearing your desk?" Aditi asked.

"Hmm?" she responded, still woolgathering. "If you don't mind..."

"Are the mismatched drumsticks rubbish?"

"NO!" both she and Severus replied at the same time, whirling on the woman.

She held her hands up in confused surrender. "My apologies, don't take my head off." She examined
the wooden rods critically. "What, are these you magic wands, or something?"

Severus responded drollly. "Yes, you've found us out. Despite my mild-mannered persona, I am in fact an all-powerful wizard, and Hermione is a witch."

"Don't forget famed double-agent and esteemed Potions Master. It's important part of the story." Hermione interjected over Aditi's laugh.

"That too."

"Right." Aditi said, picking the items up from the table top. "Which one is yours then, Wizard?"

"The ebony one. I believe that Hermione's is currently rowan, is it not?" Aditi tossed him the wand, and he pocketed it easily.

"Why, yes. Rowan, with a phoenix-feather core." She snatched it from her friend, and likewise put it away, wondering how far Severus would take the discussion.

Aditi was still chuckling as she asked the next question. "So if you are an all-power wizard, is Hermione any good as a witch?"

"They used to call her the most brilliant witch of her age when she was at school." His voice was teasing, yet the look he gave Hermione was anything but. "She's a little out of practice now, but with some time I am confident that she will surpass everyone's expectations."

"Oh, so you knew her when she was in school?" Aditi's tone was coquettish. "Do tell."

"I was her professor," he said fatuously. "How to describe Hermione Granger? Hmmm, bushy-haired, naturally. The biggest swot I have ever taught, not mention the most annoying..."

"You have the nerve to call me annoying?" Hermione let her voice rise in indignation. "What about you? Fighting the Dark Lord or no, you were a complete and utter bastard to us, Severus Snape!"

He laughed at her, and the resonant sound was just as wonderful as she'd imagined. "A bastard with good cause. You set me on fire, stole very expensive and controlled substances out of my stores, spied on me endlessly, gave me a concussion when I was only trying to prevent you from getting attacked by a werewolf... and that only covers the events of your first three years."

Severus turned back to Aditi. "Truly, you have no idea how difficult she made my life. There I was, working as a double-agent, trying to bring down the Darkest Wizard of the last two hundred years, she was turning in ten-page, fully annotated papers when all I asked for was two... and then there was her friends. Dear god, her willing choice of gormless companions..." He threw up his hands in supplication. "How I never resorted to murdering them, I'll never know."

"You, poor, tortured man." Aditi choked out, almost doubled over in mirth.

"When you twist it about that way, of course it makes him seem like the innocent party!" Hermione groused.

"I was the innocent party, Granger. It's a pity that after all of these years you still can't admit the truth." He was smirking for the umpteenth time that afternoon.

"You made fun of my teeth in front of the entire class. Who does that?"

For a moment, he looked properly chastened at the reminder. "I was having a bad day."
"You were being a bastard."

Severus rolled his eyes at her ready retort. "In that particular instance, yes, suppose I was being a bastard." He gave a gusty sigh. "My apologies. The comment was personal, spiteful and entirely uncalled for."

"Apology accepted," she said, trying to not lose the rest of her composure in the face of their continued farce. "We were just as bad, weren't we?"

"Yes." His emphatic response was enough to finally set her off, and she collapsed onto the bookcase in a gale of giggles. Every time she tried to regain her breath, she caught sight of Severus- likewise laughing on the sofa- or Aditi, and it caused her to lose it all over again.

Naturally, it was Severus that managed to recover his disposition first. He sent her a mock glare. "My sides now hurt, thank you very much."

"You started it. Not my fault if you haven't laughed that hard recently." She wiped tears from her face, and accepted Aditi's hand to help her straighten up.

"Try never laughed that much, that might be a closer approximation," he muttered in an undertone.

"You two are so full of shite." Aditi said, shaking her head. "I wish that I could hear the real story, and not just the two you trying to wind me up."

Looking at her friend, Hermione felt herself smirk. "You wouldn't believe the truth if you heard it, Aditi. Trust me on this."

She heard Severus start to chuckle again, and she swung her gaze back to him. He threw his hands up in despair. "Pax, Granger. Take pity on an old man; I don't think I'd make through another round of that."

Her retort was cut off by the sound of her mobile ringing. Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew it and looked at the number. "It's George," she said, suddenly breathless for a very different reason.

"If there was problem, they would have called me." His gaze was reassuring when he answered her. "If there was problem, they would have called me." Her ringtone started again. "Answer it, Hermione. It'll be fine."

"Hold on a minute," she said. "Let me go outside so I can hear you..."

Snape watched Hermione rush for the front door, and idly rubbed the stitch in his side. He looked back to the woman at the window, who was eyeing him consideringly rather than keeping tabs on her friend.

"A mutual... acquaintance of ours went into labour this morning. It was a difficult pregnancy," he said simply.

"Oh." The woman's hand went briefly to her stomach, and he recalled that she was pregnant. "She isn't really moving to Aberdeen, is she?"

"No, she is not." Her gaze had returned to his, and she regarded him steadily. "She is moving to Scotland, that much I can say, but not Aberdeen."
"Will she just... disappear?" Dr. Kapoor's voice wavered on the last word.

"No, she won't. It's not like that." Snape rose from the sofa, and plucked a piece of paper from the desk. Rummaging for a pen, he wrote his number on it, and handed to the woman. "Here. If you should have any questions, or concerns, ring me."

She took it. "Thank you." Swallowing, she went on. "Will she be in danger again?"

He rubbed his head, wondering just how much Hermione had told her. "Not like before, no. But life is full of risks, and I can guarantee that coming back for her is going to be... difficult, at least at first."

"She still has nightmares, even after so many years," she said in a whisper.

"I know." He sighed. "I can't promise anything other than this; I will take care of her, and will do everything in my power to prevent her from coming to any future harm."

A sound from the door had them both shifting; Hermione stood in the bright sunshine of the foyer, smiling broadly. "She's fine. It's a boy."

"Dare I inquire about what unfortunate moniker they saddled the child with?" Severus asked.

She paused. "James Sirius. Hopefully he will only live up to one part of that legacy."

"He'd better, as that leaves him with a fifty-fifty chance of being utter prat and dying young," he said acidly. Both Hermione and Dr. Kapoor blinked in surprise at his bitterness, and he took a breath in to calm his explosive burst of temper. "That was rather harsh, wasn't it?"

"Just a tad." Hermione's answer was placid.

"Then I'd better retract that statement, as we've already established that I'm not a bastard, and we are discussing a baby."

"That's not a bad notion." Her eyes were calm on his, and he saw a familiar flicker of humour return to her expression. "But then you knew those particular namesakes, not I. Given what I do know, prat is the least of the adjectives that you might apply to their memories. I don't blame you for still being angry."

"You may not, but it's long past the time when I should still concern myself with such things. James has been dead for longer than he was alive, and Sirius did not live to see his godson grow up. Given those facts, I clearly came out the victor."

"If you count something that pyrrhic as a victory, perhaps."

"I do," he stated flatly.

She appeared to want to say more, but instead shook her head with mild exasperation and looked to her friend. "Aditi, would you be terribly offended if I called it a day? I'd like to go to London tonight and visit with some people."

"Of course not." The other woman walked over to to Hermione and gave a quick hug. "Ring me when you need more help. And don't forget that you promised to join us for supper on Tuesday."

"Thanks, and I won't." Hermione gave her a squeeze back.

Dr. Kapoor turned back and gave him a warm smile. "It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance further, Mr. Snape."
"Likewise, Dr. Kapoor." With a flip of her dupatta, she left, shutting the door behind her gently.

He watched Hermione for a moment, seeing the clear excitement and uncertainty on her face, and wondered if she'd healed the breach between her and Ginerva Potter. "Come on; we should be able to move all this in less than an hour. We can get you there in good time."

Author's Postscript: Big hugs for all you lovely, lovely readers that took the time to leave me comments on the last chapter. It's wonderful to know that I am not, in fact uploading this story into a vacuum :) Also, I forgot to mention that the description of the Nave is based off the real-life Bath Abbey; should I ever have more money than sense, I shall build one my own. Google pictures of the ceiling, it's really a work of art.

The last chapter title, "Shelter" comes from the wonderful Ray Lamontagne song of the same name, and this one (duh) is in reference to the aforementioned Rolling Stones Song.
Her bloody cat woke him up. Naturally, being a perverse and possibly demonic creature, it did so in a manner guaranteed to produce the maximum carnage possible: it leapt squarely onto his chest as he slept on the sofa. The only reason he did not hex the accursed thing into oblivion was because it had managed to attach itself to the front of his robes as he sprang up. A short and rather bloody- well, at least on his end- fight had resulted. By the time he had healed the half-dozen scratches littering his chest and arms, it had been standing in his kitchen, yowling. The obstreperous feline's intent and demand was clear; it wanted to be fed, posthaste.

"Not going to happen, you sodding, bandy-legged excuse for a felis catus," he snarled, and sat back down on the sofa, rubbing at his chest. How did it even get into my rooms? With a jerk, he turned and examined at his door. It was still firmly shut and warded. He looked back to the cat, who was now perched on the table, smugly grooming an outstretched paw.

"Oh, lovely. Not a cat, but a kneazle." It sneered at him, inasmuch as something with a mouth full of bright orange fur could sneer. "Just because your mistress isn't here, doesn't mean you are suddenly my responsibility. I am quite sure she left you with provisions."

Hermione had spent the night at the Burrow. It had taken longer than expected to get her items moved, and by the time that they had finished, it was well past three in the afternoon. She'd left for St. Mungo's, and had texted him several hours later to confirm that all was still well with Ginevra and the child. Molly, apparently, had been in quite a state, and so she'd stayed with the Weasleys.

Looking at his clock, he saw that it was only a few minutes past six AM. No wonder you are about to kill your apprentice's beloved familiar; three hours of sleep does not make for a pleasant waking regardless of method. With a sigh, he summoned a house-elf and ordered breakfast. Walking over to the kitchen table, he sat, and saw his copy of the apprentice contract sitting on the table. What a mess, he thought. Not an entirely unwanted mess, but nevertheless... Between the events of the ceremony and after, it was little surprise that he'd not been able to sleep. The sight of vellum contract sitting on the polished teak surface prompted a flash of memory; his body reacting to the sight of Hermione, leaning against the doorframe of her bedroom, eyes afire with laughter and... desire.

Snape wasn't surprised at his own physical response to the witch. He would have to be dead to not be attracted to her; she was comely, brilliant, and had no aversion to his company. What shocked him, frankly, was that she seemed to perhaps... return the sentiment, or at least, not find the notion entirely repellent.

Despite what many thought, he had never led a celibate life. Perhaps one of the few perks of being a Death Eater was that it had never been hard to find a willing woman when he so desired. Granted, he had neither liked, nor respected most of those groupies, but it wasn't as if he'd ever been looking for anything remotely resembling affection or a relationship from those encounters. Since the downfall of Voldemort, sex had been a rarer occurrence, but that mostly stemmed from the fact that his hand and an active imagination had served well enough to satisfy those particular urges.

Hermione... well, yes, he found her attractive, but that was where her allure stopped; she most certainly did not fall under any of his previous categories of acceptable bed-partners. She was too young, too nice, and their shared history made it quite impossible for any sort of relationship between them- friend, or otherwise- to be anything other than a complex process of renegotiation. As attractive as she was, he did not wish to stretch the already complicated boundaries of their involvement further by adding sex to the mix. You are, of course, assuming in all this that she is likewise attracted to you. A few fleeting moments here and there are indicative of nothing.
Yesterday's... hallway incident could be nothing more than fact that her emotions, ergo her hormones, were running amuck after the binding ceremony. It's not as if you, yourself, were behaving normally.

The sheer, giddy relief of having gotten away with breaking all of his long held rules of non-engagement had certainly knocked him for a loop; in the aftermath of the ceremony he'd let himself be... silly. Fatuous, even, because it had felt so nice to let his guard down and not work at anything more than making Hermione laugh.

He did care about her. Snape wasn't sure when- or how- the hell that had happened, but he could at least acknowledge that salient fact. Sometime during their email correspondence he had stopped seeing her as a swotty, know-it-all former student, and just as Hermione Granger. He also could admit, if only to himself, that he would have offered to apprentice her even if Poppy and Minerva hadn't brought the idea up; their pushing simply had given him the excuse to do so.

So. He cared about her. He found her attractive. Equally, he did not want to change the relationship beyond what it already was. He knew what Poppy's response to all his emotional dithering would be. She would urge him to throw caution to the wind. She would clap her hands in Machiavellian glee, and roll up her sleeves to work a bit of matchmaking magic. But if there was one thing he knew with utter certainty, it was that he did not have the wherewithal or skills to navigate a romantic endeavour with Hermione Granger. Hell, with anyone, if it came to that.

Which begs the question, how are you going to make this work without being a complete ass? He wanted to be friends with her; he wanted her apprenticeship to be did not want to revert back to previous patterns of behaviour, did not wish to suddenly push her back into edges of his life. Given that she was his apprentice, he wasn't even sure that he could. So, the first order of business is to make sure that you are not sending out any mixed signals by flirting with her, even in jest. That should be enough to keep matters at bay. And if things get further... complicated, well, then you have a discussion.

He gazed down at his nearly empty plate. Lost in ruminations, he'd managed to drink a half pot of coffee and eat all but his last piece of bacon. He felt marginally more human, and glanced down to the end of the table where her kneazle was still sitting. Speaking of non-humans... It was eyeing his bacon with considerable interest. And now, you best do some bridge mending or else risk your favourite pair of boots becoming a scratching post.

Snape glared at the kneazle, trying to remember if he'd ever heard the thing's name. Beckoning the creature forward, he spoke in the tones that he reserved for frightening first-years. "If you are smart enough to figure a way through my wards, then you will understand the fine art of a trade. You may have this piece of bacon. In return, you will refrain in the future from jumping on me, otherwise harming my property, and most of all, you will stay out of my laboratory. Should you ignore this warning, I will have no hesitation in skinning you alive and presenting you to your mistress in hat form. Is that understood?"

The kneazle walked forward and glared back at him for a moment, before head-butting the hand that held the bacon. Taking that as an agreement, Snape handed over the food and rose to get dressed.

Hermione knocked on the laboratory door several hours later. She looked as if she had gotten about as much sleep as he had, and the shadows under her eyes were matched by the ones in them. Clearly, what ever the issue between her and Ginevra was yet to be resolved.

"Good morning," she stated, eyes flicking to the cauldron that he stood over.
"And to you." He gave the potion a final clockwise stir, and then switched to anti-clockwise. "Any changes?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No. They are going to keep her at St. Mungo's for a week longer, and then she'll move to the Burrow for a bit." Yawning, she placed a hand over her mouth. "I ran into Minerva on the way up. She wanted to remind us that there is a staff meeting at two."

"And I am sure it will be the highlight of my day."

She made a face at his sarcasm. "How formal is this going to be?"

"Not at all, I should think. Anything causal will do just fine. The August meeting is usually just to introduce new faculty and finalise the the schedule."

"Who don't I know?"

"Just three of the current professors. Care of Magical Creatures has been taken over by Concobhar Murchadh. He used to work with Charlie Weasley doing something dragon-related. An American, Emmett Bueller, is in the Defence Against the Dark Arts slot."

"Bueller, huh?" She raised an eyebrow at that. "And does he fall on the on the Gilderoy Lockhart side of the teaching spectrum, or is he at least somewhat effective?"

"Minerva would teach the course herself if she couldn't find anyone better than a Lockhart." Adding a measure of flobberworm mucus to the potion, he continued to stir. "From what I can tell, he seems competent. A tad on the arrogant side, but the majority of the students received sufficient marks on the exams, and I've heard no complaints from the Slytherins concerning his teaching methods."

"Do you still have any interest in teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

He snorted at that. "Hardly. As much as it is painful to watch the generations of incompetence coming through the potions classroom, there are at least sufficient numbers of students with some talent to make it bearable."

"Why did you always apply for the Dark Arts position then?"

"I would have thought that would have been obvious."

"Humour me with an explanation," she said dryly.

"The Dark Lord requested it, for one." He slanted her a chiding look over the bubbling cauldron. "There was also the issue of the position being thought cursed, which meant that there was a dearth of suitable applicants. Given that we were on the verge of all-out war, it seemed vital that someone teach you children properly about Dark Magic."

"I've always found it somewhat ironic that you and Barty Crouch were the best teachers we had in that subject," she said musingly.

"Better than Lupin?" he asked, sneering slightly.

It was her turn to look at him chidingly. "Professor Lupin was good; certainly loads better than Quirrell, Umbridge or Lockhart combined. But reflecting back on it? He gave us a decent foundation, I suppose, but nothing terribly practical for what was to come. I never fought bogarts in the war. The Imperius Curse, on the other hand..." With a sigh, she changed returned the subject to her original question. "You said there were three faculty members I didn't know?"
"The third is Scheherazade Abu-Lughod. She's Palestinian, and comes from a rather well-known line of Ottoman historians. She's been teaching Muggle Studies for the last couple of years, and is the one taking over History of Magic. I think she comes from a research background, something about being a ritual specialist. There might be a few apprentices at the meeting as well; I don't know if anyone else took one on over the summer."

Hermione nodded, and then glanced around the laboratory. "You've moved things about in here."

"Yes I have." Pointing with his free hand to the left side of the room, he explained, "Those two tables over there are for your personal use, as is the bookcase on that wall. I've also cleared off several shelves in the storeroom for you. You are, of course, welcome to use anything in the stores, but if it's one of the controlled substances, then you will need to fill out the log. Likewise, you are welcome to raid any of my bookcases in here, or in my quarters. However, should you require any of the dark grimoires on the top left shelf, please ask. Most of them have rather strong protections in place that might harm you unawares."

"Thank you."

"I could hardly do any less for my apprentice." He smirked. "Besides which, giving you the tables means that you have plenty of room to dissect horned-slugs and other nasty bits."

"I'll be sure to jump right on it, then," she said in a tone of false subservience.

He raised his pewter stirring rod at her in warning. "Cease your prattle, Granger, and tell me what I am currently making."

Smiling sweetly she asked, "You haven't forgotten already, have you? I've heard that there are things that can help with memory loss..."

"Brave words for someone only on their first full day of an apprenticeship."

She took in the table, and the items he had lined up. Walking over to his side of the cauldron, she peered in. "Are all of the ingredients on the table?"

"Yes."

"Will it turn a veritable rainbow of colours before you are done brewing?"

"Yes." He added another measure of salamander blood, and the potion accordingly turned green.

"Wiggenweld Potion, I think."

"Correct. And what is Wiggenweld Potion?"

"A healing draught that will wake those who have been placed in magically induced sleeps; it is the best potion to counteract the Draught of Living Death."

"Also correct..."

A plaintive meow issued from the doorway, and they both paused. The kneazle sat in the doorway, contriving to appear both pathetic and starving.

He gave the creature a mildly disgusted look. "You neglected to mention that your cat, is in fact, a kneazle."

"He's actually only half-kneazle," she remarked absently. "I'm sorry. I have a special ward that
discourages him from places, but I didn't think to place it yesterday before I left. Unfortunately, I've never been able to keep him from where he really wants to go. Crookshanks... what did you do this time?" Hermione wagged her finger disapprovingly. "I told you to stay in my rooms."

"Despite a rough start, I believe we have come to an adequate understanding of the rules this morning. I have informed him that should he deviate from acceptable behaviour, I will be presenting him to you in hat form."

Hermione covered her mouth, stifling a yawn. "I'd like to see you try. I've never seen him get into a fight he can't win. Still, he's crafty, not stupid. I assume that you told him to stay out of here?"

"Yes."

"Then he should do so." She yawned again, and he felt himself struggling to not repeat her gesture. "Right, unless you have anything else that needs to be discussed, I'm going to take my cat and have a little nap before the meeting."

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of your plan."

Hermione was still groggy when she knocked on Severus' doors at a quarter to two. He answered promptly, and she noted that he had changed into a pair of dark khaki trousers and a blue button-downed shirt. Looking at his clothes, she felt glad that translated his "causal" into "causally smart" and had switched in to a nice sundress with a cardigan, rather than the jeans and t-shirt she'd been wearing earlier.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"As ever as I will be," he grumbled.

She halted when they reached the main hallway. "I don't actually know where the meeting is, just that it's at two."

"This way." He started to right. "The staff room is down from the Headmistress's office."

Hermione worked to keep her mind blank of memories as they moved through the deserted and cool corridors. Needing a distraction, she inquired, "Do most of the faculty stay here over the summer?"

"On and off, yes. It depends on the person, but generally people spend a good chunk of the summer here, and a short holiday elsewhere." Reaching the doorway, he held it open for her. Almost all of the heads turned in their direction, and the low buzz in the room stopped completely. She felt suddenly awkward in the face of so much obvious attention. So, apparently the staff room of Hogwarts is just as rife with gossip as the one in Aberystwyth. Why do I have the feeling that Severus and I are the current topic of interest?

Neville, bless him, came to the rescue. "Hiya, Hermione." Giving her an easy hug, he said, "Congratulations, and welcome back. Here," grabbing her arm, he started to pull her over to section of the long table. "...there are some chairs left over on this side." She twisted backwards and glanced back to Severus, who was still standing in the doorway. He was scanning the crowd, but when he caught her look, he followed her and Neville to the vacant chairs.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape," Neville said hesitatingly.

"Professor Longbottom," Severus replied, with a shallow, if polite, inclination of his head. The door opened again, and Poppy came bustling in. Seeing Severus, she made a beeline for the free seat next
to him just as Minerva strode in.

"Brace yourself," Poppy whispered in the ominous silence that followed the Headmistress's entrance. Hermione saw the familiar lines of tension appear on Severus, and the dour mask that she had seen so often as a student settled over his features.

"Is everyone here?" Minerva asked crisply as she sat a stack of files on the table.

It was Flitwick who answered. "Still waiting on Emmett and Sybil."

"Very well. We will wait five minutes before starting." The low babble of voices started up again, and Minerva grabbed a newspaper from the top of the files. Making her way over to where they were sitting, the Headmistress spoke with no preamble.

"Am a correct in thinking that you have not seen today's edition of the Daily Prophet?"

"No, I hadn't," Hermione said, glancing over to Severus. He just shook his head mutely. Minerva handed the folded paper over to her, and she opened it cautiously.

The headline did not disappoint: SEX SCANDAL AT HOGWARTS?

Underneath the lurid text was a picture of her and Severus from the Greek diner the night she'd agreed to be his apprentice; she watched in disbelief as the picture showed a couple seemingly in the middle of an intimate supper. Picture-Hermione was staring down at her plate, a soft look of pleasure on her face, and Severus... well, the man in the picture was watching her with a fierce intensity that was perilously close to desire. Then the Picture-Hermione licked her lips, pushed the plate back, and smiled up at the man invitingly. She murmured something to the Picture-Severus, which caused a flicker of a smile appear on his face. Leaning forward, he said something in return; a statement that brought a flush of colour to the cheeks of Picture-Hermione. Then he reached across the table to take her hand... With a jerk, the picture looped, and Hermione worked to hard to contain her flabbergasted reaction to the picture.

Whoever had done the editing had done a damned fine job of it. The look of pleasure of her face came from the desert she had been eating, and she did not think that she had been so oblivious to miss that particular expression on Severus' face. She remembered finishing her baklava, and then telling him she'd be honoured to become his apprentice. He had told her to call him by his Christian name, and then they'd shook on it. There had been nothing romantic at all...

She realized that she'd been staring at the picture again, and forced herself to read the accompanying article.

The Wizarding World is once again abuzz as new rumours surface about Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's two newest professors. Hermione Granger and Severus Snape were caught sharing a romantic dinner together only weeks before it came to light that Ms. Granger was to take an apprenticeship with the former Death Eater and Potions Master. According to sources, the two were officially registered as Master and Apprentice yesterday at Hogwarts in a private ceremony.

As readers may remember, Ms. Granger was the student of Professor Snape for six years; both disappeared under mysterious circumstances in the aftermath of the Second War with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The pair have seemingly returned to the Wizarding World independently, but a careful examination of the dates reveals that it was within weeks of each other. The situation begs the question of whether or not the two were in hiding together, and indeed, if their relationship is one of long standing. Given the known proclivity of Ms. Granger to attach herself to powerful wizards, it
is not inconceivable that any relationship the two may share started during her student days...

Hermione looked away from the paper for a long moment, not able to see anything through the film of red haze that suddenly obscured her vision. With shaking hands, she pushed the paper towards Severus. Dimly, she saw the look of horror flicker across his face as he saw the picture and headline before his expression became completely non-committal.

Taking a deep breath in, she strove for the same nonchalance that he sported; she could feel the weight of curious eyes upon her and didn't want to feed the gossip mill anymore than she already had.

"So, apparently I've shagging you since my student days and we ran off together after the war," she said, anger rendering her unable to stay silent.

With a precise motion, he snapped the paper shut and dropped it onto the table. "And did this happen instead of, or at the same time as your other romances with Ron Weasley, Victor Krum and Harry Potter? I only ask because I can't remember. On account of the shagging, and all."

"Oh, at the same time, I would think."

He gave her simulacrum of a smile, and for brief second she saw the utter rage under his apparent calm. "You always were precocious overachiever, Granger."

"Well, they didn't call me the brightest witch of my age for nothing, did they?"

The door to the staff room banged open once more, and Sybill Trelawney stumbled in amidst a wave of cooking sherry, followed closely by an older, grey-haired man that she assumed was Emmett Bueller. Upon seeing the late comers, Minerva straightened, and gave Hermione's shoulder a quick squeeze.

"Please stay after the meeting concludes. I have several things to cover with the two of you." She swept back to the head of the table, and began to spread her notes out.

It was several minutes before she could make any sense of the Headmistress's opening remarks; finally however, she became aware that the group was discussing the why and hows of the curriculum changes, as well as future deviations.

"I know that for some of you, these changes are of a rather seismic nature, and for others, they do not go nearly far enough. I ask that you only have patience with this process; Hogwarts has only remained one of the finest magical institutions in the world because it has never hesitated to question the traditional notions of wizarding." Minerva paused for a moment, gaze roaming the assembly. "This year will be one of challenge and controversy, and it is only by working together and supporting each other that we will be able to accomplish our duties with any sort of grace or humour." Face hardening, she went on. "I am sure that everyone has seen this morning's rather offensive edition of the Daily Prophet. I will say only this: I have the utmost confidence in Professors Snape and Granger, and I would not have invited them back had I any doubts as to their character or past actions. I also will not tolerate any gossip or innuendo from either the staff or the students about them, or indeed, any other staff member. Is that clear?"

There were chastened nods around the table, and Hermione knew that her earlier supposition about who everyone had been talking about when she and Severus had entered had been correct.

"Excellent," Minerva said. "On a different note, let's start going over the first term schedules..."
Her teaching load for the term wasn't as bad as she'd feared. She had her large lecture sections on
Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, with labs on Tuesdays and Wednesdays; on those days she also
assisted with Severus' sixth and seventh year potions sections. The rest of of meeting passed in an
uneventful blur, and in the same manner of every other departmental meeting she'd ever attended.

The staff room didn't empty out after the meeting concluded. Instead, the various faculty members
seemed content to stand around and chatter about favourite holiday spots and summer projects.
Hermione noticed that while she was one the receiving end of several smiles and nods of greeting
from the people she knew, Severus was virtually ignored, and nobody felt the urge to come up to
either of them and inquire about their respective summers other than Neville. His cheerful and
easygoing demeanour went a long way towards blunting the anger that still roiled in her; she was
surprised to see that Neville was trying to include Severus in the conversation, despite the fact that he
was clearly uncomfortable with him.

"...So now I've got to shovel five-hundred kilos of mooncalf dung by hand over the entire
greenhouse because so many house elves got bitten last year by the fanged geraniums." Neville
grinned. "I don't suppose either of you would be willing to pitch in?"

Hermione chuckled at his hopeful entreaty. "You almost make shovelling shit sound fun, Neville.
When are you going to do the dirty deed?"

"Tonight. It has to be under the full moon, or the mooncalf dung loses most of its potency."

"Copious amounts of physical labour in a dark and possibly dangerous greenhouse? How can I
possibly resist?" Hermione asked. "What time?"

"Any time after nine-thirty, in Greenhouse Five." Neville said promptly.

"Now who's being a glutton for punishment," Severus muttered.

She swivelled to face him. "Would you care to join us, Professor Snape? Seeing as you have so
much experience dealing with excrement, that is."

"You wouldn't be trying to insinuate that I'm full of shite, would you?" His face was still set in dour,
unexpressive lines, but she could hear the thread of humour lacing his question.

"Your words, not mine," she said with a real laugh, and she saw Neville blink in shock at her
familiarity.

Just then, Minerva walked over. "As it appears that we are in the middle of the social hour, why
don't the two you join me in my office?"

"I'll see you tonight, Neville," Hermione said as she rose. He gave her quick nod, and she followed
Minerva and Severus out of the room.

The silent journey to the Headmistress's Office was broken only when Minerva's uttered the the
password- "Scáthach of Skye"- to gargoyle guarding her chambers. The office was looked far
different then Hermione remembered; gone was most of the clutter and the small, spindly tables
covered with obscure instruments. There were more bookshelves, and also a comfortable looking
plaid sofa and matching armchairs off to one corner. Peering through the bright sunshine of the room,
she saw a large, empty portrait hanging behind an imposing black desk.

Minerva gestured to the sofa. "Would either of you like tea?"

"Only if it includes whiskey," Severus said.
"Tea, yes, but I will forgo that particular addition in favour of just milk," Hermione replied.

Opening up a cabinet, Minerva started to prepare a pot and tray. "Hermione, how are you settling in? Have you managed to bring all of your items over from Wales?"

"Yes, last night. I've just the unpacking to do, and I'll be done."

"And do you have any questions regarding your schedule?"

"No, I don't."

"Good. Please don't hesitate to come to me if you have any questions, or issues that I can assist with. Severus, do you want the Talisker or the Bruichladdich?"

He raised an eyebrow at that. "The Talisker, if it's the eighty-nine."

"The Talisker it is then."

The quiet prevailed as Minerva finished the preparations for the tea, and Hermione relaxed in the into the warmth of the sunshine and soft sofa, trying to let the last of her anger go.

Minerva finally poured, and then with a tired sigh, spoke. "I ask this because I must, not because I believe any of it: was there any impropriety between the two of you while Hermione was a student?"

"No, there was not." Severus stated curtly. Minerva gaze turned to her, obviously needing to hear her confirm it.

"Absolutely not."

"Then I will consider the investigation into the matter complete, and closed. As for the rest..." She took a sip of her drink, and seemed to mull over another point. "I don't give a tinker's damn. You are both adults of sound mind, and I will not insult either of you by interfering with any aspect of your personal lives."

Severus put his tea cup down with muffled clink, and Hermione just stared at the Headmistress in blank astonishment. *Does she think that we... No. She couldn't possibly think that we are... anything more than friends.* Then the picture from the Daily Prophet sprang into vivid focus in her mind, and she recalled the latent desire on Severus' face, as well as the expression on hers. *Admit it, If you saw that picture without knowing the context, you would think that something was going on, too. And it's not as if there haven't been moments of... awareness.* That thought called forth the scene, and her feelings outside her of bedroom, and she felt a blush spread over her face.

"Minerva..." Severus started, before she put a hand up to forestall his words.

"All I need to know is if either of you want me to issue an official statement. I doubt it would do any good, but it might serve to dampen some of the worst of the rabble."

"I would rather not dignify that poxy excuse for a newspaper with a comment, but as I was not the main target of that particular article, I will defer that decision to Hermione." Hermione saw that spark of rage light Severus' eyes for a moment before he picked up his tea and took a drink.

"There are no such things as libel laws in the wizarding world, are there?" she asked somewhat bitterly.

"No, there is not. Feminism is also a concept that has yet to gain any traction, alas." Minerva's
comment echoed her resentment.

Hermione idly stroked the plaid pattern of the sofa before answering. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I agree with Severus. As much as it makes me sick, there's no point in making any statement. My reputation has been under assault since I was fourteen. I certainly didn't expect to return to a life of anonymity."

"For what it's worth, I am sorry." The regret and frustration on Minerva's countenance was clear, and Hermione could see how exhausted the woman was. "I wish that I could shield you both better from that sort of scurrilous nonsense."

"I have not been blind to the effort you've been putting forth, Minerva, and it has meant a great deal to me." Severus' voice was firm, but gentle. "There is such a thing as needlessly beating yourself up against a brick wall, however, and I believe we've reached that point. I dare say that it will take more than an attack of yellow journalism to drive myself or Hermione away."

"He's correct, Minerva. As distasteful as this is, we've all been through worse." Hermione said briskly. "It won't be any fun, but it's not the end of the world, either."

The Headmistress bowed her head in acceptance. "As you wish." Pouring herself a second cup of tea, she wordlessly held the pot out in enquiry. Hermione stuck her cup out for seconds.

She went on."I had breakfast with the Head of St. Mungo's this morning. He said that the patient health history questionnaire has cleared their internal review board, and can be used at any time."

"That's good news, at least." Hermione murmured.

"Now, I am also given to understand that as your class with the Healers has finished, you wish to have several days of mock interviews to better prepare them for the initial data collection?"

"Yes, we would like to perform a series of trial runs before we begin the project properly..."

A/N: My most sincere thanks to everybody that left me the wealth of comments from the last two chapters. Whilst writing is incredibly fun, as well as fulfilling, it's also a lot of work. I put quite a bit of effort into the last several chapters, and it's so wonderful when you all take the time to likewise interact with the story!

The title of this chapter comes from the song of the same name from the The Broken Bells. As always, my thanks goes to my lovely and talented beta, Muggle Jane, for her support and help.

Hmmmm... so Severus has apparently friend-zoned Hermione. Want to take bets on how long that lasts?

Next up: lots of shit!
"Well done, Neville. I don't think I've ever seen a pile of shit so huge."

Neville laughed. "Oh, come off it, Hermione. It's not like I'm personally responsible for either it's creation or size. Anyway, if you think that's large, you should see the pile when they deliver the regular old dragon dung in the spring. It's over two thousand kilos."

"Ew. I am not helping you with that, so don't even inquire."

"Oh, it's not too bad. We can use magic to move it, so things go pretty quickly."

"Why can't we use magic to move the mooncalf dung?"

Neville mimed looking aghast. "You mean to tell me that I know something that you don't?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione retorted, "Please, you have a Mastery in Herbology. I'd hope so."

He gave her a little smirk, but adopted a suitably professorial tone. "Mooncalf dung retains the magical energy of whatever is around it; that's why it's used to make magical plants grow stronger, or better. In essence, it mirrors back whatever strengths that the plant might have. Using magic to move it means that it will reflect back those particular spells, rather than the plant's innate magical properties that you are looking to enhance."

"Thank you for that explanation, Professor Longbottom."

"Anytime, Miss Granger."

Hermione lost a bit of her cheeriness as she examined the mound in front of the greenhouse. It really was... sizeable. "How do you suggest we tackle this thing?"

"I wouldn't suggest that you tackle it at all." Neville gave her a teasing poke, and then pointed to the side of the building. "My recommendation would be that we use the wheelbarrows to move the dung into the greenhouse, and then we spread the piles out from there."

She glared at him, and he shrugged. "You walked into that one, Hermione."

"Yeah, I suppose I did," she said ruefully.

He peered at the wheelbarrows for a moment. "How about this division of labour? You fill the wheelbarrows, and I'll push them into the greenhouse and empty them."

"Suits me."

The summer air carried the pleasant scents of the herb gardens- and more than a whiff of the mooncalf dung, although it wasn't that overpowering- and the full moon gilded the pastoral landscape with silvers and greys. Other than the rustle of the wind and the creak of the wheelbarrow, the night was comfortingly quiet, and Hermione threw herself into the physical labour, enjoying the stretch and burn that came from working her muscles.

For awhile, she imagined the pile of dung as Rita Skeeter's face, and took great pleasure in thrusting the shovel into the pile as hard as she could. But eventually, she fell into an easy rhythm that precluded any further thoughts of revenge; a scoop into the dung, turn her body and twist the shovel...
over the wheelbarrow, deep breath in, turn back to the pile, exhale...

She worked in that manner for almost an hour, and they had made a considerable dent in the task when Neville stopped and said, "Break time, Hermione. I need a bit of a breather."

He walked over the greenhouse wall, and rummaged through a rucksack. "Do you want water or lemonade?"

"Lemonade, please." She wiped a trickle of sweat off her forehead, and ambled over to where he was standing. Sitting down with a thump, she rested her back gratefully against the cool glass panes. Neville handed her a chilly bottle, and slid down beside her.

The sipped their drinks in silence until Neville gave a little sigh, and turned to face her. "Is there something going on between the two of you?"

Hermione traced the cold contours of the bottle, fingertips sliding over the glass smoothly as they collected the moisture beading up on the surface. "Not like that, no."

"I don't mean to pry, but that picture..."

He gazed back out into the night. "I heard that your apprenticeship binding was a little... different."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Flitwick was asking Scheherazade Abu-Lughod some questions this afternoon. He left your names out of it, but it was pretty obvious who he talking about."

"Great. Is that why everyone stopped talking when we walked in?"

"That was part of it, yeah." Neville pulled a second bottle out of the bag, and offered it to her. "Do you want some water?"

She shook her head. "What was your apprenticeship ceremony like, Neville?"

"Mine? Took all of about ten minutes." He opened up the water and took a deep drink. "We popped up to the Chamber of Binding at lunch one day; Gran was my witness, and Miranda Goshawk- you remember who she is, right?- stood for Pamona. They've been friends for ages, and her Herbology Encyclopedia is second to none. I took a knee to Pamona, we recited the apprenticeship oath, she handed me my wand, and we signed the contract. It was pretty basic. The only time I felt the any magic was when Minerva declared the binding complete. My wrists burned..." he encircled one wrist with his fingers, "...for a second, and that was it."

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling suddenly at a loss.

"Oh?" Neville repeated. "So what was so different in yours?"

"Loads," she said softly. "Severus didn't want me to kneel, for one thing."

"He didn't? How did... how did the ceremony even work then?" he asked, confusion clear. "I mean, it's not like kneeling is that big of deal. Everyone does it for their apprenticeship ceremony."

"It was a big deal to him... and to me, honestly." Shifting restlessly, she finally placed the empty bottle on the ground. "He wanted things to be more... equal. So we held hands instead. And then the magic got all... wonky." She broke off, unwilling to disclose how she'd felt his emotions, and he
"Wonky, how?"

"Just... wonky. Off. Not in a bad way or anything, but it was different than what you described."

Tamping down her irritation, she went on. "Then there was mini-fireworks show, and... that was it. We signed the papers, and he helped me move before I visited Harry in St. Mungo's."

"Ginny's still not talking to you, huh?"

"Nope."

"Hmmm." Neville picked at the label on his bottle. "He seems... a little nicer now. He made a joke this afternoon, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did. He does have a sense of humour, believe it or not. But he's still got a temper, too. You know about the research project we are working on together?" At his nod, she continued the story. "Well, we started the project out by just emailing back and forth; he was using the name Simon Janus, so I didn't know it was him. A couple of months in, he invited me to the first round of trials. I got off the train outside of Manchester, and when I saw it was him..." her chuckle was unsteady. "Gobsmacked does not even begin to cover it. That night, we got into pretty epic row."

"What did you fight about?"

"I told him that I was grateful that he was alive."

"And that particular sentiment did not go over well?"

"Surprisingly, it did not." She slanted him a sardonic glance. "But the next day, I had some issues, and he was... kind." Lifting her hair away, she pressed the bottle to the back of her neck. "I don't know if I'd call him nice, but he has been very kind to me, and we work well together. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we are friends."

"I had dinner with Minerva and Poppy once, right after I took over Head of House duties," Neville said musingly after a second. "I asked Minerva about why Dumbledore was never in the portrait in her office. Did you know that she hexed him? She transfigured something in his painting... anyway, she told me that her biggest regret is that she trusted Dumbledore too much, and Snape not enough. After that... I did a lot of thinking. And he was a right bastard to me, no doubt, but his anger was never really... personal. I was horrible at potions. He could have been a better teacher, mind you, but I could have killed us all many times over with my little disasters. I don't hate him, Hermione. I don't like him, but I do respect him. And if you trust him enough to call him a friend, then that's good enough for me."

He reached over and gave her hand a pat. "I meant what I said in my letter, Hermione. I want you to be happy, and I'll support you in whatever decisions you make."

"Thank you, Neville. Not just for that, but for being the buffer this afternoon."

"Eeesh... that whole meeting was awkward, especially when Minerva showed you the paper. You two were as cool as cucumbers, though."

"I wasn't feeling anything approaching cool, let me tell you."

He chuckled. "Didn't appear that way... So, any advice on how to deal with him? I am not looking forward to first time I have to go to him as Head of Gryffindor House."
"Push back." Hermione smirked his disbelieving expression. "Hey, it works for me."

"Lovely. Because if there is one thing I enjoy doing above all others, it's standing up to Professor Snape."

"It won't be that bad, Neville."

Smiling wryly, he said, "I know. And I think that things will be different. He's managed to be...polite in all of our interactions so far, and I am not the big girl's blouse of yesteryear." He rose, and proffered his hand to help her get up. "Come on. Time's a wasting, and we still have about three hundred kilos of shit to move."

She let him pull her up, and they walked back over to the pile. Neville grabbed the handles of the nearest wheelbarrow, saying teasingly, "And if he gets too bad, perhaps you can intercede on my behalf?" He waggled his eyebrows at her lasciviously. "Maybe turn on the charm a tad? Flutter your eyelashes..."

"Why you little..." laughing, she threw a particularly hard chunk of mooncalf dung at him, and had the satisfaction of seeing it bounce of his head.

"Like that, is it?" Neville grinned, and took aim with his own handful.

Snape heard their laughter first, drifting over grounds and onto the running path. He had left his rooms a little after eight when it became clear that he needed to do something to dull the rage that he'd felt since seeing the front page of the Daily Prophet. Long ago, he had come to terms with the fact that public opinion would never be favourable when it came to his character; had the article been solely about him, it would have been a minor annoyance, and nothing else. But the vicious tone it had taken with Hermione...

So he went running in an effort to clear his mind. It wasn't as if there was much he could do about the press coverage. If Rita Skeeter had not written the article, it would have been someone else. Still, he did spend the first part of his run contemplating what poisons he might be able to slip the bloody woman. Nothing that would kill her, but there was that lovely Indonesian brew that caused the most uncomfortable, permanent boils.

Their laughter- well, really, hers, if he were being perfectly honest- drew him off the path and into the greenhouse area. When he turned the corner to Greenhouse Five, he had to quickly duck, and narrowly avoided getting hit by an errant piece of what he could only assume was dung. Hermione, he noted, was crouching behind the aforementioned pile of shit, using a shovel in the manner of cricket bat, whilst Longbottom was favouring a double-handed, ape-like approach to throwing large amounts of faecal matter her way.

"Children!" he said, letting his voice lash out with harsh condemnation. They both whirled, wearing identically guilty expressions, and he was pleased to see that despite almost ten years out of the classroom, he had retained his ability to freeze students in their tracks. Former students, at least. We shall see about the rest come September...

Sneering, he eyed Hermione as a clump of excrement fell from her hair to shoulder. "Granger, must you create a shitstorm everywhere you go?"

He was rewarded by the quick flash of anger in her gaze, and saw her hand tighten minutely on the shovel. "Toss any of that excrement my way, and I'll crown you queen of the dung heap," he drawled.
"Oh, like you've never created a shitstorm." Hermione stuck her shovel in the muck and planted her hands on her hips. "In the future, would you prefer be known as the the kettle, or the pot?" she said, gritting her teeth.

He pretended to ponder the question for a second. "The kettle, naturally. Bigger handle."

Longbottom let out a burst of choked laughter before turning bright red and falling silent. Snape transferred his sharp regard over to the younger man, mentally cataloguing the many changes the years had wrought. There was the the physical, of course; Longbottom was no longer a chubby, pale youth. Even in the moonlight, he was the picture of ruddy good health, and appeared to be a great deal more coordinated than Snape remembered. He also had not been blind to the fact that Longbottom had been the only staff member, save for Poppy and Minerva, to display any manners during the meeting. Indeed, the man more than enough reason to hate him, but had treated him with respect, and had made an effort to converse politely. *Never let it be said I can't extend an olive branch when necessary... I wonder if this afternoon's bravery was a one-time incident, or if he's finally grown a backbone? "And you, Professor Longbottom... Do you know how much that mooncalf dung costs?"

His colour deepened, but Longbottom didn't flinch. "Seven galleons, three sickles, and two knuts a kilo. I did requisition it, after all."

"Did you have a reason for coming over here other than to pursue a discussion into scatological and anatomical concerns?" Hermione queried dryly.

Leaning against the corner of the greenhouse wall with a causal insolence, Snape said, "I've come to offer a trade."

"Go on then," Longbottom responded, putting on a credible poker face.

"I will assist in moving and shovelling the rest of your shit." Snape let a small smirk grace his expression. "In return, you will give me ten fanged geraniums."

After a pause, the younger man arched a brow. "Five fanged geraniums for your labour. If you want ten, I also get a bottle of freshly brewed Armadillo Bile Mixture."

"You dare bargain with me?"

"I know their worth, Professor Snape," he said steadily.

Snape waited to see if Longbottom would waver. He didn't so much as squirm, and it pleased him immensely. "You have yourself a deal, Professor Longbottom. Ten fanged geraniums in return for my labour and the Armadillo Bile Mixture."

"Excellent. I will want the mixture by the twentieth."

"In a rush to dissolve something into a puddle of goo, are we?" Snape asked lazily.

The younger man's eyes flicked to Hermione for a moment, and Snape saw the reflection of something cool and dangerous in their depths before his usual, easy geniality reemerged. "Perhaps. Do you think a single bottle of Armadillo Bile Mixture would be enough to take care of a body the size of say... Rita Skeeter?"

"I can fight my own battles, thanks for asking." Hermione interjected, looking mildly annoyed.

Snape ignored her comment. "If you only have one bottle, I would recommend that something of that
volume be cubed into smaller chunks and placed into a airtight barrel before you add the Armadillo Bile. Given your talent wielding a sword, I can't imagine any of that type of chopping would be much of an issue." Straightening up from the wall, he went on, "However, should find yourself needing any assistance in said situation, or indeed, even needing second bottle, please do let me know. What was it that Dumbledore was always so fond of saying?... Ah, yes. 'Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it'."

For the first time that evening, Longbottom smiled at him, albeit a touch smugly. "And here I was worried that we would have issues finding common ground."

"Necessity can make for strange bedfellows."

With squelching plop, Hermione deposited a large pile of shit into the nearest wheelbarrow, breaking the tableau. "Are you two done with your male bonding rituals so we can get back to work?"

Hermione really, really wanted to throw some shit at him. At both of them, actually, but as Neville already sported plenty of brown streaks she was momentarily pacified on that account. Severus, on the other hand, was wearing a pristinely white t-shirt, which gleamed like a ode to cleanliness in the moonlight.

It had been almost touching to see the two of them bury the hatchet together in the metaphorical back of Rita Skeeter, but their male presumption also annoyed the hell out of her. She knew that Neville and Severus had only been blowing off steam, but still... she didn't need either of them to rush in and slay her dragons- or in this case, a certain beetle with a penchant for practising yellow journalism- as she was perfectly capable of doing it herself. Hermione highly doubted that Skeeter had ever registered as an animagus, so if she really wanted to extract a little revenge on the women, she had a variety of options open to her.

And this time, if I catch her in beetle form, maybe I'll forget to poke holes in the jar lid!

With a little grunt of disgust, she thrust her shovel into the pile. It was up to her how much she wanted to let things like Rita Skeeter bother her; living at Hogwarts, she was protected enough from the general public that she could ignore a fair amount of the hue and cry going on in the wider world. She didn't want to get worked up over what amounted to the jealous ramblings of a vindictive woman; it wasn't as if she didn't have some real battles to fight...

Severus reappeared in the entryway of the greenhouse with an empty wheelbarrow. Damn the man, how can he go running, work in a greenhouse and keep a shirt that white? If there was anyway of getting some shit on him, it was going to have to be by 'accident'; she would have to manufacturer either a distraction, or some kind of slip...

As if reading her mind, he gave her a measuring stare as he exchanged wheelbarrows. Pushing the full one forward so that he was standing next to her, he reached over with fastidious nonchalance, and brushed a chunk of dung from her shoulder. Slowly, threateningly, he leaned in, and she restrained a shiver at his sudden nearness. "Try it, Granger, and you won't be able to run nearly far, or fast enough." He grinned condescendingly, teeth flashing in the moonlight. "If only you worked as hard at scooping as you've been plotting, we might be finished already."

She glared at him mutely, a hundred schemes running through her head. I will get him if it kills me to do so! He laughed at her unspoken reaction, and she saw Neville jerk and look momentarily stunned to see their former Professor making such a sound. Granted, it fell under the category of taunting, rather than mirth... but it was still Severus Snape, laughing.

Tapping her shovel reprovingly in a firm command to start working, he picked up the handles of the
wheelbarrow and began to make his way back to the glass structure. Hmmm. I wonder if Neville would help me?

None of them were laughing when they finally finished the task two hours later. Hermione knew she'd have no problem falling asleep; rather she was worried that she might not make it back to the Castle before collapsing.

Resentfully, she rubbed at a raw spot on her ankle. Severus, who was propped against the wall of the greenhouse, looked down at her with a raised brow. "How bad did it bite you?" he asked.

"More gnaw than bite, really." Tiredly, she stood up. "Stupid fanged geranium. Seriously, who's idea was it to put rows of razor sharp teeth on a plant anyway?"

"Well, Pelargonium originates from Southern Africa, but it was grafted successfully into the current form of Dentibus Pelargonium by the famous Yoruba wizard, Babalú-Ayé, in the mid-fourteenth century..." Neville's voice trailed off as he took in the identical blank faces staring at him.

"I believe that was an example of a rhetorical question, Professor Longbottom," Severus said mildly.

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Neville mumbled.

"No worries. We're all pooped." Hermione replied, examining the wealth of blisters that had sprung up on her palms.

Neville groaned at her poor attempt at humour, and Severus just shook his head warily. "Please tell me we've exhausted all excrement-based jokes, Granger."

"I think so. It was the best I could do at this hour..." she said.

Levering himself off the wall, Severus walked over to her. "Hands out, palm up."

"Pardon me?" she asked, befuddled by the non-sequitur.

He pulled his wand out and looked at her expectantly. "Put your hands out, palms up." She did as ordered. "Now, observe." Bringing his wand to bear over her left hand, he carefully intoned "Emaculo Integer".

Hermione blinked in startlement as a fine green mist enveloped her palm. In its wake, the blisters started to fade, and then disappeared entirely, leaving only a cool, minty tingle behind.

"Huh. That could come in handy." Neville mused, and then threw a hand up in self-defence. "Sorry. Pun not intended. What was it again?"

"Emaculo Integer," he stated. "It heals only the upper layers of skin, and won't work on any underlying damage, but it is good on minor wounds. Most typically applied non-verbally." Severus gestured to her other palm. "Your turn."

She repeated the spell, and smiled as as her other hand was bathed in a pale yellow light that carried with it a sensation of warmth, and verbena, rather than cool mint of Severus' casting. "That's interesting. It's different when I do it."

"Some healing spells are like that; they take on the... flavour, I guess of whoever uses them. For Poppy, it's a blue, flowery mist," he said, stifling a yawn.

"I wonder what it would be like for me," Neville speculated. He glanced down at his own palms,
which were thick with calluses. "Pity. I've hands like a keeper's mitt. No blisters." He eyed her reddened ankle with some avarice. "Can I try it on you?"

"Ummm. Sure," she said, and stuck her foot out. Almost immediately, her balance started to waver and her hand shot out in an attempt to steady herself. Latching onto the nearest firm object— in this case, Severus' arm— she stared down at her ankle, hoping that she was adequately concealing her trepidation.

She was taken aback when the entire bottom half of her leg began to glow a dark green. "Neville?" she asked, hoping like hell that her leg wasn't going to go suddenly boneless or something equally as unfortunate.

"It's fine," Severus said. "As I said, it tends to work best when used non-verbally. Longbottom, if you concentrate, you can push the focus towards the bite."

It was a curious feeling, akin to a feather being dragged down her leg. The green seemed to swirl and deepen, and then she felt the soreness on her ankle abate abruptly. As the mist dissolved, she twisted her foot to better catch the moonlight; the skin was perfectly unblemished.

"Well done," Severus proclaimed matter of factly. "If you widen your focus as you cast the spell, it will settle over the entire body, and you can then pull it to where it's needed."

Hermione looked up from her ankle, and saw that Neville had flushed a bright red, visible even in the low light. *That had to have been a first, Severus complementing Neville on something.*

She wrinkled her nose. "Mmm, not sure I like the aftertaste though. Yours was minty, mine is verbena, and Neville, yours was herbal, but kind of earthy..."

"Say, like marijuana?" Severus interjected with frank amusement. "Really, Professor Longbottom, for shame. Marijuana is a Class Three controlled substance."

"Of which, as a holder of a Mastery in Herbology, I am licensed to both grow and possess." Neville countered, high colour not fading.

"Duly noted," Severus said slyly. "I shall bear that in mind for the future. Speaking of earthy..." He pointed his wand at Hermione and stated, "Scourgify."

"Ouch!" Hermione sputtered, and released his arm as the abrasive magic hit her. "You do know that spell is for cleaning pots and pans, not people, right?"

"You didn't exactly smell purdy," he said mockingly. Neville snickered until Severus turned a quelling stare in his direction. "And yes, I am aware of it's intended use. However, I believe that we already determined that you identify as the pot in this equation."

"Oh, shut it..." she grumbled through Neville's resumed laughter. "Are we done here, or do you need help getting the tools back to the shed?"

"I'll put everything away," Neville urged. "You guys might as well go to bed." His blush, which had just started receding, flared to life again. "I mean, go back to your apartments, not..."

"Longbottom, just leave your foot in your mouth. It will be far less painful for all of us, trust me." Severus sounded annoyed for the first time that evening.

"Uhh, right... well, thank you both, then."
"You're welcome," Hermione answered. "Have a good night, Neville."

"You too," he mumbled, and began to toss their tools into one of the wheelbarrows.

"Shall we?" queried Severus, with a now-familiar gesture to depart.

Feeling a wave tiredness overcome her, she only nodded and they started back to the Castle.

She was stumbling with fatigue by the time they reached the school. Holding the door open for her, Severus growled, "Pick up your feet before you hurt yourself, Granger. Under no circumstance am I carrying you through this school."

"Probably end up on the front page of the Prophet if you did," she observed.

His tone was acidic when he responded. "Precisely."

"It would almost be worth it, though..."

"In what possible way could that sort of attention be worth it?"

"One," she said, holding up a finger. "I would not have to walk the remainder of the way back to the staff floor. That is a rather weighty inducement for me."

"And for me as well," he noted, giving her a sardonic, if measuring, glance.

She blithely ignored the jibe. "Two: Think of all the pearl clutching and kitten-having said picture would generate. I mean, we are never going to win any public relations battle. Might as well enjoy causing a much fuss as possible."

"And it really doesn't bother you to have your name linked to mine, and your reputation slandered?" He sounded politely disbelieving.

"I made the choice, freely and gladly, to become your apprentice. It's not as if my name isn't already linked to yours." She shrugged. "Anyway, I could take a binding oath of celibacy, join a nunnery, and the next day I'm sure that there would be allegations that I was snogging the Mother Superior in the confessional."

He snorted at that. "Now there's a fascinating mental picture for me to reflect upon..."

"That depends," she cautioned. "Are you visualising the Mother Superior as the delicately divine 'The Bells of St. Mary's' era Ingrid Bergman, or the more stern and strait-laced Maggie Smith from 'Sister Act'? Because, personally, those produce completely different reactions for me..."

"Jesus, Granger, does the impudence ever stop with you?" he groaned, laughing a little.

Hermione snaked a quick arm out and smacked the back of his hand, hard. "Quit your blasphemy, Severus Snape." She softened her statement with a smirk.

"Catholic, are we?" he asked snidely.

She went quiet for a moment before speaking. "Yes, actually. Well, my parents were, but I was confirmed. You?"

He looked faintly abashed at her tone. "No, I was raised nominally C of E." Pausing, he gave her another side-long glance as they started up a set of stairs. "Are you practising?"
It was her turn to snort. "Hardly. I still go to mass when the whim strikes me, but it's not as if I can take communion, or anything. I haven't even been to confession in... what, thirteen...?" she scoured her memory. "...No, fourteen years. The last time I went, I had to edit half the things I said as to not violate International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy; I haven't been back since, and considering what's happened in the intervening years..." she made a face, and her next words came out bitterly. "Should you ever meet a wizard that is also a duly ordained priest in good standing with the Catholic Church, please do let me know."

"I only know a vicar," he offered, somewhat apologetically. "Does that mean that you believe in God?"

"You mean, do I 'believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible...' and all that jazz?" Sighing, she went on. "No, not really. Not in the Catholic sense, certainly. I'm too much of a feminist, not mention the whole 'witch' thing to buy into it unquestioningly. I do believe in something, but it's a lot more... ephemeral. Mostly, I miss the ritual. I think there is something to be said for taking a break every so often from the profane to contemplate the divine, or at least the abstract. When I went to Catholic school, my favourite part of the day was always chapel. It was the one time that I could shut my brain off enough to really hear silence."

Disarming the wards that led to staff floor, he stepped into the long corridor. "Did you go directly from parochial school to Hogwarts?"

"No," she said. "I was asked very nicely to leave my third year, and transferred to the local primary until I came here."

"You got kicked out of school? What ever for?" Severus held open the door that accessed their suite with a raised brow.

"I asked too many uncomfortable questions. Shocking, I know," she said, seeing his ironic expression. "What about you? Do you believe in God?"

Severus pointed the middle door in their hallway. "In the storeroom for a moment." She complied, wondering if he was going to answer her question. "Don't let me forget, sometime tomorrow..." he stopped and rubbed his forehead tiredly, "...no, sometime later today, I need to go over the storeroom precautions with you."

He strode over the the far wall, and plucked a series of small bottles from the shelves. "I would recommend that you take this one," he said, handing her a blue vial, "tonight, right before you get into bed. It's mostly a muscle relaxant. The green bottle is for when you wake up."

"Alright." She palmed the bottles. "Now," she said, holding up the first one. "...and later."

"Correct." Again, he rubbed his head, and struck her all at once that he looked very, very done in. "To answer your question, no, I do not believe in a god, or gods. On a good day, you might get me to believe in some sort of interconnectedness, à la certain forms of Buddhism, but that is as far as I'm willing to go. Quite frankly, I've done and seen too many horrible things to believe that there is some benevolent heavenly father watching out us all with a grand plan." Walking back over to the door, he gave her shallow bow. "Now, we can continue this discussion on theological matters at a later date, but as I've been up for almost twenty-four hours at this point, I'm completely knackered and want nothing more than my bed."

As he finished his statement, she yawned hard enough make her eyes water. "Off to Bedfordshire with you, then."
"How... twee of you to say so."

"It'll only get worse the longer I stay up." She gave him rueful glance as they moved back into the hallway. "Thank you for helping out tonight."

"I did not help; I traded services for goods." He opened his door, and turned back to look at her. "You're welcome."

"That wasn't too hard, was it?" she asked sweetly, and enjoyed the mulish look that crossed his expression. "Good night."

"Good night," he grumbled, and shut the door firmly.

Hermione stood in the hallway for a long moment, a smile lingering on her face, before finally shuffling towards her own rooms.

Author's Postscript:

Several random notes for the chapter- the title comes from the Van Morrison song 'Dancing in the Moonlight'.

When Snape says that he's C of E, he means Church of England. Being that he was a half-blood, and his father a Muggle, I find it hard to believe that given the time (early 70's) and place (Northern England) that there had not been at least a token attempt at raising him in some kind of religious faith.

Pelargonium is the Latin name for geranium; accordingly, Dentibus Pelargonium means 'fanged geranium'... at least according to google translate. According to the HP Canon, fanged geraniums have healing properties.

Babali-Ayé is one of the gods in the Afro-Caribbean Orisha (Yoruba) pantheon. Specifically, he is associated with healing and infectious disease. Finally, my apologies about the delay; I work in education, and the end of school year is rather brutal, and leaves very little time for any fun... or fanfiction, it seems.
Brightbrook's Balls and Broken Plates

Hermione spent the next two days in planning meetings; Minerva had agreed to allow the apprentice Healers to come and perform their mock interview drills in the various classrooms of the school as long as it was done prior to the start of term. St. Mungo's had also offered up the use of their coterie of 'actors'- witches and wizards that had sufficient medical knowledge to serve as proxy patients- and so she, Poppy, Severus, Richard Brightbrook, and two other Healers worked furiously to create the schedule and write the scripts for the actors to follow.

Each apprentice Healer was to go through six interviews- two easy scenarios, two moderately difficult, and two wherein the 'patient' was highly emotional or otherwise difficult. They would be assessed and debriefed after each successive attempt, and once everyone had completed the course, the entire group would get together and discuss improvements. Hermione was looking forward to seeing how much the Healer's had learned from their seminar; if it went well, she felt that it would bode highly for the overall project.

It was almost seven by the time they finalized plans for the two-day event, and Hermione was feeling beyond peckish. She turned to Richard, who was reading through the day's notes a last time, and asked, "Would you like to stay for supper?"

"I'd love to, but I really need to get back to St. Mungo's." He shook his head with more than a tinge of resentment. "I've got a full ward, three Healers out sick, and an ocean of paperwork from being gone for three weeks." Giving her a regretful smile, he said, "That'll teach me to dare take a vacation. How about a rain cheque for sometime next week, though?"

"You're on." Hermione responded. "I'll settle for walking you to the gates."

The silence between them was surprisingly awkward as they walked down the halls. Deciding to go with the easy conversational gambit, she inquired about his holiday. "How was Canada?"

She was rewarded by his full smile. "Wonderful. My younger sister got married, so I had a chance to see the entire clan. We sat around and ate too much food, gossiped endlessly, and spent several days hiking on the Coast. It was really nice to spend that much time back home."

"You miss it quite a bit, don't you?" she asked.

"Everyday." He turned his warm smile on her, and touched her arm briefly. "But I keep finding these reasons to stay in England."

"Is that so?" she retorted, feeling a faint blush cover her cheeks. "That explains why you've been eyeing me all afternoon like I'm some sort of rabid cerberus posed to take off a limb off. I would like to think I'm not that frightening in a dress."

The man looked chagrined. "It isn't that, believe me. I just got a bit of an earful from several colleagues when I mentioned that I've been working with you." He opened one of the wooden doors for her, and gestured her ahead. "I knew that you were involved rather heavily with the... Voldemort matter, but I didn't realize the full extent of things. I mean, the news of the civil war was covered in Canada, but I was in my final years of schooling before my apprenticeship, and not really paying attention to much other than that."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that, other than the banal and obvious. "Oh. So... someone clued you in, did they?"
He sighed. "Yeah, more than I would have liked, truth be told."

She felt her stomach cramp in a combination of nerves and anger; she had not realized how little he knew about her past given how liberally it had always been splashed about. "And what did they tell you?"

"Do you really want to discuss this right now?"

"No, but you clearly have questions, and I can only imagine what half-truths they were spouting. Best get the interrogation over with."

"Did you really first battle Voldemort when you were eleven?"

"I was twelve, actually. Voldemort had possessed the body of our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and was trying to get the Philosopher's Stone. But yes, I was a first-year."

"Right." Richard clearly wasn't sure how to respond to her blasé recitation. "And you fought off several hundred Dementors in your a third year."

"That was more of Harry's doing, not mine. I couldn't cast a Patronus Charm until Fifth Year."

"That would be the same Fifth Year when you faced down the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic because they were trying to retrieve the prophecy about Harry Potter?"

"Yes." She could feel the start of a headache, and took a deep breath of summer air as they exited the Castle. "It was trap. I got hurt fairly badly, as did Ron, and Harry's godfather was killed."

"You were there when Dumbledore was killed."

"Yes."

"You helped to find the pieces of Voldemort's soul that allowed Harry Potter to kill him."

"Some of them, yes."

"You not only broke into Gringotts, but managed to steal something, and escaped unharmed?"

"That was one of the bits of Voldemort's soul, properly called a Horcrux. And there was a... dragon that assisted our exit from Gringotts."

"You fought in both the First and Second Battles of Hogwarts, and during the second one..."

"Killed many Death Eaters, yes."

"You were tortured."

"Several times."

"Your parents?"

"Despite reports, were not murdered by the Death Eaters. I Obliviated them and sent them to Australia. They were killed by wildfires a couple of months later."

Richard's alternately fascinated and horrified expression was slowly submerged under his persona of Healer as he questioned her. Her response concerning her parents briefly stopped the stream of questions, and he gazed at her unspeaking for a long second. His voice held a note of grim
determination when he went on. "One of the mediwitches had quite a lot to say about your dating escapades."

"Wherein I play the role of the Whore of Babylon?"

"Ah, yes. Something like that."

She smiled at Richard, aiming for a reassuring look, but had feeling her grin sported too many teeth to display anything more than repressed anger. "Go on, then. What's the list? It gets longer every time I hear it."

"Potter, Ron Weasley. Also several of his brothers... ummm, some fellow named Longbottom. That Bulgarian Seeker. And..." His voice broke off, and he suddenly appeared rather uncomfortable.

"And?" she queried, not able to keep the sharp note from her reply.

"Professor Snape."

Hermione glanced down at the flower-lined path, the picture from the Daily Prophet suddenly fresh in her mind. "Yes, he's a rather new addition to the list. God... I always forget what a small, incestuous, world this is." She laughed bitterly. "I was with Ron for two years, and only went out on a couple of dates with Victor Krum during my fourth year. Harry has always been like a brother to me, and as much I love the Weasleys, dating one of them was more than enough for me. Neville- Neville Longbottom- is a friend and colleague, nothing more. Had I ever approached Professor Snape as student..." she shivered, thinking of the few times she'd seen him lose his temper, and then mentally multiplied it times ten. "He would have taken my head off bare-handed, and then gladly used my organs for potions ingredients. He hated me a student, or at least felt a near enough emotion to make no matter."

"And now?" His expression was careful.

"And now we are friends, of a sort, and I'm his apprentice. If you wish to learn any more about his current feelings on the subject, you'll have to ask him." She wondered if he had noticed how evasive her answer had been; however, it wasn't as if she could properly answer his question about her... current feelings in relation to Severus. He was a friend, without a doubt, but she also had a sneaking suspicion that if she stopped to examine her thoughts on the man, she'd find something rather more complicated than mere friendship.

Brightbrook's voice interrupted her internal monologue. "Discretion being the better part of valour... I think I'll decline."

"Smart man."

"There was a bright spot in today's rehashing of old gossip; you had a rather... unexpected champion."

She looked at him, nonplussed. "And who might that be?"

"Lucius Malfoy. Emily- that's the mediwitch that loves the tabloids- was trying to get me to read some special edition tripe in the Daily Prophet, and he incinerated the paper. Nearly took half my desk with it too." He grinned.

"Burning copies of the Daily Prophet can hardly be construed as an act of support; an act of common sense, certainly, but that hardly makes Lucius Malfoy my champion."
"He said- and I quote- that he was 'relieved that vacuous and inane natterings of the general public have not deterred Doctor Granger from coming back and performing vital research'. He also told Emily that once she had received ten 'Exceptional' O.W.L.s as you had, she was free to read whatever she pleased, but until that point she would be better served by studying something more substantial."

"He did not!" Hermione realized that her mouth was hanging open, and she shut it with a snap.

"He did. He appeared to be sucking on a very bitter lemon the entire time he said it, but I assure you, those words passed his lips."

She rubbed her forehead. "Talk about strange bedfellows... did Draco have anything to say to all that?"

The amusement that had begun to lighten Richard's expression dispersed. "No." He looked down and away before speaking again. "He was unconscious most of the day. I think that Lucius was rather happy to have something to strike out at, truthfully."

"Oh."

Richard exhaled. "Draco signed the consent forms yesterday to take part in the project; you should get a copy of his files this sometime week. He also volunteered to be guinea pig for our first group of interviewers."

"I am surprised that he agreed to take part."

"He doesn't want to die."

"Is it that bad?"

"Honestly, yes." He tapped his fingers on his trouser leg in open frustration. "None of his issues- the seizures, muscle weakness, or vascular concerns- are enough to kill him. But together? And the frequency of incidents increases every month... he can't go on like this indefinitely."

"Oh," Hermione said, at a loss. She certainly didn't like Draco Malfoy... but it gave her a queer feeling to think of him lying in a hospital bed, dying.

"Have you had any further issues since I've been gone?" he asked, clearly keen to change the subject.

"Not of that sort..." she stopped, really wishing that they could have had this particular conversation over dinner, or at least drinks. "There have been... complications of another sort. I rather enjoyed our other dates, but... I can't do this right now. For one thing, I'm not willing to subject you to the inevitable round of scrutiny that going out with me would involve."

"I don't really give a damn about any of that, Hermione." He sounded so earnest, and she wanted to smile at his naïvety.

"You can say that now, but trust me when I say that it's a whole different beast when you are staring it down headlong." She took another deep breath, trying to curb her anger. "In a way, I'm glad that your colleague blabbed; I don't need to explain why I need to spend the next couple of months, or however long it takes, dealing with the various issues of my past. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." His reply was quick, and he reached over to take her hand. "I'm a Healer, Hermione. I've dealt with enough trauma in my own life not to understand why you need the space." He gave an
anaemic chuckle. "I've always had atrocious timing, anyways."

"I wasn't trying to lead you on," she said, feeling miserable in the face of his sincere words and manner. "Had I known how quickly things were going to change in my life, I wouldn't have accepted in the first place, believe me."

Richard's smile was disappointed, but came easily. "I would never think that of you... I just hope that we can stay friends. I like you, not just... like-like, you." He groaned at his own awkward delivery. "Right... let me if I can rephrase that in a way that doesn't make me sound like a teenager. I like you, Hermione, not just fancy you. And if nothing ever comes of us but friendship... then I will still count myself a lucky man."

"I would like that as well." Touched, she gave him a self-deprecating smile in return. "I don't have enough good friends to reject a quality request like that."

"I'm still buying dinner next week, though." the Healer stated firmly.

"No you won't." Her grin turned brash. "I told you earlier, it's dutch or nothing."

What little amusement she found in their parting comments quickly evaporated on the walk from the Hogwarts' gates back to her rooms. She was angry- angrier than she'd been in a long time- and she could feel her hair begin to twist and curl around her head as her temper grew. She had not wanted to talk about her past, and doing so, even concisely, had unearthed feelings of fear and rage-inducing impotence concerning both her past, and the present situation. She'd also genuinely liked Richard Brightbrook, and hadn't wanted to turn him down in such a manner. Still, she knew that it was not a good time to start a relationship. As overwhelmed as she already felt, she knew that matters would only get more complicated as she settled back in Hogwarts. And then was the little issue of Severus...

The picture flashed in her mind again. She'd known that coming back to the wizarding world would mean a return to life back in the fish bowl of public scrutiny... but she thought she'd have more than three days back before the hounds started circling. Recalling Brightbrook's comments about there being a special edition of the Daily Prophet, she felt her mood snap from temper to outright ire, and took a great satisfaction in slamming the door to her quarters shut.

"I've told you, Poppy: I don't understand what happened any more than you or Minerva do. And quite frankly, I don't give a damn, either." Standing up from his spot on the sofa, Snape strode over the the windows and looked into the dark. "All I can tell that there are no compulsions beyond that of a normal apprenticeship acting on either of us, and no magical prohibitions in effect that could cause harm."

"And you aren't the least bit curious why the binding manifested so differently?" Poppy shot back sharply.

"For the fifth time, no." He whirled and glared at her. "And do you know why I'm not curious? Because we can't go back and change what happened. We did it, Hermione and I have spoken about matters to my satisfaction, and I am content to let things lie until there is a reason for me to think otherwise!"

Poppy sat back on the sofa, lips pursed in such a way that he was forcibly reminded of Minerva. "Severus... I am concerned, that's all."

"It's a little late for second thoughts." Aware that he was nearly yelling, he reined in his temper and
tried for a more conciliatory tone. "If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn't go back and change things even if I could."

Her gaze sharpened at his statement, and he could tell the moment that she figured out that he hadn't told her the entire story. Conveniently, he had omitted telling her about the tiny, little, inconsequential detail of their momentary telepathic bond. He could only think of two other types of bindings that would bring that specific element to into play, and neither of them were of the temporary, or of the apprenticeship variety. Given Poppy's apparent... concern, he thought it had been prudent choice on his part. Moreover, he found himself loathe to tell her something that had been be a rather private moment between himself and Hermione.

The Healer looked down for a beat, and when she made eye contact with him again, the only emotion he could see in her gaze was worry. "It's just if something should happen..."

"I am not going to hurt the woman, Poppy. Not if I can at all help it. Surely you've figured out that part." He couldn't help the sarcasm that leached into his reply.

She got up and walked over to him swiftly. Placing her hand on his, she spoke. "I am not worried about you hurting her, you foolish man. It's the other way around that has me losing sleep."

He blinked down at her, surprised. "This is Hermione Granger we are discussing, Poppy. Have you ever known her to be deliberately cruel to her friends? Hell, mean to strangers, house-elves, or even vegetables for that matter?"

Sighing, she tightened her grip on his hand briefly before stepping back. "There is a first time for everything, Severus, and I don't want you to be that exception."

"Might I remind you who it was that gave me particular encouragement to take her on as apprentice?"

"Just because it's too late for second thoughts doesn't mean that I don't have them," she groused.

"Poppy, I am not altogether comfortable with what happened either. But I do trust Hermione; I was sure of her when I agreed to apprentice her, and nothing during or after the ceremony has changed my mind."

Snape winced as he felt his wards flicker and then flare to life. "Speak of the devil..." The sound of Hermione's door slamming was clear, even though the stone walls.

"Was that Hermione?" Poppy looked startled.

"Yes." He smiled, albeit wryly. "It seems like she didn't have a very nice walk."

"Wasn't she taking Richard back to the gates?"

"I believe so, yes."

He kept his expression blank under her sudden and increased interest. They both grimaced, however, when another wave of fury hit his wards.

"Ouch." Poppy rubbed her head. "If she keeps that up much longer, she'll have Minerva in here investigating."

"I know. I can handle her."
Poppy raised an eyebrow at his calm statement. "Hah. Good luck with that. Are you really sure you
don't want backup?"

He smirked. "No. I figured that Granger was going to lose her temper sooner rather than later, and
have a plan to deal with it. However, should you find either of our broken and bloody corpses in
morning, I beg of you to remember that whilst I am magically prohibited from doing her serious
bodily harm, she is not likewise bound."

After eating a perfunctory dinner, she had decided that she might as well finish unpacking and put
some of her fury to good use. Accordingly, she was shelving books by hand while using magic to
unpack her kitchen goods, when Hagrid's stupid book bit her. Of course, she had forgotten that The
Monster Book of Monsters was in the bottom of the box. And, naturally, some time during transport,
the belt used to hold the ruddy thing closed had loosened enough that it was able to take a good chop
on two of her fingers. Her scream was almost, but not quite, drowned out by the sound of dishes
breaking as her charms faltered. Incinerating the book with a quick blast, she stalked over to the
kitchenette to examine the damage. About half of the box was broken, but it was nothing a quick
reparo wouldn't fix. Picking up one of the unbroken plates, she looked at it consideringly. Hefting
the solid, ceramic weight in her hand, she came to an abrupt decision.

Hermione threw the plate. The sound and impact of it shattering on the stone wall was strangely,
intensely satisfying. Taking a second plate out of the box, she took aim.

He was standing outside of her door when he heard her scream, followed by the sound of plates
breaking. Bending down, he knotted the laces of trainers more securely. He smiled in anticipation
when he heard the a second crash, and then a third. I do believe that's my cue.

Severus knocked loudly. All noises from within stopped, and then Hermione flung the door open.
Her navy blue, sleeveless dress was the only thing prim and proper about her; her hair fairly
cracked, and was surrounding her flushed face in a riotous nimbus. Blood dripped from her left hand
on to the floor.

Snagging the offended digits, he examined the bites with avuncular curiosity. "I should have known
you for a woman who likes to break the dishes in anger." His comment brought a feral grimace of
temper and promise to her expression, and he felt his own darker urges flicker to life in response
before he firmly checked the notion.

"Do I need to hex Brightbrook's balls off for being mean to you?"

"No. He was a perfect gentlemen." Her eyes flashed again.

"Do I need to hex Brightbrook's balls off for being a perfect gentleman to you?" He tapped his wand
gently on her fingers, healing the wounds with an easy expenditure of minty magic.

"No. If he- or anyone else's balls -requires hexing, I will do so myself."

"So, pray tell, why are you destroying crockery?"

"I am in a mood."

"Yes, you most certainly are," he drawled with supreme condescension, and she jerked her hand
from his.

"Did you need something, or were you just coming to gawk at the angry female?" She matched his
tone with equal scorn.

"You've been setting off my wards for the last twenty minutes, Granger. If you lose your cool any further, it'll be the Headmistress at your door because you've set off the Castle's warnings."

"Duly noted."

"Go get on your running kit."

"What makes you think I am a runner?"

"Your London Marathon t-shirt and that pile of trainers," he pointed "...over there were my first clues. Now, don't make me repeat myself: go change."

"I don't want to go running."

"I'm not giving you a choice, Apprentice. We are going running. What remains to be seen is if you can keep up with me."

"You better be bloody fast then!" she snarled, and strode into her bedroom.

He leaned against the door-jam and smirked. *Oh, this going to be so much fun!*

Calling out to her again, he spoke tauntingly, "Don't faff about now, Granger. I've things to do later."
The balmy August air took the edge off her anger, but only just. It did clear her mind enough, however, for Hermione to recognise that Severus was not just taunting her, but indulging her fit of temper. That thought gave her pause; she couldn't recall a time when that particular emotion had been tolerated, and it certainly had never been encouraged to flourish.

Her parents had always taken the reasonable route with her tantrums. If something was wrong, they discussed it in a mature, forthright manner, and expected her to respond likewise. For the most part their approach had worked, although there were several notable occasions when it hadn't. The last time they'd had a serious row- and Hermione couldn't remember what the fight had been about- she completely lost it in the middle of Tesco. That incident, shortly before she'd left for Hogwarts, had resulted in her losing her library card for two weeks. She took care to not repeat that mistake again, at least in front of her parents.

Harry and Ron had always been so frightened by her rare displays of real ire that they had always tried to placate her into calmer waters; perversely, that response had only made her mood worse. But when she left the wizarding world, she'd seemingly left her anger behind as well. Her emotions had instead manifested themselves either in tears or complete and utter detachment.

And suddenly, Severus' willingness to indulge her temper made sense. She'd been alternating between tetchy and teary since leaving St. Mungo's three days ago, and mentally, she had started to flounder under all of the events of the previous month... add tonight's little conversation, and it was no wonder that she had started to throw her plates.

He, apparently, did not want to deal with her tears any more than she did, so he'd instead chosen to let her fight; she had a feeling that he might also be seeking an outlet for his own temper as well.

She observed him covertly through a veil of curls. Like her, he was stretching in the damp grass at the start of the lakeside trail. The waning moon had rendered the landscape around them into sharp contrasts of black or white, and his face stood out bright amongst the darkness of his loose hair. His expression was remote, and focused on some unknown point across the lake.

Sensing her gaze, he turned to look at her. He remained expressionless as he rose, and after dusting off his shorts, he extended his hand out to her to help her up. She saw a glint of amusement in his eyes before a familiar sneer appeared.

"Out of courtesy, Granger, I'll let you set the initial pace. My height and all being such an advantage."

She let her voice go saccharine."I won't get worked up about your height as long as you promise to not feel too bad about my age. After all, I am what, twenty years younger than you?"

"Nineteen," he snapped, and she was pleased to note that her comment had apparently annoyed him. It's not a proper fight if only one of us is mad...

"Do you know where the large, turtle-shaped rock is?"

"The one about five kilometres off?"

"Yes. That will be our halfway point." Giving her a mocking bow, he said, "Now, shall we proceed?"
She could run easily at a decent clip, Severus noticed. It had only taken a little adjustment on both their parts to find comfortable pace, and looking down at her, he could see that the steady rhythm was easing the worst of her mood away. Moreover, she'd been smart about it; rather than trying to push the pace up right away, she was slowly working them into a faster step. Deliberately, he lengthened his stride, and watched with satisfaction as she balled her fists and strove to match him. *Younger, you might be, but I've been running longer than you've been walking, and I'm good foot taller. There is no way you are beating me in this particular race!*

Three times he lengthened his stride, until even he started to get winded at their speed. She doggedly kept up, although he thought it was purely the force of her own anger that allowed her to do so. They reached the bend directly before the rock in record time, and he gave himself a little magical push of energy to beat her to it. With a resounding smack, he slapped his palm on the rock a scant second before she did.

"Victory!" he crowed, wiping at the sweat running down his face.

"You... cheater!" she panted. Leaning against the rock, she extended trembling hands down to shoes and began to stretch in an effort to stay loose.

"Were there any prohibitions against using magic?" Taking several deep inhalations in an effort to slow his breathing, he began to circle the rock. "Slytherin Rule Number One, Granger. If it is worth winning, it is worth cheating."

She shot him a disgruntled look, and he jeered in return. Deliberately, he continued to bait her. "I do so love beating Gryffindors."

"Aren't you a little old to be so concerned with such childish matters?" she retorted, and then smirked at his own petulant expression. "The fanged geraniums aren't the only one with teeth, Professor Snape. I will fight back."

He wondered if she had any inkling of what he had planned. Despite her comment, he rather thought not... "By all means, Apprentice, fight back. Five minutes, and then we began again," he remarked obliquely.

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They lapsed into silence, and Hermione took a moment to enjoy the beautiful evening. Truly, it was a night for soft romance; she could see faery-lights swirling over sections of the dark lake, mirroring the majestic sweep of stars in the cloudless skies above. *Pity I wish to hex it all to pieces...* Straightening up from the rock, she shifted her posture into a *trikonasana*, or the triangle yoga pose, hoping that the act would calm her. Holding it for a long count, she smoothly twisted the position to stretch the other side. Finally, she transitioned into a warrior pose, and began to plot her return to the Castle.

Suddenly, she became aware that the small sounds that had marked Severus's presence had ceased; "By all means, Apprentice, fight back..." she recalled him saying, and the fine hairs at the back of her neck stood up. She dove for the ground just as a handful of stones flew through the air where she had previously been standing. Rolling for the dubious cover of the turtle rock, she scanned the shoreline for Severus.

Nothing. The path and beach were completely empty and lifeless; even the evening song of the birds had halted. Snapping a shield charm up, she withdrew her wand from her shorts. *So, what is he planning? Is he actually going to fight me, or simply trying to scare the bejesus out of me?*

As if in answer, a dozen larger stones came hurtling her from several directions, impacting her shield...
with blinding flashes of light. Deciding that she best move off the beach so she'd not be surrounded by ammunition, she sent her own wave of stones out, hoping to hit his defences.

She made it safely behind a small strand of bushes as the last of her stones hit the beach. Again, there no trace of Severus. *We are to duel, apparently...* she remembered the sight of him as he had taken down Professor Lockhart; black robes billowing, the fluid crack of magic as he effortlessly slammed the imbecilic man against the wall. She was better than Lockhart, but all the same... *I know he's not going to try and kill me, but this isn't going to be a fair fight!* Then, the terms of her apprenticeship contract came to her; he was magically prohibited from doing her major harm, thus he was limited to defensive and minor magics only...

He was playing with her. Oh, he'd try to dress the action up in a patina of necessity; after all, duelling would be a good way of testing her current magical abilities, but when it came down to it, he was playing with her. Indulging her temper. And for once, she didn't have worry about holding back, and no one's life was on the line...

*Oh, this is going to be fun!*

---

*Took her long enough to catch on,* he thought, restraining his mirth. The look on her face when she'd realized that something was amiss, body frozen in that ridiculous yoga pose, had been comically priceless. She'd hit the deck fast enough though, and smart woman that she was, had left the beach with its easy weapons as soon as she could.

He waited patiently for her next move, wonderingly idly if she'd dare attack him, or if she would stick to defensive magics. The sound of her low laughter made him stiffen; then the she stepped boldly from behind a thicket of vegetation. She wore a predator's smile, and he was abruptly reminded a scene from his travels.

He had gone to Egypt to see the sights, and ended in the small backwater town of Ensa, which supposedly boasted unrivalled, painted bas-relief hieroglyphs. What he had seen had been unimpressive, to say the least. He had made up his mind to leave, when a sunburned man in a dusty *galabiya* had approached him. Figuring it was another poor attempt to sell him fake papyrus, or convince him to visit a carpet shop, he'd glared at the man in hopes of discouraging any interaction.

It hadn't stopped him. He'd walked up, and calm as you please had asked, "Hello, wizard. Are you here to see Menhit?"

He'd followed the man- Ahmed, that had been his name- down a dirty, donkey-shit infested trail to a cliff-side cave. The entrance cave was dark, and surprisingly hot. With a murmur of Arabic, the man had produced a shivering mage light, and illuminated a sizeable cavern; there on the back wall was a brilliantly painted scene from antiquity. In the middle of that wall, drawn three times the size of anything else, stood a woman with a lioness' head. Fire rained down from her outstretched hands, and armies were running from her.

"Do you know the story of Menhit?" his guide had inquired conversationally. "Today, she is know as a Goddess of War, or the Lioness Defender of Egypt. Her name means 'she who massacres'. But once upon a time, she was a very powerful witch, and a particularly good animagus." The man pointed to a small, dark depression in the middle of the floor. "If you gift her a drop of your blood, you can hear her words."

With amused condescension, Severus had pulled out his belt knife and made to prick his finger. There were similar dioramas in Rome, in China... much like a Pensive, they showed a fixed scene from a witch or wizard's life. He'd never seen one so old though, and it sparked his interest.
"My friend," Ahmed had interrupted with a small smile. "You will want to kneel for this, I promise." He had eyed the man with a fair amount of annoyance, but had done as requested. One never did want to anger long dead magicians, after all...

For a long moment after his blood had hit the sand-covered floor, nothing had happened. He had just been thinking about getting up when a blast of powerful magic hit, all but blinding him. Then he was no longer in the cave; instead, he was kneeling in the barren, sun-baked plain that he vaguely recognized as the landscape that the town now resided on. Beside him stood a tall, dark, Nubian woman in full battle regalia, magic sparking around her like leading edge of thunderstorm. Behind her stood the amassed Egyptian Army. Hundreds of charioteers and stamping horses were flanked by great walls of foot soldiers... and charging towards them was another howling mass of men and chariots.

The witch had smiled widely, a leonine baring of teeth and intent, and had laughed. "I am Menhit!" she had roared, and the earth seemed to stand still in the wake of her pronouncement. "This is my land!" Striding forward, the witch sent great gouts of flaming arrows from her hands at the oncoming forces. With another rolling laugh, Menhit had motioned to the men behind her. "Now children, we hunt..."

She had leapt into the air, and in that single bound, had transformed into the largest, most frightening lioness that he'd ever seen. Within seconds she was destroying whole swaths of the other army.

With a jerk, he found himself back in the hot cave. Ahmed stood next to him, offering a hand up. "How do you like our Menhit? Quite the woman, isn't she?" The man had patted his shoulder. "My wife, she is exactly like that when she gets mad..."

Forcefully, he wrenched his mind back to the present as Hermione laughed again, and stepped calmly into to the centre of the field. He wondered then, if perhaps he a miscalculated just a tad. Minerva had said she'd been good, but it had been years since she had done any fighting... theoretically, she shouldn't be much of a challenge. But looking at her? Her hair- hell, her entire being- was crackling with magic, and she resembled nothing more than a lioness rampant, bent on slaughtering armies.

She stopped and looked directly at him. It was unnerving; he knew for a fact that she couldn't see him, but it didn't stop the trickle of cold sweat that broke out on his brow.

That slow, leonine smile appeared on Hermione's face, and with casual insolence, she murmured to the still night air, "Let's see what you can do, Severus Snape."

Blue fire erupted all around him.

She caught of a whiff of... incredulity from him before he responded to her charmed fire with a sudden rainstorm courtesy of the lake. The shock of cold water was enough to cause her her Bluebell Flames to falter, and he took advantage of her lapse with series of stunning spells. Spinning away from each in turn, she almost slipped in the wet grass. Seizing on the inspiration, she threw a bubble-head charm around herself and proceeded to drench the entire clearing again with water.

"AVIS!" she shouted, a flock of angry birds began to sweep about the clearing, looking for her prey. In the fresh mud, she saw his footsteps race to left, and then pause.

A blast of blistering air left her gasping and sent the birds fluttering away and upwards, mitigating the earlier effects of the lake water. She matched his blast of air with a phalanx of dust devils, with two of them hitting his shields. She sent a jet of scarlet light in that direction, but her use of Expelliarmus
proved futile.

Her magic was a living, quaking thing in her blood, mixing with the sheer and ferocious pleasure of the hunt in a glorious alchemy. *You have to pin him down to one spot,* said the small corner of her mind that was still capable of thought amongst the swirl of power. *If you can break his disillusionment charm long enough to properly aim, you might be able to win this...*

As they traded spells back and forth, Snape began to relax into the flow of magic and mental strategy. Hermione was good, no doubt about that, and her castings packed quite a punch, but there was nothing that he couldn't easily counter. He started combining his charms, and saw with no little satisfaction that her shields had started to waver under his increased assault.

He finally hit her with *Rictusempra,* and she doubled up, laughing a touch hysterically under the tickling charm. To his right, a dense clump of heather burst into flame, and he moved to the left to escape the heat. She sent a wave of jinxes his way, still fighting back waves of laughter. Smugly, he danced backwards; none of her charms had managed to come even close to his shields.

All at once he hit a wall of solid ice, and he realized that she hadn't been missing him at all. Rather, she had neatly pinned him to one small corner of the copse, and there was no other place for him to go. She had transfigured or hexed the remainder of the open ground into a apocalyptic midfield of fiery hazards. *Rather appropriate, given her temper...*

Hermione straightened abruptly, throwing off the tickling charm. Snape saw her eyes flash a challenge, reflecting the fire around her, and then she flickered briefly before disappearing completely. A barrage of magic struck him, a confusing mass of intertwined charms and hexes, and it took all of his concentration to deflect them. By the time he had done so, he found himself standing alone in the field, with no idea where she might be.

Unexpectedly, she extinguished all of the flames, and he was left in the dark, night vision completely shot. A wild, ululating cry echoed behind him, and he spun with real fear, arms flailing. *A fucking werewolf!?*

She had him! Hermione saw finally saw him through his fluttering disillusionment charm, and put everything she had into a non-verbal casting of *Petrificus Totalus.* It didn't take him down entirely, but he did fall to on knee and as she swiftly raced forward...

Suddenly, the world exploded into a kaleidoscope of sound and fury, pushing every bit of magic and thought from her with all of the force of cudgel to head. Hermione collapsed on the ground, and all of the colours were replaced by darkness.

Hermione woke sometime later, face first in the grass, head throbbing in time to her racing heart. There was a still form next her, and she tentatively identified it as Severus. Dragging herself up onto her elbows, she looked around her, seeing nothing but a few smouldering bushes and much trampled grass.

"What the fuck was that?" Severus snarled, without moving from a prone position on his back.

She blinked stupidly, rolling onto her side to get a better view of him. "How should I know?" she groaned. "You're the one who did it."

"No..." he said, hand reaching up through the dark to rub his forehead. "I most certainly did not..."
There was an explosive whoosh, and Hermione's vision went white as something collided with the shield charm that Severus had hastily snapped over the two of them. As the ripples from charm dissipated, she saw the hissing shape of Minerva's Patronus standing outside the shimmering wards.

"HAVE YOU LOST ALL COMMON SENSE AND REASONABLE STANDARDS OF DECORUM?" They both grimaced as the Headmistress' voice rebounded harshly at Howler-like levels. "DID IT NOT OCCUR TO EITHER OF YOU TO WARN ME BEFORE YOU INDULGED IN A PUIERILE FIT OF DUELLING? I LEAVE THE GROUNDS TO HAVE ONE NICE SUPPER, AND AM SUMMONED BACK BECAUSE YOU TWO SET OFF THE SCHOOL'S WARDS. YOU WOKE THE ENTIRE BLOODY CASTLE WITH YOUR LITTLE DISPLAY! HAD POPPY NOT SEEN FIT TO ADVISE ME AS TO WHAT WAS GOING ON, I WOULD HAVE CALLED IN THE AURORS!"

"Puerile fit of duelling? I was testing my apprentice, Minerva. It's not as if I could do it in the Castle." Severus ground out. "And I did reinforce the wards in this section!"

"NOT WELL ENOUGH." There was a pause, and then Minerva spoke again. "SEVERUS, YOU WILL BE IN MY OFFICE AT NINE AM SHARP!"

With a flounce, the furious cat turned and dissolved into the darkness. With a nearly inaudible groan, Hermione rolled onto her back and closed her eyes.

"Oops."

"Indeed."

They lay quietly in the grass for several minutes, and Hermione searched for something to say. "Would my presence tomorrow help at all?" she murmured finally.

"No." He shifted, linking his hands under head as cushion. "Besides which, I don't want any witnesses to the verbal ass-kicking that is sure to come my direction."

"Just how mad is she?"

"Right now? Very. By tomorrow?" He shrugged. "We'll see. I think most of that was fear; we set the wards off bad enough that she probably thought the Castle was under attack for a moment."

Hermione bit her lip, feeling like a complete heel. "Oh," she said miserably, knowing what memories had to have been dredged up.

"It will be alright. I'll apologize in the morning. It might take awhile for her temper to cool, but she doesn't hold grudges the way Albus did. Well, except her grudge against Albus..." His voice turned meditative. "Are you normally that free with fire, or was that just a product of the last several days?"

"Neither, really. I've always been good at casting fire based charms, and I knew that I didn't have much of a chance getting through your shields. The next best thing seemed to keep you in place with a bit of distraction. Hence all the pretty lights..."

"Have you ever cast Fiendfyre?"

"Twice. Last ditch measure both times. It's a little too... personal for me to want to use it with any regularity."

"Speaking of personal... the werewolf call?"
"It was the best I could think of," she said, abashed. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be," he replied, a touch ruefully. "Was it not I who told you that if it's worth winning, it's worth cheating?" Sitting up slowly, he brushed some grass off his shirt. "Your use of strategy was solid, as was all of your spell work. How much were you holding back?"

"In terms of power, or what spells I was using?"

"Both."

"I wasn't holding that much back, power-wise." She likewise sat up to face him. "I was holding back on what spells I was using, however. In real fight, I don't have any compunction about throwing the nasties about."

"Good," he grunted.

"And how much were you holding back?" she asked in return.

He slanted her a sardonic look. "Despite the fact that I was limited from using a good two-thirds of my normal repertoire, less that I am comfortable with."

She grinned at that. "So I earned an 'exceeds expectations,' then?"

"Always the little swot, aren't you?" Rising, he offered her a hand up. "You know I don't accept anything below 'outstanding' in my upper level pupils."

As she felt her grin widen, she reflected that it wasn't only Neville that was susceptible to his praise. Thoughts of Neville, and his greenhouse reminded her of the another unspoken challenge. Do I dare? she thought. She eyed him critically. Well, we do have to run back, and that blasted shirt is still entirely to white...

"So, areas of improvement..." she asked, hoping that she could keep her expression guileless enough that he wouldn't sense what she was plotting. Accio mooncalf dung!

"You need to work on not dropping your sustained charms and spells when startled, but that's fairly standard. There are some drills we can run through to..."

His voice trailed off as she swiftly stepped back, and this time, he did not get his shield charm up quickly enough to block the incoming salvo. The handful or so of shit hit him squarely in the chest with a satisfyingly wet smack, and he looked down with aporetic shock, as if he'd been shot cleanly though the heart. Hermione began to snicker, and then finally broke down completely into uncontrollable giggles at his utterly gobsmacked expression.

The sight of him, hands on hips, firmly glowering at her, only made matter worse. I just threw shit at Professor Snape!

As Severus waited for Hermione to regain some semblance of control, it was a struggle for him to not join her in the hilarity; she was never more beguiling than when she was lost in laughter. Moreover, what she had done was funny. Poppy teased him, even Minerva on occasion, but not in the same brash way that Hermione did, and he found that he liked it very much. That he admired the sheer impudence of the woman was a continual source of surprise to him. He remembered her as a cautious, rule-bound child, and he wondered when she had developed such an appetite for risk-taking.
Finally, her laughter eased, and she straightened up and transferred her bright gaze to his shirt. Walking- sashaying, really- forward, she stopped a mere hand's length from him, and the exultant expression on her face set the alarm bells sounding in his mind. Before he could do anything however, she ran a delicate finger down the length of his sternum, and he froze.

Her touch, as ephemeral as a shooting star, still managed to light an an instantaneous reaction within him. Maybe it was because his blood was still running hot from their duel; maybe it was because he had spent the last three days thinking of her in ways that were not 'friend' or 'apprentice'. Whatever the reason, that brief contact made him suddenly aware of how much he wanted everything from her... anything from her. Gladly, he would have given every last piece of his gold in Gringotts for that contact to return, to continue downward. It took all of his experience as a spy, and every bit of his strength as an Occlumens to not let his sudden and ravenous need for that simple touch be plastered all over his face; he could not tear his eyes from her finger, gently waving in the dark air of night.

Hermione was speaking; dimly he heard her say, "...Of course, that's how your t-shirt stays so white. You've charmed the bloody thing." She laughed, a low and tantalizing sound. Unaware. "But it looks like the mooncalf dung is doing a fine job of fighting that charm. Only half of it has come off..."

Frantically, he struggled to shove all of his lust behind his shields of Occlumency before he did something stupid, like kiss her. The sudden burst of fear from that notion was enough to begin to separate his mind from his physical urges, and he was able to see the wider surroundings again.

"...but I think that we can both agree that I won," she was saying, and he had no clue what she was referring too. *The dung? It has to be the dung!*" Mmm, I'm afraid I got some on your face though." He stared at her, bewildered, thoughts racing to catch up to her.

Then that hand, that lovely, damnable hand reached out of the dark, and he felt the soft warmth of her fingers stroking his cheek. He wanted to lean into that to touch, he wanted...

Meeting her gaze, he watched as the humour in her eyes shimmered into something darker, something infinitely more dangerous. She gasped suddenly, and he realized that his hand had snaked up between them and was firmly holding her wrist in place; to push it closer or away, he didn't know. Her eyes drifted down slowly, settling on his lips, and he saw her chin begin to tilt upward in open invitation.

The klaxons in head were screaming now, and he knew he had to say something, do something to stop this...

"Hermione..." he breathed out, and the utterance of her name helped to ground his spinning thoughts, helped to remind him who he was lusting after. "Don't." Stepping back, he released her wrist, even as his body rebelled at losing the sensation of her silken skin under his. "Don't look at me like that... I am man, not a monk." Aware his voice had gone harsh, he attempted to make his next words smoother, more rational. "I can't be that person for you. I won't be that person for you."

She stepped back, hand falling to her side, face blank. Over the roar of his beating heart, he could hear the wind whispering over the lake, and smell the faint scent of singed heather overlaid with verbena. *Say something!* His mind screamed, and he reached for something, anything to make the moment less painful.

He heard his voice in the night, sounding as if it came from a stranger. "What did I tell would happen if you tried to get mooncalf dung on me?"
"That you would crown me queen of the dung heap." Her voice sounded breathless. "That I wouldn't be able to run far, or fast enough..."

Closing his eyes for a moment, he grasped at the rapidly fraying threads of his control. "I am a man of my word, Hermione. You'd better run like hell, and hope to god I don't catch you."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 26- Empire of Dirt

Hermione bolted into the darkness.

She didn't run from him. Oh no, were it only that simple. No... she ran from herself, from her own wildly pounding desires that were, even now, urging her stop, to let herself be taken by the dark-eyed man chasing her.

Over the years, she'd been on the receiving end of any number of looks of entreaty, of longing, and yes, even lust, from men. Ron had been the master of what she'd privately termed as the 'plaintive puppy dog', most commonly deployed in a bid for assistance on a paper or exam. Adam, her first Muggle boyfriend, had been proficient at conveying a certain lascivious cajoling in order to distract her into pursuits other than studying. However, it was never the pleading look, in and of itself, that convinced her to give in. Rather, those glances of entreaty had more often than not generated a feeling of grudging resentment; she hated it when people tried used emotional manipulation on her. When faced with such pleas, she'd would capitulate because it was easier to say yes than no, and at her heart, Hermione hated disappointing people.

Severus' look did not generate a feeling of grudging resentment. On the contrary, it made her want to strip naked under the waning moon like a pagan offering, and sacrifice herself all-willing to that volcanic need. His eyes had burned with the twin flames of lust and longing, a desire so elemental that it had rendered her breathless.

Never had a man looked at her with such a ferocity. But she had read something else in his visage-the certainty that his desire was to go unquenched. Seeing that particular emotion had called forth the memory of his intense loneliness from their binding ceremony, and she felt a sudden and profound pain for him.

He had told her to run, and she had, because she was quite sure that her self-control was not equal to his.

She could hear nothing but the pound of her feet on the packed earth and her ragged inhalations. Turning her head, she peered behind her to see how far back he was.

He wasn't but three steps behind her. *He's going to catch me*, she thought, and then, *Oh god, I hope he catches me!*

Severus had not meant to pursue her. It had been his intent to let her run off into the night alone, back to the Castle unmolested and unharmed by the likes of him. But the second that she'd taken off, that darker part had broken through the last shreds of his control, and he found himself chasing after her like Hades after Persephone.

She turned in mid-stride, and their eyes met through a veil of shadows and widely blowing curls. He had been expecting to see fear on her face, or perhaps rejection. There was neither of those things.

But before he could figure out what exactly he was reading in her expression, she faltered as one of her ankles twisted under her sharply. Arms shooting out, she pinwheeled for balance desperately. He
saw panic then, and lunging forward, grabbed at her in a futile bid to keep her from falling.

He managed to seize a shoulder. Pulling her backwards, the effort only served to combine their momentum, and they went crashing together towards the ground.

One minute she'd been running, and the next moment she'd felt her ankle give out in an explosive burst of pain. Then she was flying towards the ground, and she'd instinctively cast a cushioning charm as something had collided into her from behind.

They hit the ground in a tangle of limbs, the charm only half-successful in muting the impact of the fall. It sent them into an odd sort of roll, and when she finally came to a rest, it was to find herself sprawled ungracefully on top of Severus.

Hermione had never fully appreciated the phrase 'came to a screeching halt' until that second. Everything in her, everything around her, seemed to freeze; had Voldemort himself returned to dance a merry jig, she would have been utterly incapable of sparing him even one iota of her attention.

No, all of her attention was firmly fixed on the man below her, and all of his unwavering focus was fixed upon her. For a long, taut moment, they stared at each other, his expression damned, and damning for the position they found themselves in. Then there was a quiet 'pop' in her ears, and the world began to move again. She became aware of the sensation of his heart rapidly beating under her right hand, of the sheer heat of him burning into her. That heat seemed leap from him and insinuate itself under her skin, rapidly raking up the coals of her own suddenly ardent desires.

She longed to touch the fine, black filaments of his hair, to kiss and lick at the the pulse that hammered, half hidden, amongst the scars in the base of his throat. She wanted to make his breath catch, and hear him whisper her name in those silky tones as he thrust into her. Hermione felt her blood boil in a curious melding of possessiveness, excitement and lust, tenderness...

Oh, my...

The situation should have been funny; him, blithely challenging the biggest swot of his career into a duel, and getting not just his arse neatly handed to him, but finding himself completely seduced by her.

It wasn't even remotely humorous. Her compact, delicious weight on top of him only served to to remind him of how long it had been since he'd had sex. The hip under his hand was perfectly lush and pliant; he felt his fingers tighten around it in unwilling appreciation and craving. In response, she arched further into him, and he nearly groaned out loud at the tantalizing friction.

No, it certainly wasn't funny, especially when he met the fiery heat of her whiskey-coloured eyes and saw not rejection, but a desire as strong as his. Sex. It engulfed them like a fog; carnal, potent and all-consuming. His body had gone rigid with readiness and a unfamiliar, violent longing. He could almost feel her, naked but for the moonlight, riding him... and he damned himself for having such lovely, filthy thoughts about her.

He'd never reacted in such a fashion to a woman before. He'd used sex as a means to an end; most of the time, he'd enjoyed it, but that was as far as it went. Sex had never controlled him. This time, above any other, he needed to think with his brain, not his cock. This wasn't a random woman that he could fuck and then walk away. This was Hermione. His apprentice, a friend...

Severus felt dazed, and he knew with a sort of distant horror that he'd not be able to stop anything
from happening. He was not going to be able to push her away this time, no matter how much the shrill, sensible voice in his head told him he would deeply regret this come the morning.

*Kiss me!*

*Don't kiss me!*

His splayed fingers tightened on her hip, and she arched into the incontestable proof of his desire. Hermione saw him bite back a moan and her body tightened in response; she had never before felt so out of control and yet so powerful as she did in that moment. She leaned down to kiss him...

Then his eyes met hers, and what she saw in those black depths caused her her body to clinch for an entirely different reason. There was that ferocious longing, but she also saw something just as strong: utter rejection.

It was like being doused in a bucket of cold lake water. The haze of lust abruptly disappeared, and she heard his earlier words as if for the first time.

"I can't be that person for you. I won't be that person for you."

Consternation and shame broke over her. *He said no, and you didn't listen... Oh god, he said no, and you still almost kissed him!*

She arched again, but this time in was in the opposite direction. Once again his fingers tightened on her hip, and she gasped out the first thing that came to her mind.

"Mobilicorpus!"

His hand fell limply away as she managed to untangle herself. Rolling to one side, she stumbled to her feet and stood unsteadily, ankle protesting. Looking down at him, she had a fleeting notion to free him, before recalling his last statement to her.

"You'd better run like hell, and hope to god I don't catch you."

For a second time that night, she sprinted away from him, and this time, she prayed that he wouldn't catch her.

The return journey to the Castle was a blur of shadows and pain; by the time she got back to her rooms, she was reduced to hobbling and her ankle had started to turn a ghastly shade of purple. She collapsed to the stone floor with an audible thump and knocked the door shut with her hand, activating the wards as she did so.

For a solid ten minutes, she did nothing, just sat on the floor and let the flood of emotions wash over her. Shame. Fear. The remnants of lust. At some point, she started crying, becoming cognizant of it only when her damp shirt became coated in cat hair from Crookshanks. As the cat stroked his head against her limp hands, she damned herself for being so stupid, so careless.

The night that she'd agreed to be his apprentice, he'd made it clear that he wasn't interested in anything other than friendship. How had he phrased it? "I will be honest; I do not know if I can manage any more than that, nor am I sure that I would want to." Oblique as his words had been, she had understood the connotations. Had conceded to them. Because really, that concession had cost her nothing; she had not expected to feel anything for him other than friendship.
Then there had been the events of apprentice ceremony, and his humbling request for a relationship based on respect and equality. In their subsequent interactions, he’d proven to be considerate, thoughtful and more than lived up to his part of the agreement. He had even put her needs first on a number of occasions. And in return? She had not been nearly as mindful. Oh, no, quite the opposite... Hermione had greatly enjoyed their banter, revelled in their verbal sparring. Indeed, she had found it to be a point of inordinate pride in that she could coax such un-Professor Snape behaviour out of him. Deliberately, she’d avoided about thinking about the consequences. It wasn't as if her attraction to him had sprung up overnight- even Aditi had seen what was brewing. There had been those moments of awareness, those red flags, and she’d done nothing to regulate her behaviour, just plunged on ahead, uncaring. Not only that, but she had thrust all of the responsibility of keeping their relationship on accepted grounds to him.

Her past actions- or at least, her lack of actions- had almost cost the man his life in the Shrieking Shack. And tonight, she had done something just as bad: she had had almost taken advantage of him. Taken advantage of him? What a bland little euphemism. If the your roles had been reversed, and you had told him no, and then... that had happened... it would have been called something very different.

Oh, god. What have I done?

Snape lay in the grass staring up at the subtle swirl of stars, torn between bitter gratitude and acidic laughter. 'Nous sommes rarement fiers quand nous sommes seuls,' he thought to himself. 'We are rarely proud when we are alone.' Voltaire’s line seemed especially appropriate given the evenings’ happenings. He was grateful that she had come to her senses in the end, truly, but it did not halt the burn of his body. It did not ease the lash of his temper or arrest the first flickers of panic that had began to creep in.

He had been arrogant; he had made many assumptions. How could you have been so careless, so stupid? You just assumed that you would be able to master any situation that you found yourself in; you assumed that she would be no real threat to you in a duel... or in other areas. And then... then what did you do? You tempted fate. You practically begged to shown the folly of your hubris by provoking her time and again.

Therein lay the rub: he had no one to blame for this mess but himself. Yes, when they had agreed to terms he had, in a thoroughly Slytherin manner, declared himself not interested and unavailable in anything other than friendship. Hermione had understood his evasive language, of that he was confident. But then he had muddied the waters at every point possible; rather than think about the consequences of his actions, he had once again chosen to not respected his own boundaries. Little surprise then, that matters had gotten so out hand.

Moreover, in all of his musings, he had failed to take one rather vital thing into consideration. He didn't just desire her... he respected, even liked Hermione. Snape couldn't remember the last time that he had felt anything other than a vague interest in a comely collection of feminine traits. He had vastly underestimated how potent the combination of lust and liking would be, especially when combined with his own blend of wants and idiosyncrasies.

And what was to happen next? Hermione... desired him in the moment, certainly. But beyond that? He very much doubted that her feelings for him were anything other than the fleeting urge for a safe harbour in the midst of change and turmoil. He'd caught that much from her mind. Their binding had also forced a level of intimacy on the two of them, complicating things... and furthermore, she'd always been one to seek approval from authority figures. He had no doubt that given several months to ground herself and integrate into the wizarding world, she'd not feel anything for him beyond
friendship. She did not truly want him. But what about you? asked a sly mental voice. 'Liking' is a rather paltry word for your feelings for her. Admit it... you are tired of being alone. That's why you returned. And you aren't thick-skinned enough any more to just be a bastard and shut her out. In a few short months, he had been reduced to a state where his emotions were pressing at the very limits of his control; he was suddenly at the mercy of feelings he'd spent most of his life working to conquer, to sublimate, to use for his own purposes, or to just forget altogether. Letting Poppy in, allowing himself to come back to Hogwarts... all of his recent choices had been symptomatic of the upheaval taking place inside him.

Say what you will about change, but there is one area that has remained the same. You've always had a weakness for brilliant Gryffindor women. And this one... you've handed her the keys to the castle. Do you really think that this going to end well?

Hermione cried herself to sleep on the cold stone floor, and awoke sometime after seven horribly stiff. Her first ten minutes were spent trying to cast a strong enough healing charm on her foot so she that could stand. Once that task was completed, she made her way to the shower, a grim sort of self-flagellation settling over her.

So, you have three options. You can run, you can wallow in your guilt, or you can deal with what you did. It wasn't really much of a choice; she had no idea if Professor Snape would ever trust her again, more or less work with her, but she had to at least try to apologize for her appalling conduct. Her memory flashed to the night of their first fight at the cottage... If he hadn't like hearing that she was grateful that he lived, she had the feeling that he would like her mea culpa even less.

Belatedly, she wondered how much of the previous evening's... behaviour had to do with their modified binding ceremony. Could some of her attraction be due to that? Was it influencing both of them to act in ways that they might not normally? She didn't believe so- for one thing, she did not think he'd willingly live under some sort compulsion again without an almighty battle. Much to her chagrin, she had not bothered to research into the ceremony further; she'd been busy, yes, but also complaisant.

Stepping out of the shower, she began to catalogue the way forward. Apologize... but before or after he meets with the Headmistress? That led to a sudden panicked thought. What if he's still out there in the grass? I don't think a poorly cast Mobilicorpus could really hold him for long, but what if something happened, and he couldn't throw it off?

Dressing hastily, she made her way to the the private hallway that separated their quarters. Muster what remained of her courage, she knocked on his door.

Nothing. If he was in his rooms, he wasn't answering. But what if he never made it back to his rooms? Anxiety began to press at her, and she dithered for a moment, trying to decide if she should solicit Poppy for help. Deciding that it would be best to search herself, she made her way out of the Castle, and began to retrace their steps.

She made it all the way to the lakeside clearing without finding him. The burnt bushes were gone, however, and the grass was as pristine as anything in the wider surrounds. He must have come back and repaired things. Looking at her watch, she saw that it was half past eight; she would not make back to the Castle before his nine o'clock meeting.

In the end, Snape fell back on his time-tested methods of coping; he took his burgeoning feelings for Hermione and buried them deep under the shields of his Occlumency. To allow his emotions to see
the light of day was a risk he was not willing to take. To want more than friendship was sheer folly, he had learned that lesson well enough from Lily.

Mechanically, he made his way to Minerva's office, realizing only when he made it to the gargoyle that it was only half-past seven. He debated briefly about whether or not he should head to his rooms and change; a sleepless night in the grass had done little for his appearance. The wariness dogging him, however, made the walk back up to his quarters about as appealing as hike up Everest barefoot. He hesitated. What am I even going to say to Minerva? In all of his mental meanderings of the previous evening, he had given very little thought to this particular conversation.

His relationship with the Headmistress had always been complicated. As a student he'd both respected and resented her. She had been an excellent teacher, and treated the Slytherin students based on their individual merits rather than holding their House affiliation against them. But at the same time, as Head of Gryffindor House, she had rarely checked the behaviours of her students—James Potter being the worst of the offenders. He knew that some of that had to do with the way Albus had interfered and overruled her decisions; he'd seen that much when he had joined the ranks of the faculty.

Their relationship had changed subtly after he began teaching, eventually reaching a quasi-friendship. Naturally, it had been blown to shreds when he had killed Albus. To give her credit, she had reached out to him several times and been firmly rebuffed; he could not risk any hint of his true loyalties getting out, and she'd eventually subsided into a grim and determined silence.

But in the months since she'd come to the cottage seeking him out, she had taken great pains to make his life better. To say that he owed her an apology was like saying the Great Wall of China was large; her experiences during the wars had been no easier than his, and he knew that setting the wards off had reminded her of the bitter times when she'd not been able to protect the school or its inhabitants.

Yet another thing I've messed up...

"Is she in her office?" he asked the gargoyle softly.

"She is." With a rumble, the passage opened to reveal the spiral stairway. With a sigh, he started up the stairs, feeling the many muscles of his back and legs protest the climb.

He stopped at the top of the stairs, looking across the room. Albus' portrait was empty, thank god, and most of the other Headmasters and Headmistresses were pretending to be asleep. Minerva sat at the desk reading, with a stack of student files perched at one elbow. She peered up at his entry, face set in the austere lines that any Hogwarts student facing disciplinary action would recognise.

Snape felt a wave of wariness hit again, and gripped the bannister tightly lest he quite literally fall to her feet. Minerva's sharp gaze raked over him, still clad in his running gear, and then over to the ornate grandfather clock by the sitting area. One perfectly arched eyebrow went up, and when her gaze returned to him, she spoke.

"You're early." They stared at each other for a long breath, moments of their shared history flashing between them like lightning. There had been mistrust, and respect between them, regret and rage, enmity, humour and empathy... The relationship had been most often one of fellowship rather than outright friendship, and Snape knew with a dull certainty that his actions in next several minutes would determine the course for their future relations. He found that he cared, not just what Minerva thought about him, but also about her. What do I say?

"Minerva, I'm sorry." He took a deep breath. "Last night... I was exceedingly careless and didn't
given enough thought as to what might happen if matters... got out of control. I should have known better. I should have planned better..." Snape paused, too tired to scrape up the energy to prevaricate further. Hoped that it was enough.

"Why," she asked with no little asperity, "...do I think that your words cover a multitude of sins?"

She waved off his reply, and stood. "I can hardly yell when you not only apologize, but look like something a cat mangled and left on the hearth rug." Pointing the sofa by the windows, she said, "Sit. I assume you've yet to have breakfast?" Dumbfounded, he nodded.

"Winky?" she called, and the house-elf popped into the room. "Breakfast for two, if you would."

"Yes, Headmistress," the elf squeaked, and disappeared.

"So, just how much did matters spiral out of control?" Minerva asked as she settled herself into one of the arm chairs.

Snape moved forward and took a cautious seat on the sofa. "Nothing was irreparably damaged. I hope.

"Very well. I said that I'd not interfere with things, and I meant it. However, you will not pull a stunt like that again when students are present, do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

She sighed, and all at once the fight seem to leave her. Snape watched her, again rendered supremely confused and unsettled. She isn't really going to drop the matter that easily, is she? Albus certainly wouldn't have stopped there; no, he'd be layering on the guilt and obligations as he offered a bloody lemon drop.

Winky popped back into view, balancing a large tray in her stubby hands. With nary a clink, the creature set the tray on the table and disappeared.

"Coffee or tea?" Minerva asked, reaching for a cup.

"Coffee, please."

The next five minutes were spent filling plates and sipping coffee, while Snape floundered for something to say. What do you do after an apology? It wasn't as if he'd had much practice, either in making them, or moving on once one had been proffered. Lost in his rambling, exhausted thoughts, he almost missed Minerva's query.

"How did she do?"

He glanced up from buttering his scone, and registered the slight smirk on the woman's face.

Finding familiar ground at last he said, "When you said she was good, you neglected to say that she was, in fact, very good."

"I did qualify the statement by mentioning that she had taken out seven people wandless, Severus." She gave him a spare smile. "It's not my fault if you failed to adequately place the two statements in proper context."

"You said that she was 'good' but not the duellist that either of us is. Is it any wonder I misread that and thought that I'd have an easy go of things?" Snape retorted. Gratefully, he sipped at the strong
brew, enjoying the tendrils of warmth that started to ease the lingering chill.

Minerva gave an almost Gallic shrug, and took another piece of bacon. "That's because Hermione isn't the duellist you or I is. Her instincts are to used actual fighting; I doubt she'd be able to overcome those impulses to learn the formalities and rules of proper duelling."

He grunted, pondering the comment, and how their fight had nearly ended. "If you had put a halt to things thirty-seconds later, she would have had me. Lucky for me, you did interrupt, and I was saved from utter embarrassment at the hands of my apprentice."

"And to think," she replied sardonically, "...had you just told me of your plans, I would not have stepped in."

"Minerva..." he said with genuine regret, "...I am sorry about scaring you. Truly, I did not mean things to happen the way they did."

"I know that, Severus." She gave him a stern, if sympathetic look. "Had I not thought your apology was anything less than sincere, you would be eating something far different than that scone."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Snape muttered. "She was in a mood, I was angry... a duel should have been an excellent way to let off some steam."

"Like that, was it?" Minerva asked, the earlier asperity returning to her tone.

"Depending on your definition of 'that' and 'it', perhaps." Deciding that it would be best to change the subject, Snape hastily asked, "Why haven't you accepted my resignation as Headmaster?"

That surprised her. "You asked that particular question on this of all mornings?"

"I've been spending too much time around Gryffindors to refrain from bluntness."

"Rubbish." She shook her finger at him. "Admit it, sometimes it is beneficial to take the straightforward approach to matters."

"I'll do no such thing. I will point out, however, that your response- a rather Slytherin one, if I may say so- neatly side-stepped my question."

"I think that you have a fair idea why I've not signed it." Manner starchily formal, she silently offered to refill his coffee.

"I have some notion, yes," he replied quietly. "But I need to hear your reasons, Headmistress." He found once he had uttered the question that it was the absolute truth. So many times over the years, he had accepted a duty while the words, an acknowledgement of reasons and need had been left unsaid, and Snape found that he could no longer operate without hearing at least one why. *Maybe Hermione is having an effect on me after all...*

Minerva stood abruptly and walked over to her desk. Opening a drawer, she withdrew a single sheet of paper and a quill. Returning the sofa, she placed the items on the table between them; he saw that the paper was the resignation he had given to her upon returning the Castle.

"It's been selfish of me, but I've not accepted it because having you remain Headmaster has given me the first amount of peace I've had in several years." She looked at him, vivid green eyes shadowed and tired. "I'm not in my dotage yet, but neither Filius or I are getting any younger. Should something happen, we cannot... fight for the Castle as we once did, and I would prefer there to be a backup plan."
"And so you want me to be what, your shadow Headmaster?"

Her mouth twitched. "Whatever our differences are, I hardly think it would warrant forming an opposition party. Although if that is what it takes..."

"Then what will you have of me, Minerva?"

"I would have you remain as Headmaster; it's not as if having two serving Heads at the school is not without precedent. In day-to-day matters, I would ask nothing more of you than your customary Head of House duties. Should the worst happen, however... I would prefer that you step in, and if need be, take over. Think of it less as shadow headmaster, and more as a war chieftain."

"And would you want this arrangement to become public knowledge?"

"No." Her response was instantaneous, and firm. "Not unless you want it so. It will not be hidden, mind you; Merlin forbid something happen, but you'll not be left hanging as happened the last time." Her face tightened, and Snape saw the very real anger behind her words.

"And what does Filius think of all this?"

"He feels as I do. You are the best person to protect the school should events come to that, and there is no one else either of us would rather have with us. Moreover, while the physical rebuilding of this Castle may be complete, we still have far to go on the... immaterial level, and I think that you should be part of that."

Snape sat back in chair, considering what she was asking of him. He had guessed her reasons well enough. And in truth, he had not pressured her to accept his resignation because the possessive part of him was loathe to renounce his claim on either the Castle or the subtle magical perks that came with being Headmaster. As for the rest? Hogwarts was home, and the only place that he'd ever found any measure of peace or happiness. Taking part in the rebuilding was not something he opposed.

"And if I do not wish to remain Headmaster?" He watched carefully for her reaction.

"Then I'll sign this right now." She sighed. "Severus, I'm no fool. I don't believe that you'd let the Castle burn out of spite, or you'd turn your back on us should something go wrong. That's part of the reason that I put off having this conversation; I wanted to give you time to settle in before I asked this of you."

"You wish me to be your... war chieftain?" he repeated dryly, amused despite himself with the very Scottish way she'd framed things.

"Yes, I do."

"And if I have issues with the way you chose to run the day-to-day matters?"

"Then we will talk about the issue, and if need be, bring Filius into the discussion."

How different would events have been if Albus had ever unbent enough to ask him to join him in the fight before he became a Death Eater? So much of his early anger had stemmed from being not being wanted, or valued... What sort of life would he had led if someone other than the Dark Lord had expressed a desire for his presence and skills?

Minerva clearly caught the bitter train of his thoughts. "Severus, I can't change the past. Would that I could... but I can offer you a place now, and in the future at Hogwarts."
The choice, when presented to him in such a fashion, was remarkably easy. "Then you have me."

Leaning forward, he plucked the paper from the table and neatly ripped it in half. Snape saw her eyes go bright and teary with suppressed emotion, and felt a similar sentiment push at him. They looked at each other, a rare moment of complete understanding and accord shimmering between them.

From the formal half of the office, he gradually heard a rumble of conversation; the portraits had dropped their supposed somnolence in favour of discussing his decision. But whatever their consensus might have been was utterly halted by the appearance of Albus Dumbledore standing in his frame.

Without meaning to, Snape shot to his feet, feeling a rush of anger and bitterness roar through him like a summer gale. The wizard regarded him with something akin to sorrow, or maybe shame before he looked over to where the Headmistress was sitting.

"Minerva..." Dumbledore whispered, plea evident in his voice.

Upon hearing his voice, she paled to the colour of chalk, and her shoulders went almost painfully rigid. "Get out!" she spat, without even bothering to turn around.

The portrait wavered a moment, giving him a last imploring glance before stepping out of the frame. Snape stood stock still for another several breaths, frozen with complete shock.

He sat finally, an ungraceful collapse onto the sofa. Eyeing Minerva, he saw the hands gripping her cup were shaking slightly and felt a sense of sorrow for what she'd endured, and was in the process of cleaning up.

After a brief silence, he said, "You will have to come to peace with him someday, Minerva."

She met his gaze with a raised and sceptical brow. "As you have?"

Looking down at his lap, he saw that he was still clutching his wand. "You know I have not. I assume that you found the bottle of turpentine that I left when this was my office?" At her grim nod, he went on. "I do not have your skill at transfiguration, and at the time, I preferred a more... physical threat to keep him away." He paused, trying to think how Poppy might phrase the next sentiment.

"You were his friend, Minerva. There were many things between Albus Dumbledore and I, but true friendship was not among them." He said his next words gently. "I am not suggesting that you forgive him. But if you don't come to peace with... events, they will continue to eat you alive. Trust me on this; I drank from that bitter cup for nearly twenty years, and it came far closer to killing me than Voldemort did."

"I don't even know how to start, Severus. I followed him... in everything. And in the end, he trusted none of us..." she trailed off, rendered wordless.

"If... if it makes things any easier to bear, know that his choices of the last year- those made after he was cursed by Marvolo Gaunt's ring- were not purely his own. The curse influenced his decisions long before it began to spread to the rest of him. Had he been in his right mind, I don't think he would have kept you in the dark... at least not entirely."

She nodded stiffly. "I figured as much. But curse or no, he still made choice regarding both yourself and Mr. Potter that were utterly repellent. He was too much of a long-term planner for those possibilities to not have been decided long before he tried to wear that ring."

"Did you really think that Potter would live?" he asked, genuinely curious.
"No." She paused. "But I also wasn't prepared to sacrifice him like he was nothing more than a pawn on a chessboard, either. Going down in battle was one thing... but something that... cold-blooded? No, I didn't expect that. Nor did I expect him to throw you to the wolves as he did, so that shows how little I understood."

Snape slid his wand back into his pocket, and picked up his cup of coffee again. "I can't explain his choices regarding Potter's eventual fate; he did care for the boy in his own fashion. As for me..." He laughed bitterly. "He never fully trusted my motivations, never truly thought me... consistent in my affections, even when presented with irrefutable evidence at the end."

"You loved her." Her soft words were phrased somewhere between a statement and a question.

"Very much."

"And now?"

He rubbed his head, feeling the start of a headache forming in the area between his eyes. "And now? My love for her hasn't altered, but neither is it blind. Moreover, Lily has been dead longer than she was alive." He glanced up at Minerva. "And she was never really mine in the first place."

"Is that why you hated Potter so?"

"Partially," he acknowledged. "A good amount of that was also guilt. To admit that I loved his mother... it would have meant sharing the only part of Lily that I possessed. My memories. In the end, of course, that was all rendered moot, but I had hoped to at least kept those for myself." He gave her a mocking smile. "Love isn't always kind, or even a pleasant thing, for that matter."

She made a Scottish noise. "Don't I know it."

Reaching forward, he picked up the coffee pot. "More?" She nodded, a small, if sincere smile easing onto her expression. He gestured to the stack of student files still sitting on her desk, wishing to change the subject. "You were reading through the students' files when I arrived. Do we yet know how many Slytherins we lost?"

"Only the three you guessed would not be returning..."

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter comes from a line in the Johnny Cash cover of 'Hurt'.
Severus woke to the soft scent of lavender, not verbena. Poppy was leaning over him inspecting his right elbow, a moue of exasperated annoyance crossing her face as she examined the scrapes and abrasions littering his arm.

"You know, healing spells only work if you cast them," she said dryly. With a firm tap of her wand, he felt a cool tingle envelop his arm, and watched as the red marks gradually faded.

"And maybe I wanted you to fix them," he murmured, and sank back into the sofa with a grateful sigh. He'd been in Minerva's office until almost eleven discussing the needs of various students, and upon returning to his quarters, had only stopped long enough to kick off his trainers before passing out on the sofa. Squinting at the clock, he saw that it was a little past three in the afternoon.

Poppy smiled slightly at his words, but her tone remained brisk. "Raise your other arm, Severus."

He did as he was ordered, and felt the soothing touch of her magic on his left limb. "Anywhere else?" she asked.

"No. I landed rather awkwardly and my arms got the worst of it." He failed to stifle a yawn.

Poppy sat back on the coffee table with an appraising glance. "That was quite the display you two put on last night. Pity that it was August, not November; it would have served well for Bonfire Night."

He turned his head and took in her mulish expression. Right. My kip is officially over. Levering himself up, he said, "Go on. Say it."

"I told you so," the Healer said with some relish.

"Yes, you did."

"Who won?"

He snorted. "Minerva, naturally."

She laughed merrily at that. "And had Minerva not stepped in...?"

His glower was ineffective. "As I told you last night, I was magically prohibited from doing much more than defend myself. It was hardly a fair fight."

"You poor man," she said sardonically. "Bested by your own Apprentice, no less. I assume all of the fire was her doing?"
"Yes."

The humour faded a bit from Poppy's eyes. "She fractured two of the small bones in her foot, incidentally. Her healing spells could use some improvement."

"So there is something that she's not preternaturally proficient at? Wonders never cease."

"Sarcasm doesn't always suit you," she chided gently, while he continued to glare at her. She finally shook her head in mild frustration, and gave his arm a light pat. "Hermione said she fell while she was running back to the Castle."

"I was chasing her," he said flatly.

Poppy blinked, surprise easy to read. "Why would she run from you? I rather thought she was..." she trailed off, watching his face intently.

"Interest," he stated carefully, "...was not the issue. She ran because I told her to."

At that, Poppy sighed. "Oh, Severus, I wish you'd just..."

In one fluid movement, he sat up and swung his legs off the sofa so that they were sitting virtually knee-to-knee. His anger was not feigned when he spoke. "No, Poppy. I want you listen to me: no matchmaking. None. I will gladly have you meddle in any other part of my life, but not in this."

Forestalling the argument clear in her eyes, he went on. "I am content with things the way they are. Is it so odd to imagine that, for once in my life, I want to exercise my right to chose what I will do or not?"

"By denying yourself something that could make you happy?" she shot back, tone matching his.

"It's no sacrifice when it's perfectly clear that nothing good would come of it!" He stood, frustration and anger making impossible to remain still. "Do I really need to list the numerous reasons why it would not be a smart idea to further complicate matters? For Merlin's sake, woman, I know that you have faith in me, but at least make a token effort to be reasonable about this."

She glared up him thin-lipped and silent, her reproach evident. Trying to explain his thoughts, he spoke again. "She has been my apprentice for less than a week. She has issues."

"...as do I. I have given the situation considerable thought. And I just can't... " He looked away for a long moment, finding that even with her, he couldn't speak of his fears. Changing tack, he stated, "Please respect my feelings on this matter, Poppy. I'm not asking you to agree... just let me make my own decision on this."

"As you wish." The words were given grudgingly, but he felt something inside himself relax with her promise; knowing that he would not have be watchful of well-meaning but ultimately futile schemes gave him some hope that the entire affair might yet be salvaged. Assuming, of course, you can iron out things with Hermione...

Gathering his thoughts, he asked, "How bad was her foot?"

"She'll be fine; other than no running for several days, I gave her no restrictions."

"Was she in her rooms, or did she go up to the hospital wing?"

"She came up to the ward, but she said something about going down to the Great Hall as she was leaving."
That stopped him cold. "She what?"

Poppy gave him a droll, if slightly bitter smile. "For some reason, your apprentice felt the immediate and burning need to start dealing with her 'issues', as you so aptly put it."

He felt a mingled rush of irritation and concern. *Does she have to be a bloody Gryffindor about everything?* "How long ago was that?"

"Almost two hours."

Poppy stood as he made for the door. "If I may make one suggestion, Severus?" she asked gently. Turning, he faced her again. "By all means, do."

"Shower, and change before you go talk with her." She wrinkled her nose. "You smell like..."

"Shit?" he inquired dryly.

"I was aiming for something more circumspect, but yes."

The open concern in the woman's expression, along with her tone mollified most of his irritation. Feeling a stab of guilt about the way he had yelled at her, he stepped back towards the sofa and said, "Poppy, I understand your motivation in all of this, and I do appreciate the sentiment..."

"But not the effort?" she interrupted.

He grimaced. "I also appreciate that you are willing to have a discussion with me. But there are many things that I want right now, and until I determine... what is transitory, and what is not, I am disinclined to act with anything other than caution. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's just that..." she shook her head, and went on. "Never mind. Go shower."

"Say it. I promise to not bite your head off."

She paused, marshalling her words. "I understand that you are asking for time, and I don't begrudge you that... it's only that things don't always wait for us to decide, or for us come back to them. Sometimes you must leap, and have faith that the fall won't be far."

"I don't know what is more apropos here: a reference to the habits of lemmings, or the tale of Icarus, but given my track record, leaping off anything seems a rather bad idea," he stated baldly.

She closed the distance between the two of the them, and placed a soft hand over his faded Dark Mark. "If you can't bring yourself to jump, then at least refrain from punishing yourself so much over the past." She gave his arm a squeeze, and then pushed him towards the back hallway. "Now, go shower. You really do smell."

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*Really, Hermione thought, things could not get much more pear-shaped. Why the hell not? Ignoring her shaking limbs and the clammy sweat that had broken out all over her body, she stepped into the Great Hall for the first time in almost eight years.*

*As the Dark Magic rolls over her, it feels like her skin is on fire; crackling and crisping like an obscene ode to a Christmas ham. If only she could shuck her outer layer like a bad jacket, she might just be able to crawl away from the pain. As she rolls around on the stone floor, Hermione is vaguely grateful for the bindings lashing together her limbs and body. Without them, she knows that*
She would be trying to rip herself to shreds.

She is once again eighteen days away from her twelfth birthday, and standing in the Great Hall for the first time. Hermione had been greatly disappointed on the train: the other children had been so... ordinary. So... petty. There had been none of the expected overtures of friendship, and they were not at all like her. But here, in the cathedral like space, full of floating candles and endless possibilities, she experiences a moment of belonging. Standing amongst the gaggle of other First Years, she exults in the fact that she is a witch... until she remembers that one of the other students had said there was to be test to sort them into their houses. Fighting off a wave of panic, she starts to recite all of the spells that she had taught herself... "Please don't let me fail this!" she prays.

Viktor is looking down at her, pleasantly befuddled but handsome in his red Durmstrang robes. "You are so beautiful, Herm-own-ninny," he says reverently as they spin through the opening moves of the waltz. The sensation of her silk robes fluttering around her legs lends a certain decadence to the dance, as does the wonderfully masculine cologne he is wearing. She smiles up at him, feeling for the first time like a woman, and not a child.

"I will make you a deal, Mudblood," Martson Mortaine murmurs. "As long as you continue to scream, I won't touch the others." He lowers his wand, and Hermione screams.

As she listens to the high-pitched, and patronizingly girlish tones of their newest Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Hermione wonders if anyone else in the student body understands what having this Ministry... toad living amongst them means. Dolores Umbridge is not a harmless lackey; she is the political equivalent to an Unspeakable. This was the Ministry of Magic calling Professor Dumbledore's bluff... only it wasn't a bluff; He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned. Hadn't Cedric Diggory's death proven that? Stomach twisting in fear and anger, she concentrates on the odious woman's words, knowing that they would set the stage for the forthcoming school year.

The air is thick with smoke and dust, underlaid with copper tang of blood; stygian, it muffles all of the surrounding noise. Hermione says against a cold wall, mind running in frantic circles. "It's over. He's dead... it's over..." Voldemort was dead. Harry was alive. Glancing up, she spots Harry approaching the cluster of Weasleys. The circle opens, admitting him, and in that split second she sees George cradling his twin. George's shattered expression of grief is made all the more painful by Fred's curiously peaceful expression.

Hermione can feel her heartbeat strongly in her chest, the steady and reassuring thump and pulse of her blood. "I am still alive," she thinks. And then: "Now what?"

Two of the three children trapped in the Great Hall with her are staring at her with fear and horror. The two girls- twin sisters, and Ravenclaws- would have been Fourth Years if the school year had started. They are clutching at each other tightly, and teeter on the edge of outright hysteria. The boy's countenance, on the other hand, is oddly blank, but not unaware. He is a Slytherin, and she rather thinks he's seen all this before. There is the faintest sliver of sympathy in his gaze, but it is mingled with the bitter knowledge that when she breaks- and she will, and rather soon, if the tremors racing over her body are any indication- it will be his turn to scream and cry and beg. He looks down at his hands, and begins to pick at hangnail. The hexes start again.
"And then he used the Canadian Goose Double Twist..." Ron's elbow shoots out as he demonstrates the move, and neatly connects with her goblet of pumpkin juice. But before it can spill all over her book, Harry snatches the glass away like it's a snitch. He waits for the liquid inside to stop sloshing about, and then places it gently back on the table with easy grace that makes her smile. He returns the grin, and they both look at Ron... who despite a mouthful of kippers, is still talking about Quidditch, and is quite obvious to anything else. Hermione rolls her eyes, feeling a surge affection for both her friends.

Hermione is panting in short, staccato bursts, but the air doesn't seem to have enough oxygen in it no matter how deeply she tries to inhale. Black spots dance briefly in her vision, obscuring the table leg and stone floor in front of her. Abruptly, rough hands roll her over to her back. The change in positions makes her suddenly conscious of the the bindings digging into feet and arms, as well as the blood trickling down her face. Nerves burning, the only thing she can see from her trussed position is the ceiling of the Great Hall. Lighting cleaves the broiling mass of clouds, echoing the tempest outside. "I am going to die tonight," she thinks...

Then Mortaine is looming above her, his hands perched upon narrow hips. The Snatcher-turned-Leader of the of the Death Eaters contemplates her for a long moment, before crouching down and stroking a matted curl almost gently.

"You've stopped screaming, Mudblood." He says it regretfully, like she is a toy that broke too soon. "I am quite sure that another round of Cruciatus Curse would do you in. But given the amount of trouble you've given us over the years, I think it far more appropriate for you to die in a thoroughly Muggle manner, don't you?" He leers at her as his hand slides from her temple to her exposed throat. He gives it a light squeeze, testing the firmness of her flesh like one might do a piece of fruit at the market.

She is incredulous at first; the sheer physical threat of his hand around her throat stuns her into passivity. His green eyes are flat and dark as he stares at her. His hand becomes a vice then, and she finds that she is bucking widely, trying to do something, anything to stop the implacable compression around her neck. Over the rushing of blood and frenzied pounding of her heart, she can hear laughter. Her head strikes the stone tiles sharply, and her vision goes crimson as blood vessels in her eyes burst.

The skin of her throat has gone hypersensitive; Hermione can feel the bumpy line of calluses on his fingers, and the vitality and magic running through his hands serve as a mocking-counterpoint to her own dwindling reserves. He is still crouching over her, and through what remains of her rapidly narrowing sight, she just make out the untouched column of his neck. It is pale in the faltering light, except for several large smudges of dirt that cross his Adam's apple. She wishes that she could slash at that skin. She wishes she could silence the laughing people around her.

"For enemies," she thinks. As she lashes out with the last of her power, Hermione grabs at the magical pulse running through the hand at her throat. She is caught suddenly in a maelstrom of energy and light. Then, mercifully, there is nothing.

Snape had stood under the hot spray of the shower for a truly indecent amount of time figuring out what he wanted to say to Hermione, and just how he was going to phrase it. That she had gone down to the Great Hall to face her 'issues' did not bode well for their conversation. The ominous notion that she was blaming herself for what had happened was lurking in his mind, and thought of having to deal with her apologies pushed his mood firmly into the black. It had not been her fault. He had set the boundaries between them, and then broken them at every opportunity. He was also older,
and presumably wiser. The connections and interplay between anger, adrenaline and lust were well known to him—he should have known better than to play with those metaphysical fires. *Some Slytherin you are...* The entire situation had been of his doing, and it was up to him to fix it.

He didn't bother to dry his hair, just pulled it back with an elastic tie. Clothing, however, was chosen with more care; he'd allowed himself to be entirely too informal with her, and in an effort to lessen that familiarity, put on a pair of black woollen dress trousers and a white button down shirt. It was close enough to his formal robes to place their conversation into the realm of student/professor, without actually being his habitual attire.

Suitably dressed, he left his quarters and headed towards the back staircase that led to teachers' entrance of the Great Hall. He toyed with the thought of taking a calming walk before speaking with her, but discarded the idea. *Best get this over with as soon as possible. Matters will be awkward enough as it is; no need to prolong things.*

Hermione was easy to spot. Headed tilted up to view the enchanted ceiling, she sat in a patch of sunlight on the steps that traversed the dais, the light imparting her form the vivid luminescence of a renaissance painting. He stopped, feeling suddenly very unprepared, and very unwilling to interrupt what was clearly intended to be a private moment. Before he could shift back into the shadows, her focus moved downward and caught his.

It was as if he had met the omniscient gaze of a Thestral; what he saw in her brown eyes made a shiver ripple down his spine.

As a child, Hermione had always what he privately thought of as a glass face. Her thoughts and motivations had always been easy to decipher, a task made ridiculously simple by dint of her obstinate and passionate Gryffindor nature. Unlike Potter, however, she had grasped the concept of not being ruled by one's own emotions, and had grown better at concealing her thoughts as she grew older.

What he saw in her expression wasn't her thoughts, exactly. Nor was it like the brief but overwhelming melding of sentiment from the binding ceremony, or even the type of memory-knowledge gained by use of Legilimency.

He could see in her gaze all the horror and pain that she had experienced in this place, underlain by the softer memories and joys that she had found within the four high walls of the Great Hall. It was as if for a moment, she bared her soul to him. *This is who I am, Severus Snape,* her eyes seemed to say. It was less emotion and memories, and more like the raw knowledge of someone who had taken a long look at their demons and was determined to understand and master them.

He felt suddenly like the shabby and cowardly boy of his youth. The peace that he had achieved over the previous eight years seemed very illusionary; whilst he may have become a more contented creature, his idyll had not come from examining and coming to terms with his deeds, but rather by a thorough redaction of his past and shoving the remainder away using Occlumency.

The blunted northern tones of a long-dead vicar came to him then: *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

He altogether lacked the fortitude of Hermione. Snape could not expose his soul, even to himself; for all of his previous statements about coming to terms with the past, he'd most assuredly not. He could not look into that glass. That she had done, and then willingly revealed a part of it to him was almost painful. The mere thought of making himself that vulnerable to another was anathema, and he had to fight the very strong urge to turn and run.
Somewhere outside, a cloud passed over the sun, casting the Great Hall into twilight. Hermione blinked, and in that interlude, seem to return to the familiar woman of the past six months.

"I'm so sorry about last night," she offered quietly.

With that, all of his earlier words and reasons seemed rather petty in light of... well, everything. Snape found that all he wanted to do was to make sure that matters were right between them; he did not particularly care to argue over blame and culpability. He did not want to think about what he had seen in her gaze.

Walking forward, he extended a hand out to help her rise. "Don't be. It... happened, and now we know." He swallowed, tired and wishing for nothing more than to be alone with a stiff drink.

She stood, and released his hand. Her brows creased for a moment, and he got the rather uncomfortable idea that she was seeing far more of his thoughts than he wanted.

"It can't happen again, Hermione." Snape had to make that much clear, at least.

"I know. It won't."

The room darkened further, and Hermione shivered. Rubbing her hands together lightly, she said, "I'm ready leave. I think a drink, and sandwich or two would not be amiss. Would you care to join me?"

From her expression, he could tell that she would not take offence if he declined. So, the question is, do you really want to be alone with that drink, or would you prefer it to be in the company of another?

"Do you care for brandy?" he asked.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Postscript: Not an easy chapter to write, nor to read. There will be a more linear retelling of what happened to Hermione in the Great Hall in later chapters, so if some of that didn't make sense, hang in there.

Bonfire Night is also known as Guy Fawkes Day, and takes place on the 5th of November.

"For enemies" was the explanation given for the curse Sectumsempra in the Half-Blood Prince's potions textbook. If you recall, the curse is a slices those it hits. In Hermione's case, she used to take off the head's of the Death Eaters in the Great Hall with her.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known," is from 1 Corinthians 13:12. Essentially, it states that we can only see ourselves through the flawed lens of our humanity, and will only be able to see the full truth when we meet God.

If it's not painfully clear by now, Snape is doing the denial twist in double time. And in case you are wondering, I'm with Poppy on pretty much everything.

The title for today's chapter comes from the song of the same name, on the album "The
Lioness" by Jason Molina/Songs: Ohia. Google it. Seriously.

Comments?
They were halfway through a mostly-silent repast when Minerva knocked on the main door of the suite. Carrying a luscious traveling cloak made of raw silk the colour of malachite, and hair plaited into an elaborate coronet of braids, the Headmistress appeared as Hermione had never seen her before; still regal in bearing, but unmistakably a woman- and a very handsome one at that.

Professor Snape's expression showed the first hint of emotion since their encounter in the Great Hall. His tone was sardonic, if sincere, when he spoke. "You have always looked exceptionally lovely in green, Minerva."

"As if I would allow any juvenile House nonsense to dictate my sartorial choices." Her reply was equally dry, but her gaze was warm and humorous. "Far be it from me to suggest you wear a colour as gauche as scarlet, but I do recall a recent occasion when a rather Ravenclaw shade of blue appeared particularly flattering on you, Severus."

"I, regularly wear a colour other than black? That would be gilding the lily a bit much, don't you think? Besides which, I imagine the sight of me in something other than my normal attire would cause much of wizarding Britain to expire from the sheer shock of it."

Hermione was startled at the words as much as his delivery. Sarcastic as they were, they contained no bitterness. Moreover, the ease in which the Headmistress and Potions Master were bantering back and forth was a distinct change from what she had seen of their previous interactions. Their meeting this morning must have gone quite a bit better than expected. Interesting...

"May I infer from the way you are dressed that my Apprentice and I interrupted something important last night?" asked Professor Snape slyly.

For a moment, the woman's face was supremely feline. "Infer all you would like, but you'll not get an answer to that particular question from me." With that comment, Minerva's face resumed more normal lines. "I've just been floo'd by Alan Briggs, the Head of Curse Breaking at St. Mungo's; two patients were brought in earlier today after being stuck down by some sort of enchanted feather duster. A local Healer apparently muddied things further by giving the pair some rather questionable combinations of healing draughts. As Richard Brightbrook has been singing your praises, and it was proposed that perhaps you might be able to assist."

"Was it now? In what capacity?"

"Briggs inquired if your contract with Hogwarts prohibited you from serving as a independent consultant with St. Mungo's."

"And is it?" Professor Snape inquired with a raised brow.

"No, it's not, as you well know."

He looked down at his half-empty tumbler of brandy ruefully. "Well, then... It appears that I am off to see a man about a feather duster." For the first time since the Headmistress had knocked, he glanced Hermione's direction. "My apologies; it appears that only one of us will be enjoying any further libations this evening."

"No worries," Hermione responded, feeling both relieved that he was leaving and unsettled by all
that was being left unsaid. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be awake anyway. Between the food and the brandy, my bed is singing quite the clarion call."

He gave her a short nod before turning back to Minerva. "Are you headed out yourself?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then if you've no objections, I'll walk with you to the gate." Reaching for a set of summer robes hanging by the door, he shot Hermione a veiled look over his shoulder, "By all means, help yourself to the brandy in my absence, especially if it might help you sleep."

Reaching for the decanter, she gave him a small smile in return. "You don't have to offer twice. Pity it's as habit forming as Dreamless Sleep."

Minerva spoke from the doorway. "Sometime tomorrow I would like to sit down and plan out some matters with the two of you." Addressing Hermione directly, she continued. "Among other things, I would like to set up a schedule for your N.E.W.T.s."

"Right," Hermione said, feeling a sudden curl of nerves at the thought of taking her examinations after being so long out of the classroom. Oh, god... the amount of revising that I'm going to have to do...

"I need to get started brewing the infirmary stock tomorrow. Would it be possible to meet first thing in the morning?" Professor Snape asked crisply.

"That works well enough for me," the Headmistress answered. "Hermione?"

It was her turn to look ruefully at the glass in her hand. "I've no problem with that. Worse comes to worst, I'll just start off the morning with a shot of Sober-Up in my tea."

Minerva chucked a little at that. "It wouldn't be the first time a meeting started in such a fashion. Especially not at this august institution."

"Breakfast then, say, at eight?" Professor Snape inquired. After affirmatives from the two women, he swept his robes on, and stepped through the door. "Good." Proffering his arm to the Headmistress, he gave a Hermione a final nod.

"An enchanted feather duster...?" Hermione heard him say incredulously as the two disappeared into the hallway. Topping off her glass, Hermione rose and replaced the lid on the decanter. Walking a tad unsteadily towards her rooms, she pondered the day's happenings.

It could have gone far worse, especially given the way the day had started. She had been expecting things to get ugly, truth be told, and had been prepared to grovel; instead she had been met with a curious blankness. He hadn't raged, they hadn't fought... and she had not been able to read a single emotion in his expression when he'd found her in the Great Hall, or during their truncated meal. Hermione wasn't sure if she was scared by his reaction- or lack thereof- or if she was relieved that they had resorted to the inanity of polite civilities. They would have to properly have it out, however; she had too many questions to just leave everything unsaid.

Reaching her rooms, she shut the door behind her with a quiet thump, and toed off her trainers. Peering down at the tumbler full of amber liquid still clutched in her hand, Hermione debated the wisdom of having a second glass. She wasn't in the mood to get pissed, but all the same, she wanted nothing more than to slide into oblivion and stay there for a good long while. And the brandy was rather lovely... With a sigh, she tipped the glass back and emptied it. Gasping at the corresponding fire that sprung to life in her stomach, she entered her bedroom. Shucking off her jeans and shirt, she
flopped down on her bed, enjoying the pleasant haze that filled her vision. With a final sigh, Hermione unhooked her bra and pulled the covers up. Later, she thought through the fog of excellent brandy. *I'll think about it all later.*

She awoke at half-past six in great need of toothbrush, and to an exceedingly displeased Crookshanks. Her familiar glared at her, fuzzy and flat face a bare inch from her own, claws gently flexing on her bare chest.

"I forgot to feed you last night, didn't I?" she asked, and Crooks gave her a final glare before leaping to the floor and marching militantly to the door. Hermione sat up with a muffled groan, pushing the mass of lank curls away from her face. She wasn't hung over, precisely, but neither was she feeling particularly refreshed. *Well, at least I didn't dream. Or rather, I don't remember any dreams. That's one positive.*

Pulling her robe on, she made her way to the kitchenette and poured her cat an extra scoop of kibble as an apology. Looking around her rooms, she took in the signs of disarray: half-unpacked boxes scattered about, the broken remains of several plates by the far wall, and messy pile of trainers by the door. *One week back, and you've already managed to complicate matters quite nicely.*

But the self-pitying thought sounded off, even in the jumble of her own mind. She was tired of feeling scared, of pushing things away. If there had been one good thing that had come from the previous days events, it was that knowledge that she had confronted some of her demons, and hadn't broken; she hadn't even fallen to pieces. It had not been pleasant, but Hermione felt a sense of profound relief at having taken the first step in reclaiming her life and past.

*So, she thought experimentally, is your new motto 'Carpe Diem?" At least it makes a hell of lot more sense than 'Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus'... Letting sleeping dragons lie hasn't worked out so well, so perhaps it's time for a change. With a quick flick, and non-verbal incantation, she repaired the plates; watching them flawlessly knit back together was almost as satisfying as breaking them. Carpe Diem it is, then.*

With that resolution made, she went into the bathroom to get ready for the day.

Snape was standing with his back to her, preparing French toast and sausage. His movements were surgically precise, and he had all of his ingredients laid out in a proper *mise en place* like the Potions Master that he was. Hermione recalled suddenly that French toast was the Headmistress' favourite breakfast, and it struck her anew how little she understood the man before her. The soothingly domestic- and rather sentimental- behaviour did not fit at all with his public persona; that he apparently shared the same sort of mothering trait as Molly Weasley was not something that she would have ever pegged. But then, did you ever really know him in the first place?

On the heels of that thought came another: had there ever been a time that he had been free to act as he had wished? To show favour and emotion without fear of it being used against him? While she was not naïve enough to rework him into some sort of Byronic hero, she wondered at how much of his loathsome behaviour during her childhood had been an act, and what had been in truth. His actions over the last six months had shown her that he was capable of not being a complete bastard when he so desired; this morning would be a good test of just what the limits of his temper were.

"Good morning," she said quietly, unsure if the peace of the previous night would hold.
He half-turned and gave her an opaque glance over the length of the kitchen, spatula in hand. "And good morning to you." Turning back to the hob, he flipped a piece of toast over with practised ease. "How is your ankle? I did not inquire last night."

She stared at his back, trying to puzzle out his body language. "It's fine. Looks far worse than it feels. Can I help with anything?"

His look was mild yet dismissive. "No need. I have everything under control."

Hermione was struck anew at the curious blankness in his expression; taking in what she could see of familiarly furrowed brow and veiled countenance it suddenly occurred to her that he must be occluding. So he's not comfortable with any of this either. Do I push the issue, or wait?

Wait, she thought with grim humour. Have some more coffee, and then proceed with the carpe diem.

Availing herself to the coffee laid out, she sat down at the kitchen table. "So, should housewitches everywhere start to fear their feather dusters?"

Snape snorted lightly. "Alas, the feather duster only played a supporting role in yesterday's shenanigans. The enchantment on it had been sufficiently warped to make it impossible for the user to do anything other than endlessly dust once it was handled." Flipping a perfectly golden slice of French toast, he went on. "Not much of challenge to break the enchantment's hold, but combine that situation with rather large infestation of doxies, poorly made doxycide, and an apprentice Healer mucking about, you have a very different situation altogether. The couple in question were in the middle of intense series of hallucinations, and were accordingly hexing everything in sight."

Intrigued, Hermione asked, "What did you do?"

A hint of smugness crept through his mask. "I stunned the lot of them, and then shoved bezoars down their throats. Whilst my solution was lacking in both finesse and a certain element of mystery, it was effective, and most important of all, immediate."

"You stunned them?" Hermione repeated, having expected something complicated, or at the very least, potions-based.

"Yes, I did," he said with a nonchalant shrug, body loosening further. "Unlike the Healers, there is nothing in my Oath of Mastery that says anything about 'first, do no harm'."

She couldn't help but laugh into her coffee cup. "That was a rather... daring act of chutzpah, being that you were in the middle of St. Mungo's."

"I prefer to think of it as more of a reflection of my personal panache, rather than any sort of chutzpah."

"Nonetheless..." she responded dryly. "Do you think that they will ask you back?"

Again, he shrugged. "Don't know. Don't really care."

"So why did you go in the first place?" Hermione asked, having wondered at his willingness the night before.

Placing two fresh pieces of French toast onto a plate, Snape began to fuss over the browning sausage methodically. "Because I wanted to, and it amused me to do so." His tone had lost the trace of levity that had been animating it, and the words did not invite further questioning.
Hermione bit back a sigh, weighing the pros and cons of pressing matters. On one level, she understood and even appreciated his desire to create space between the two of them given what had happened; on the other hand, she was not going to spend the next several years trying to tease meaning and understanding out from his cryptic body language and occasional tell. She had no clue how they stood, or even if he was mad at her, and she was not going to try at guessing what was going on beneath his still waters. Batten down the hatches, for carpe diem it is...

"Are we going to discuss any of the events of the last two days?" Hermione asked crisply, not wanting her nerves to show.

"I thought we had," Professor Snape said, the barest hint of ire implicit in his reply.

She was relieved by that hint of temper; Hermione could work with anger, but there was no negotiating if he shut her out. "We talked around matters, yes. But we did not discuss what happened, nor where we stand currently."

"And do we need to?" he intoned punctiliously.

"I don't think that we need a blow-by-blow replay, but I would like to discuss several other things."

Professor Snape gave a insouciant wave of his free hand- clearly meaning for her to go on with it- and deliberately kept his back to her as he worked over the hob. She felt her own irritation spike with his play at indifference, and took a calming breath before she spoke.

I'll be damned if I have this conversation to his back. If he was serious about wanting to be friends, then he's going to have to learn to face things- literally, as well as metaphorically. I am not going to dance around him, or his temper.

"Would you turn around, please?" Hermione requested softy.

That put his back up, and when he swivelled, Hermione saw several small flashes of the Professor Snape from her youth; the hard, glittering black eyes and neatly checked rage all set off the deeply-held alarm bells. But she was determined to not back away from the conversation, recalling what her mother had always said about negotiating new relationships- "Always start the way you mean to go on."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm not looking to turn this into an interrogation, nor am I seeking to change your mind about matters. I just... I need to know that you aren't horribly mad at me, or failing that, that we are still going to be able to work together without things turning... uncomfortable." Hermione stopped talking, the betraying heat of a blush beginning to creep up her face.

The normal noises of the kitchen suddenly seemed overly loud; the pop of fat in the sausage pan provided an apt soundtrack to Hermione's internal monologue. Talk about moving from the frying pan to the fire, she thought.

For his part, Professor Snape merely gave her an assessing glance before speaking. "I'm not mad at you." He almost sounded somewhat baffled at her question.

"Right," Hermione replied, wondering how she was going to phrase her thoughts without sounding like a total nutter. "It's just that, despite having known you since I was eleven, I don't actually know you. I don't have the faintest clue as to what you are thinking most of the time, and I can't even begin to guess at your motivations. And if I keep making assumptions... well, you know the old saying about what happens when you assume..."

She trailed off again, and the gulf between them suddenly seemed wider than the Channel. "Like
yesterday. I was expecting you to be mad, but you say you're not. Okay, but what does that mean? Did the other night preclude a friendship between us, or are we fine?"

"Do you think that a friendship between us is now impossible?" He put the spatula down carefully, and some of the pique faded from his countenance as he stared at her.

"No, I don't. But I haven't the faintest idea what you are thinking, and I need something to work with. Is any of this making sense to you, or am I just digging a bigger hole?"

"I'd recommend that you put the shovel down, yes," he said evenly. "But I think I understand what you are trying to say. Past experiences can not be a guide for either of us, given how much things have changed." He tipped his head back for a long moment, eyes focusing on the far view of the lake out the windows. "I'm not angry at you Hermione; if anything, I am unhappy with my own actions. When I said I was certain that I would cock things up, I did not think to mean that in a literal sense." The words were spoken with the lightest patina of self-directed sarcasm, and the mild joke reassured her more than the actual words themselves.

"It wasn't all your fault..." Hermione started to say before Snape interrupted.

"Perhaps not, but of the two of us, I would wager that I have far more understanding of the linkages between fighting and desire. I should have know better than to allow events to progress as they did."

She nodded, seeing his point but not conceding entirely. "And I should have done a better job of respecting your boundaries. I just..." she stopped then, wondering if she should go further. "I just wasn't expecting... that."

"Likewise," he admitted.

"So," she said, "...we agree to do better, and move on?"

"Yes," he responded. "But allow me to reiterate this one more time: I can be friends. I cannot, and will not be anything else. I don't do... those sort of relationships." Again, his final words were said with barest hint of sarcasm, but this time, his eyes were rather harder and the statement lacked any sense of levity.

"I understand, and will respect your wishes," she replied formally, not daring to push things any further.

"Good," he said, as the sound of heeled footsteps came from the internal hallway announcing the Headmistress' arrival. Hermione realized that she had not heard the outer door open, and wondered how much of their conversation the older woman had overheard.

When Minerva entered, it was with a blank face and in her usual attire. From the raised eyebrow that Snape gave her, it was clear that he had been thinking along the same lines as Hermione. But if Minerva had been eavesdropping, she made no acknowledgement of it in her greeting.

"Good morning," she said, and her smile grew when she saw the offerings on the kitchen table. "I was hoping that you would make French toast, Severus. One of these days you will have to provide the house elves with the recipe. The Hogwarts recipe is lovely, but not quite as good as yours."

"It's a long-cherished Snape family secret," he replied sardonically. "Better for my job security that I don't."

Turning to Hermione, the Headmistress spoke. "I am glad to see that you appear none the worse for wear. No need for Sober-Up, then?"
Hermione chuckled. "No, none. I wouldn't go so far to say that I'm bright-eyed or bushy-tailed, but I'll do."


"You dare criticise my hair? You, of all people..." Hermione let her voice trail off in disbelief. True, his hair no longer was the lank and greasy veil of her memory, but still... her hair wasn't the bushy tangle of yesteryear either. "Pot meets kettle, Professor."

"I am the kettle and you are the pot, Granger. Do get the order correct." Snagging several of the plates, he began to dish up the breakfast. "Now, shall we eat, or merely allow my all of my excellent work to go cold?"

"So," Minerva asked, pulling out a quill and parchment. "How many N.E.W.T.s do you intended to take, Hermione?"

She took a deep breath. "To start with? Potions, obviously, along with Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Eventually, I'd like to go for Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures, and History of Magic, but I need to be realistic about the work involved, especially as my mastery is more important at this point."

"What, no Muggle Studies?" Snape said slyly. "You are the Muggle Studies Professor, after all."

"A Ph.D and eight years living solely as a Muggle should more than suffice," she shot back.

"There now, Severus. No need to needle your apprentice; it's not as if you took Muggle Studies yourself," Minerva interjected.

"How many N.E.W.T.s did the both of you take?" Hermione asked, curious.

The Headmistress grimaced. "Alas, I only took Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Potions, Ancient Runes and History of Magic. In my day, it was considered rather bad form for women to take the upper level courses in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures or Arithmancy. I did received top marks in everything that I took, however."

Hermione turned her gaze to Snape, who answered the question readily enough. "I took everything but Divination and Muggle Studies."

"And how did you do?" Hermione asked, wondering if she could do some needling of her own.

"I earned O's in all but Charms and Care of Magical Creatures."

"Problems with a spot of foolish wand waving, huh?" Hermione said with false sympathy, remembering his speech on the first day of Potions.

"Not quite."

Minerva laughed, and gave Snape a teasing glance. "Will you tell the story, Severus, or should I?"

"If you wish to waste you time talking, rather than eating, by all means..."

"I believe you had Professor Kettleburn your first several years of Care of Magical Creatures, did you not?" Minerva asked Hermione.

"Yes, I did."
"Then you will remember that he was..."

"Reckless," Snape put in. "Foolhardy. Rash. Imprudent... I can provide other adjectives if you so require."

"Much like Hagrid," the Headmistress continued, unruffled, "Silvanus was rather passionate about his subject, and had a rather unique teaching style."

Snape shook a fork loaded with sausage at the woman, and mimicked her tone. "Much like Hagrid, Silvanus had no compunction in exposing his students to irreparable harm all in the name of 'learning'. After all, he was missing most of his limbs, and was able to live without significant issue. Why would it matter if a student was similarly affected?"

"Have you decided to tell the story, then?" Minerva asked him, spearing another piece of French toast.

He ignored her sarcasm and kept speaking. "Care of Magical Creatures was the exam before Charms; I had just successfully finished with my practical section when Kettleburn released a... what on earth would you call a large group of fire crabs?"

"As fire crabs are more closely related to turtles than actual crustaceans, I used the term 'bale' in my accident report." Minerva murmured.

"Right. So Kettleburn released a bale of angry fire crabs into the testing area- constant vigilance apparently being the byword of the day- and they proceeded to set the area, as well as the majority of Gryffindors present, ablaze."

"They were not set 'ablaze', Severus. Badly scorched, perhaps, but not set ablaze. And I'll have you remember that quite of few Slytherins were also rather singed. Oddly enough, the Hufflepuffs were all to a man unharmed," Minerva marvelled dryly.

"A fact owing to Kettleburn being a Hufflepuff himself, I am sure." Snape remarked.

"And did you escape unharmed?" Hermione asked.

"No, I did not." He put his fork down with a firm clink.

"Your actions were rather gallant, Severus. Foolhardy, perhaps... one could even go as far as to say imprudent, but it was gallant behaviour, nonetheless." Minerva's smile was playful, if sincere.

"One of my housemates was deathly afraid of fire, and I hastened her exit of the area. In doing so, I was burned."

"What he is not telling you, Hermione," Minerva stated, "...was that he jumped onto a Thestral, and managed to fly the creature over the pen, and snatched the girl- Lucy Malstrome, was it not?- off the ground without landing, or causing the poor Thestral any harm."

"It took several passes," he groused, "and I had to hang off the blasted thing so far that I wrenched my back on top of getting burns all over my arms."

Hermione suddenly had vision of Snape swooping through apocalyptic flames on the back of a Thestral, his black robes and hair billowing. "Gallant, indeed," she repeated, the mental imagery making her stomach tighten in unwilling appreciation.

"Gallant it may have been, but it brought me no favours; by the time I convinced the Thestral to land
and returned to the Castle, I had but five minutes before the Charms exam, and Poppy had run out of burn paste. Thus, I walked into the Great Hall covered in a mixture of honey and acemannan. I got through the written section with a minimum of fuss..."

"Although not mess, if I remember correctly," Minerva said.

"You try writing with a quill when covered with honey. I was fine until the practical portion, when my oh so sweet exterior attracted the... fruits, shall we say, of my fellow students labours. After being mobbed by first butterflies, then bees, and finally a flock of birds, I vanished the lot of them and walked out."

"You vanished everything, Severus. Not just the birds and the butterflies, but all of the desks and chairs. Even the exam equipment... everything but the people in the Hall were just gone."

He shrugged. "Which should have fully demonstrated my abilities at Charms, but alas, the proctors did not see it that way." He glanced over to Hermione. "As I did not complete the fourth section of the exam, I only received an acceptable."

"I always wondered why you walked out," Minerva said. "I knew that Charms was never one of your favourite subjects, but you always were quite the perfectionist when it came to marks."

Snape was silent for a moment, and his voice was rather stiff when he finally responded. "It was not purely an accident that I was continually... accosted by various creatures. As ever, Potter and his little band of merry men were more than happy to take advantage of my misfortune for a bit of sport. It was walk out or hex them; the night before, I had signed my apprenticeship contact with Géroux, so leaving mattered little in the grand scheme of things."

Minerva looked surprised at his last admission. "I had not realized that... matters were decided so early on."

Again, silence filled the room, and Hermione found herself struggling to parse out the undercurrents of the conversation. Snape and the Headmistress were eyeing each other with wary curiosity, gazes communicating as much as the carefully worded statements.

"It was decided in my sixth year." Snape said softly. "The Dark Lord was the only one to show any interest in my future, and Lucius was more than eager to sponsor me. He arranged terms with Géroux; by Christmas of my seventh year the details had been ironed out, and it was just a matter waiting for graduation and the exams."

Minerva only nodded, a look of intense regret clouding her features. For her part, Hermione was afraid to breathe deeply, lest she draw any attention to herself. It was obvious that two professors were speaking of the conditions leading to Snape's taking the Dark Mark, and she fairly burned with questions; never had she heard any of that particular back story.

The Headmistress appeared to share some of those same questions. She opened her mouth as if to ask something, but clearly had second thoughts, and abruptly looked down at her empty plate. Snape read her expression well enough, however, to answer the unasked query. "I took the Mark the day after graduation, and was on my way to France the day after that to start my apprenticeship."

Minerva met his gaze again, but appeared slightly nauseated. "I wish it could have been different, Severus. Truly, I do."

He shrugged, the motion more uncomfortable than nonchalant. "I made the choices I did. I suppose if you want to look for silver linings, some can be found. We survived, did we not?" He turned then,
and gave Hermione an arch look. "And here we are, nominally discussing my very own apprentice."

"Indeed we are," the Headmistress said briskly, accepting the change of topic. "Hermione, it would simply not do for you to take your N.E.W.T.s with the rest of students. Accordingly, we can do one of two things: either have you take them at the end of the year privatively, or spread them out over the course of the next year or so. I can prevail on the examiners to come every two months until you've completed the courses you deem necessary."

Hermione thought about the options, but the choice was easy. "I would prefer to spread them out. It would be easier revising for one class rather than seven, especially with a teaching load on top of our project."

"Excellent. That would have been my choice as well. I will send the seventh year syllabuses to you in the next week, and you can decide what exam you would like to begin with." Minerva made several notes on her parchment. "Now, Severus, have the two of you discussed the order and time line for the apprenticeship? I am not familiar with all of the requirements for Potions."

Snape rose and walked over the side-table that separated the kitchen from the rest of the room, and fetched a spiral bound notebook. Flipping it open to the middle section, he said, "We've not discussed things in detail, no, but I've made up some preliminary plans. Essentially, the first year's work would be primarily focused on in-depth reading, language acquisition, and returning Hermione to N.E.W.T. level work. Year two I've slated for potion identification and development, and the third year starting to preparing for the Mastery Examination and thesis."

Minerva looked thoughtful. "That doesn't sound much different than my Mastery. Why then are there so few Potions Masters, especially as compared to Transfiguration, or even Charms?"

"More people are interested in Transfiguration and Charms, for one thing. As a result, there are fewer Masters, and thus few chances for new people to join the field. Moreover, a high percentage of apprentices fail their practical exams or are otherwise not approved by a Quorum of the active Masters." Seemingly changing tack, he turned to Hermione and asked, "What do you think is the difference between a competent Potions Brewer, and Master?"

"The obvious answer would be that one merely makes potions, while the other also develops them," she responded.

"Simplistically put, but yes, that is true. The better answer to that question, however, lays in the origins of Potions as a field of specialization." Snape said, switching neatly into lecture mode. To her surprise, Hermione saw that the Headmistress appeared interested what Snape had to say.

"Can you name the three main branches of Potions?" he asked Minerva.

"Healing, alchemy and poisons," she replied after a pause.

"Five points to Gryffindor." At his smirk, Minerva merely rolled her eyes and gave him a dirty look. Unchastened, Snape went on. "At various times in the last fifteen hundred years, each of those three branches has taken supremacy over the others in terms of innovation and popularity; when alchemy was at the forefront, for example, great strides were made in using transfiguration to aid potion making. To excel at Potions, one must not just have a firm grasp on how those various waves changed the conventional methods and ingredients used, but also understand each of three branches as separate specialisations. A Potions Master must balance an encyclopaedic memory with a streak of creativity in order to wade through what has been done to produce something new."

He turned to Hermione, suddenly serious. "You've always had that encyclopaedic memory, but as
student you lacked that creativity. You relied on instructions from the book entirely too much, rather than trusting your knowledge to guide you into better work. By contrast, Fred and George Weasley had all the creative genius one could wish for, but relied on instinct rather than concrete knowledge of methods and ingredients. As a result, they went through quite a bit of trial and error in order to successfully tweak known formulas into working products. They were both very good brewers, but lacked the foundation to step up into something more."

Flipping open his notebook, he explained, "The main reason most apprentices fail their mastery examinations is because they just don't have the depth of knowledge required. Just to access the foundational research, you typically need to be fluent in at least three languages, although five would be better." He gave an impatient wave. "In addition to demonstrating a thorough understanding of each of the specialisations, you also need a strong background in Herbology and transfiguration... I could go on, but really, the best way to break this all down is to start creating a schedule."

Hermione reached into her bag and took out her day planner, a pen and several coloured highlighters. "Let's start with planning out the languages then..."
Snape peered across the Great Hall, empty but for the small groups of teachers milling about. The incoming students were set to arrive in less than twenty minutes, and he felt a faint frisson of something—uncertainty, perhaps?—make itself known in his belly. *After so many years of teaching, one would think that you would be over this by now. Then again, it has been ten years since you last taught a class, and the situation has considerably... altered.*

Despite the uncertainty, Snape found himself relieved that the term was finally starting; he could only plan for so many contingencies and problems before paranoia and doubt twisted his entire thought process. He'd never been the sort to deal with waiting graciously, and he had been increasingly short-tempered during the waning weeks of August. Perhaps it was a natural facet of his personality, or merely a by-product of spending over twenty years of his life living at boarding school, but he found that he rather liked his life to be highly structured. Idle hands were only half the battle; it was having idle thoughts— and time to think— that inevitably did him in.

A whisper of robes from the entranceway drew his attention, and he turned to see Hermione. She was pale, but composed, and to his surprise, it appeared that she intended to attend the Sorting.

"Will you be joining us?" he asked a shade diffidently.

"For the Sorting, at least."

"You don't have to." He paused, unsure if he should offer her support or merely a stiff upper lip. Given her experiences in the Hall, he did not question her avoidance of the place; for his part, he would not be visiting the Astronomy Tower or Shrieking Shack any time soon. "No one would think less of you if you declined to participate."

"I know." She let her gaze sweep over the majestic, candle-lit space for a long moment, and then met his eyes again. "Minerva said much the same thing. But I missed too many of the Sortings as a student, and I'll not start things off by willingly doing so this go around. "No one would think less of you if you declined to participate."

"I know." She let her gaze sweep over the majestic, candle-lit space for a long moment, and then met his eyes again. "Minerva said much the same thing. But I missed too many of the Sortings as a student, and I'll not start things off by willingly doing so this go around. "Running a uneasy hand through her riotous hair, she stated, "I doubt very much I'll be taking meals in here any time soon, but tonight is important enough to push matters."

They stood silently watching the clusters of staff for several minutes from the doorway before Minerva herself approached. "You'll be attending, then?" the Headmistress asked Hermione, mirroring his own query.

His Apprentice nodded, appearing a trifle queasy. With unexpected sentimentality, the older woman reached forward to lightly cup the Hermione's cheek in reassurance. "Ever the lioness." With a final, gentle pat, Minerva let her hand fall. "For what it is worth, I want you to know that I am proud of
you; no matter how this night turns out- never-mind the year- I am proud of you." Looking over at Snape, she went on. "Both of you. Coming back wasn't easy, I know, but in the end I think that you'll both be the happier for it."

She smiled at the two of them, emerald eyes sharp with sentiment before she raised an interrogative eyebrow at Snape. "Now, what is it I see here? Are you wearing a colour other than black?"

"I have it on good authority that I appear at some advantage in blue," he temporized. "Accordingly, I shall be fishing for compliments all evening."

Minerva chuckled. "Well, it appears that change is the mode of the evening: Filius is in yellow, Pomona's in scarlet, and Neville's in green. Either great minds think alike, or I missed that particular proposal in the staff meeting."

"It was unplanned, I assure you."

"Speaking of plans, Filius and I had a discussion about the normal order of things, and we've decided that another change is in due."

He stared down at Minerva, wondering at what she had up her sleeve. "And what exactly would that be?"

"While it's normally the deputy head's job to introduce the first years, we would prefer that you do the honours this time."

Startled, he made no response until Hermione prompted him with amused look. "You can't be serious." Snape couldn't believe that they thought the idea a good one. His might be a familiar face, but it wasn't a comforting one; the first years tended to be enough of a fidgety, frightened mess as it was without adding a meeting with Hogwarts' resident villain.

The Headmistress read his negative reaction well enough, and graced him with a gimlet-eyed stare; he found that her version of Albus' twinkle was no easier to stomach. "Of course I am serious. It's a new year, which means new beginnings all around. You're no bogey-man, Severus, and it's time the children- as well as the rest of the staff- adjust to that."

"No wonder you resorted to flattery earlier," he grumbled, feeling simultaneously put-out and pleased at her words.

"Begin as you mean to go on," murmured Hermione, sounding reflective. "It's what my Mum always used to say."

"My thoughts precisely," agreed Minerva. "Are you willing, Severus, or shall I have Filius do it?"

"I shall bow to the greater collective's wishes," he replied with light sarcasm. "However, I will not be held responsible for any mayhem that may occur as a result."

"Oh, don't go doubting yourself now," Minerva shot back. "You are quite capable of making a dramatic entrance. Think of it this way: if you make a favourable impression on them, it might result in more Slytherins."

A loud crash and unsteady laughter suddenly came from the dais. Minerva chuffed in disgust. "Merlin help me if Sybil's already into the sherry..." Snapping her attention back to Severus, she said, "You remember where to pick them up?"

"Yes."
"Excellent." Looking down to a delicate fob watch, she made a small moue of impatience. "The boats should be here in five minutes or so, depending on how much the weather slows matters down." She turned to Hermione. "I've also arranged for the two of you to have the end seats by the staff door; if you need to leave, you'll be able to do it with the minimum of fuss."

"Thank you," Hermione responded.

"None needed. I'm sure that you'll do just fine." Then Minerva matched his earlier sarcasm with some of her own. "Both of you." She gave him a quick, if brazen, smile before hurrying off.

He looked down at Hermione, seeing that humour had replaced her burgeoning nerves. "Under no circumstance should you allow Sybil to sit anywhere near us. You have my direct approval to use any means necessary to insure that she doesn't."

"Aye, aye, sir," she said, laughing.

Sighing, he made to leave. "I'll be off to frighten the firsties, then."

Hands on hips, Hermione stared at him with mild exasperation. "You know, they don't give out Orders of Merlin to just anyone. Generally speaking, you have to do something pretty heroic to get one."

"And I'll remind you that they only awarded it to me after they thought I was dead."

"Be that as it may, they haven't taken it back." Hermione stepped back, and offered him an credible echo of Minerva's smile. "You do look good in blue." With a swish of green fabric, she followed the Headmistress down the main aisle towards the dais.

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Snape was still pondering what perverse part of his mental makeup was responsible for his life-long susceptibility to flattery from Gryffindor women when Concobhar Murchadh rapped on the main door of the Castle. The taciturn Irishman did not look surprised to see him, merely giving a brusque nod before speaking the customary opening.

"The first years, Professor Snape."

"Thank you, Professor Murchadh..."

A loud, wet sneeze interrupted the rest of the exchange; a bedraggled boy about halfway into the crush of students froze with a hand covering his presumably snotty appendage. The rest of the children likewise halted, and Snape suddenly felt the combined weight of their gazes hit him. For an almost painfully long moment, the entrance hall went silent but for the dripping of water on the stone floor and continuing storm outside.

Begin as you mean to go on...

The first time around, he hadn't really had a choice in becoming a teacher, nor the timing of it. His heart had been set on doing research, but Voldemort had wanted him at Hogwarts, and it had amused Albus enough to allow it. Consumed by guilt and fear, he'd come back to a Castle still full of his peers- students who, on the whole, had hated him- and had quickly made a right hash out of the job. That it was tacitly known that he was Death Eater by the staff had not helped matters; outside of Albus, only Minerva and Poppy had known his true allegiance.

Then, a bare two months into the school year, his world had come crashing down on him with the death of Lily and supposed downfall of Voldemort. It had been clear that his spying had meant little
in the grand scheme of things- a point on driven home further with the attacks on Alice and Frank Longbottom- and he spent the rest of year alternating been drunken stupors and all-out rage.

It had taken several years to reach an uncertain equilibrium in regards to his unchosen career; while he had never been a favourite of students, he had been at least respected and could boast admirable O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores. Ten years into it, however, the horror had started anew... and slowly but surely, he'd come to thoroughly hate the lot of it, culminating in his horrible year as Headmaster.

And what now?

The children stared up at him, all round faces and messy possibilities. With a mental sigh, he withdrew a snowy white handkerchief from his frock coat and extended out over the crowd to the snotty young boy. *It's official*, he thought. *I have indeed gone soft, and that's my white flag.*

"Blow your nose," he ordered, though not unkindly.

The boy complied with alacrity, and the corresponding treble honk prompted a wave of hastily suppressed twitters. He flushed a bit, and the colour on his cheeks only deepened further as he gazed down at the newly soiled object in his hand. Then the lad looked up at him, clearly uncertain as what to do next.

Snape took out his wand and pointed it at the cloth. Cleaning it with a quick *tergeo*, he stuck out his hand again.

"Thank you, Professor Snape," the boy said, handing it back.

He acknowledged the thanks with a nod of his head. "Your name?" he inquired, sighting something familiar in the lad's pert-nosed, whey-faced countenance.

"Riley. Riley Burke."

"Any relation to Alice or Neville Longbottom?"

"We're second cousins."

Recalling the absurd number of cauldrons that Longbottom had melted, he said dryly, "Let us hope then, that in Potions at least, you take after Alice, and not her calamitous son."

Burke grinned at that. "Yes, sir. I've been warned. I don't think I could top Cousin Neville's record anyhow."

"I shouldn't attempt it were I you," Snape replied, giving him a stern look.

The blond girl next to Burke began to shiver uncontrollably, and glancing around, he saw that she wasn't the only one doing so. *In for a pence...* he thought with another mental sigh, and with quick sweep of his arm cast an instant drying and heating charm over the huddled masses standing in front of him. Several of the children blinked in surprise as the magic ruffled their hair and robes; Burke, in contrast, grinned at him, appearing only marginally less dishevelled when dry.

"Cool," the he breathed, a calculating gleam entering his gaze as he eyed Snape's wand with juvenile avarice.

Wishing to forestall the raft of questions surely coming his way from the boy, Snape started to speak.

"Welcome to Hogwarts. Tonight, you will take the first steps in becoming fully-fledged witches and
wizards." Magic show concluded, he tucked his wand back into his sleeve. "Despite what you may
think, or have experienced, the varied aspects of magic are not easy to master, and in order to do so,
you must being willing to apply yourself diligently to your studies. Thankfully, you will not be
required to perform this task alone; you will shortly be Sorted into houses that will provide you with
the support and encouragement needed to succeed.

Deliberately, he kept his voiced pitched just loud enough to be heard at the edge of the crowd but no
further; he watched with satisfaction as those on the fringes leaned forward to hear better.

"Each House emphasises different qualities, and have distinct personalities. I, myself, am Head of the
Slytherin House. As Slytherins, we value leadership and strategy; we are not afraid to blaze our own
path if required. Very few students have the necessary strength of spirit to chose our House, but
should you join our ranks, you will find a rather..." Snape allowed a very small smile to grace his
expression with his last words, "...warm welcome regardless of any blood status or family ties." We
shall see if that was phrased mysteriously enough to sway the undecided our way, he thought with
some humour.

"There are three other houses, all with their own unique traditions and values. The Gryffindors like
to boast of their courage and bravery; the Hufflepuffs, in contrast are well known for their generous
natures and admirable work effort. Last but not least, the Ravenclaws have fully embraced the notion
that 'wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure'. Your House will become like a second family,
so during your sorting you should think on what values are most important to you. Finally, as it will
behave you to make the best possible impression as you enter the Great Hall for the first time, I
would recommend that you smarten yourselves up; once you have done so, check your neighbours.
Do so now."

Striding over the door leading into the Great Hall, Snape ignored the murmured whispers coming
from behind him until he saw Minerva's signal indicating they should enter for the Sorting.

"First Years," he intoned more formally. "You will now form an orderly line and follow me."

Giving them a firm stare that brooked no dawdling, he waited for them to hurriedly fall into line, and
then opened the doors to the Hall. The distinctive creak of the wide double doors opening drew the
attention of the assembled student body; to a person, they fell silent.

The sight of the Great Hall, fully decked out in the school regalia and replete with expectant students,
roused the disquiet that he'd felt earlier, and for an uneasy moment, his feet felt firmly stuck to the
stone flagstones beneath him. Then Minerva gave him a sharp nod from her central spot on the dais,
and he found he was moving forward again, dress robes in full billow behind him.

Once they'd reached the front of the platform and the gaggle behind him had settled, the
Headmistress addressed the new students. "Welcome to Hogwarts; we will now commence with
Sorting you into your Houses. When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to
be Sorted."

Filius stood at the low stool, Sorting Hat in hand, while Minerva held the long scroll of names.
Seeing that his part of the Sorting was complete, Snape edged over until he could walk up the
shallow steps to the staff table. As the applause for 'Aaron, Jane'- the newest Hufflepuff- rang out,
Snape sat down on the final chair. Longbottom, who was sitting on the other side of Hermione, gave
him a cordial nod which he returned.

"Do you know how large this class is?" Hermione asked during the next round of applause.
Although her tone was cheerful enough, her amber gaze had slid into a familiar, careful blankness,
and she was twisting her napkin back and forth on her lap.
"One hundred and seven, Minerva said. Largest class in a decade," he informed her smoothly, wondering if some banal discussion could distract her enough to relax.

"Any idea what the breakdowns are?" Longbottom inquired, eyeing "Abdulrazik, Mona" with interest.

"Ravenclaw!" the Sorting Hat shouted, and the Head of Gryffindor leaned back in his seat, disappointed.

"Thirty Muggle-borns, and split almost evenly between fifty-three boys and fifty-four girls."

"Hmm. Good showing then."

"We shall see," Snape replied non-committally.

They all remained quiet until Minerva announced, "Burke, Riley," and Longbottom perked up again. "My youngest cousin," he whispered to Hermione and Snape. "I've been looking forward to having him around for quite awhile."

There was a decent paused after the boy put on the Hat; finally, it proclaimed, "Slytherin!"

"What?!" Longbottom yipped in a startled undertone, only just remembering to clap. "I don't understand..."

"It appears you will be spending rather less time with him than you thought," Snape said with a smirk.

"Don't be too smug," the younger man retorted. "The one thing Riley has a predilection for is trouble."

"Well, I suppose I'll just have teach him not to get caught," Snape put in smugly as "Connor, Emily," became another Hufflepuff.

"Good luck with that."

"Now, now, gentlemen. There are plenty of children to go around," Hermione interjected wryly.

"Perhaps, but none of them are my cousins," Longbottom whinged. Snape caught the side-long glance the man gave his fellow Gryffindor, and rather thought Longbottom was laying it on thick in hopes of diverting her.

"Please," Snape scoffed in return, pleased to play along. "You're a pureblood, Longbottom. Half of the students in this room are your cousins." Thinking of his own pureblood relations, he gave a mock-shudder. "Come to it, we just might be cousins..."

"Well, when you put it that way..." the other man gave him an arch look. "Shall I call you Uncle Severus, then?"

"Do so, and I shall promptly turn you over my knee and give you a swift paddling." Threat duly delivered, he gave Longbottom an exaggerated salute with his goblet before taking a sip of wine.

"Are you really cousins?" asked Hermione dubiously.

"Do the Longbottoms or Burkes claim any connection to the Fawleys?" Snape queried.

Longbottom thought while the next student- 'Edger, Heath'- was proclaimed a Gryffindor. "Yes, they
both do. Are the Princes related to the Travers?"

"Yes, they are," Snape admitted, surprised that Longbottom knew he was a Prince.

The other man had clearly seen his reaction. "Gran told me several years back. She fancies herself quite the genealogist. She's rather obsessed with the Sacred Twenty-Eight."

"Indeed," he drawled in return.

"So there you are," Longbottom said. "Professor Snape and I can trace kinship through several lines. It's distant, but we are undeniably related."

"How delightfully... incestuous," Hermione responded. "You're kissing cousins. That might explain quite a bit, come to think about it..."

"Hey now, go easy," chuckled Longbottom from behind his own goblet.

"I'm only a half-blood," Snape shrugged, unconcerned. "Thus not nearly as inbred as Longbottom; should I ever reproduce, the only concern will come from being a direct relation to me, not of some sort deleterious mutation being passed on. You, on the other hand..." He paused, clapping for the latest Ravenclaw. "Well, were I you, Longbottom, I'd either consider sterilization or began aggressively seeking out a Muggle-born wife."

"Both options Gran would absolutely love," Longbottom sighed. Shifting slightly in his seat, he offered Hermione a patently innocent expression. "Say, do you fancy going out to dinner with me some time?"

Hermione laughed. "Not on your life, Neville. We may not be cousins, but going out with you would be like dating a brother."

"Sounds like sterilization it is." Snape smirked. "I know of several potions that can assist in that..."

"I'm sure you do," Longbottom said. "I assume you'd even help me brew it, if I asked you."

From her spot just left of the dais, Minerva sent them a chiding look; clearly their inattention had been noted. Snape sat up a little straighter- some habits were impossible to break- and endeavoured to pay better attention to the Sorting.

Ten minutes later, he noted a definite trend.

"Is it me, or are more of the students being sorted into Slytherin?" Hermione asked softly. "That and Hufflepuff..."

Longbottom tapped the table with mild frustration. "We've only seven Gryffindors so far. Have you been counting the Slytherins?"

"Naturally." Snape paused before continuing, wondering if could actually wind the man up. However, Longbottom just gave him a level stare and waited without further comment.

"As you noted, seven Gryffindors, eleven Ravenclaws, fifteen Hufflepuffs and nineteen Slytherins," Snape finally supplied.

Longbottom rolled his eyes. "Showoff."

"Because I can multi-task? Hardly." Snape took another sip of his wine. "Try spy. I learned very quickly the importance always being aware of my surroundings." The last statement came out more
bitterly than he'd intended, and Hermione glanced at him, faint concern wrinkling her brow.

"And I'm sure that teaching Potions only honed those skills," Longbottom noted in a neat redirection.

"That it did," he affirmed. "Yet another silver lining."

"Life is just full of them, isn't it?" Hermione commented sardonically.

"Yes, Apprentice, it certainly is," he agreed.

Thirty-five minutes later, the Sorting had been completed and the Feast was well underway. Snape found himself thirty-seven Slytherins richer; perhaps the most surprising part of the evening was that realisation that seven of those students were Muggle-born, a new record for his House. Let's see what the papers do with that little bit of information, he thought a touch snidely. Will I be honouring Dumbledore's memory, or seducing the Muggle-borns over to the dark side? Me thinks it will be more along the lines of Darth Severus striking back...

Out of nowhere, a blood-curdling scream rent through the happy chatter. The entire hall seemed to come to a standstill as a red-headed Ravenclaw leapt from her bench, letting out another high-pitched screech. Without making a conscious decision to do so, Snape found himself standing, wand held low at his side as he scanned the space for trouble; more than half of the head table and a full third of the students had also drawn their wands in the interval.

"There's a toad in my soup!" the girl bawled, waving her napkin about with clear hysteria.

Peals of nervous laughter rang out, and Snape took a deep breath in to ease the sudden tension in his chest. At one of the lower tables, a third year leapt up with a startled exclamation. "Ralph?" he burbled, patting at his pockets pointlessly.

One of the Ravenclaw prefects rose. "Sean, your toad is clearly in Maggie's soup. Retrieve it, please, and do remember that pets are not allowed at meals." The prefect put a comforting hand on the crying girl's shoulder. "Come along, Maggie. Why don't you sit with us for the rest of the feast? Duncan, Helen, budge over..."

With that, normal activities resumed, and Snape peered over to the Slytherin table. The first years were all laughing, and the addition of so many younger students had lightened the overall mood of table considerably. Greengrass, sitting exactly in the middle of the table, caught his regard and bowed; taking in the pleased- nay, smug- expression on the Prefect's face, he wondered at just what the boy had been up to. With that self-satisfied expression, he's been in the thick of something- and successful at it, if I'm any judge. Somehow, I don't think my little speech with the firsties was solely responsible for all of the new Slytherins. Between my Apprentice and my Prefect, I'm going to be a busy man...

As he resumed his seat, Snape looked over to Hermione. She was just tucking her wand back into her robes, and met his gaze evenly. Scanning her expression, he could see nothing beyond the normal after effects of being startled.

Well, she didn't lose it, or start hexing things, so...

Longbottom was also eyeing Hermione with some approbation, and she gave him a mild look of annoyance upon seeing it. "Ahh, the joy of toads. The only time I want to see one on my plate is when it's being served as cuisses de grenouille."

"What?" Longbottom asked, confused.

"Frog legs, Neville...fried frog legs. You take garlic, and parsley..." she teased.
Longbottom turned as green as the amphibian in question. "I'll pass, thanks."

She shrugged, and picked up her fork. "More for the rest of us, then."

She'd thought she was alright. The girl's scream had surprised her, as it had almost everyone in the Hall. But beyond the initial jolt, there'd been no flood of memories, no panic. Hermione hadn't even frozen; she'd been able to sit back down calmly, and continuing eating her supper. Had joked with Neville; had been blithely unconcerned.

But the rush of adrenaline hadn't faded after a few minutes. Her heart had continued racing, and she felt herself become more and more aware of the surroundings. The space around her had suddenly grown more vivid, with movement of the people around her thrown into high-relief. The chaotic jumble of the students drew her eye, time and again, until she forced herself to stare a fixed point on their table in an effort to stay calm.

Her hands turned cold, then clammy.

In addition to the main set of double doors that led into the Great Hall, there were two side exits, and one more behind the upper dais; Hermione knew first hand how easy it was to block all egress in and out of the Hall. It wouldn't take much to trap them all in the room, and with this many students, it would be all too easy for events to slide into pure pandemonium.

But Minerva knows that. There are layers of security measures in place. The school is unplottable, and they spent almost six months casting the new wards before they allowed students back... the Death Eaters are all dead or in Azkaban; the Snatchers are no more...

Neville was yammering on about something- his old toad, Trevor, had apparently gone on permanent holiday with the Giant Squid, or some such thing- and Hermione wished he'd just shut it for moment so she could think straight.

But all it would take is one person. They wouldn't even have to be that strong of a wizard, just good at planning. Creative. Would something like a Muggle weapon- a gun?- even set off the wards?

At the Slytherin table, Neville's cousin was re-enacting something, his short, stubby arms making grandiose circles in the air. He was such a tiny thing; pert-nosed, with a mop of hair that reminded her of Harry's in its rampant untidiness. She bet he had freckles, with that pale complexion. Listening intently, indulgently, to him was Aelius Greengrass. A handsome lad, that one. The picture perfect Prefect, with his charm and nascent masculine glory. Achingly vulnerable.

How hard would it be to take a de-aging potion and sneak aboard the Hogwarts Express?

The wooden lip of the chair was digging into the backside of her thighs; she was perching on the edge of her seat.

It would be like Dunblane all over again. Just one person, with a gun...

She nearly jumped out of her chair when the unexpected heat of a hand landed heavy upon hers.

Swivelling to her right, she met Severus' dispassionate expression.

"Granger," he said, for all the world like she was a first year. "Do stop shredding the fine linens. If Minerva catches you at it, we'll be stuck with that inferior paper nonsense." Plucking the crumpled napkin from her hands, he placed it next to her half-empty plate.
Then his hand returned to cover hers.

"Longbottom, I don't understand your attachment to that utterly useless amphibian. Did he ever do anything other than eat, defecate and croak?"

She took a deep breath, then another. Her hyper-awareness began to fade.

"No, but that's not that point." Neville's voice no longer grated on her nerves. "Having a pet isn't about what it does for you; it's about the bond you develop with it, the care and concern you give it."

"You don't need to resort to a toad to shower something with care and concern. A houseplant—say, a Japanese peace lily, would work equally as well, with the added bonus of not being something that gets lost or hops into people's appetizers."

Severus' hand gave hers a gentle squeeze, and she could feel the subtle demarcation of calluses lining his long fingers. For a fleeting moment, the sensation jogged a memory of another man in this hall, of hands on her neck, but the warmth and reassurance implicit in his grasp pushed those thoughts away.

"Have you ever had a pet?"

"No."

"Not even as child?"

"No."

"Why ever not?"

There was a pause, and Severus sounded annoyed when he finally answered. "Because I was horribly poor growing up, and besides which, my father would have allowed me to bring some sort of mangy, flea-bitten cur in the house."

"What about later? Did you ever want a familiar?"

The last of her panic was replaced with shock; she couldn't believe that Severus was holding her hand, discussing pet ownership with Neville as if it was nothing. Granted, no one but Neville could see the comforting gesture, but still...

"Had I gotten a pet during my first tenure, it likely would have been killed."

"And now?" Neville persisted.

The remains of supper disappeared from the table, and the Hermione heard the ringing tones of a silver spoon hitting a crystal goblet.

"And now..." Severus' voice dipped as a hush fell over the Great Hall. "...I've no need for pet, or a Japanese peace lily." His amused gaze met hers, and she couldn't help but notice that he really did look handsome in blue. "After all, I have an apprentice."

Before Neville could reply, Minerva's amplified words sounded. "This concludes the Opening Feast. Shortly, you will be dismissed back to your dormitories..."
Hermione was sitting at the desk in her quarters, going over her notes before the first lecture of the morning when a house-elf abruptly popped into view. The accompanying crack startled her badly enough that she knocked over her tea, drenching the top layer of papers and the floor in rather spectacular fashion.

"Oh, bugger!" Reaching for her wand, she quickly zapped the quickly spreading mess and examined the first page for any lingering damage. There was none, thankfully; swivelling back to the elf, she had just enough time to grab the proffered note from it's hand before it disapperated loudly away again.

"And a good morning to you, too," she muttered, wiping some of the splatter from her pyjamas. From his perch on top the sofa, Crooks gave a low hiss of annoyance at all the ruckus. "Honestly," she continued, "...it's been over a decade since I've tried to give a house-elf any type of clothing. You'd think by now they'd gotten over it. And I can't have been the only student who has tried to do something pro-actively about the rights of magical creatures..."

Breaking open the green wax seal, Hermione read the note.

"The items you have requested have arrived, and are ready to be picked up. Given their age and delicate condition, this will need to be done in person. As a reminder, the library is open early from 6:30-7:30 AM as a courtesy for all staff members. Yours, Madame Pince"

Sitting back in her chair with a muted sigh, she suddenly felt a little queasy. So much for carpe diem...

The day before term had started, Hermione had spent the day in the library trying to dig up further answers about what exactly had happened during the apprenticeship ceremony; to her consternation, what she'd found had been less than helpful. None of the books and journals that she'd read discussed the phenomenon that they'd experienced. Certainly, there had been plenty of examples of bindings being rejected, but none of those had come close to the mini-magical explosion and momentary telepathic bond that had occurred when she and Snape had gone through the ceremony. Still, she'd come up with a list of other research materials that might shed light on the mystery, and with her brand new staff privileges had duly requested them on interlibrary loan.

And now that they had arrived, she was rather... disinclined to look further into the matter.

For one thing, it felt a bit like she was going behind Snape's back by doing more research. Which is load of rubbish, if you think logically about it, and besides, when has that stopped you in the past? she thought with a snort. Just because Snape has displayed absolutely no interest into the matter doesn't mean that you can't try to puzzle it out.

His utter lack of curiosity had been a surprise to her; indeed, the lack of it had made her surmise that he knew, or at least, had ruddy good idea more about what happened than he was letting on. When she finally worked up the nerve to ask him about it a couple of weeks before, he'd been almost dismissive in his response.

"I don't know any more than I did directly after the ceremony," he'd finally stated firmly. "And does it really matter? There's been nothing to indicate to me that there is an issue, and I don't wish to break the apprenticeship. Do you?"
She didn't. Even if there were massive complications that they had hitherto not discovered, Hermione didn't think that she would want to break their binding. There had been several... bumps in the road, true, but she had expected that. Well, to be fair, you expected challenges, just not that particular kind of... bump. Still, it was the middle of September, and she had no real regrets, not about any of it. As awkward as things could be between the two of them- and lord knew, it could bloody awkward making friends with a forty-something year old man who occasionally had all the social graces of an angry hippogriff- they had settled into a strong working relationship, and she thought that they had the foundations of an even better friendship.

And yet, there was a lingering sense of unease when she thought about all of the unknowns of the apprenticeship ceremony. Clearly, they had modified the binding well beyond the norm. Something happened. And I don't want to be blind-sided by that something!... It wasn't that she didn't trust him, because she did... Well, what's the old saying? she thought a bit grimly as she watched Crooks rise from the back of the sofa and arch his back in preparation for a stretch. Curiosity killed the cat.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione was making her way down the still hallways with a swift purpose. Give it another ten minutes or so, and there would be a fair amount of students making their way to breakfast, but for the moment, the corridors were peaceful and wonderfully child-free.

Pulling open the wooden double doors of the library, she entered the sunlit space with an appreciative inhalation; the air was redolent with smell of parchment and leather, of lemon beeswax and aged wood, all underlain with just the faintest whiff of magic. She loved this space, and just standing at the entrance brought an easy smile to her face. It was one of the few places in Hogwarts unmarred by bad memories and associations; how many late nights had she spent here, crouched over a table? How many afternoons had she been curled up in a chair, reading something fascinating and being bathed in the glorious sunlight streaming in from the high, mullioned windows? Her first kiss- thanks to Viktor- had happened in the far corner by the botany stacks. And, oh, the mysteries she'd unravelled thanks to what she'd found in those quiescent tomes...

"I assume," Madame Pince said, appearing abruptly from the nearest stack, "...that you are here for your books?"

"Yes," she answered, as flush worked its way up her neck. I must have looked quite the barmy idiot, standing in the doorway with a silly grin plastered on my face...

The woman looked unchanged from when Hermione had been a student; thin, and sporting a overhanging pointed black hat, she resembled nothing more than a underfed vulture. She had not liked Hermione as a student, but then, given Hermione's penchant for always having the maximum number of books checked out at once and Madame Pince's overly protective manner towards her 'charges', it was somewhat understandable.

Moving behind the solid oak check-out counter, Madame Pince pulled out four paper-wrapped volumes from under the counter. From another drawer, she took out a pair of white cotton gloves and placed them on top of the pile.

"You are required to use these," she said stiffly, pointing the gloves, "...whilst handling the books. In particular, the journal you requested is susceptible to damage from the common oils found on the skin. I do not want to have to make explanations to the British Library as to why a volume is damaged."

"I promise to use them," Hermione affirmed gravely, inwardly amused at the glower that was pointing her way.
The woman gave her a short nod. "Be sure that you do." She paused then, and treated Hermione to a rather assessing stare. "I assume that you are trying to research the abnormalities that occurred during your apprenticeship ceremony?"

*Goodness, has absolutely everybody heard what happened?* "Yes, I am."

Madame Pince gave her thin, if triumphant smile. "As I thought. I have taken the liberty of pulling several other books that you might find helpful. Would you like those as well?"

"I... yes, that would be lovely," Hermione said, taken aback by the unexpected generosity.

Madame Pince took out several more volumes, and then began to place the entire stack into a protective carryall. "I would also recommend that you speak to Scheherazade Abu-Lughod. I understand she has quite the collection of her own, and being that she specialises in ritual magic, it would follow that she might also be able to provide more answers."

"Thank you for the recommendation," Hermione replied, trying to not sound as dumbfounded as she felt.

The smile, faint as it was, disappeared. "As a staff member, you are are allow up to twenty books out at a time, rather than the ten that the students may check out." Madame Pince pursed her lips then, communicating her disapproval of the high number clearly. "You may also put another twenty items on reserve here in the library, and the checkout time has likewise doubled to one month. I also don't need to remind you to keep your familiar well away from any borrowed items, as well as Professor Snape."

Hermione had to bite off a laugh at the way the librarian had paired the two men together. "I need to keep Professor Snape away from the books?" she inquired politely.

The woman gave an irritated sniff. "He has any of a number of bad book habits, such as writing in the margins and dog earing the pages."

Hermione suddenly recalled the crowded pages of Half-blood Prince's old potions textbook, and any number of Snape's texts she'd borrowed and read since then. "He does that in all of his books, I'm afraid."

"I know," the woman said sourly. "I've spent countless hours erasing his notes over the last thirty years."

"Well, my bookcases and desktops are warded to keep my cat away. I shall endeavour to likewise keep Professor Snape away from anything that I checkout."

Again, she received that short nod in return. "Excellent." With a quick flourish, Madame Pince waved her wand over the library register; the titles and authors of the books she had received suddenly appeared, followed by her name. "Your items are due back on the eighteenth of October."

The books remained untouched in the carryall for the remainder of the day; each time that Hermione thought that she might have a couple of free moments to at least flip through them, something inevitably occurred. The spilt tea was only the beginning, and by the time four rolled around, she was verging on the frazzled end of the spectrum. It was then with a grateful- if tad dramatic- sigh that she flopped down on the large leather sofa in Snape's quarters.

He was lounging in an armchair, reading the latest edition of an arithmancy journal; lowering the the item, he gave her a sardonic stare. "That bad, was it?" he inquired with false sympathy.
"Worse." Rolling her head from side to side in a futile attempt to release some of the tension, she went on. "It's days like these that I really miss teaching university students. The worst you deal with is an odd pompous windbag who thinks they can teach the course better than you because they read some article on the internet. Here, on the other hand... well, my only guess is that Filius must be teaching replicating charms to the fourth years this week..." Breaking off with a yawn, she accepted the cup of tea that Snape wordlessly sent her way.

"Mmm, bergamot, mint, ginger and a hint of... anise?" she asked, and took another, less cautious sip at the hot brew.

"Correct. Which group of miscreants dared violate the sanctity of your classroom today? I assume, of course, that any Slytherins knew better than to get caught."

She didn't respond to his verbal jab with anything other than disgruntled silence and a dirty look; they both knew that of all the groups, the fourth year Gryffindors had a well-deserved reputation for mischief making.

"Ahh, so it was the Gryffindors. How utterly... predictable," he said, after letting her silence stretch out.

Hermione ignored his sarcasm. "We were dissecting frogs today, and Frankie Hewes had the brilliant idea of using the replication charm on a section of intestine, and then Philip Williams snagged the resulting... extras and tried to be slick about using the Disillusionment Charm to fling the bits about."

"I'm guessing it all went rather pear shaped from there?" Snape asked, amused.

"Some how," Hermione said with an airy wave of her hand, "...Jessica Anders got a rather lot of frogs' guts down her blouse, and proceeded to rip it halfway open..."

Snape laughed. "Which I'm quite sure rendered the gentlemen in the class both still and mute."

"It did that." Hermione replied, a smile beginning to creep into her expression. "I must say, I find myself rather appreciative that I wasn't endowed quite so... generously while I was student." She looked down to her own chest- much improved from her student days, but still not terribly large, and commented ruefully, "Come to think of it, I'm not sure that I'm that well endowed now."

"The sheer abundance of your hair makes up for any other lack, I assure you," he noted dryly.

"Gee, thanks."

He merely raised a brow. "Just how bad was the resulting mayhem?"

"Could have been worse. Unlike the little terrors, my shield charm stood up just fine, and I got to assign several lengthy detentions. Less chopping and cleaning for me, so there is a silver lining in the whole situation."

"Such positive and forward thinking from my apprentice. And what of poor Miss Anders?"

"Was chatting up the ever-popular Mr. Edwards after class, so I dare say that the trauma did not have that much of a negative impact on the rest of her day."

"And so, all's well that ends well," he intoned staidly, before switching miens. "Be thankful that you don't have to deal with this crop of first years. I swear, they could set fire to water with nothing more than flux weed and belladonna."
"Small favours," she murmured, and sunk further into the softness of the sofa. "I will get them eventually... how much longer do we have before we need to go to the Common Room for the meeting?"

"We have about fifteen minutes," he said, and began to read the journal again.

Hermione watched him covertly through the rising cloud steam of wafting from her tea. To her great amusement, he picked up a biro and started to make notes in the margins of his journal. Should I bring up the books in my bag, or keep my mouth shut until I actually find something?

She had just opened her mouth to mention the books when a knock at the outer door made them both look up. "Were you expecting Poppy?" Snape queried, surprised.

"No... how do you know it's Poppy?" she asked in return. "More of your special Headmaster's privileges?"

He rose, and shot her smug look as the Healer in question breezed in. "Hardly. I simply know her knock." He turned to Poppy. "What brings you off the ward at such an hour? Not a problem with one of the students, I hope?"

"No, no issues. I was coming to speak to Hermione, although I'm glad I managed to catch you as well."

"Tea?" Snape asked, and moved towards the pot on the side table.

"No, I've had far too much already." Poppy perched on the other end of the sofa and gave them both a measuring stare. "I am about halfway through doing the yearly student physicals, and it occurred to me that I had not done a physical on either of you in quite some time." She shifted her gaze over to Hermione. "I know you've undergone a fair amount of poking and prodding as late, but I would like to have a more recent physical on record... as a baseline."

Hermione gazed at the Healer, hearing the implicit assertion in her words. "You think that I'll get worse."

Poppy nodded. "As much as it makes me unhappy to say so, yes, I do believe that you will. Don't you?"

She had sudden and visceral recollection of waking up on the floor of her flat in Aberystwyth, Aditi and Rhys leaning over her. "I haven't had any real issues since the middle of June. Nothing at all since..." stopping to think about the last time she'd had any numbness or muscle weakness, went on. "...August. I mean, I've had some anxiety problems, but nothing health related." Hermione stopped, realizing that her reply had sounded a lot like she was in denial.

"August, hmmmm?" Poppy asked shrewdly, glancing between Hermione and Snape. "Been dosing her on the sly, Severus?"

To her surprise, Snape was still visibly annoyed, appearing almost angry at the Healer. Before things could escalate further, Hermione stepped in, "I've haven't needed anything. I've been fine." She took
a deep breath. "But yes, I agree, a physical would not be a bad idea. I would love to be wrong, but I do think that... things will probably get worse."

Poppy offered her a sympathetic smile. "It's not fun to contemplate, I know, but I prefer to be prepared. You said that that the last major incident you had was in June?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "I had a seizure, and then blacked out. It didn't help matters that I hit my head on the way down, and managed to give myself a concussion."

"It occurred the day before you fell, if you remember," Snape informed Poppy.

"And is it common for you to go several months between issues?"

"Yes, and no." Hermione put her tea down, finding the taste suddenly off. "The first time I had an... attack, it was almost a year before I had another. Then it was about six months until the next one. Now... well, it's been fairly steady at three to four month intervals between major issues."

"Do you have any minor symptoms on a more frequent basis?"

"Usually after a major attack, I'll have periods of numbness and tingling in my limbs, but that gradually fades over several weeks."

"Well, it sounds like we will have plenty to discuss when we go over your health history." Poppy shifted, and stared at Snape. "Severus, I would like to do one on your as well..."

"There is no need. I am perfectly healthy," he said stiffly.

The Healer inclined her head gracefully. "And I am perfectly aware that you are more than capable of looking after yourself. However, it's easy enough to miss something. I perform checks on Minerva and Filius every six months for that exact reason, and it would certainly be a reassurance to us all if there were no concerns."

"You wouldn't be trying to use emotions to manipulate me into agreeing, would you, Poppy?" The smooth pitch of his voice did nothing to disguise the anger lacing his words; even with none of Snape's ire directed at her, Hermione had to fight the urge squirm on the sofa, and wondered why the conversation had suddenly devolved into a pitched battle.

Looking away for a long moment, Poppy regained her composure and stood from the sofa. "No, Severus, I am not. I am simply stating my preference, and giving you the option to say yes or no." Hermione had never seen the Healer thusly: calm but utterly lacking her normal serenity. The woman's regard was quite cool as she waited for an answer.

"I do not require a physical."

"As you wish." A muscle in Poppy's jaw flexed, and her voice was crisp when she spoke to Hermione. "Short notice, I know, but would you be available to pop up to the ward sometime tonight after supper?"

"Yes, I can," Hermione said softly.

"Then I'll bid you both a pleasant evening." Saying nothing else, the woman turned and walked swiftly from the room. Scant seconds later, they heard the outer door thud shut.

Without comment, Snape walked into the kitchen and pulled something out from a drawer. Shrinking the item, he placed it into a pocket and turned to face her. "Shall we go down to the Common
Hermione trailed a step behind Snape, staying just far enough back from him as to not be hit by the wake of his billowing robes. Given the mood he was in, she wasn't so sure that interacting with students— even those from his own house— was the best idea, but she wasn't exactly comfortable in saying so. Besides which, this is as good a time as any to see just how well he can handle being in a temper...

They made it to the Common Room with record speed. The space was crowded with most of the first years, and made even more chaotic by the jumble of homework and personal items scattered all about. Hermione likened large influx of new students to a dropping a dozen rambunctious puppies into a room full of grumpy cats; while it hadn't been completely smooth transition, bringing so many more people in the fold had done a good job of boosting the overall morale.

As if on cue, all activity in room ground to a halt at the appearance of Snape. He let the silence gather ominously, and then stated firmly, "Tonight's meeting is for second years and above. First years may remain in their dormitories, or congregate elsewhere until supper."

With that, he swept down one of the corridors leading to the baths. Left with nothing to do, Hermione stood against the wall by the exit and reflected on the difference between how Snape and Minerva ran their houses. Unlike when she had had been in Gryffindor, Slytherin House had two mandatory meetings a week. One all-house meeting took place Thursday evenings, covering any pressing house business or school-wide issues; by contrast, the Monday meeting was more of a class or lecture, and alternated between the crop of first years, and the rest of the house.

Snape returned, continence still implacable, and carrying a large white towel draped over one black clad arm. The sight of such an innocuous item set off alarm bells. That, and the fact that he was purposefully avoiding her gaze did nothing to reassure her about the content of upcoming lesson. Somehow, I don't think that we will be working on defensive charms...

Standing by one of the large tables, he waited for the noise to die down and the last first year to finally leave. Then, with nary a sound or movement, Hermione felt him do... something to wards around the room. It was as if they firmed up, and yet, thinned out within the room. She thought that it would prevent any of the first years from seeing or entering the space, but couldn't be sure without asking him; moreover, she assumed it would allow them to cast certain spells that would normally be prohibited. As he had not done anything of the sort during any of the other previous meetings, her unease deepened further.

Several of the students felt the disturbance as well, and she watched as wands were surreptitiously drawn among the assembled students. Unlike with the more trusting first years, there was still quite a bit of tension between Snape and some older members if this group; it was understandable, and quite frankly, had she been in their place, Hermione rather thought she would be doing the same.

"We will be working on healing spells tonight." Methodically, Snape folded the towel over several times, and laid it precisely on the burnished oak of the tabletop. Pulling a chair over to the corner of the table where he stood, he removed the item he had put earlier in his pocket. A sudden, metallic glint caught the greenish light as he place the object onto the towel.

It was a large knife.

Snape went on. "Healing spells are different from most other forms of magic in that they do not necessarily require incantations to function; often, the intent to heal is enough to actually do so, at least in a rudimentary fashion. That does not mean, of course, that verbal or nonverbal incantations
are not helpful. They allow the caster to be more precise, for one thing, but also allow for more of the
user's power to aid in healing, rather than simply making the action possible."

His dark gaze, unfathomable and shuttered, swept over the Slytherins; once more he was careful to
not catch the Hermione's gaze. "For best results, one should try to find the reservoir of their magical
core and concentrate on bringing the power up and out over the injury. I have found that it easiest to
centre myself, and then visualize the change I want the healing action to bring about."

Snape pulled off his outer robe, hung it neatly over the chair, and sat down. Deftly, he undid the cuff
links on his shirt, and began to roll the sleeve up. "One does not have to like the person they heal. All
that is needed is the sufficient strength of will to affect change."

He picked up the knife, testing the balance of the blade. "I require a volunteer."

A pin drop could have been heard, and even Aelius Greengrass, normally so confident, hesitated to
come forward.

"Then you shall have one." A clear, feminine voice rippled through the quiet, and there was an edge
in the voice that was just a shade short of mocking. From several metres to the right of Hermione, a
girl stepped into the empty space between Severus and the rest of the crowd.

Lucretia Prewett was a pretty, if frigid-looking blonde sixth year. Graceful and always immaculately
put together, she carried with her a certain weight of knowledge that made her appear both older and
harder than her mere sixteen years. As the girl took one step forward, and then another, Hermione
recollected that Miss Prewett's father had been one of those struck down when Severus had
unleashed the killing curse upon his own Dark Mark. How on earth can she stand to be around
Severus?

Snape gave the girl a bow that was formal despite his sitting position. "How much healing training
have you had?"

"Very little. I know the fever charm, and a few bone-setting spells, but that is all."

Black eyes sliding again to the group, Snape continued. "Each of you tonight will have the chance to
practice healing spells at least twice. The first time, I want you to try to heal something without an
incantation to guide your magic. Following that, I want you to feel the difference in power and
ability when using a spell as the focus."

Without another word, Snape picked up the knife and drew it horizontally across the pale white
expanse of his forearm. For a moment it seemed as nothing had happened; then a thin red line
blossomed and bloomed. Within the space of another heartbeat, a wave of blood had swelled
upward, and ran down his arm in twin rivulets. It had to hurt, Hermione knew, yet he gave no
indication of it.

"Miss Prewett," Snape addressed the girl, voice almost pedantic in it's placidity. "I would have you
centre yourself and thoughts. When you feel ready, I want you to push your magic, your intent over
the wound."
As regal as any queen, Prewett inclined her head in acknowledgement, her action a mirror to Snape's earlier bow; again, Hermione thought that she caught a hint of satire in the response. Then the girl allowed her eyelids to fall to half-mast, and took several deep breaths. Chin jutting forward, she stared at Snape's forearm for a long moment. Slowly, she reached out and placed two fingers just above the streaming wound.

Nothing happened.

Snape was not looking down. Instead, the entirety of his regard was focused on the girl. The lack of progress appeared to not bother him one whit, even as the towel underneath his arm became saturated with blood and the tension in the room sky-rocketed.

Finally, after what seemed ages, the bleeding slowed, then stopped. If the wound did not precisely close, it did at least knit together somewhat. Snape finally glanced down at his arm, and queer sort of half-smile flickered over his expression as he took in the changes.

"Very well done. Tell me, Miss Prewett, how did you visualization the wound healing?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, the gesture stuck somewhere in between uncomfortable and graceful. "I pictured it older, I guess. Not quite as... fresh."

He nodded. "And that is precisely what you did. Clotting agents stopped the bleeding, and if you look at the edges of wound, you can see the beginnings of what is known as granulation tissue forming. These are all things that would occur naturally over time, assuming of course one does not either bleed out, or the area did not get infected in the interval."

Snape's wand appeared suddenly in his free hand. "There are many spells that can be used to heal flesh wounds. For the purpose of this demonstration, I will show you one of the more powerful and versatile spells. Observe closely, Miss Prewett." Waving his wand slowly over the other arm, Snape began to sing in a soft and low voice, and the hair on the back Hermione's neck stood to attention as the resonant sound filled the common room. For a brief moment, the strength of his magic filled the space like the tang of ozone after a strong thunderstorm, and Hermione found herself unable to tear her gaze away.

For a man who openly disdains 'foolish wand waving', he certainly can put on a show when he wants to, she thought a touch ruefully. As he made one elegant pass with his wand, Hermione reflected that it was actually rare to both see and hear him cast a spell; more often than not, he kept his incantations non-verbal, or simply did things in the Muggle fashion. He so rarely tips his hand, she thought. I know he's one of the more powerful wizards in Britain, but you wouldn't think it if you watched him over the course of a normal day. I suppose that served him well, before.

Focusing again on his arm, she saw that the blood had all but disappeared, and the flesh was knitting together smoothly. A final pass got rid of the lingering redness; his forearm regained the pristine pallor of earlier. But for the crimson fabric under the limb, Hermione could almost believe that the last several minutes had been all an illusion.

"The incantation is 'Vulnera Sanentur'. Like most Roman-based healing spells, it is usually sung rather spoken, with the phrase is repeated at least three times for maximum effect."

'Vulnera Sanentur', Miss Prewett repeated back to him carefully, and he inclined his head to acknowledge that she had gotten the pronunciation correct. This time when his slit open the skin of his arm, it did not come as quite as much of a shock; still, Hermione was troubled by his sudden decision to change the content of the meeting, and wondered how much of that had to do with his earlier tiff with Poppy.
Several of the braver students stepped closer to get a better view as Miss Prewett began to sing in a lovely, if slightly weedy soprano. As the girl focused her magic into the spell, her face seemed to soften, and some of her hard shell fell away, rendering her altogether more vulnerable looking. She did not manage to completely heal the wound as Snape had; his arm still looked a rather angry red, and the skin was not smooth—but it was impressive how much she did manage to fix.

"How would you describe the difference, Miss Prewett?" Snape inquired after repairing his forearm again.

"It's like merely throwing quaffle into the air, and trying again but aiming and throwing it through a hoop; you get a sense of effort expanded with both, but with the later there is more of a notion of success or failure."

"An interesting, if apt way of phrasing it. Well done, Miss Prewett. Who will volunteer next?"

To absolutely no one's surprise, Aelius Greengrass went next, and Snape tacked on a second healing spell to the lesson: Emaculo Integer. Once the prefect had completed the drill, Snape addressed the students again.

"While you wait your turn, I want you to separate into groups of three. One of you will be injured and lying prone on the ground, one of you will attempt to extend a shielding over not just yourselves, but also the person on the ground. The third person will be attempting to penetrate the shield charm with Rictusempra. You will rotate roles every two minutes, and Professor Granger will assist where needed. Any questions?"

Twenty minutes later, sounds of muffled laughter echoed throughout the Common Room, and the mood had lighted considerably. Glancing over, she noted that Snape was working with a fifth year on one of the healing spells; he finally met her gaze, and arched an interrogative eyebrow at her in clear challenge. Sliding over to the shadows by the entrance, Hermione firmed her own shield charm, picked five of the aggressors out from the groups and sent out a vigorous stinging hex at them.

She had to bite back a smirk at the chorus of squeals that rang out. Snape, however, did not bother to hide his amusement. "When attempting to hex others, it's always important to remember to also protect yourself. Be glad that it was my apprentice doing the casting, not I," he said. "Change of rules. Injured people are not always judicious with the spells they fling about. Accordingly, the prone person will be trying to hit anyone they can with Rictusempra. Professor Granger will also be ensuring that everyone has their shields up. Carry on."

Apparently, the Slytherins took Snape's injunction to try and hex anyone as also including her; within the first minute, her shield had absorbed no less than ten hits. Deciding enough was enough, she tweaked the shield to send the charm back out, boomerang style. Her timing couldn't have been better; three students had evidently decided to gang up on her and send out hexes at the same time.

The air around her flashed a blinding blue, and the resulting ricochet caused several students to collapse in near hysterical giggles as they were hit with the rebounding Rictusempra. Seeing several grins from the remaining students, Hermione braced herself... and then decided to have a bit of fun. In an opportunity too good to resist, she noted that Aelius Greengrass was standing only an arms-length from her. Snagging the boy's elbow, she swung him in front of her just as she was hit by a barrage of hexes; had it not been for the fact that she had pulled him into her own shielding, he would have likely been sent to the floor in fit of uncontrolled tickled-caused laughter.

There was no second barrage; the sight of the ever-popular prefect being used as a human shield was
enough to the stay the hands of his house. Greengrass swirled, looking shocked that she would stoop to such a tactic. "Oi! That wasn't fair, Professor Granger."

She smiled at him, entirely unrepentant. "Nether is ten against one, nor life in general, Mr. Greengrass. Besides which, the more shields you have- magical or otherwise- the harder it is to get hit."

"So what would you do in a situation like this?" he asked, tilting a curious head at her.

"A friend down hurt and someone attacking?" Hermione clarified, and he nodded. The entire room was paying attention; even Snape and the fifth year had stopped and were listening for the answer. "I suppose that would depend in part what the context was. Ideally, I would not only shield myself and the other person, but I would take cover- a table, a wall, something physical. Remember, when you're in a fight, it's not only spells flying around. There's plenty of other debris that can hurt you as well." Thinking of Fred, she added, "A good friend of mine was killed not by a spell, but by falling bricks, so it's a factor that I always try to account for. Once I've gotten myself and other person into as safe of position as I can manage, the next step is to summon help." Switching into more of a lecture mood, Hermione quizzed the class at large. "What are some ways that you might be able to ask for help?"

"Send up red wand sparks," Aelius put in promptly. "That's what my father taught us when we'd get lost in the woods around our manor."

"Absolutely. What's another?" she asked.

"A patronus!" a girl with glasses shouted.

One of the older boys scoffed. "Yeah, right. Like one of us can do that spell. They don't even teach it until seventh year."

Snape entered the fray. "A fact that does not prohibit you from trying to learn it earlier, Mr. Phillips. I was able to cast a Patronus by fourth year, and if memory serves, Professor Granger was able to do so in her third year. It is difficult, but not impossible."

Feeling that she'd better set the record straight, Hermione interjected, "I was able to produce a non-corporeal Patronus in third year; it wasn't until fifth year that I could cast a full Patronus. Harry..." she paused, uncomfortable for a moment, "It was Harry who was able to cast a full Patronus by the end of third year."

"Naturally, it had to be the estimable Mr. Potter," Snape said with slight sarcasm. "How could I forget that little detail?"

Remembering how the events with Sirius and Professor Lupin in the Shrieking Shack unfolded, Hermione replied, "Blunt force trauma to the head?"

Before Snape could do any more than glower at her reminder, Aelius Greengrass asked, "Can we see what a Patronus looks like?"

To her surprise, Snape acquiesced easily enough. "Bear in mind that everyone has a different Patronus, so knowing what mine looks like only provides a single illustration. There is quite a variance in appearance, as well as the shade and brightness of each Patronus, for example. *Expecto Patronum*," he intoned, almost lazily.

Hermione was expecting the dainty doe; what shot from Snape's wand was very different. Instead of four legs, she saw two wings, and the flash of a large, curved beak as it circled the room. Deftly, the
silver creature back winged, landing on the high back of a sofa, and gave the onlooking students an irritated, imperious caw before dissolving into mist.

"A raven?" Hermione stated, seeking to hide her shock for a second time that evening.

Snape's eyes glinted just as sharply as the raven's had. "A raven, Professor Granger."

"And what is yours, Professor?" Meredith Fairly inquired, oblivious to the undercurrents of the conversation.

She swallowed, reaching for a measure a detachment. "It was an otter. I'm not sure if that's still true. It's been a very long time since I've cast one. Quite honestly, I was unable to conjure it the last several times that I tried." Again, she strove to adopt a more professorial tone. "As you may know, the Patronus Charm relies upon the user being able to summon up the most positive and powerful memories directly prior to casting it; for my part, the memories that I had relied on are no longer... happy enough, I guess you could say, to be able to fuel the charm. It's been over five years since I've even given it a go."

Hermione took a deep breath, letting her mind drift in search of a properly happy memory. Before, it had always been the day that she received her Hogwarts letter, and her joy and excitement as she'd read it at the kitchen table with her Mum and Dad. But she couldn't recall her parents without an accompanying flood of grief, so instead, she chose a more recent event: the day she had found out that she'd been granted her doctorate.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" she cried, swishing her wand about in the familiar concentric circles of the spell. For a brief second it seemed that as if the tip of her wand had brighten, but as she completed the pattern, it became clear that nothing more was emerging. She looked at her wand, a soft swell of sadness afloat in her stomach. *Foolish of me, but I miss my otter..."

"It appears," she said crisply, "...that I have some revising of my own to do."

As Aelius Greengrass opened his mouth to ask another question, the supper bell rang. Snape stepped into the centre of the room, rolling down his sleeve as he did so.

"How many of you have not had a chance to practice the healing portion of tonight's lesson?" he asked. Nine students raised their hands in response. "I want the second and third years to come to my office hours tomorrow night to practice; everyone else who has not gone will meet a half hour prior to the House meeting on Thursday." Hermione felt that odd shift in the wards again, even as Snape continued to speak. "For obvious reasons, you cannot practice this charm on either yourself or your peers. Barring an emergency, be aware that the protective wards of this castle will prevent you from trying to use it without the express permission of a staff member. Dismissed."

The space was sudden overrun with chattering first years as they headed for the Great Hall; Hermione thought it prudent to stand aside lest she be trampled by hungry students. In less than a minute, the common room was empty again.

"Do you have supper supervision tonight?" she asked as she pushed several stray chairs back into position.

"Yes," Snape replied, doing much the same as she. Taking a final glance around the space, she saw that it had been restored to a semblance of tidiness, and started for the exit. Reaching the hallway, Hermione started to peel off to the left towards the stairs that lead to the staff tower. Snape followed, to her surprise.
At her inquiring look, he murmured, "I want to change my shirt."

They were both silent on the way back to their quarters; for her part, Hermione was sifting through the various memories that might prove to be more efficacious in producing a Patronus. *So if graduation didn't work, what might? Perhaps something simpler... like time when I was more content and at peace, rather than outrageously happy.* Two images sprung immediately to mind; one of the last dinner parties that she'd held at her flat in Aberystwyth with her friends, and sitting on the garden bench with Arthur Weasley after deciding to accept Severus' offer for apprenticeship.

She walked through the shared entrance to their quarters first, absently holding the door open for Severus. *It might be worth it to ask Poppy about it. Surely I can't be the only person to suddenly have issue with that particular charm, especially after the war... Harry might know something too. He is an Auror, after all; I'll have to remember to ask him next time I write.*

A hand on her elbow stopped her; turning, she glanced back at Severus.

"I did not mean to embarrass you in front of the students," he started, and at her blank look, clarified. "Had I known that you were having issues with the Patronus Charm, I never would have brought it up in such a manner."

Hermione shifted all the way around, facing him completely. That she'd been unable to cast a spell in front of students had not really bothered her; truthfully, she was far more worried about why he had abruptly decided to teach something that required more than a little pain after the fight with Poppy.

"You didn't embarrass me," she reassured. He gave a disbelieving scoff, and she shook her head. "You didn't. In years past, yes, that would have bothered me a great deal. But now? I'm not perfect, and I'm not going to waste a whole lot of time and energy in pretending to be. If some of the students think less of me because of it, then so be it."

"It did not even occur to me that you might not be able to cast a Patronus," he said, still abashed. "How long has that been an issue?"

"I started having problems casting it a couple of months after Voldemort fell. When I found out that my parents had been killed, I ceased being able to cast it entirely." She cocked her head, curious. "Have you always been able to produce one?"

"Yes," he stated. "That and Occlumency are the two things that have never failed me, even as a student."

"What do you..." she started to ask, and then stopped, visions of Harry's mum dancing through her thoughts.

He gave her a shrewd glance, but replied rather blandly. "I have always thought of what is most important to me, rather than a specific event or object." *Well, that was suitably cryptic, she thought. That could refer to any number of things... or people.*

Deciding to drop that particular subject for the time being, she said, "Since you brought it up, I would greatly prefer that you give me a warning the next time you decide to... deviate from the plan. I can hardly play the sophisticated professor when I'm gaping like Muggle firstie."

Like a cloud obscuring the sun, his expression became harder to read. "That was the method in which Poppy taught me those healing charms."

"I am not objecting to your methods," she said firmly. *Well, that's not quite the truth. They did bother me... "A bit of a warning if possible would be nice. I'm not keen on seeing you bleeding all over the
"furniture again."

"That bothered you?" he asked carefully, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Yes. I wasn't about to start foaming at the mouth or anything, but I would have preferred to be able to brace myself. Having a panic attack in front of the students would have been embarrassing. I don't care if they think me a slag or a sycophant, but crazy is not be borne. And speaking of that, stick out your arm," she ordered.

He complied grudgingly, rolling up the sleeve. His arm was reddened and very angry appearing, but the skin was mostly unbroken; taking in the expanding series bruising and welts, she reflected that it appeared rather like someone had smacked him repeatedly with a cane or ruler.

Pulling out the small crystalline bottle that she always kept in her robes, Hermione poured some of the brown liquid onto Severus' forearm; the instant it hit his flesh, it started to bubble and steam.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, and yanked his arm away.

"Oh, don't be such a ninny. If you can cut your arm open forty times in the space of a lesson, surely you can handle a single application of dittany."

"It burns," he groused, and eyed her with some approbation.

Carefully, she stuck the stopper back into the bottle, wiggling it to ensure a tight fit. "Then don't be such a glutton for punishment."

His chin jerked up at her reference, and she saw his lips thin momentarily before he subsided again. Wordlessly, she placed the bottle into his hand and wrapped his fingers around it.

"You are my friend, Severus," she said. "I don't like to see you hurt, regardless of cause. Now, you'd better go change. If you are any later to supper, Minerva will have your hide, and you'll need a lot more than dittany to fix it."

"Bossy, interfering, know-it all," he muttered.

She smirked. "Yup. Pot," she intoned, gesturing first to herself, than him. "Kettle."
Hermione graded her first series of quizzes between bites of a hastily eaten supper. She wanted to finish with the papers before her visit to Poppy in hopes of delving into the books she’d checked out before she went to bed. *With my luck, however, there will be some further oddball emergency that will prevent that from happening; a plague of toads, or rather, toad parts...? And I won’t have time tomorrow, not with both lectures and potions duties...*

The clock had just hit half past seven when she transferred the final mark into her grade book. Slipping a navy blue robe over her jeans and jumper, she made her way up to the Hospital Ward. Poppy was bent over a student in one of the beds, murmuring something too quietly for her to make out; the Healer discreetly motioned her towards the office.

The private room was warmly lit and surrounded on three sides by packed bookshelves. A fourth wall featured the inky blank expanse of a large window, and Hermione wondered what the woman had chosen for her own view. Turning slowly to take the room in, she saw a thick manila file folder lying next to a notebook on a side table; peering closer at the item, she saw that the file had her name on it.

Flipping open the cover, Hermione saw that it was indeed her student health records, and had to smile at the picture of her eleven year-old self, frizzy haired and grinning widely.

*My goodness,* she thought dolefully, *my massive teeth must have given my parents nightmares. Bloody good thing I am witch, or I would have been in braces for most of my natural life.*

Idly, she skimmed through several more pages- her yearly check-ups had always been excellent-until she came to the section detailing her wounds received in the fighting the Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries.

The handwriting was different; reading the name on the top, she realized that it was copy of the Healer’s notes from St. Mungo's.

*Patient presented with open haemopneumothorax due to unknown Dark Magic curse; possible deviation of the Entrail Expelling Curse. Single open wound starting at the inferomedial quadrant of the left breast, approximately 2 cm from the nipple and extending downwards towards the umbilical. Displayed marked dyspnoea and anxiety; hypovolemic. Flail chest clearly evident from external examination. Median sternotomy revealed gross defects to the intrathoracic organs, pericardial tamponade, major bilateral damage to the parenchymal sections of the lungs, minor pneumoperitoneum and pleural empyema. Chyle also present in the pleural space.*

*Patient intubated and sedated, given a continuous flow of blood replenishing potion. Unable to perform pericardiocentesis, thoracotomy, or any affect any closure of wounds due to Dark Curse; outside curse breaker brought in per Hogwarts request...*

Hermione stopped reading, feeling suddenly nauseous. She did not remember much after she’d received the chest wound from Dolohov; there had been intense pressure and pain, and she had several lingering chaotic impressions of what she could only assume was the emergency department...
of St. Mungo's.

Poppy's soft footsteps sounded behind her, and Hermione turned to greet the Healer. The other woman saw the file in her hands, and gave her a thin smile.

"Not very pleasant after-supper reading, is it?"

Hermione made a wry face. "No, not particularly something that would aid the digestion. Even without understanding the better part of the particulars, it's pretty gruesome."

"Would you like me to explain it?" Poppy inquired carefully.

Hermione found that she did. It was far more than a simple, if morbid curiosity that was driving her to understand what had happened to her so many years before; she wanted to reclaim some of the blank spaces of her past. "Maybe just the beginning section. Despite taking anatomy, I'm not quite sure what all this means."

Poppy moved to her side, and placed a delicate finger under the first line. "An open haemopneumothorax means that your chest wall had been punctured, and you had both air and blood free floating in your chest cavity. That resulted in your lungs not being able to expand due to the growing pressure… your right lung eventually collapsed, if I remember correctly."

She tapped her finger on the page again. "Now, you'll know well enough where the wound was- do you still have scarring from it?" she asked as an aside.

"Yes," Hermione answered. "It's never really gotten any better."

"Hmmm," the Healer mused. "There have been some significant advancements in scar removing salves over the last five years. I'll have to look into them… anyway, dyspnoea means that you were extremely short of breath, and hypovolemic refers to being in a state of shock due to advanced blood loss. Flail chest is when significant sections of your rib cage are broken free from the chest wall. That contributed greatly to your lung collapse. Do you remember what the intrathoracic organs are?"

"The heart, lungs, oesophagus…"

"Correct. Now, let's see, where were we? Ah, yes, pericardial tamponade. While the heart is a muscle, and thus capable of flexing, the sack around it is not. In your case, that sack started to fill with blood and pus, causing a decreased and irregular rhythm. Bilateral damage to the parenchymal… both your lungs had trauma to the interior structures that process oxygen into the blood stream. You had air trapped in your abdomen… the pleural empyema refers to the pus and infection around your heart. Chyle is lymphatic fluid, so we knew that you had ruptured your thoracic duct on top of everything else. As you can tell, you were a right mess."

"What happened next?"

"Severus and another Healer were able stabilize you enough for the curse to fade, and then they took you to surgery to fix everything. It was several days before we had any real hope that you would recover. Your mother was quite the sight to behold." Poppy smiled then, and squeezed her hand in a comforting fashion. "She ripped into both Albus and Minerva, and nearly pestered the Healers into insanity. I think that the Healers only saw them as Muggles, not as fellow medical professionals, so they didn't really bother to explain what they were doing, or what had happened."

"I'm sure that went over like a load bricks," Hermione replied, a sharp swell of grief racing over her as she thought of her parents.
"That it did. I know that they were dentists, but they also had some general medical training, did they not?"

She nodded. "They met when they were both volunteer paramedics. They eventually got fully certificated, and did quite a few medical missions in Africa with the Church."

A contemplative expression crossed the Healer's face. "Oddly enough, it was Severus that got them calmed down enough to listen to reason; they were plotting how to break you out of St. Mungo's and take you a Muggle hospital. He sat them down explained the situation, and how they were fixing it."

"I wonder what he said," Hermione mused. "It must have been good. They didn't ask me much when I woke up."

"Well, you'll have to find that one out yourself." Poppy pulled out her notebook. "Now, unless you've any further questions, let's start in on your health history. I have a feeling this is going to take awhile…"

It took almost two hours; Hermione was on her third cup of tea by the time they finished. She watched Poppy transcribing her final notes into the file; the woman looked up as she placed the last privacy charm upon it.

"The physical shows nothing untoward, so you can rest easy about that, at least."

Hermione swallowed, and glanced down at her teacup, examining the nonsensical patterns of the tealeaves for advice. What she really wanted to ask about was the fight between the other woman and Severus earlier that evening.

There had been much in that conflict that she had not understood. It had been clear, however, that the confrontation had bothered Severus enough that he had made a rather drastic change to the lesson plans. That the change involved him hurting himself- repeatedly- bothered her greatly. While she understood that he had a different… relationship to pain, and even to the notion of self-sacrifice- it would be hard not to, given his many years of being a spy in among Voldemort's followers- his actions that evening had not rung true the man that she had worked with for the last half year. She was hesitant, however, to bring the subject up; the Healer was Severus' friend first and foremost, and Hermione was loath to interfere in matters perhaps best left untouched.

Apparently Poppy saw enough of the question in her mien to bring up the topic herself. "So, how was Severus the last time you saw him?"

"Still in a bit of strop, but not nearly so…"

"Grumpy? Petulant as any spotty youth?" the Healer provided dryly.

Hermione laughed a little. "Your words, not mine. But yes, he was a better mood when he went down to supper." She paused, and then decided that there was no point in holding back. "He decided to teach the upper level Slytherins healing charms tonight."

"Did he now?" Poppy went still at her revelation, gaze going sharp.

"Severus sliced open his own arm and had the students practice the spells on it. He, uh, mentioned that you taught him that method of instruction."

"I did." Poppy's mouth compressed into a thin line, and Hermione could see that she was not happy to hear what had occurred. "However, I did not teach a room full of students in that way; there are
healing simulacrums for when you need to demonstrate a technique to larger groups."

"The timing of it… seemed off."

"That bloody fool," Poppy snapped, sounding rather unlike her normal self.

"He was that," Hermione agreed quietly. "Especially by the end… Poppy, why did he object so strongly to having a physical done on him?"

The woman sighed gustily. "To be honest, I'm not sure how much I can tell you: my Healer's Oath would prevent most of it without his express permission."

"Thankfully," a brusque Scottish voice cut through the room, "I am not bound by such oaths, and can divulge quite a lot more." Minerva McGonagall strode in, looking about as grim as Poppy.

"He would not like you discussing it, even among friends," Poppy maintained stiffly.

"And we all know that you don't always get what you want," Minerva stated firmly. "Don't you get all stroppy with me, Poppy. I'll not spill all the precious beans. It's important for Hermione to understand some of what happened before. Severus certainly won't unbend enough to tell her."

Poppy said nothing, her mulish silence making her suddenly resemble Severus a great deal more than usual. Minerva took a seat at the side table, and stared at the other woman for a long moment, finally giving a snort. "Oh, come off it, you know I'm correct."

She switched her attention to Hermione. "Albus, on the best of days, was a benevolent tyrant. On the worst of days… well, if there was one thing above any other that he could not stomach, it was not knowing the full details of something. He had absolutely no compunction about not allowing a person any sort of privacy; Severus more than others. Albus made it clear one of the costs of penitence was that Severus did not have any right to privacy. The former Headmaster, in all of his manipulate wisdom, frequently used that guilt- Severus' desire for atonement- against him as cudgel to get his way in any number of areas." She paused, and gave Hermione an unhappy little smile. "I think you are familiar enough, Hermione, of how Albus could use a call to emotions to motivate people to understand how it could start to wear on you after awhile."

Hermione nodded, thinking about the number of scrapes- horrid situations, really, she corrected herself- that she had been involved in as a student, and how the Headmaster had always been there afterwards to thank them for the service and sacrifice; he had made it seem almost normal, almost… expected that they would take part in the fight even when it had been insanely dangerous for them to do so. It had only been after several years away from the magical community that she had realized how off her childhood had been, and how much the Headmaster had used her and her friends to fight in battles they should not.

"Ironic that we talk about Albus not allowing Severus any secrets, and now we go discussing things behind his back. But some things… well, left alone, they fester." The Headmistress was looking at the Healer as she spoke, and Hermione rather thought that the older woman was still trying to convince Poppy that speaking so freely was necessary.

Poppy's expression had not softened, and Minerva fussed with sleeve of her robe for second, finally continuing. "You know, I think, that Severus was tortured quite a bit by both Voldemort, and other Death Eaters?"

Hermione, nodded slowly, not liking where this was heading. "For the most part, Severus healed himself, and in doing, concealed the worst of the damage from everyone. It drove Albus spare; never
mind that Severus gave him a full accounting of what was happening, he had to have all the gory details."

"Thus, he forced Severus to undergo monthly physicals during the first war," Poppy interjected angrily; Hermione was not sure if the emotion sprung from a latent ire at the Headmaster, or at the current Head for making her reveal it. "When things started to go badly during the second go-around- your fourth year or so- he made me perform weekly checks. Severus had no privacy at all…"

"It was far more than just Cruciatu," Minerva said softly. "There were certain… acts that he flatly refused to do, and as a result, he more often than not suffered them himself."

Feeling as though she was about vomit, Hermione rose and walked swiftly over the darkened window, placing a shaky hand against the cold glass to steady herself. She had spent enough time suffering the degradations of various Death Eaters and Snatchers to know what was being tactfully hinted at; she was also quite sure that she didn't want to know any further details.

"It was long enough ago that I thought he'd not react in that fashion… and he's been so obliging as of late…" The Healer swallowed thickly. "Quite frankly, the only reason that I asked him about undergoing a physical is that I'm worried that he might have the same sort of illness that you do, Hermione. Lord knows he's been exposed to enough Dark Magic that it would come as no great surprise."

"I've asked him, and he says not," the Headmistress said crisply.

"As have I, but you know how secretive he is about these sort of things. His leg could be dangling by a thread, and he'd hardly admit that there was a problem."

"Why do you think he decided to teach healing charms tonight? So that the Slytherins could heal themselves?" Hermione asked, struggling to keep her emotions under control.

It was Minerva that answered. "I would imagine so, yes. But there's far more to it. I think that he was punishing himself for denying Poppy something he knew was well within her rights to request. He'd walk through the bowels of Hell if someone he loved requested it."

"He did." Poppy said shortly.

"True enough," Minerva agreed. "But the only thing stronger than that man's loyalty is his capacity for self-loathing. What a better way to show you that he was fine- that he needed no Healer's help- than by hurting himself, repeatedly. Proof and punishment, all in one neat trick."

"How so very… logical," Hermione murmured.

"That's one adjective you could use." Minerva said flatly.

"I should not had phrased the request the way I did," fretted Poppy. "I thought I was being smart mentioning that both you and Filius undergo frequent checks; I did not want him to think I was singling him out…"

The Headmistress rose, and placed a sympathetic hand on Poppy's shoulder. "There is no point in trying to dance around Severus' issues. He'll be fine in a few days, and I'll speak to him when he's in a mood to listen. Do not take the dratted man's lead and punish yourself for something you can't control, Poppy."

"Yes, Headmistress," the Healer mouthed dutifully, a hint of humour restored to her expression.
Turning from the window, Hermione stretched as well, feeling her joints protest after sitting so long in a hard chair. "I'd better be off to bed as well. I won't say thank you for letting me in on… past events, but I do appreciate it. For what its worth," she stated, gazing a Poppy, "…I think that Minerva is correct. He'll be fine. I've bungled my way into several persona non grata topics and he's managed to shake it off."

She gave the two women a self-deprecating grin. "After all, he still asked me to be his apprentice after I acted the total arse. There's that... and I do think," she went on in more serious tones, thinking of his actions in the Slytherin Common Room "…that we can take heart in the fact that he has chosen to come back, and wasn't forced into any of this. Whatever his coping methods were in the past, they must be slightly more… advanced for that to happen, and happened so successfully yet far. He's still Neolithic, mind, but that's common among the males of our species."

"Neolithic?" the Headmistress asked, confusion clear.

"Stone age," Hermione supplied.

"That's not something I'll argue with," Minerva said. "Men are rather stone-headed. But then I've always felt that this world would be a far better place if we women ran it."

Hermione was stretched out on her sofa in her rattiest pair of sweats and a t-shirt, her outfit made replete by the pair of pristine white cotton gloves, when she heard a knock on the half-open door. Placing the leather bound book- Rights and Responsibilities of Apprentices through the Ages- carefully back into the carryall, she said, "Come in."

Severus' eyebrow nearly hit his hairline as he took in her attire and relaxed pose. "Another long day?"

"I didn't sleep particularly well," Hermione admitted.

"There's a lot of that going around," Severus said, twisting his head about so he could read the title of the book in the bag. His eyes, when he met her gaze, were unreadable. "Both Poppy and Minerva appeared in much the same state at breakfast this morning."

"Imagine that," Hermione shot back with some asperity, then sighed, deciding to drop it. "There were also yet more guts hitting my ceiling this afternoon. As it came from the Hufflepuffs this time, I'm inclined to think it was an accident…"

Severus smirked. "It's never an accident. Trust me on this."

"Regardless, I'm just happy that the day is over. Hence the crazy cat woman attire and relaxed pose. "Another long day?"

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"Regardless, I'm just happy that the day is over. Hence the crazy cat woman attire and the massive glass of vino, she told him, pointing towards the Riesling sitting on the kitchen table.

"Alas, it's not quite over…" he replied, giving her an odd look. But before Hermione could ask him what he meant, he asked her a question. "Doing some extracurricular reading?"

He started to reach for the book, but Hermione smacked his hand away. "Madame Pince says you aren't allowed to touch."

Rubbing his hand resentfully, he muttered, "I've never understood why that woman hates me…"

"Because you write in all her books?" Hermione suggested sweetly.

"The charm to remove handwriting is very simple," he said. "Besides which, if one was not
supposed to mark up a book, the authors would not provide so much space in the margins to do so." He
gave the leather bound volume a look of profound disgust, and then repeated his question. "So…
extracurricular reading?"

"Yes," she replied, glad that the decision to hide her research had been taken out of her hands. "I
checked these out yesterday. I thought I'd look more into the binding ceremony."

"Find anything interesting?" he inquired neutrally.

"Not yet. Do you want me to tell you when I do?"

"If you wish," Severus said with a non-committal shrug.

"Do you mind that I'm doing more reading?" Hermione asked, feeling as though she was pulling
teeth to get any sort of reasoning from him.

He gave her a chiding expression. "No, I don't. I've already told you my view. I'm also well aware of
your inability to drop things, so I figured that you would be doing more research regardless of any
objections."

She swallowed, thinking that given the suddenly peeved quality of his tone, she ought to explain
things better. "Severus, it's not a matter of trust, or wanting to change things. It's just… there are days
that I feel perilously close to spinning out of control, and when it comes to matters concerning my
health and body, or even my magic, I have to know what's going on. I can't just accept things on a
wing and a prayer these days."

Something in his face relaxed at her answer, and his tone was far more conciliatory when he
responded. "I can appreciate that. If you wish my help, you only need to ask."

"Thank you." Hermione glanced down at the large, butcher-paper wrapped package that he'd sat at
his feet at the start of their conversation. "What's that? And why did you say that my day wasn't
over?"

Again, he gave her that quizzical stare. Picking up the package, he deposited it onto her lap. "Happy
Birthday."

"It's not my birthday," she said automatically, not touching the package.

"Today is the nineteenth of September, is it not?" he drawled.

"Bugger. It is my birthday."

"Judging from the overwhelming nature of your excited response, should I conveniently forget the
occasion of your natal day next year?"

Hermione laughed, and began pulling at the paper. "No, it's not that. I don't mind getting older." She
glanced up at him. "Truthfully, I didn't think that I'd get past twenty, so each additional year is a
good thing. No, I just sort of… stopped celebrating my birthday when I left the wizarding world.
Without my parents and friends there didn't seem to be much of point. Out of sight, out of mind, I
guess."

"Now who's being the glutton for punishment?" he commented wryly.

"I am," she admitted. "Lucky for me, someone still remembered and was kind enough to get me a
big pressie…" The paper finally fell away, revealing a pair brand-new dragonhide boots, gloves, and
"They are the traditional items..." he started gruffly, before Hermione interrupted.

"...presented to an apprentice by their master on the occasion of the first birthday, post-binding. I just read it in *Rights and Responsibilities of Apprentices through the Ages*, as a matter of fact." Hermione beamed up at him, hefting the items in her hands. "My goodness, they are light..."

"Besides the normal shielding and repelling spells, they have charms to regulate weight and temperature. They are also charmed to automatically re-size each time you wear them."

She blinked, mentally cataloguing all the work that had to have gone into layering that many complex magical spells on top of each other. "Did you do this all by yourself?"

"I could hardly gift you with something that is substandard to what I use. Besides which, you needed a kit that fitted properly." He was staring at the boots, not her. "And now you won't remind me of a herd of elephants when you work in lab."

"Are you calling me fat?" she mock-exclaimed.

"No," he shot back. "Just loud."

"Did you put a silencing spell on them, then? Something to prohibit me from asking questions?" she teased, a smile creeping over her face.

"I can make that adjustment," he said, and started to reach for the boots.

"Nope. Next time. I want to try them on now." With two quick wiggles, she kicked her sheepskin slippers off and slid into the knee-high boots. She felt the magic in them pulse for a slow second, and then the items shrank to fit her perfectly. With a grin, she pulled on the apron, then the gloves, the same thing happening as well.

"Thank you." She grinned warmly. "They are perfect." Closing the distance between the two of them, she impulsively gave him a hug and brief kiss on the cheek. Stepping back, she noted he looked rather pleased with himself. Doing a happy little two-step, Hermione joked, "I feel like I could dance in this gear, it's so airy and comfortable."

"I wouldn't, were I you." His tone was mildly sarcastic.

"Spoilsport," she retorted, sticking her tongue out at him. "So is this what you meant when you said my night wasn't over, or is there something else I should be prepared for?"

"Mercenary little thing, aren't you? First you forget your birthday, then you want more attention heaped upon you..."

She merely gave him an imperious glare, to which he responded with smug silence.

"What else?" she demanded firmly, hands going to her hips.

"I have been informed by Longbottom that he has arranged a surprise birthday dinner for you. It is also my understanding that many Weasleys, as well as certain Mr. Potter, will be in attendance. Longbottom should be along shortly with some sort of specious excuse to get you to the staff room."

"Oh, bollocks. I hate surprises."

"Well, now it's not one, so that's one problem solved."
"Thank you," she said, and squeezed his arm in real gratitude for the warning. She glanced down at her clothes, and groaned aloud again. "But now I'm going to have to go get dressed again…"

"I don't see why. All the important bits are properly covered up."

"This coming from the man who spells his running shirts to stay perfectly white. No, I'll go change into something fit for company. If I went like this, I'd only further cement my reputation as crazy." She sighed again, feeling rather sulky.

He narrowed his eyes at her in vexation. "I have some Cheering Solution if you think it might help matters. It should stop your whinging, at least..."

"You know," she said thoughtfully, ignoring the later half of his statement, "…that's not a half bad idea."

A knock sounded on the outdoor, and Severus loosened the wards to permit entry.

Seconds later, Neville poked his head into her quarters, doing a comical double-take as he took in her wild hair, sweats, t-shirt and dragonhide accoutrement.

"Blimey Hermione, have you had too much to drink already?" he asked.

"No yet," she threatened.

Neville glanced between her and Snape. "You told her," he accused, appearing somewhat hurt.

"My apprentice," he informed the younger man, stressing the possessive, "…does not appreciate surprises."

"Is that so?" Neville said sardonically. Then he shrugged good-naturedly, dropping a bit of the act. "Fair enough, I suppose. Hermione, everyone is here, so do you want to go down? Or would you prefer to change, first?"

Hermione said nothing, merely turned and flounced towards her bedroom, rewarded by Neville's laugh.

She emerged ten minutes later, having tamed her hair into a semblance of order, and wearing her favourite purple wrap dress. On a whim, she'd left Severus' boots on. The dark grey colour complemented the dress, and footwear was not the clunky, masculine affairs she'd previously been wearing; if anything, they resembled low-heeled riding boots.

Neville rose, having evidently spent the time petting Crookshanks, and smiled obligingly at her improved appearance. Severus, on the other hand, said nothing, but there was a glint in his eyes that spoke to his approval.

She walked up to where he was lounging in her doorway and asked, "Will you be joining us?"

"I'd rather dine with angry Blast-Ended Skrewts," he responded shortly.

"That can be arraigned," Neville offered.

They both ignored his pithy comment. She pointed to the small, obscenely yellow vial that was casually dangling from Severus' fingers.

"What's that?"
"Cheering Solution," he replied.

Cocking her head, she eyed the object, admiring the graceful, masculine lines of Severus' hands. *And just keep those thoughts out of the gutter, Granger…*

He hadn't so much as blinked when she glanced back up again. "Can still I drink after taking it?"

"I wouldn't, were I you," he said, echoing his line from earlier.

"Then merely drinking it is," She smiled a little. "Are you sure that you don't want to join us?"

"Quite. Besides, a senior member of staff needs to be present at supper."

"Alright." Shoving her disappointment away, Hermione reached over to squeeze his arm a final time. "Thank you. For everything tonight."

"You're welcome," he said, and standing as close as she was, Hermione could see the way his eyes had morphed into a chocolaty brown in the lamplight. The urge to lean upward and give him another swift kiss on the cheek- just a simple buss, nothing more- suddenly overwhelmed her. He smelt so nice…

Neville cleared his throat loudly.

She stepped back hurriedly. *Oh, well done, that. What is wrong with you tonight? Must be just about that time for my monthlies…*

"I'll see you later then," she announced brightly. "Neville, shall we?"

Once they'd smoothed over the awkward bits- which had occurred about the same time that everyone was finishing a second glass of potent elven-made wine- the evening proved to be a roaring success. It was a surprisingly crowded table; of the staff members, Minerva, Poppy, Pomona and Filius had come.

Naturally, the elder Weasleys were also there, along with Bill and Fleur. Percy- whose sense of humour only got drier the more pissed he got- was in attendance, as was George. Ron, still being in America, had sent a surprisingly lovely card. To no one's shock, Harry had come stag.

"Ginny felt it was best that someone stay back and mind the baby," he explained haltingly.

"Someone is being a big baby, you mean," interjected George.

Harry had given the redhead a look, but George was unimpressed. "She is my wife, you know," Harry said, defending Ginny stoutly.

"And she's still my sister, which means I get to call her out when she's being a prat," George asserted.

"She is being a prat, Harry. Take my word on it. Of everyone here, I certainly have the most experience with such a state, and I say, she's being an utter prat. Wouldn't you agree, Headmistress?" Percy said with a smirk.

"Agree that you have many years experience being a prat, or your younger sister is currently existing in said state?" Minerva clarified with a gently raised eyebrow.

Percy made a face. "Phrased like that, I'm not sure I want to hear your answer."
"There's a smart lad, Mr. Weasley. One can almost understand why you work for the Ministry."

Three large cauldrons of soup appeared on the table then, along with loaves of crusty French bread.

"Bouillabaisse," Hermione said with a fond smile as she identified the fragrant main course.

"You still like it, right?" Neville asked as he ladled some into a bowl for Mrs. Weasley.

"I do," Hermione affirmed. "It's one of my favourites. Thank you for remembering, Neville."

Pitching her voice loud enough to address the entire table, Hermione said, "All of you: thank you so much for doing this. This was quite unexpected, and I do appreciate it more than I can say."

Neville shot her an amused glance, but wisely, chose not contradict her words.

"It's our pleasure, my dear. We are just glad to be celebrating with you," Mrs. Weasley said, eyes going a touch misty.

"Yeah, cheers, Hermione. After all, it's not everyday that you turn thirty-one…" George exclaimed.

"Twenty-nine, George. I'm turning twenty-nine…"

"If you insist…"

Two hours later, Hermione was well onto way to needing a vial or two of Sobering Solution. Attempting to creep down the far back stairs quietly, she had a right mental giggle thinking about the picture she must be making; Severus is right…I do sound like an elephant sometimes…oh, lord, I am so pissed...

She wasn't the only one, however; Neville, Harry, Arthur, George, Percy and Filius- all trailing a dozen steps behind her- could be found in similar states, and were likewise trying to sneak outside to Greenhouse Five without running into any curious students. Neville had been waxing poetic all night about a large Brazilian flowering carnivorous plant that he had successfully grown, and somehow near the end of the dessert course, it seemed like a brilliant idea for them to all go examine it in the moonlight.

They were just short of the double doors that would lead to the outside when one swung open, revealing Severus.

He had been out running, that much was obvious from his shorts and trainers. Amusement flooded his face as he took in their collective shambolic smirks.

Peering down at the diminutive Deputy Head, he said, "Pity that it would not be sporting of me to take points from your House for such an unbecoming display. What might the students think, Filius?"

"Do you see any students?" Flitwick made a sweeping gesture of unconcern. "Neville's got a large biting flower, Severus. We thought we'd go take a looksee…"

Severus gave a sardonic snort. "Is that what we are calling it, nowadays?"

Percy and George sniggered, and even Hermione had to bite back a laugh of her own.

"Actually," Neville began, sounding pompously drunk, "…it's called *Heliamphora chimantensis*, and it's classified as a pitcher plant… so it doesn't actually bite. The bugs get stuck in the reservoirs, you see… and it doesn't have flowers, as such, just multi-coloured leaves… but it is really massive…"
Snape put a hand up, and Neville trailed off, blinking. "Longbottom, stop speaking while you're still ahead."

In the lull that followed, Harry stepped out of the shadows of the staircase and into the moonlight.

All trace of emotion disappeared from Severus' continence, his loose-limb posture suddenly full of tension and something that Hermione couldn't quite name.

Harry, for his part, appeared calm, almost... detached. Hermione was struck anew with how little of the boy remained, despite the fact his obvious features- black hair, emerald eyes among others- having not changed. Hermione swung her head back to look at Severus. The mercurial qualities of the moonlight had transformed him; with his skin gone as pallid as alabaster, the network of scars on his neck stood out, dark and webbed. It made her recall the Shrieking Shack... Just as it occurred to her that Harry and Severus' last meeting had been in that beastly place, she was assaulted by a ferocious wave of memories: fear, making her limbs cold and shaky, the sight of massive amounts of blood, opaque as the surrounding night, utterly contrasted by the silver shimmer of memories hanging off a wand. There was the sensation of her fingers, fumbling and numbly grabbing for the small glass vial in her robes... a rasping gurgle, and searing, rebounding pain arching in time with his racing heart beat, shocked green eyes...

*Wait, pain? What pain?!...* Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath and stepped forward slightly; Severus' fathomless gaze snapped over to her, and abruptly, the flood of memories ceased.

As if coming from a tunnel, Harry's voice resounded oddly in the night. "Professor Snape."

Hermione saw Severus' lips start to narrow into a sneer before absolute impassivity once again blanked out all expression on his face. "Mr. Potter."

The next few seconds were excruciatingly awkward. The two men were staring in fierce absorption at each other; while it was not precisely an angry exchange, it was also nowhere near friendly. Hermione vacillated between wanting to say something- anything, really- to smooth over the meeting, and simply staying out of the way.

It was Snape that broke the tableau. With a quick burst of movement, he turned sharply and made for the front staircase. Despite being in trainers, shorts and t-shirt, he still seemed to leave the impression of billowing robes as he made off into the darkness.

"Longbottom," came the suddenly sober voice of Filius. "Lead on before we run into anyone else, will you?"

"Right," Neville replied, shoving the door open wider. "That's an excellent idea..."

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It was close to midnight before Hermione returned to her quarters. While Neville's carnivorous plants had proven to be less than fascinating, the mood had lightened again once George revealed that he'd nicked several more bottles of wine. An entertaining competition was spawned by the amusingly lurid shapes cast onto the glass walls by the various plants in the greenhouse; in a matter of minutes an increasingly complex series of shadow figures was being projected onto the reflective surface by each member of the party. It was Arthur, oddly enough, who was able produce the most imaginative- not to mention roguish- scenes. That, combined with Filius' penchant for equally naughty limericks, made Hermione feel like she'd quite suddenly stumbled into a stag party. She'd finally called it quits when Neville had popped the cork on the third bottle of wine, mindful that she had to teach come the morning.
Closing the outer door behind her, Hermione's gaze went to the entrance of Severus' quarters. That door was standing half open, and Hermione contemplated poking her head in and checking on him. They'd developed an unwritten code for visiting that so far was working out nicely: wide open meant come in, ajar indicated a knock and confirmation was required, and shut meant bugger off unless it was an emergency.

Well, it is half open... and while it might be late, he is a night owl...

Ignoring the fact that she was still rather tipsy, Hermione lightly rapped on the frame; after a moment, she heard his voice.

"Enter."

Easing through the doorway, she stepped in and let her eyes adjust to the dim lighting; a single lamp was lit in the far corner by the kitchen. Severus was sitting slouched in the middle of the sofa, bare feet propped on the coffee table.

Still in clad his running gear, he was loosely holding a shot glass in one hand, the drink precariously balanced on the flat plane of his stomach.

A half smile appeared as he took in her own rather mused appearance. "Have fun?" he inquired readily enough, voice dropping a full octave lower than normal with either the effects of sleep or drink.

"Yes," she answered, relieved that he seemed to be in a decent mood despite the events of the past several days. "Did you know that Flitwick has a positively encyclopaedic repertoire of naughty limericks? He had this ghastly one about a man from Ealing..."

He gave an amused chuff before finishing off the remainder of his drink. Raising the empty glass towards her, he began to recite the limerick in sonorous tones. "There once was a young man from Ealing, who pounded his pud with great feeling, then like a trout, he'd stick his mouth out, and wait for the drops from the ceiling."

She laughed, a flush spreading across her cheeks. "Yes, that one."

"Don't ever make the mistake of being around both Filius and Rolanda when they've been drinking." He shook his head, making a sour face. "They can make even me blush when they get really wound up."

"Dully noted." Walking over to the sofa, Hermione flapped a hand at him. "Budge over."

He raised an eyebrow at her order and remained solidly planted in the middle. She sighed. "Fine, have it your way." Plucking the shot glass from his hand, she leaned over him and snagged the bottle of pear brandy. Pouring a healthy two fingers, she flopped down on the leather sofa next to him, swinging her feet up companionably on the table next to his.

Turning his head, he gave her a scolding glance. "You are taking rather free liberties with both my settee and my alcohol."

"It's my birthday," she replied, blasé.

"For another thirteen minutes."

"Then for another thirteen minutes, I shall abuse my natal privileges merrily."
He said nothing to her sally, and she shifted a bit to get a better look at his expression. "All right, then?"

"I'm fine."

"Good," she said dryly. "I'd hate for you to be discomfited by something as simple as running into a former student in the hallway."

Severus gave her another dirty look. "It's a bit more complicated than that," he grumbled finally.

"I know," she replied, and took a sip of the brandy. Hermione found that the sweet stuff did not go well with all of the wine she'd already consumed, and so she carefully placed the half-full glass back into his hand. "That's why I asked."

"I'm fine," he repeated again, but met her gaze. "I knew he was in Castle, so it wasn't that much of a surprise."

It was a lie, and they both knew it; the meeting had provided a jolt to all involved. And while it might have been her imagination, she rather thought that she'd somehow been a recipient of his memories and remnants of his long-ago panic. The vivid recollection of pain- of seeing Harry's emerald eyes, wide with horror- was quite strong, and not something easily made up, no matter how much she had drunk. She wasn't sure how it had happened- perhaps it had been another facet of their bond- but as it seemed that he'd reached some sort of equilibrium, Hermione was disinclined to push it further.

"I'll not play friends with him the way I do Longbottom," he cautioned her suddenly. "So don't ask it of me."

"I wasn't aware that anyone had asked you to be nice to Harry," she murmured, pleased that he'd think she had enough stones to even suggest it. "But it's nice to know you feel that Neville is a friend."

"I said play friends, not that we are, in fact, friends," he corrected.

"If you say so, Severus." She smiled benignly at him, and he glowered.

"Nine minutes, Granger."

Hermione ignored his sarcastic jibe. "I had a lot fun once I stopped being such a big girl's blouse. It was awfully sweet of Neville to arrange things."

"Oh, yes, Longbottom is such a sweet boy," he snarked.

"He's not a boy."

"But he is sweet on you," Severus stated, and she couldn't tell if he was being serious, or merely teasing.


"He's not. Neville's carried a torch for Luna Lovegood since sixth year. Believe me, you wouldn't question it if you'd been there for some of the limericks he tried to make up tonight. I'm fairly sure that a good half of them are anatomically impossible…"

"I don't want to know," he said quickly, raising a long fingered hand in supplication.

They were both silent for a long moment, and Hermione started to feel sleepy. Sitting as close as they
were on the leather sofa, she could feel the heat radiating off Severus, and it was a struggle to not lean into his warmth.

"Luna Lovegood, hmmm?" he finally asked.

"Yeah."

"Bit of an odd duck."

"So is Neville, when it comes down to it. But you couldn't ask for more in a friend." The wonderfully familial feeling she'd gotten from sitting around a table with her friends returned, and she smiled. It had been nice- not just to be in the presence of people who knew her, as well as her past- but also to see everyone likewise happy. The conversation, and the laughter all recalled the dinner parties her parents had often thrown, and some of the happiest moments of her childhood.

"Do you have a favourite day of the week?" she asked him, mindful that her question would probably come across as a non sequitur, but not really caring.

He raised an eyebrow, but answered after a short pause. "Saturday, I suppose. The day starts with a bit of lie-in, I can brew whatever I want, and you still have Sunday to look forward too."

Hermione bit back a yawn. "For me, it's always been Sunday evenings. That was the one night my Mum would go all out and cook a proper dinner. We'd keep our church clothes on, and my Dad would set the table with the fancy Granger china. Sometimes they'd invite friends over, and I'd feel so adult, so very… cosmopolitan, sitting at the table listening to them debate current politics, or literature. And if it was just us, my Mum would put on an opera, and we'd listen to that while we ate."

"That sounds… exceedingly bucolic," Severus said, absent-mindedly swirling the pear brandy about in the glass.

"It was," she murmured, voice suddenly gone tight. "I was so lucky, growing up. Tonight reminded of those evenings; reminded me of my parents. Most days, I can almost fool myself into feeling that they are only on holiday, that they aren't really gone. And then I remember…"

Hermione stiffened her spine, fighting off tears. Turning her head to stare fixedly at the lamp, she worked to master her breathing. "I am not going to cry. Not here, not right now!"

From her right, she felt Severus shift, and heard a muffled clunk of the glass being set on the table. "Hermione," he stated, waiting for her look at him before he went on. "As trite as it sounds, the ones we love don't truly leave us. Not when they continue to inform our actions or inspire us to live better."

Hearing such unabashed sentiment from such an unlikely source was enough to set her waterworks off; the tears that had been threatening spilled over her cheeks, and she struggled mightily to keep from breaking down completely.

Severus wordlessly summoned a handkerchief from a pocket of the robes hanging by the door. Handing it to her with a raised brow, he said, "None of that now. There will be no crying on my settee."

She wiped hastily at the wetness on her face, feeling herself grow bright red with embarrassment. "It's my birthday, and I'll cry if I want to."

He merely rolled his eyes. "You have three minutes left of your birthday, Granger. That's hardly
enough time for a good cry. If you can get a hold of yourself, I'll tell you a story."

She could read nothing other a cautious wariness in his continence; Hermione gave a final sniff, and pushed a clump of curls away from her sticky cheeks. "I know," she said, trying to forestall any further commentary from him. "I am not an attractive crier."

"And I am a maudlin drunk." He shrugged, supremely unconcerned. "Now that we know each other's deepest, darkest secret, shall I go on with the story?"

"Only if you make it a good one," Hermione demanded, the last of her wayward emotions finally under control.

Severus gave her a narrowed-eyed glare, and took a sip of the brandy. He looked down for a brief second, and when his gaze returned to hers, it was altogether more serious.

"Even when I was a little boy, I liked to go on rambles. I needed to, really, or I'd be rather… well, rambunctious would be a charitable way to put it." He smirked at that, and Hermione smiled internally at his words, thinking that it was even true as an adult; Severus could be damn near insufferable when he skipped one of his daily runs.

"That presented a problem for my Mum; my father was the type that believed that all children should be seen, and not heard, and when he got home, the last thing he wanted to be reminded of was my presence. Most nights, after supper, my Mum and I would go for a walk to the park, just the two of us. I think that you know that I grew up outside of Manchester, in a mill town?"

She nodded, and he continued. "It was a run down, dreary place, and the park was no exception. The path leading to it was full of potholes and ruts. When it rained- which was most of the year, it seemed- there would be these massive puddles the last hundred metres or so that would just about block the entrance. One the way, my Mum would tell me stories about the various puddles- if you fell into one it would take you to all the way to China, that another had mermaids, or grindylows, or some such creature in it- and when we'd get there, it would a mad dash to jump over and around the puddles. It was our game, jumping to the safety of the park."

In her mind's eye, Hermione had a sudden vision of a younger Severus, face screwed up in concentration and exhilaration as he made running leaps over muddy puddles. She glanced up at the grown man in front of her; he had stopped speaking, and she saw something angry and sour cross his expression.

"When did you stop jumping the puddles?" she asked quietly, almost afraid to ask.

His response, when it came, was bitter. "When I was seven. My father shoved my Mum down the front stairs, and she broke her leg. He threatened to kill her if she used magic to fix it, and we didn't have the money to go to a proper hospital. Naturally, it never healed right, and she couldn't jump after that. But that's not the point of my story, Hermione." He sighed, and scrubbed his face with one hand. "The point is, my Mum isn't completely gone, because some forty years later, I still think about jumping over puddles when I see one. You might not be able to have supper with your parents any more, but that doesn't mean you can't recreate the tradition of family. To resort to yet another nauseating cliché, friends are the family you take; I think that your enjoyment of tonight's events proves that much. Host your own dinners. It won't be the same, but it will be better than nothing."

_Well, that little personal titbit makes for a rather unexpected second birthday present…_ It was funny, but he was correct; while the sentiment was trite, coming from one Severus Tobias Snape, it took on all the weight of a papal bull. _But why would he share it now? Why share it all?_ Glancing down at the table, she saw then that brandy bottle was mostly empty, and it occurred to her that he probably
had been drinking as much as she had that evening. And maybe he wasn't actually lying when he
said he was a maudlin drunk…

A gentle chiming indicated that it had struck midnight, and Hermione rose from the sofa, a feeling of
drifting off into dangerous waters niggling at the remains of her better sense. Severus had sunk down
further into the soft leather, in repose resembling nothing more than a sloe-eyed sultan.

"Isn't it 'friends are the family you make'?” she asked, returning to their conversation before sticking
out a hand to help him up.

Severus ignored the out stretched hand. "Is there a difference?"

"Between 'make' and 'take'? I rather think so."

"Not when the end result is the same."

"Just when I start thinking that you're not so Neolithic after all, you make a foolish statement like
that." Hermione tugged at his free hand, trying to pull him up. "Come on. I'm off to bed, and you
should be too." She heaved a second time, and he merely pulled back in perfect counterbalance.
Something in his face shifted, a lazy sort of impudence appearing, and it sparked an immediate
challenge in her. Putting her weight behind it, she gave a third tug; but this time, he pulled back, and
she nearly tumbled into his lap.

Then his gaze suddenly turned more predatory rather than lazy. "Perhaps there is a difference in
taking versus making…” he murmured, and Hermione was abruptly flustered by the swing in mood.
We shouldn't be doing this! Hermione thought frantically, even as her body started to respond to the
heated look in his eyes.

The wards on the outer door rippled then. Startled, Severus drew his wand, Hermione following suit
an instant later. They both subsided a moment later when they heard the familiar tap of heels on the
stone floor.

"Still awake, the two of you?” Minerva asked, sounding not at all surprised as she came around the
corner.

"I was trying to get him to get up and off to bed, but he was being less than cooperative," Hermione
explained, sidling towards the door herself. She recalled Minerva's promise that she'd speak to
Severus about matters, and guessed that she was making good on her word to Poppy. And this would
be the time to leave when you can still claim a graceful exit...

Minerva pursed her lips. "Don't you worry yourself, Hermione. I'll get him tucked in." The older
woman briefly flicked her gaze over to where Hermione stood, still clutching a damp handkerchief
like a white flag. "I would recommend that you have a jigger of Sobering Solution before you go to
bed. No need to make the morning any worse than it already will be."

"Excellent advice I shall heed," Hermione said, and turned back to look a Severus. He was in total
disarray, at least for him; hair mused and clothes wrinkled, he was light-years away from the
impeccable Professor that regularly stalked the halls of Hogwarts. "Thank you for the present, as
well as the advance warning about the party,” she said, lingering in his doorway a moment longer.

He acknowledged her words with a short nod. "Please shut the door behind you, Hermione."

And that, she thought with mingled curiosity and apprehension, is your cue to exit stage left, pronto.
Snape watched Minerva, cold circumspection creeping over him. He knew that he deserved a lecture on several fronts. There was his over reaction to Poppy's simple request, for one thing, not mention his impromptu healing lesson- but the notion of being dressed down still rankled. He'd endured any number of sermons from Albus concerning his behaviour, and wasn't keen to continue the tradition under Minerva.

Minerva raised a finely arched brow at him in wordless challenge. "You know," she began, a subtle smirk playing across her face, "...you are making this far... harder on yourself than it needs to be."

The innuendo implicit in her words made it clear that she'd not been blind to the undercurrents playing out when she'd walked in, and Snape mentally winced. Bad enough that Poppy likes to harp on matters; I don't think I can take Minerva going on about it, too...

"So you've come to lecture me, then?" he spat, figuring that the best defence was offence.

"Do I need too?" she said, a smile tugging more strongly at her expression.

"No," he answered shortly.

"Then I won't." Without a warning, she pulled a dark blue phial from her pocket and tossed it at him. "You're a grown man, Severus. The time for me to lecture you came and went a good thirty years ago."

Something in him loosened at her words; Minerva generally kept to her word, and it appeared that he'd be getting off with little more than metaphorical slap on the wrist. He glanced down at the bottle, seeing that it was Sobering Solution. Breaking the seal, he took a deep swallowing, feeling the unsettling rush that flowed through him as the potion took hold.

"So if you didn't come to lecture, why come at all?" he inquired, tone far more mild than before.

"I've just come from putting Filius and Longbottom to bed, and figured that it wouldn't hurt to check on you and your apprentice as well. The lot of you need to be in a good enough condition to teach tomorrow, and while I can have a little kip behind my desk, you don't have that same lovely prerogative."

"Dare I ask what sort of condition you found Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum in?"

Minerva gave a brief cackle before marshalling her composure. "Now, now, Severus... that is not appropriate way to refer to your fellow Heads of House."

"Please." He tossed back a bit more of the Sobering Solution. "I ran into them sneaking out to the greenhouse earlier. I don't know who was more ridiculous, Longbottom or Filius."

"Oh, Arthur Weasley had them both beat, trust me. I won't go into the details, but suffice to say I've now seen more of that man than I've ever cared too. Thank goodness Molly came down with me."

She walked over to the settee, and offered a hand up. "Off to bed with you."

He took it willingly, and required only minimal help staying steady on his feet. Circling the coffee table, he headed for his bedroom. "Thank you, Minerva. I do believe I can take it from here."

"Severus..." she started, with far less humour. "Don't over think matters."

"I thought you didn't come here to lecture," he muttered with asperity.

"Oh, that falls under the category of advice, not a lecture."
"I will keep it mind," he said, and shuffled closer to his door.

"And one more thing…"

A giant yawn forestalled the sarcastic remarked that he had been about to make, and he simply looked at her, knowing that she needed no invitation to continue.

"Go reassure Poppy. She's been fretting that she's hurt your feelings."

"More advice?"

"No," Minerva said, the sharpness in her tone contrasting with a certain fondness. "That's an order."

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks to all you lovely readers who take the time to comment- it makes my day, and keeps me writing! If you are a bit of sick puppy like myself and wish to read the back story about Filius' love for dirty limericks, check out my one-shot, "Of Mice and Men".
This is what happens when one of my long-time readers has the temerity to call a chapter 'mildly satisfying'. Muwhahaha!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At first, he dreamt of Potter. Of the Shack, and of pain and bitterness and regret and not-quite-dying... With an effort, Snape pulled himself from his dreams, and lay in his bed examining the flickering shadows on the ceiling until it was clear that he was done sleeping for the night.

He had returned to his place on the settee when Hermione cautiously poked her head back in his rooms from the hallway.

"Severus," she exclaimed, voice chiding when she saw him. "You were supposed to go to bed ages ago."

"So were you," he replied. She slipped in, gloriously bare-legged and hair let loose of the chignon that she had wrangled it in earlier. The purple dress she was wearing clung to her arse as she moved, and he allowed himself the small freedom of noticing that enticing, mouth-watering sway. She had come into his rooms in the middle of the night, after all, he was neither a monk nor saint.

"I was just going to put these on your table," she explained cautiously, holding up two bottles of Sobering Solution.

His only response was to raise a sardonic eyebrow at her; the reason- or rather, excuse- was a specious one at best, and he wondered at what her true motivation was. She knew the rules of their relationship, and by returning she had decided to break that agreement. And one way or another, he thought, a dark, lush satisfaction filling him, I'm going to punish her for it...

Hermione ghosted closer to him, hesitancy and covert desire warring for supremacy on her expression. He said nothing, letting her make the choice.

She finally stopped just short of the coffee table, eyes never leaving his face. Severus saw her jaw firm, her chin thrusting forward as she made up her mind.

Licking her lips, she spoke in her bossiest tones. "You should be in bed."

He wasn't Potter or Weasley, and she wasn't going to order him about like a child. Deliberately-insolutely- he allowed his eyes to slide over her figure, from the sweet handfulls of her hips to the hard points of her breasts showing clearly through the dress. The foolish little tie that kept the dress fastened beckoned, and he wondered how difficult it would be to non-verbally give the fabric a tug and expose those firm little tits to his scrutiny.

Slowly, he met her gaze again, letting her see the hot lust that was raging through his blood. But he also didn't hide the incipient anger that darkened his thoughts... anger that she dared push him past his ability to control his desire, fury that she had cornered him despite his repeated pleas to the contrary.
Even as she flinched a little under the lash of his regard, her breathing became unsteady, the rapid inhalations causing her breasts to jiggle slightly. He felt his cock give a twitch in solidity. *She's not wearing a bra*, he thought desperately, and could almost taste her creamy curves in his mouth.

He offered her his hand, a parody of their earlier interaction. "Then take me to bed, Hermione." Her eyes flashed, jerking to his as he stressed the word 'take'.

Leaving his arm suspended in air, he waited with the same sort of patience that any crafty hunter would recognize. She could still end this charade. If she didn't take his hand, they might yet be able to salvage something. Their pretence of simple friendship would be utterly destroyed, true, but he would take the cold comfort of knowing that she had at least acquiesced to his wishes in the end.

Her gaze fell to his bare feet propped on the coffee table, and then followed the long line of his legs upward until she reached the burgeoning erection that was straining his running shorts. She licked her lips again, and it became a fight to not surge upward and take her, ethos be damned.

On the heels of a final, jagged exhalation, she moved. Stepping forward, Hermione swung one leg over his so that when she stopped, she was straddling his legs.

She took his outstretched hand in his, and he yanked. Hard.

Hermione fell into his lap with very little grace, but all that suddenly mattered to him was that she was there, her supple form pressing against his. He felt a fission of relief then. *Christ, but I am tired of pretending that I don't want her…*

A lingering affection for the woman kept from immediately ravaging her mouth. Instead, he drew his hands down her sides, squeezing lightly until he reached the hem of her dress. Reaching up with his left hand, he cupped her jaw and kissed her softly.

She gave a little sigh- of surrender, of equal relief- and opened her mouth for him, hands settling on his shoulders delicately. Sucking on her bottom lip, he watched in pleasure as her eyes closed and she gave a breathy moan.

The satiny skin under his hand was too alluring to ignore, and he swept a palm up her naked thigh until he reached her hips. He paused, registering only the smooth heat of her flesh.

"My, are we presumptuous tonight," he drawled, squeezing her hip a little harder than necessary. "You're not wearing any knickers."

"No," she said, trepidation and guilt clouding her eyes for a moment. "I'm not."

He ignored the wave of self-reproach that nudged at him- he could have sent her away with a few well-placed barbs- and let his hand fall on the dangling tie of her dress. It was shaking, he noted, and pulled at the fabric quickly lest she see.

Her dress fell open, and her body was just as luscious as he'd imagined.

A flush blossomed over her chest, racing up her neck and turning her cheeks a rosy pink. By contrast, the unblemished skin of her abdomen was a pale golden perfection, and he longed to nuzzle and suck his way down the length of it to the triangle of curls framed by her hips.

But he would be a patient man, this once. Leisurely, he drew his hands up her quivering belly and cupped her breasts; they fit into his hands as if they had been made for that express purpose. He rubbed her hard nipples with the pads of his thumbs, and she shuddered.
"Severus..." she gasped, eyes wide and beseeching on his, "...please..."

The scent of her musk filled the air between them, and it took considerable effort not free himself from his pants and thrust into her right then and there. With a heated exhalation of his own, he took a nipple into his mouth, free hand gliding down her stomach.

She tasted of cream and sunshine.

Her body bucked as his fingers found her wet quim, and he nearly moaned with her as he continued to lave at her breasts. "Severus, please..." she whimpered again, tugging hard at his shirt with both hands. He released her only long enough to free himself from the offending garment, and then captured her mouth in a hungry kiss.

Hermione rubbed against him wantonly as their tongues met, the silky friction of their skin meeting raising gooseflesh all over his own body. He met her eyes again. "You feel so damn good," he murmured, and was rewarded with her smile, a feral, frantic edge lacing her expression.

One of her hands slid from chest to cock, and it was his turn to shudder under her deft ministrations. He could feel the balance of control between them waver then, and that would simply not do. She had disobeyed him on this subject, and if they couldn't be friends, then he would damn well be her master in this.

Taking his right hand- gone slick with her juices- he reached behind her and gave her lovely arse a stinging smack.

"Fuck!" she cried out, startled.

"That's rather the point, my dear," he growled, and did it again with rather more force. His hand burned after the impact, but that didn't stop his fingers from fondling the firm globes of her arse as he waited for her reaction.

She went perfectly still in his lap. Gaze full of rebuke, he hit her a third time. He saw the realization of what he was doing dawn in her stare, and once again, he ignored the little lurch of shame that filled him. Her eyelashes swept downward, veiling her gaze for a long moment.

There was a touch of sorrow in her face when she finally looked up at him, and a cold shiver danced down her back. This was only the first time of many he would hurt her, he knew; nor would this be the last time she would betray him to get something she wanted.

But she was his now, and since they'd made this bed, they would damn well lay in it.

"Hermione," he said, startled to find that his voice had gone rough with some strong emotion. She started to pull away, clearly expecting rejection. But before she could do more than shift her knees, he leaned forward and took her lips again.

*I'm mad at you*, he told her with his kiss. *And I'll be angry with you for a long time. But by god, I still want you. I still need you.*

They came together again with as much desperation as desire. Hands greedy and searching, they plundered each other, wringing gasps and moans out of each other as they discovered their mutual weaknesses.

She finally pulled back from the brink to speak. "Will you take me?" she gasped, and he answered her by flipping her onto her back and pressing her down into the softness of the settee.
Her legs snaked around his hips, and the sensation of her naked body rubbing against his groin nearly drove him spare.

"Will you take me?" she demanded again, eyes fiercely trained upon his.

He longed to suck every last bit of passion from her lips, to feed off her climax. The physical tension of the moment made him clumsier than he ought have been; it took several painful seconds to free himself from his pants.

"Will you?" she begged, and it was almost his undoing.

"Yes," he vowed, and thrust into her in one long slide…

…Only to wake suddenly, finding that he was humping the mattress like some randy adolescent.

"Bloody fucking hell!" he roared, and rolled over, body coiled and unbearably taut with ungratified arousal. Visions of her naked curves filled his sight, and without conscious thought, he found that his right hand had reached into his pants and started to tug at his cock.

It was wrong, but that didn't stop him from pulling himself free of his already damp boxers and revelling in the sensations even as his mind warred over motivations and reservations. He should not be wanking off to thoughts of Hermione, not after all his protests and strident denials. But recognizing that point did nothing to cool his blood; rather, he was reminded of the growing number of nights that she had found her way into his dreams. Despite all his efforts- not to mention his skills at Occlumency- he'd not been able to keep her out of his nocturnal existence… and those nightly reveries had turned increasing explicit and erotic since the start of the term. He'd stopped himself each and every time; taken a cold shower, gone for a run, or resorted to any number of clichéd activities that supposedly calmed the libido.

_But not tonight…_ he thought. Eyes closing, he summoned her presence again, eyes alight with joy and lust as she sucked him off. For a glorious moment, he could smell the musk of her arousal, feel the burning weight of her in his palms. Then there was brush of her curls along his thighs as she took him deeper into the wet warmth of her mouth…

His hand tightened, and he pumped harder. Three more strokes and his release was upon him, his entire body shuddering with the strength of it and seed splattering his stomach.

"Hermione…” Severus heard himself gasp, and mind going blessedly blank, he allowed himself the refuge of oblivion.

When he awoke again it was a little after five, the dark having shifted into a murky, cold grey that heralded the advent of another blustery dawn. He grimaced and swung his legs quickly out of the bed, feeling a wave of disgust hit him as he registered the sticky sensation on his body and sheets.

_Don't think about it, don't think about it…_

Making his way swiftly to the bathroom, he stepped into the shower. Turning the water on, he did not bother to restraint the vitriol that sprung forth as the frigid water hit him, and stayed under the punishing spray until he was nearly numb in both mind and body. Resolutely, he wrestled with his mutinous thoughts until they were once again firmly under the control of his Occlumency. Drying himself, he threw on his running kit.

Snape was just stepping out of his quarters when a house elf popped mutely into view.
"Begging your pardon, but the Prefect Greengrass wishes to speak with you most urgently," the creature piped, bowing uneasily as he took in the growing storm clouds in Snape's expression.

"Did he say about what?" he snapped, feeling his temper break through the numbness. *If it's not one thing, it's a half-dozen others...*

The house elf shook its head. "No, Professor. Only that it wasn't about Quidditch, and it was most urgent."

"Very well. Tell the boy to come up here immediately." He sighed, not really wanting to contemplate what had gone wrong enough for Greengrass to feel that a pre-dawn meeting was necessitated. "Summon the Headmistress as well."

"Yes, sir," the house elf replied, and disappeared from the hallway. Snape glanced down the corridor, eyes landing on Hermione's door, briefly contemplating the notion of letting her sleep. *Sod it all, he thought nastily. If I have deal with something unpleasant, then she gets to as well.*

It took only a moment's work to break the warding on her door; opening it, he stuck his head in.

"Granger!" he bellowed into the dark. "Get up, now!"

He heard a startled exclamation, followed by thump and an angry yowl. Hermione appeared suddenly in her door, hastily pulling on a robe.

"What's the matter?" she asked groggily, still fumbling with the recalcitrant fabric.

His temper spiked again as he forced his gaze off the creamy length of her exposed legs and up to her sleep-tousled face. "Get decent," he snarled, disregarding the sudden hurt in her expression. "Greengrass is coming up with a problem."

Shutting her door with more force than required, he returned to his rooms to get properly dressed.

Snape was just slipping on his boots when he heard the knock as his door. Opening it, he saw that Greengrass was not alone: Lucretia Prewett was standing next to him.

Wordlessly, he motioned them to enter, and gestured towards the kitchen table.

"Am I correct in supposing that the two of you have yet to eat?" he asked carefully, mindful that he did not want to take his foul mood out on his students.

"No, we have not," Greengrass answered, manner solemn.

"Winky," he called sharply, and waited for the elf to appear. When it did, he ordered tea and breakfast for the lot of them. Meeting his Prefect's questioning eyes, he explained, "I have requested that the Headmistress join us, as well as Professor Granger."

The boy nodded, and courteously pulled a chair out for Lucretia Prewett sit before taking his own place next to her. Both appeared calm, although the girl's composure did not quite mask a certain fear that lingered in the far corners of her expression.

Mentally, he shuffled through the few details that he knew of her. Her father had been a minor follower of the Dark Lord, elevated to a position of some leadership as a Snatcher as events had devolved near the end of the War. He had also been one of the many that he had killed with his curse through the shared link of Dark Mark. Of the rest of Prewett's family, he had only a lesser idea. She
was a distant cousins to Molly Weasley, and he thought he remembered notes in the girl's file that mentioned several younger siblings. Snape had heard very little gossip concerning her; she was a solid student, and as far as he knew, not dating or otherwise involved with anyone.

So it must be some sort of family issue. I doubt she would involve me for any other reason...

He watched her silently, trying to see if he could pick up any hint of the problem from her countenance. She was staring at her clasped hands, but when she registered his regard, she looked up and met his gaze challengingly.

Although her slate blue eyes were veiled, it was impossible to miss her complete abhorrence of him, nor her anger at having to come to him for assistance. With some amusement, he noted that she continued to hold his gaze deliberately, unwilling to look away. The arrival of the tea service broke their staring contest, and he moved smoothly to play mother.

"Miss Prewett, how do you take your tea?" he asked formally.

"Splash of milk, no sugar," she responded, voice flat.

He poured her a cup, and then Greengrass, recalling that the prefect enjoyed copious amounts of both sugar and milk. There was a rustle of movement from the door, and shifting, he saw both Minerva and Hermione entering. Minerva's gaze swept over the two students, and he saw her mouth tighten minutely as she took in his visitors.

"Miss Prewett, I believe you have a issue of some great importance to bring to us," Snape said as the two women settled around the table.

The girl took a delicate sip of her tea and begun her tale. "I do. As you may know, I have two younger brothers, Marcus and Titus. They are nine." Her voice gentled as she spoke their names, but hardened again as she continued. "My mother has been unwell since my Father's untimely... passing, and as a result, I have been much involved in their rearing. Recently, Mother's health has declined, and I instructed the boys to write to me daily in order to confirm that all was as it should be."

Miss Prewett paused, and again, Snape saw that flicker of disquiet run through her eyes. "I have not heard word from either of them for the last three days. Yesterday, I prevailed upon Aelius' father to visit the house and check on matters, but he was unable to do so. The wards repelled him completely. As a formally invited guest, and one who had eaten at our table in the past, that should not have happened."

"Do you have blood ward protections on the house?" Snape asked, already having a good idea of the answer.

"Yes."

"And have you been formally brought into those wards, Miss Prewitt?"

This time, her fear was plain to see. "No, I have not. Mother... felt that it would be unwise until I reach my majority."

Next to her, Greengrass sucked in a startled breath and asked a question of his own. "What about Marcus and Titus... surely there was someone other than just your Mum in charge of the wards?"

She turned on the boy, her composure rapidly dissolving. "And just who would that be, Aelius? Everyone else is dead. And now my brothers haven't owled in days..." The girl stopped, voice
choked with emotion.

Snape met Minerva's grim gaze; as Heads, they were both intimately aware of the magical costs of blood wards, being tied into Hogwarts protections as they were. For the Prewett house to disappear in such a way only meant things had gone horribly wrong, and he would wager that Prewett's mother was dead, if not her siblings as well.

"I'm afraid that I am at some disadvantage in understanding the entirety of the situation," Hermione said softly, looking first to him, and then to the girl. Severus did not miss the flash of contempt in Lucretia Prewett's expression that Hermione's question provoked, but it was Minerva who answered her question.

"Blood wards are some of the most potent magical protections possible. They not only carry the power of those who cast them, but can also form a rudimentary sentience, the protections of Hogwarts being a prime example of that flexibility. The only reason Voldemort was able to breach the protections is that Professor Dumbledore did not bring Professor Snape fully into the wards as Headmaster…"

"Rather hard to, as I killed him before he got around to it," Severus muttered.

"And he could have chosen to do so months before hand," Minerva shot back, and then went on in an aggrieved voice. "Professor Snape had already been brought in as Head of House, and so the Castle chose to accept him as Headmaster. But because the usual rites had not been completed, the wards were considerably weakened. That is the main flaw of blood wards: if the person who casts them dies without bringing others into their web, the magic either fails utterly, or becomes impenetrable until someone of the line is able to gain access. Moreover, the strain of maintaining blood wards without other casters is considerable. It draws on one's magic considerably, and has been known to drive people mad…"

Snape tuned the rest of her explanation out. He had heard enough from the girl; the only way they were going to ascertain what had occurred was by actually trying to breach the wards. He glanced over at Minerva, and she gave him the slightest of affirmative nods as she finished speaking. Well, isn't this novel? How nice, being trusted to run my House the way I see fit… "Miss Prewett, as I see it, we have two avenues of approach. We can either notify the Aurors that there has likely been an incident at your house, or we can go and try to investigate it ourselves. What is your preference?"

"I would prefer not involve the Ministry if at all possible."

Snape watched her for a long moment, wondering if she really had any idea what breaking the family wards would entail. "Do you understand that it will mean using blood magic to break the wards? Specifically, you will be making a blood sacrifice to do so?"

Her eyes flashed with a brilliant anger before she managed to corral her emotions. "I will not simply abandon my brothers to their fate, Professor. I am quite aware of challenges we will face, and am prepared to do what ever is necessary to break the wards."

"Very well. Mr. Greengrass, I assume that you have already spoken to your father this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"And will there be any objection to us Apparating to your house before attempting to reach Miss Prewett's property?"

"No, sir. My father has already pledged to assist in anyway he can."
Snape turned back to the girl. "Are there any other protections that we should know about before we go?"

"As a Muggle-born, your apprentice will not be able to set foot on the property." Prewett did not so much flicker a cold blue eye at Hermione, but Snape merely nodded, having expected that.

"Mr. Greengrass, please floo your father to let him know that we will be along shortly. I want both of you to change out of your school uniforms into something better suited for traipsing about outdoors. That means trousers and sturdy shoes," he ordered, looking at Prewett in particular. "I will meet you both in front of the main school doors in twenty minutes."

"Yes, sir," they both chorused, and rose from the table.

"And take some biscuits," he belatedly added, realizing that neither had eaten much during their truncated breakfast.

Greengrass pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and with a faint smile, make quick work of packing up a decent amount of food for the both of them. Without another word, the two children made for the hallway.

He turned his attention back to Minerva once he heard the door shut. "Taking Poppy along would be best, I think. As a Pureblood, she's had plenty of experience in dealing with blood magic, and I'd like to have her skills as Healer available in case they are needed." He ignored his apprentice, as well as the clear questions that seemed to dance across her expression as he spoke to Minerva.

"As you wish. Hermione, you don't start teaching until the fourth period, correct?"

"Correct."

"Severus, how many of your classes can she cover?" Minerva asked.

Snape pondered the day's lessons. "The first and second years, certainly. I'd rather not have her dealing with the third year class, however. We are covering Shrinking Solutions, and you know how… messy those can be."

The Headmistress winced slightly, no doubt recalling some of the prior incidents. "Agreed. Hermione, do you have any issues covering the first two classes of the day?"

"No, they shouldn't be a problem."

"Then it's settled," Minerva said. "I will make the appropriate announcements at breakfast, and if you are not back to the Castle for the afternoon classes, I'll cancel those as well." She levelled a stern glance at him. "Periodic updates would not be amiss."

He stared back at her, restraining the urge to sigh in exasperation. "I will keep you apprised as to how things are going. Now, would you mind informing Poppy about our little expedition? I need a bit of time to pull things together."

"Of course," she said, and got up swiftly. "Hermione, why don't you join me? I have several other things I'd like to discuss with you about the schedule."

Hermione nodded after a moment, looking as though she wanted to ask him something further. He met her warm, confused eyes across the table, memories of the dream suddenly flooding him with a clarity that was almost painful.
Those memories— or rather, his lingering desires— seemed to form a bitter lump in his stomach, threatening to rise up and choke him. Anger, incipient and cold, came over him like a cloak. His earlier emotions made a thunderous return, and he found himself furious with himself, for his lack of control, and at her, for persisting in haunting his dreams and testing that control. Moreover, he was mad that no matter his skill at Occlumency, she continued to wriggle her way back into his mind. Even now, when he should be thinking of something else, his thoughts rested on her…

Hermione must have caught something of his resentment because she looked away, face sliding into a neutral mask. No, he thought mulishly. I am not doing this. Not now. Not again. Not with her. For a second time that morning, he reached for Occlumentic shields and roughly shoved his wayward sentiment away; for horrifying, brief instant, they resisted his power. Then, with an almost audible pop, his protections firmed, and there was an abrupt return to dispassionate, detached logic.

"Good luck with classes," he said. "Don't forget to lay the wardings before the first period."

She blinked, nonplussed. "I won't. Good luck to you as well."

He gave her an impersonal nod, and then started toward his bedroom to pack.

Snape met Poppy on the staff stairs, and was pleased to note that she had changed from her normal voluminous robes and carried an emergency medical pack with her. He stopped and waited for her to catch up with him.

She paused as she drew even. "Minerva says she thinks the mother is dead?" she asked with no other preamble.

"As do I. I would not be surprised if the younger children were as well given the lack of communication."

Sorrow filled her eyes momentarily. "The poor girl… her father, I assume, was one of the ones that you…"

"Yes," he interrupted shortly. "He was a Snatcher and carried the Mark."

"The tangled webs we weave…" Poppy murmured, and resumed walking down the stairs without another word.

As ordered, the children were waiting for them at the doors, likewise attired appropriately. Stepping out, Snape saw that the lake was ruffled and grey, the building mass of clouds hanging low at the far end of loch promising rain in the not too distant future. Striding forward, he listened with half an ear as Poppy made small talk, questioning Greengrass about Astoria's engagement to Draco.

They reached the gates without encountering anyone, and silently, he opened the broad iron gates so that the others could pass.

"Miss Prewett, have you passed your Apparition test?" he asked.

"No, I am still sixteen," she answered.

He turned to Poppy. "Have you been to the Greengrass Estate?"

"Yes, my mother was a good friend of Aelius' grandmother."
"Then I'll have you side-along her," he said, gesturing to the girl, "...I will take Mr. Greengrass."

With a push of magic, he secured the gates behind them and offered an arm to the boy.

Meeting Poppy’s gaze for a count of three, they turned simultaneously and Apparated away from the school.

The Greengrass Estate was located just outside of Taunton; the manor itself was well kept, and although of a formal Georgian style, wholly lacked the pretension of the Malfoy dwellings.

The elder Greengrass was waiting for them. He was a broad-shouldered and dark-haired man, the resemblance between himself and his son quite marked; but while Aelius held all the burgeoning promise of masculine grace, his father had started to soften into the comfort of middle age.

After acknowledging the children, he offered a Snape a firm handshake, and a formal welcome to the estate. Snape was surprised by the warmth of the greeting he received; they had never run in the same circles, the Greengrass' being one of the few Slytherin families that had not openly sided with the Dark Lord, and he wondered at the show of friendship now.

"And a good day to you too, Poppy," the man said with a slight smile when he saw who had accompanied them. "I did not know you were also coming."

"Hullo, Felix," she said, and gave him a quick hug. "Better safe than sorry, and all that rot."

"Indeed," Greengrass agreed, and then got down to business. "Prewett Hall is about a forty-five minute walk north," he informed Snape, "...so I took the liberty of having brooms ready for us to speed the journey."

Lucretia Prewett was already mounting a broom. "I can feel the wards," she said tightly, eyes scanning the horizon.

"Then by all means, let us be on our way," Snape said, and picked up a broom.

The flight would have been bucolic but for the burgeoning sense of unease that grew stronger as they got closer to Prewett Hall; the pressure from the wards was a repellant, charged presence, and he saw that Aelius Greengrass had gone pale and sweaty by the time they landed next to an ancient oak next to large hill.

Miss Prewett hopped off her broom and stared into the distance, worry clearly etched on her expression. "The house should be right there," she stated, pointing to the rise. "But I can't see it. I can't see anything..."

"Let us see how close we can get before the wards stop us," Snape suggested, trying to recall the exact placement of the house upon the hill.

They were only able to get the base of the gradient before they hit the protections; it was like walking into solid glass wall.

"Can you feel anything specific in the wards?" Felix Greengrass queried, grim-faced.

"No... it's just... wrong," Prewett gasped as she repeatedly slammed her hands against the invisible barrier. "Now what?" she exclaimed in frustration, turning on him.

Taking out the pack that he'd shrunk from his pocket, he withdrew a silver dagger. Handing it to the girl, he said brusquely, "Prick your finger." Pulling a second knife from a pocket, he sliced open his
palm and waited for her to do as ordered.

She hesitated, focused on his blood. "What are you going to do?"

He let his dispassionate regard settle on her, and from the periphery, saw Poppy go thin-lipped at his decidedly unemotional reaction. "I would attempt to see if there is anyone alive controlling the wards. To do so, I will need a small amount of your blood."

In response, her gaze flickered first to Aelius, then to his father. It was Felix Greengrass who spoke. "Lucretia, I understand your… caution, but I assure you, were I able to do anything to remedy matters, I would have already done so."

That seemed to decide matters for the girl. Slicing her finger with a quick motion, she offered it to him, hand trembling slightly. He took it without comment, and smeared her blood onto the open cut on his palm.

"Stand back," he barked, and released the girl from his grasp. "Videam Vincula..."

Keeping his intent- to search and see, not to conquer- clear in his mind, he thrust his bloody hand at the wall of wards; the second it touched the barrier, the air around them flared a deep, violent red. Fire seemed engulf his hand then, the sheer pain of it almost sending him to his knees.

Snape hissed, and fought hard against the burning ache radiating down his arm. *Let me see…* he pressed, and took a steadying breath in. Slowly, he felt the magic of the wards bend to his will, felt the layers of protections peel back like an onion. Knowledge trickled in; he had ephemeral flashes of all the bygone Prewetts who had poured their magic into the making of the protections over the years. Then, among the all pictures, there was a shadowy face he thought he recalled- Stuart, that had been her father's name- and a blond, brittle woman who could only be her mother.

The magic tightened around him then, adrift and unmoored, and he came to understand that his assumption had been correct; there was no one living controlling the protections.

Snape was suddenly distracted by a sharp cramp running down his arm and knotting though his shoulder, and he shuddered, almost loosing touch of the spell. With one last thrust, he sought out any knowledge of the youngest Prewetts, but there was nothing within the well of knowledge. He was left with the lingering sensation of madness, as ripe and corrupted as a corpse left out in the hot summer sun.

Abruptly, he withdrew his arm and fought the urge to sag. Looking down at his hand, he saw the flesh had gone a mottled red, and he flexed his hand mechanically, checking to make sure that it still worked properly.

Poppy came to his side, and smacked a cooling charm on the limb without speaking. As the pain receded, he looked up at the expectant faces. Greengrass the younger was fairly bursting with bright-eyed inquisitiveness, while his father was far more restrained, neither displaying curiosity nor much excitement.

Shifting his regard to Lucretia Prewett, he spoke softly. "Your mother is dead; of your brothers, I could gain no information."

She looked away, gaze settling on what appeared to be the broken remains of swing hanging off one of the branches of the oak tree. The sun peaked out from the clouds, the light suddenly gilding her with the golden, dying brilliance of a fine fall afternoon.

Blank-faced, she finally asked, "What is the next step?"
Sifting through the myriad of impressions that he had received, Snape spoke slowly. "I cannot break into the protections, but the wards will accept you, I think. A blood vow might be enough to bind yourself and get us in; we can take care of the rest once we find your brothers."

"How?" she demanded flatly.

"Have you made a blood vow before?" he inquired carefully.

"No, I have not."

"For this, you will need to slice both of palms. I would do it here," he explained, making a cut across the fleshy bottom of his palm with a long finger, "...on both sides. Once you have done so, you will place your hands against the barrier as I did, and name yourself. You understand the custom that I am referring to?"

She nodded stiffly.

His tone slipped into a parody of his usual lecture mode. "Just as you did with the healing spells the other night, your intent and will is more important than the exact wording of what you say. However," he stressed, "it is vital that you do it with the strong intent of mastering the wards, not simply becoming part of them. The protections are such that they very well might try to capture your magic in order to feed the spell."

"Will it hurt?" she asked as she began to roll up her sleeves.

"More than likely," he replied diffidently. "I would recommend that you try it either sitting on the ground or kneeling."

Without glancing at the others, she knelt in the grass, the breeze ruffling the fine blond strands of her hair gently. A faint whiff of sympathy nuded at him then, and a shred of mordant humour surfaced. She certainly looks the part of a proper, Pureblood, virgin sacrifice, doesn't she?

Taking several calming, deep breaths in, he watched as Prewett centred herself, her blue eyes going unfocused as she sought the source of her magic. Deliberately, she drew the knife across one palm, and then the other, the upswell of ruby-red blood vivid against the white of her skin.

Resolutely, she laid her hands against the wards, body going rigid as she felt the first fiery burn of the magic bear down upon her. She did not so much as flinch, however, and Snape was reluctantly impressed.

"I am Lucretia Lavinia Prewett, only daughter of Stuart Antoninus Prewett and Portia Elizabeth Rowle," she asserted in ringing tones, "...and I lay claim upon what is mine as eldest heir to the House Prewett. Corvos Pascimus!"

We feed the ravens, Snape translated the family motto unthinkingly. Appropriate, that, given why we are here... The girl leaned hard into the wards then, pressing not just body, but her will against it. They flared strongly, the red transforming into a violet, then briefly a bright blue. Then Snape felt a ripple in the air, and Prewett gave an anguished cry as the wards shoved back at her.

He and Poppy moved at the same time, reaching for the girl's shoulders, but she jerked her arms away from the wards and tucked her hands against her stomach, curling inward. Her hair fell forward, obscuring her expression; when she finally glanced upwards, her face was streaked with tears.

The sight of her, steadfast despite the failure and pain, cracked at the reservoir of his detachment. He
knelt beside her and cast the same cooling charm on her that Poppy had used on him. "You did well," he told her, a certain pride bleeding through. "What did you sense?"

"At first?" she panted, "...nothing. And then I saw... them. My family, I mean. All of the ones that came before me, and it was like, I don't know, the wardings wanted me to take control of them. But then... something kicked me out. Something angry, and... wrong."

"That was the same impression I got," Snape confirmed, forestalling to add that he was fairly certain that the wrongness they had sensed were the remains of her mother's magic in the wards. "Now that you know what to expect, I want you visualize mastering the wards before you try it again."

Before she could reply, Poppy spoke up. "However, that attempt will wait at least ten minutes, and you will drink a cup of juice and eat something first. I'll not have you keeling over if I can help it."

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Snape started to walk the perimeter, trying to detect any weaknesses in the protections.

By the time he had returned, it appeared as if the group was taking an impromptu tea, spread out as they were on the grass; still, the rest and food seemed have done the girl some good.

Aelius gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder before getting up to join his father. "You will do this, Lucretia," he told her, voice comforting and confident in the way that only the innocent could be.

Once again, she knelt against the barrier, and pressed her bloodied palms against the wards with only a faint moue at the pain. Snape crouched beside her, unable to entirely stay out of matters on this go. "Picture your brothers," he said quietly. "Picture their faces, and the love you feel for them."

The girl said nothing as the wards flashed around them; he could feel the intent and power of her magic pour from her in formidable waves. Her strength was impressive, and from what he could sense, she was exerting some sort of strategy in its deployment.

Then there was a crackle of electricity, and ground around them trembled as the magic seemed to bend inward on itself. For a long moment, the house appeared triumphant on the hill; then with pyrotechnic, ghastly flicker, the wards cast Prewett out again.

It was strong enough to throw the girl on her back, revealing the painfully bright, lobster-red hue of her arms. Wordlessly, Poppy placed the cooling charm on the shaking girl, and supported her into a sitting position.

Felix Greengrass knelt alongside the two women on the ground and shot a frustrated look to Snape. "Can we try a casting circle to give her more power?"

Poppy answered before he could. "It's not a matter of power, Felix. Miss Prewett has that in spades, along with the blood right, and the proper intent... no, if we tried to link to grant her additional power, the wards would likely see it as an attack and burn us all out of existence."

"So why isn't working?" Aelius Greengrass exclaimed. "If she's doing it right..."

"I don't know," Snape snapped, running a hand through his hair. "Poppy, do you have any ideas?"

The Healer was quiet as she looked down on the girl, who was still curled in a ball. "I'm not sure... the only thing that I can think of is that it's because she's not an of age... because there is not adult vouching for her, perhaps the wards will not accept her as master."
Blue eyes opened, and glared out from a face that had gone chalky. "So I must wait to turn seventeen? That is not an option, not without knowing if my brothers are alright!"

"Who are your godparents, Lucretia?" Felix Greengrass asked quickly.

"As they are also dead," she replied acidly, "...it matters not."

"And your closest adult, blood relative?" he continued doggedly.

If anything, her glare became harder. "Molly Weasley, but she is only a sixth cousin. Hardly a blood relative at that."

"Guardianship?" Snape asked the man, having an inkling where the line of questioning was headed.

"Yes," he affirmed.

Lucretia shrugged Poppy's arm away. "I am not a child," she began.

Greengrass' voice was sympathetic, if firm. "In the eyes of the law, and in this case, magic, you are, at least for the next several months."

The girl bit off her retort, and glanced at the empty hill. "What are my options?" she finally asked.

"We can summon Molly Weasley, and see if there enough of a blood tie for her to assume in loco parentis. I know her well enough to say that she would come without any hesitation, but at the sixth degree, it very well be a moot point. We could go to the Ministry and request that they appoint you a guardian ad litem, although that process will take several days, if not a full week. There is a third option..." the man said, trailing off.

"You are student of Hogwarts," Snape said, after the silence stretched out too far. "Thus, you can consent to become a ward of the school, and the Head will stand for you in matters of guardianship."

"So Minerva McGonagall as my guardian?" Prewett stated, "...That is my third choice?"

Snape stared at her, the tendrils of his suppressed emotions grazing his conscience. It always comes down to debts owed, doesn't it? "There is another choice, although I highly doubt you will find it any more palatable. As I neither resigned, nor was sacked, I am still Headmaster. I can stand for you."

Prewett laughed, a bitter, mocking tone. "Oh, so you would serve my House as you did the Malfoys?"

Anger flared within him, but before he could even formulate a response, Felix Greengrass gripped the girl's arm and spoke in an icy hiss. "You and I spoke on this topic not a month ago, and I gave you a full accounting. You do not have to like the man, but do not dare to presume to pass judgement in matters you know very little about, and do not insult him when he makes an offer that you are in no place to refuse."

"And so I am to what?" she spat back, "...accept the so-called help of the man who killed my father and all but ruined my family?"

"If it provides both the ways and means to save your brothers, then yes." There was no softness in the man's expression. "If you want to be counted as an adult, then act like it. Do not complain when you do not like the choices presented to you; be grateful that you are at least are being given some say in this."
In a fluid, furious movement, Prewett pulled herself from the grass and rose. Turning her back to them, she walked several metres away and said nothing; offering a hand to Poppy, Snape pulled her up and waited.

He did not want to take on another responsibility, even if it was only for several months. But in all good conscience, he could not pawn this off on Minerva either; the girl was a Slytherin, and clearly fell under his care. And while he was not responsible for her father’s choices, nor his fall, he had been the tool that brought about the man’s ruin; it was fitting that he now be part a solution.

When she turned back to them, her expression was both flat and hard. "Will you be able to help me break the wards if you become my guardian?"

"I am the person most likely to be able to do so, yes."

"Then do it. One way or another, I will not leave here without Marcus and Titus."

Snape bowed to her, and then drew his wand. Pulling on his own ties to the Hogwarts protections, he began to sketch the runic symbols for binding and guardianship. "As the formally sworn and acknowledged Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I, Severus Tobias Snape, do accept guardianship over Lucretia Livinia Prewett until the first hour of her seventeenth year, and further vow to protect and guide with all my capabilities and wisdom until that stated time."

He brought his wand down a quick, tight loop, a bright blue light arcing out to encircle them both; then there was the slight burn of magic around them, like the remnants of a summer thunderstorm, before both faded into nothingness.

"It is done," he confirmed. "Now, give me your hand so we can break these damn wards." She thrust her hand up, and he snagged it, pulling them both to barrier. "This will be one of the few times I will advise this, but use your anger to feed your magic. Concentrate on your desire to find your brothers. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she bit off, and together they slammed their clasped hands into the barrier.

It hurt.

Poppy had been right; the magic took his presence as an assault, and the corresponding wave of power was akin being doused in flames. Dimly, he thought he heard the girl scream, but knew there was no moving back; if they did not break the wards now, it would not happen. Snape pulled on his own reserves of magic, the deep, dark currents doing little other than making the wards cackle with a hungry, gleeful avarice.

Unexpectedly, a second source magic filled him; bright and hot, it tasted of lemons and woman. He did not stop to ponder the oddity, only threw the additional strength at the wards.

Then there was deafening crack, a reverberation both physical and mental. As he started to fall into the swirl of red light, Snape could only think one thing: Bollocks. I promised to keep Minerva updated…

Hermione was just re-shelving a spare cauldron when she felt her wrists suddenly tingle, the sensation quickly shifting to a scalding, burning heat. She looked down in confusion. There was nothing on them to cause the peculiar feeling, and she rubbed at the joints, trying to lessen the growing irritation.

Then, almost as if she was being snatched by a portkey, she felt the magic within her lurch outward
and towards… something. Pain, insistent and fierce, flooded her, and the floor of Potions storeroom rushed up to meet her.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, I know, I'm evil. But truly, it's so much fun that I can't stop myself...

'Night Moves' is a nod to the Bob Seger song of the same name. 'Videam Vincula' is my horrible Latin rendering of 'let me see the bonds/chains. Interestingly enough, the Prewett family motto is actually 'deus pascit corvus' (God feeds the ravens); I adjusted it slightly for obvious reasons. Doing so makes me wonder, however, if JKR ever gave a reason for magical folk all being quite secular. Has anyone read anything about her reasoning?
Snape woke to a mouth full of dirt and blood, and with the knowledge that he had broken his nose for what had to be the sixth or possibly seventh time. "Must it always be my nose? I suppose I should be grateful that it's not been my hands with all these breaks…"

Poppy was crouched on the ground next to him, her gentle hands rolling him over to his side. He bit back a groan, feeling the world spin and tug at him as his brain struggled to bring everything back into focus.

"Prewett?" he finally managed to spit out, fighting back a wave of nausea.

"Is fine, and coming around as we speak. The wards have fallen as well," Poppy informed him, voice sharp as she cast several healing charms over him in quick succession.

Feeling the cuts on his hands close up, he braced himself with one arm and struggled to sit upright.

"We need to let Minerva know what's occurred. I, ah, forgot…"

"Lucky for you, boyo, I've been sending her regular updates." Poppy pursed her lips and glared down at him. "You'll owe me for this one. Of all the stupid, bone-headed things to do... Did you think that you were standing at the walls of Jericho?"

"I suppose you'll be saying next that you'll be taking it out of my sorry hide," he muttered, sitting upright only reluctantly.

Her smile was one of unholy glee. "Not quite. You are finally going to let me fix that nose of yours…"

"Poppy…" he groaned, wincing as the throb in his malformed and battered proboscis increased as if sensing the impending procedure. "Is that punishment really necessary?"

"Yes," she said firmly, and taking a wad of bandages from her bag, pressed them to his nose and pinched. Hard.

"Ouch," Snape said, the word coming out rather muffled.

"Oh, don't whinge, you've only a broken nose and a bump on your head. You've been hurt far worse than this…"
He was saved from a response by an exclamation coming from behind him; turning, he saw Lucretia Prewett pull herself up from a prone position, eyes trained on something in the distance.

"I can see the house!" she gasped, and shifting, tried to rise despite very wobbly knees.

Aelius placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Lucretia, give it a mo…"

"No!" she shouted, and with a surprisingly forceful shrug, pushed the boy away and wordlessly summoned one of the brooms to her hand with a loud 'smack'. Leaping on it, she accelerated shakily towards the house.

Snape didn't hesitate; summoning his own broomstick, he chased after her. While the wards might be down, Salazar only knew what other dangers might still be in effect; if the house was anything like the majority of Pureblood dwellings, it was riddled with traps and a myriad of dangerous idiosyncrasies. As he flew upward, the wind tore off the bandages at his nose, and he felt a trickle of blood start to run across his face.

*I am too old for this shite…* he thought in frustration as Prewett hit the front steps and somehow managed to tumble up them. She threw herself at the massive front door, screaming her brothers' names; likewise landing less than gracefuiy, Snape rushed up behind her just as the door gave a low groan and cracked open.

Immediately, a foul, cloying stench assaulted them. Yanking the girl back roughly from the door by the waist, he spun her around, lest she see the horror he knew had to be lurking in the entry hall.

"Let… me… go!" she screeched, kicking and clawing at him fiercely in her haste to escape. "I have to find them!" He merely tightened his grip, giving a grunt of pain as one of her feet connected with his shin. Hearing several thumps from behind him, Snape waited, knowing that it had to be either Greengrass or Poppy.

It was Felix Greengrass; pinioning her arms to her sides in an awkward hug, he effectively stopped the fight. Prewett started crying freely into his chest, the tears cascading down her face and blonde hair flying out in all directions like a mad rag doll. Greengrass met his eyes over her narrow shoulder, understanding flowing between them. The man wasn't daft; he knew what that particular odour indicated.

Prewett stilled only reluctantly, sides heaving wildly as she tried to catch her breath. "Stop," Snape ordered, putting the weight of his will and magic behind the words.

"You will do your brothers no good if you rush in there and get yourself killed. If you try that again, I will not hesitate to stupefy you. Is that clear?"

Her eyes flicked towards the half open door. "But…" she started to protest half-heartedly.

"No," he repeated firmly. "We do not know if the house is safe. You will not go charging in there like a half-witted crup. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes," Prewett said, biting her lip and suddenly looking like the child that she was.

Snape heard Poppy and Aelius land, and then the boy's shaky voice. "Da…?" he questioned. Snape glanced over to him. Greengrass the younger had clearly gotten a whiff of the stench emanating from the house if his suddenly wakened face was any indication. Thankfully, Poppy had a firm hold on the boy's arm, preventing him from drawing any closer.

*Christ, but I don't want the children to see this; I don't want to when it comes down to it, either…*
Snape thought wearily, his head pounding from the sudden flurry of action. Deciding that he just didn’t give a damn how juvenile it looked, he put a sleeve up to his face to staunch the continued bleeding and tried to come up with a workable plan.

To his relief, Greengrass spoke up before he had to. "Aelius, go back to the house and floo the Headmistress. Tell her what has happened, and have her call the Aurors. I want you to stay there until they come, and then escort them here."

**Good,** he thought. *Minerva can make sure that we get people here that will be at least somewhat friendly, and not complete idiots. If Aelius makes the call himself, we are likely to get whatever green and inexperienced Aurors that make it a habit to hang around the office answering the floo.*

"Yes, Father," Aelius replied, and got back on his broom without further discussion.

Other than the girl’s sniffles, they were all silent for the next couple of minutes. No noise could be heard from inside the house, and Snape felt his stomach twist as he pondered the likelihood of Prewett's brothers being alive.

The faces of other little boys came to him then; Cedric Diggory lying prone in the grass next to the Triwizard Cup, four-year old Malcolm McKinnon clutching his stuffed hippogriff as his parents were murdered, and a Muggle boy with no name… all dead and long gone.

He recalled the pale, round, sweaty face of Neville Longbottom as he cruico’d him on the floor of the Headmaster's Office- he had not screamed, not until the very end- and then Draco Malfoy sitting at his dining room table watching Charity Burbage spin and scream and die.

Potter, watching him die.

In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to return to his anonymous, mostly Muggle life in Blackrod. Snape didn’t want to have to go look at more death. He didn’t want to pretend that it didn’t affect him, that it did not remind him of his own miserable childhood. Didn't want to be a murderer and torturer and a million other things that he was and he could never change.

"Please," Lucretia Prewett whispered, interrupting his thoughts. "Please, will one of you just go and tell me if it's just my mother, or if…"

Sometime during his internal anamnesis, Prewett had slumped to the ground, and had her still-red arms wrapped about her upraised knees. She looked more than a little broken, and miles from the haughty and cold sixth year student he had become accustomed to.

**Will it ever end?**

It would be a good twenty minutes or more until the Aurors arrived, he knew, and he had a fair idea what the wait had to be doing to her; it wasn’t as if looking through the door and seeing a bit more human carnage was going to kill him, after all…

Without a word, he moved, making for the steps. A hand on his shoulder stopped him. Turning, he saw Felix Greengrass, the latent sympathy in the man's gaze oddly welcome.

"I'll go," he said, and Severus subsided without a fight, watching him climb the set of steps. Cautionly, the man pushed the door open further, wand at the ready and shielding spell cast; there was no reaction from within the house. Briefly, sorrow and a more bitter emotion- anger?- crossed Greengrass' expression.

"I see only your mother, Lucretia," he said finally. "It appears that she's… been this way for several
days. I think she fell down the stairs."

"Thank you," the girl said softly before resting her forehead on her arms, blonde hair hiding her face.

Greengrass shot off several spells into the house, again with no reaction, and turned to look at Snape. "I might as well go in and see if I can find them. I know the house well enough, and having been a guest, I should be safe. I really don't want to wait until the Aurors arrive…"

Snape nodded, feeling fatigued enough that he simply sat on the second step. "I'd recommend putting a Bubble-Head Charm on before you go. It'll help with the smell, and keep the bugs away from your face."

"Excellent advice," he said, and duly cast the charm. "Lucretia, where are Marcus and Titus most likely to be hiding?"

"There is a hidden nook behind the bookcase in the playroom. The latch is under the painted yellow rabbit. Otherwise…" She took a slow breath, and glanced up. "If they aren't there, try the priest hole to the right of the fireplace in the kitchen; it's where the house elf used to sleep. You have to tap the seventh brick on the bottom row seven times for it to open."

"Right then, I'll make this quick," Greengrass said, and strode into the house. Snape could hear his footsteps on the creaky wood floors as he called out for the boys. Blankly, he looked down at his left hand, seeing that he still had a fair amount of blood on it from cutting it open earlier.

And there's a metaphor if there ever was one… Dully, he performed several cleansing charms and tried to blank out his increasing morose thoughts.

Poppy left the girl's side and came over to him. She watched him for the space of several heartbeats before cupping his cheek in her hand. "How badly does your head hurt?"

"Enough," he said, and allowed himself the small luxury of leaning into her soothing touch. Briefly, he closed his eyes, the bright sunlight lending the inside of his eyelids a certain swirling vermilion darkness.

"I think you might have a concussion," Poppy eventually murmured, her other hand coming to stroke the rounded contours of his skull with care. "You have a decent size knot, right here…"

"Perhaps," he said with a sigh, and opened his eyes again. Severus rather thought that the ferocity of his headache had more to do with trying to precipitously and completely occlude his emotions away for the last several hours, along with more recent events. Funny, that: I tell Granger that my Occlumency is one of the few things that has never failed me, and what happens? It fails… Still, extreme magical drain and a head injury would not help matters, regardless of any other factors.

Pulling back from Poppy's warmth, he looked down at the girl in the grass, and back up to the Healer. Poppy got the hint and turned back to the girl; while he found her concern… agreeable, he had no need of it, not really. Prewett, on the other hand…

Snape heard footsteps again, and Greengrass swiftly exited the house. Cancelling the Bubble-Head charm, he spoke. "The house is safe enough. There's not a trace of them, but the cellar was warded too tightly for me to ascertain if they are down there."

"My mother would lock the boys in the cellar as punishment. If it's warded, then that's where they are," Lucretia Prewett said flatly, and rose, dusting off her trousers.

Snape stood as well. If Greengrass had cleared the house, then other than the obvious issue of the
foyer, there was no real reason for them to not go inside and check the cellar. "Do you know how to lower those wards?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered simply.

Snape looked over to Greengrass. The man answered his unspoken question. "It'll be easy enough to walk around… her."

Small mercies, he thought and turned back to the girl. "And am I correct in assuming that you still wish to go in the house?"

"Yes."

"Very well. You will do exactly what we tell you to do, is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Face the stairs and close your eyes."

"What?" she exclaimed and glanced over to Greengrass as if seeking reassurance. His reply held no sympathy. "Do as he requested, Lucretia."

Snape deliberately moved into her space and loomed over her, capturing her gaze with his. God, she's a headstrong as a bloody Gryffindor! Must she argue about every little detail?

"Face the stairs and close your eyes, Miss Prewett. I assure you, no matter what your feelings are towards your mother, you don't want your last sight of her to be of a rotting corpse. I say this from experience."

Anger lit her eyes briefly before she registered the both his words and the personal message behind them; finally stepping around him- and apparently starting to practice a little Occlumency of her own, because her countenance cleared of all emotion- she moved to the front of the stairs and closed her eyes. He traded glances with Poppy, and the Healer picked up her medical bag with a slight grimace.

Greengrass spoke. "Since I know the house, I'd better go first. Shall we have her between us, and Poppy behind you?"

"A reasonable plan," he agreed. "Lead on."

"Stick out your hand, Lucretia. I'll balance you on the steps." Greengrass took the girl's outstretched hand and helped up onto the portico. Snapping the Bubble-head charm first over her, and then himself, Greengrass looked over to make sure that he was ready. Giving the man a sharp nod, they started in.

The foyer was shabby and bare; the hollow spaces and faded walls making it clear that much had been sold off over the years. As Greengrass had said, Prewett's mother was laying in a broken and bloated heap at the bottom of a grand staircase, a shattered bottle of fire whisky laying next her.

Prewett jerked as she registered the low, droning sound of the multitudes of blowflies gathering on the body; she did, however, manage to keep her eyes resolutely shut. The Bubble-Head charm only partially repelled the foul odour, and Snape was glad that Greengrass set a quick pace for the relative comfort of the back half of the house.

Once they were safely down the main hallway, he tapped the girl on the shoulder. "Open your eyes, and have your wand drawn. We'll take no chances."

She did as ordered, and they continued down the dark passageway without seeing anything more
threatening than an abundance of spiders. What a wonderfully cheerful place to raise children, Snape mused bitterly as they passed several more empty rooms. How the mighty have fallen; I wonder how many more of my Slytherins live like this?

After a minute, they reached the kitchen. It was a dank and singularly uninviting place. Given the level of filth, Snape was almost happy to see no evidence of food; the thought that two young boys had to somehow negotiate making meals in such a space only served to sour his stomach further. He had an unexpected and brief memory of himself as a child, stealthily trying to search through bare kitchen cabinets for any hint of food while his own father slept off a night of drinking. You made it, he thought hollowly. So will they, assuming we find them alive. And there are three of them- at least they have not been alone in all this…

"When did your house elf die?" questioned Greengrass quietly.

"Last May. But he had been sick for several years. He was a wedding present to Grandfather Rowle, after all."

Greengrass' jaw tightened, and the man appeared to be on the verge of saying something else. Prewett interrupted him before he could speak further. "She forbade asking for help. Had I done so, she would have kicked me out of the house, and I would have never seen the boys again." A hint of anger leached back into her voice. "We grew enough food over the summer that the boys should have been fine until I returned for the winter holiday. I thought that I had done enough to protect them…"

The cellar door lay off the main kitchen; the narrow wooden door had an inlaid pattern of large iron rivets. Stopping in front of it, the girl looked back at Snape.

"Unward it, but do not go down."

Again, she did as ordered, and stepped back. "Homenum Revelio," Snape intoned with a flick of his wand, sending a streak of blue light down the stairs. Briefly, the light disappeared. Then with a flare of magic, two round balls of light appeared, bobbing at the top of the stairs.

Snape grabbed Prewett's arm before she could go dashing off; it did not stop her from calling out.

"Marcus? Titus?!" Her voice echoed shrilly down the stairs to no response, and the smell of damp and rot wafted up the passageway. There was something- two somethings, if the spell was true- alive down there, but Snape did not want to think about what condition they were likely in given everything else they had seen.

Again, Greengrass met his gaze, clearly waiting to see how Snape wanted to proceed. "Are there any other protections we need to be concerned with?" he asked, watching the blue orbs bob gently in the dark of the cellar.

"No, I've disarmed them all," she said in a rush, looking beseechingly down the stair.

"Onward, then," he said unenthusiastically, and noted that Poppy was holding her wand in a clear duelling stance; he was not the only one to feel a sense of foreboding. Greengrass sent another ball of mage-light ahead of them, the white light casting harsh shadows on the slimy stone walls.

The stairs creaked ominously under their combined weight. As they descended, Snape could hear the muted rustling of small animals; one final twist of the staircase and they were in the depths of the cellar. The low, small room was filled with generations of rubbish, broken furniture and odd bits of miscellanea. To the right, there was another half-door, and Prewett gave Greengrass' robes a tug as
she pointed to it.

"There," she said, inching towards he door.

Snape heard the quiet crackle of magic as Poppy sent some sort spell towards the door, which pulsed green.

"It's fine," she stated firmly, and Greengrass strode towards the door. Both he and the girl pulled hard at it before it wrenched open on loudly protesting hinges. For a long, painful instant, there was no movement from inside, but as the mage-light moved into the cell, a small form detached itself from the darkness.

"Lu?..." a shaky treble voice asked. "Lu, is that you?"

Hermione woke on the floor of the Potions closet with a nasty headache and a fair size bruise on her arm where she'd caught herself on something on the way down. Cautiously, she stretched, taking stock. As far as she could tell, she was fine, and she felt none of the customary aches and pains that accompanied her normal attacks.

Recalling the strange sensations that had directly preceded her fall, Hermione wondered if something else had been the cause. Examining the area around her, she could see no spilt potions ingredients, and could smell nothing in the air.

And then there was that odd feeling with my magic...

Experimentally, she withdrew her wand and cast a *lumos* charm. It took more effort than usual, and mind racing and heart pounding, she re-entered the empty classroom and sat down at the large desk with a thump.

_I… I don't think that had anything to do with my illness. It rather felt like something was drawing on my magic. But what on earth was it?_

Taking a pen from her bag, she opened up a notebook and began writing down her impressions of the incident. *Let's be logical. What happened first? My wrists started burning…* Pushing her sleeves back, she examined the unmarked skin. There was no trace of any magic or substance. *Then what? I felt something yank at the core of my magic, and then it really started to hurt, like standing too close to fire…*

Bizarrely enough, the 'pull' had been accompanied by an almost familiar sensation. *No, not quite a sensation... more like an aura. Like mint and juniper, and... Severus. It felt like Severus. Why would that be?*

Biting her lip, Hermione suddenly recalled what Neville had said about his own apprenticeship ceremony. "The only time I felt any magic was when Minerva declared the binding complete. My wrists burned..." he had told her, and had encircled a wrist with his fingers, "...for a second, and that was it."

*Which is exactly what I felt when it all started; putting that together with the rest of my observations, it would appear that something happened to Severus, and he somehow pulled on my magic. It must have something to do with our apprenticeship bond.*

A frisson of fear flickered down her spine. *What if something happened to him? He is with Poppy, so it's unlikely that something truly bad could have occurred. And it's not like he can't take care of himself in a fight...*
She sighed, the pounding in her head only getting worse. *Well, the first step is easy enough. Go up to the Hospital Wing and get some headache reliever. Perhaps Poppy will have returned and I can find out what happened. If not, I'll go find Minerva and quiz her...*

When she finally reached the Ward, the dreaded privacy curtains were up in the far corner, and she could hear the low buzz of conversation from behind them. To her relief, Minerva stepped from behind them and saw her; motioning her forward, the older woman had a troubled expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked, feeling her palms go damp with sudden nerves.

"Severus and Poppy managed to find Miss Prewett's brothers. Apparently their mother had locked them in the cellar, and then promptly fell down a set of stairs. The children are mostly fine-dehydrated and malnourished from what Poppy can find- but their mother is dead..." Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Minerva made a small sound of disgust. "What a mess, the lot of it..."

"God, that's barbaric," Hermione said, aghast.

"Alas, child abuse is not only limited to the Muggle world. Quite frankly, after all of the upheaval of the last thirty odd years, it's become more commonplace than we'd all like to admit."

"What's going to happen to them?" Hermione questioned. "I mean, their father is dead, right? And Miss Prewett is too young to take custody..."

"It's too soon to tell yet. Typically, other family members take the children on, but I'm not positive that the Prewetts have any close blood relatives left. We shall have to see..."

Thinking of her fall, Hermione asked, "Were there any... problems getting them out?"

"There was a bit of a fuss with the blood wards, I believe, but nothing Severus and Poppy couldn't handle. Felix Greengrass provided quite a bit of assistance as well," the Headmistress added. "Severus and Felix are still at Prewett Hall waiting for the Aurors. Speaking of that, I need to get down to the gates and let the Ministry Child Welfare Investigators in..."

"Right," Hermione commented. "I've class in twenty minutes, but is there anything I can help with in the mean time?"

The Headmistress patted her on the shoulder and started walking towards the hall briskly. "No, we've got it handled, in as much as one can. I've already posted the notice cancelling Severus' later classes, so there should be no problems on that front. His first two went well, I assume?"

"The second years were a bit of a handful, but settled down once I started the pop quiz," Hermione replied, hastening to keep up.

"Excellent. Let me know if there are any other issues," Minerva urged, and they parted ways.

Hermione made it through her classes mechanically, mind firmly stuck on the fate of the Prewett children, and the disquieting questions concerning the sudden manifestation of her bond with Severus. Worryingly, her magic also remained off for the rest of the afternoon, and she was rather at disturbed at how drained she felt.

As the last of the students escaped out the classroom door, Hermione snatched up her bag and followed, intent on getting some answers. Reaching the hallway, she paused. *To the library, or back...*
to my room and the books that I already have? she wondered.

A flash of lilac fabric caught her eye; focusing, she saw it came from the headscarf of Scheherazade Abu-Lughod, the History of Magic Professor, who was also leaving her own classroom. Well, isn't that just a stroke of luck. Both Severus and Madame Pince mentioned her as another source of information.

The woman saw her regard, and gave her a slight smile; before Hermione had to come up with a reason to approach her, she closed the distance and spoke.

"I understand there was an issue with one of your students this morning." The woman's accent was rolling and delicate, and oddly soothing amongst the harder British tones.

Hermione glanced around to ensure that they would not be overheard by lingering ears, somewhat amused to have the Slytherin students labelled as 'hers' after so many years of being a Gryffindor. "Unfortunately. I haven't heard all the details yet, but Lucretia Prewett's mother passed away. There were some… difficulties with her younger brothers."

The other woman nodded, clearly having heard some of the news already. "Please let her know that she need not worry about missing any work this week, or next; I will catch her up when her situation permits it."

"I'll do so," Hermione said, and awkwardly searched her mind for a graceful way to change the subject. While they had chatted several times in the staff room, they had never really gotten beyond the basic niceties. "Actually, I'm glad I've run into you; I was hoping I could pick your brain about something…"

Abu-Lughod laughed unexpectedly, a genuine smile appearing over the polite veil of civility. "I don't suppose that something has to do with the unusual conditions of your apprenticeship binding, does it?"

"As a matter of fact, it does," Hermione confirmed, at turns bemused and irritated with the woman's quick guess, as well as how much of her personal life still seemed to feed the rumour mill. "I understand that you are a ritual specialist, and you might be able to point me in the direction of some alternate sources for material on apprenticeship bindings?"

"I am, and I can. I must admit, I was hoping that one of you would come and speak with me; the gossip has been running wild, and I much prefer to hear about events first-hand, rather than wade through all the useless chaff."

"Mmmm," Hermione started, at a loss in the face of such bluntness. "Well, I'm not sure it's as interesting as all the gossip warrants," Nor will I be telling you the whole of it, she thought, "…but I've found that the truth rarely matters when it comes to rumours. When would be a good time?"

"Now, if it suits you. I am about to start office hours, but this early in the term I doubt even the most studious Ravenclaw will be seeking me out." She gestured down the hall. "Would you like to join me for some tea in my rooms?"

The woman's quarters proved to not be far from Hermione's own, and the abundance of books, plants, and soft furniture rendered it comfortable and welcoming.

"So what exactly is a ritual specialist?" Hermione asked as they settled down to cups of fragrant mint tea.
"The women of my family have been story-tellers- historians, if you wish to use a more masculine term, or hakawati, in Arabic- for many generations. We record, share and analyse the mythology of magical lore and spell work. Traditionally, we have worked for the royal courts- most recently that of the Ottomans- as advisers."

"Like the Scheherazade of 'A Thousand and One Nights?" Hermione inquired, sipping at the hot tea carefully.

The woman gave her a wry smile. "Not like: the Scheherazade of 'Alf laylah wa-laylah' was my seventeen-times great-grandmother. Galland and Burton bowdlerized much of her tale, mind you- heaven forbid we allow the tradition of a powerful Muslim woman- not to mention a witch- to go down unchecked in the annuls of history, but the basics are mostly correct."

Her voice was tinged with a familiar sarcasm, and Hermione found herself relaxing a bit. "You sound much like Minerva when she goes off on the long tradition of erasing women's contributions to magic by relegating them all to the role of assistants or wives."

Abu-Lughod snorted and saluted her with the cup. "Yes, we are unashamedly both academics and feminists. That's why I took the position here. Minerva has given me the chance to radically re-write the History of Magic curriculum to not just include woman, but to also take a much broader and holistic world view. There is so much more to magic than the tiny paradigm of British understanding and knowledge that has been taught in the past. Much like you are trying to do with Muggle Studies, I fully intend on dragging the History of Magic class both into the twenty-first century, and out into the wider world. We are covering Western European magical practices at the moment, but I am highly looking forward exploding their lovely little minds next term when we start delving into the various African schools of practice."

Hermione was absolutely fascinated by the easy polemic; while she knew that magical practices varied wildly by country, she had never really given it much thought. "It appears that I am going to need a copy of your syllabus… I've done very little reading outside the European traditions."

"Most wizards and witches have not stretched themselves to look beyond the traditional geographical or ideological borders. More often than not, we view other belief systems as savage and undeveloped as compared to our own; colonialism has occurred not just in the Muggle world, but also in the magical one. But I digress… I believe that we are here to discuss your rather unique binding ceremony? Why don't you start by telling me how things unfolded?"

"Right," Hermione said with a small smirk of her own, thinking that Minerva must have really bamboozled the Board of Governors to get this particular hiring past them. "At the start of the ceremony, we decided to modify things a bit…"

Snape and Greengrass sat on the steps awaiting Aelius' return silently; he was relieved that the man felt no need for idle conversation.

Minerva's Patronus appeared, almost translucently white in the sunlight. "Aelius and Aurors should be leaving now; Harry is leading the team."

Bloody fucking wonderful, Snape thought, a spike of anger lancing through him at having to deal with Potter in anything more than a passing fashion. I've managed to stay clear of the Boy Wonder for years, and then I am blessed with his company twice in as many days…

Greengrass shifted and rose, scanning the horizon for any hint of his son or the Ministry officials. After another quiet minute, he turned around and gazed at Snape.
"Thank you," he said softly, if firmly. "...for watching over my daughters that final year, as well as the rest of the children of Pureblood families who did not openly pledge for the Dark Lord. While that was not clear at the time... it became obvious after it was all over that you had been protecting quite a few of us."

The man's words only deepened his growing ire. "I do not enjoy the senseless slaughter of innocents, Mr. Greengrass, despite reports to the contrary," he said coldly, hoping the man would take the hint and shut it.

"Nevertheless," Greengrass continued with easy equanimity, "...I, and my family owe you a debt of honour that we can never hope to repay. Should I ever be of any use to you, please don't hesitate to contact me."

It took a considerable effort to not inform the blasted man where exactly he could stick his vaunted honour; Snape had no real use for such a sentiment, especially coming so long after the fact, and did not care to dwell on the past any more than he had to. Moreover, standing as they were- only metres from the rotting body of Portia Prewett- the sheer gall of it struck Snape as supremely hypocritical.  

*You were a help today, I'll grant you that... but where were you when the seeds of this were sown? Surely this bitter harvest should come as no surprise...*

Still, he had been a spy for too long to let his emotions run riot all over his expression. Deciding that he was best served by gathering a bit of intelligence, he asked, "How many other Slytherin families are in such a state?"

Greengrass shrugged uncomfortably. "Far too many... We've done what we can, but the majority of the older families will not admit that they need help. Often we find out only when something like this happens." He sighed, and rubbed his forehead tiredly. "Pureblood society is no longer a close-knit group as it once was. Too many people died, or left Britain to maintain any sort of cohesive... ties. It is those with connections in the Ministry rather than blood-status that now comprise what passes for high society..."

"And do you miss the old ways?" Snape questioned without audible rancour. He was curious; he rather liked Aelius Greengrass, and the boy had lacked the provincial xenophobia that nominally marked most Purebloods. Given that he was by far one of the most promising young Slytherins that he'd had under his care, it would be highly disappointing to find that it was all a smoke screen for a family with entrenched Pureblood beliefs of supremacy.

"Hardly," the man stated emphatically, raising a brow at him. "What I object to is going from one narrow-minded, power hungry group of ruling idiots to another without any sort of real examination of values or underlying policy. There are no checks and balances, and very few people who are willing to challenge the status quo."

His answer surprised Snape. "And do you seek rattle the status quo, Mr. Greengrass?"

"I do."

Snape didn't know if he wanted to laugh at the man outright- twenty some years of spying had killed any sort of idealism that he might have had- or question him further so that he could best decide how to stay the hell out of it. He could- and would- support Minerva's ideas for changing the pedagogical landscape of education at Hogwarts, but that was as far as he was willing to go.

Thankfully he was once again saved from making any sort of reply by the appearance of a handful of broomed riders on the horizon. Grimly, he rose from his position on the front steps, and prepared to deal with the incoming mess.
Potter dismounted from his broom with all the accustomed grace of an ex-Quidditch player; black hair ruffled and robes rakishly askew, he momentarily looked like the Boy-Who-Lived, not Harry Potter, Auror Extraordinaire. But the mid-afternoon sunlight—so unlike the concealing qualities of moonlight—laid waste to any illusions of endless youth. For the first time, Potter didn't appear to be a clone of his father; he was older than James had ever been, and the passing years had marked him in a way that he'd never seen in James… or Lily, for that matter.

Aelius was at his side, eyes bright with curiosity and chattering away, apparently not immune to the lure of being able to freely question the Saviour of the Wizarding World. Potter was trying to be patient in answering the boy's queries, and the sight of it made Snape want to smirk. Aelius certainly chose an interesting time to show his youth, Snape thought. I wonder how much of it is genuine?

The boy opened his mouth to ask Potter yet another question, and Greengrass cut him off with a single, paternal look. Aelius subsided grudgingly, and Potter used the silence to make his greeting.

"Mr. Greengrass. Professor Snape." He bowed respectfully, and the use of properly deployed manners generated a small measure of surprise in Snape. "I understand that there has been an incident involving the family of a Hogwarts student?"

Hermione ran through the basic changes of the apprenticeship ceremony with Abu-Lughod, whose expression grew increasingly analytical as they spoke. About halfway through the conversation, she started to take notes, and stopped periodically to consult with several books pulled from her massive shelves as she ran through a thorough list of questions.

"Would you mind if I ran through a series of diagnostic spells?" the woman eventually asked.

Hermione studied the foreign witch for a long moment before the growing unease in her stomach pushed any doubts away. You want answers; if Minerva trusted her enough to hire her, than there is no cause to suddenly go shy. "Yes, you may."

Abu-Lughod must have caught some of her reluctance because she didn't immediately draw her wand. "I would be happy to demonstrate the spells, and have you cast them on yourself if you prefer. It makes no difference for my purposes."

"No, go ahead," Hermione told her. "I might have you show me later, but for the sake of expediency, you might as well do what you need to now."

Abu-Lughod rose from her chair. "The first set of spells is simply to verify your apprenticeship status." Hermione nodded, and watched as the other woman preformed an elaborate cycle of swishes and flicks. A pale golden light appeared on Hermione's wrists, where the burning had been earlier.

Hermione gave a little snort. "This looks like something Wonder Woman should be wearing."

"Pity there is no such thing as the Lasso of Truth, no?" Abu-Lughod said, chuckling. "Were it only that easy…"

"I am surprised that you understand the reference," Hermione remarked candidly, as Abu-Lughod withdrew a clean sheet of parchment and started to place several complex charms on it.

"My younger sister, Mona, lives in New York City. She's a design student, and rather obsessed with comic books. All things American, really," The woman offered her another impish smile, and Hermione wondered how old she was. Not much more than forty, if that, she thought. It certainly would be nice to have a female friend in the Castle who wasn't decades older than I am…"
"Mona takes to sending me all sorts of interesting things, Wonder Woman comics being the least of it. You should have seen the fuss a pair of glow-in-the-dark slinkies caused on the grand staircase… Now," Abu-Lughod continued, "…The next set of spells I'd like to use seeks the traces of other magical bindings. Am I correct in thinking that you are not married, hand-fasted, have children, or owe anyone a wizarding or life debt?"

"As far as I know, no."

"Good. It never hurts to check, however. Will you stand on the carpet over there for me?"

Hermione did as requested, and the woman slowly started circling her and chanting in what she assumed was Arabic. Magic, ephemeral and fleeting, brushed against her skin feeling like a spring breeze, and Hermione saw runes appear on the formerly blank sheet of parchment.

After a couple of revolutions Abu-Lughod finished with a decisive flick, and walked over the table. "Let's see what we've got then," she murmured softly, and began to scan the page. Hermione walked over and peered at it, but the runes were nothing she recognized.

Abu-Lughod was quiet for several minutes, comparing her notes to the books. Finally, she looked up at Hermione, and the humour had left her face. "Professor Granger, I know this is a personal question, but during your binding, were there any moments of… emotional resonance between yourself and Professor Snape?"

"Yes." Hermione swallowed, remembering the vivid flood of sentiment that had flowed between them. "And this morning, I… had the most peculiar feeling…"

"Like someone was pulling on your magic," Abu-Lughod supplied.

"Yes, exactly."

Abu-Lughod sat down in her chair with far more economy than grace. "The runes clearly show several interesting connections, and I'm fairly sure I know what has happened although I have never seen it before outside of a few texts." She paused, looking suddenly hesitant. "It is a rather lot to ask, but would you allow me to view your memory of the ceremony? I would prefer to be sure in my opinion, and there is something that I need to see in order to confirm."

"How?" Hermione asked.

"I have a Pensive," she answered, pointing to a low shelf. "I am more than happy to make wand oath with you that I will not reveal what I see, and we can stop the process any time you'd like."

Hermione considered it. There was a part of her that leapt at the thought of viewing her memory of the apprenticeship ceremony through the somewhat neutral lens of a Pensive; she had missed so many of the little details in her nervousness, and then there were the actual complications of the ceremony itself… But she was also loath to expose what had happened to herself- and Severus- to the eyes and judgement of another person. The question is, how much do I really want answers? Ignoring the… irregularities has not made them disappear. And can I really risk another bout of ignorance given my illness? I mean, I've been mostly fine since I've been in the Castle, but what if things change? If Snape can access my magic, does that mean I can do the same? Can I pass on my illness?

"I will show you my memories, but I would have you make the wand oath," Hermione stated firmly, deciding that a solid answer would negate any privacy concerns; it wasn't as if she'd had much luck in doing research herself.
"As you wish," the other woman replied formally. "Have you used a Pensive before?"

In a matter of minutes, Hermione found herself dropping into the beautiful, chapel-like room, the floor and ceiling speckled with multi-coloured jewels of light cascading from the stained glass windows. Glancing around the space, Hermione saw that it was just prior to the start of the ceremony, with Severus and Poppy conferring in the corner, and herself walking up to the dais to check the contract.

It was more than a little strange to see herself in such a fashion; the reality presented by Muggle pictures could be jarring enough- and she was always surprised to see just how bushy her hair could be, as well as how short she really was- and viewing the scene from the perspective of a Pensive only further highlighted the disconnect.

With a quiet rustle of fabric, Scheherazade Abu-Lughod appeared next to her, wand raised. The woman murmured something, and the tableau in front of them froze.

"I didn't know you could pause a memory like you would a film," Hermione said, startled.

"You can't, normally. This is a family Pensive, however, and we've developed quite a few charms over the years to better dissect memories." She stepped forward and began casting a series of rapid-fire spells, waves of ochre light rolling from her wand. "The first thing I always do is check the area to see what sort of underlying magic is at work; you would be shocked to see how many bindings are unknowingly disrupted by that sort of thing."

Once again, runes began appearing on the paper that floated next to Abu-Lughod, and she paused to read it. "Hmmm… the magic of Hogwarts really is singular- see this, here?" A delicate finger pointed to a row of blue. "…the room has been enchanted to encourage empathy, understanding and openness. The magics of the chamber also have significant protections against uttering falsehoods, or making false promises."

"What would happen if someone did try to make a false statement, or coerce someone into a bad apprenticeship?" Hermione asked.

"They would still be able to; these magics aren't on the same level as direct compulsions. But it would make the person incredibly uncomfortable, and I can't imagine you would be able to hide it from anyone in the room. Likewise, the more… positive aspects of the enchantments don't force people into actions that are against their character, but rather enhance qualities or desires already there."

"Is this sort of magic common?"

Abu-Lughod nodded, and moved towards the centre of the room confidently. "Yes, although few spaces in Great Britain can rival the potency or strength of Hogwarts. It really is well done." With another flick, the memory started again, and Hermione was drawn into the sudden drama of the scene.

"I do have one problem, Minerva..." Severus started to say, and with the hindsight and knowledge of the past several months, she could see just how unhappy he was with the more traditional facets of the ceremony.

Recalling Severus' murmured comments about the message contained in the Slytherin window, she hastily glanced toward it to no avail; the glass was only a fuzzy conglomeration of bright colours and vague outlines. Damn, maybe it will become sharper as this goes on…
Shifting her gaze back to the low dais where she now stood with Severus, Hermione noted that Severus looked subtly different. Thinner, perhaps, and not in a good way; certainly more tired and careworn. *Living in the Castle must agree with him*, she thought with some humour, *at least now that he's not playing a balancing game between two psychotic and deluded wizards. Although I rather imagine that Minerva, Poppy and myself could present an equal amount of challenge if we wanted to.*

_Huh. I wonder if I look any different since then?_

"Shall we begin?" Minerva said, and Hermione could see that the Headmistress was not just short-tempered, but worried about something as well.

It was surreal, watching herself clasp hands with Severus. As the various witnesses announced themselves, Hermione could feel her palms go sweaty with remembered nerves. From the corner of her eye, she could see Abu-Lughod lean forward as well, a look of anticipation on her face.

But it was Severus that stole the show. In his deep blue robes, he was every inch a fierce, brilliant wizard, and the sheer intensity of his regard—moreover, the way that it was totally focused on her—caused Hermione's heart to skip a beat. *Well, I definitely had his attention…* Despite a blush staining her own cheeks, Hermione was pleased to note that she didn't appear to be beset by nerves, or particularly overwhelmed, although she had been at the time.

"…As Headmistress of Hogwarts, and a Holder of a Mastery in Transfiguration, I declare this contract to be valid and binding."

Even though she'd been expecting the eruption of magic, it still caused her to jump; the blasts of light and energy surrounding Severus and her almost completely blocked them from view. Hermione exhaled jerkily, realizing only then that she'd been holding her breath, and then Abu-Lughod stopped the unfolding chaos with another sharp tap of her wand.

Upon doing so, the shifting luminosity resolved into solid, intertwined lines that formed something almost like a cage around the pair of them. Through the latticework of light, Hermione could see herself and Severus pressed together, and the shock clear on both of their faces. But frozen in their expressions were other, equally combustible elements; longing and passion… bitterness and need. Acceptance, and gratitude. For a fleeting moment, she could once again feel the heat of Severus' body against hers, and echoes of their mingled emotions brushed at her.

"This," Scheherazade Abu-Lughod informed her haltingly, "…is what I was hoping to find when I asked to see your memory." The woman pointed at the latticework. "These amber coloured lines—that's your magic…"

Hermione peered closer at the phenomena. What she had originally taken as a random configuration of colour and light was anything but; rather, there were two distinct sets of lines. One was a vivid, rippling amber with sparks of amethyst scattered throughout—hers, apparently—and the second was a deep, loamy green with shots of bright silver.

"And so the green…?" Hermione started.

"…Is that of Professor Snape," Abu-Lughod confirmed. "Watch closely." She gave her wand a languid swish, and events began to move forward again, but at a much slower pace.

The lines thickened, turning into threads, and then began twisting together, becoming thick green and gold ropes. It was utterly mesmerizing to Hermione, who reached up to stroke it.
"Thank you," Scheherazade Abu-Lughod said softly, pulling her back into the present "…for letting me view this. I know that it is quite… personal, but you have given me a wonderful gift. A hakawati I might be, but I did not ever expect to see this in my lifetime."

Hermione ripped her eyes away from the tapestry of magic to stare at Abu-Lughod. "What is it?"

"It is something very rare. Does the term 'm'ahadat ed-dam' mean anything to you?"

"No," Hermione responded, both scared and terribly curious.

"It means 'covenant of blood'; a more common English understanding would be something like the sacred vows taken by blood brothers. What you see here," Abu-Lughod said, and pointed to the intertwined threads of magic with her wand, "…is a type of soul bond."

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