Mudsnake

by Flye_Autumne

Summary

"Whatever you decide to say, make it believable." Hermione Granger learned to avoid the hard questions years ago. To her, Hogwarts is a relief: a new school with new people who have no knowledge of her past...only, they keep asking the hard questions. And it's getting harder for Hermione to maintain the lies. Featuring: Mentor!Snape and Slytherin!Hermione

Notes

Disclaimer for this entire work: I own nothing. JK Rowling owns all of the Harry Potter universe and its characters -- this is why she is rich and I am not. :)

Trigger warnings for scenes that will occur in later chapters- there will be references to abuse/neglect and bullying. If this is likely to upset you, you might want to read a different fic.

With all that being said, let’s begin!
It's Tradition

It had become an unofficial tradition at Hogwarts to take bets on which Houses the first years would be Sorted into — not that he, Severus, would admit to taking part in such a tradition. No, Severus Snape was not a betting man, although he did make certain... investments in students he knew would be Sorted into the House of Snakes.

“Now what about Longbottom,” Filius asked conversationally. “He didn’t lack for bravery from either parent, although Alice was a Hufflepuff.”

“Five sickles says he goes to Gryffindor,” said Pomona.

Minerva looked scandalized. “Really, Pomona, betting against your own House?”

The Herbology witch shrugged, clearly not wishing to share her thought process.

Severus smirked. Few people realized that Pomona housed an incredibly shrewd mind behind her friendly face. The Hat may wish to put Longbottom in Hufflepuff, but he will certainly end up in Gryffindor — that awful grandmother of his likely doesn’t shut up about their alleged virtues. “Five galleons says that Malfoy, Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Nott and Zabini will be in Slytherin.”

Minerva scowled. “Severus, that’s hardly fair...all of them are practically shoo-ins…”

Severus fixed her with a cold glare. “I hope you aren’t typecasting any students, Minerva,” he said silkily.

The Gryffindor matriarch looked flustered. “Of course not! I just -”

Filius took pity on her. “He’s just baiting you -”

“Severus!”

“So what about the muggle borns,” Filius asked, clearly trying to steer the conversation into calmer waters.

“I do believe Minerva has a distinct advantage in that realm,” Severus cut in. “After all, she is the one who delivers their letters.”

“That’s how it is every year, Severus.”

“I know. And that’s the reason I seldom bet on the muggleborns.”

“You’ve never bet on a muggleborn.”

“Never say never,” Severus snarked.

“Pssh. I’ll bet a galleon that you won’t bet on a muggleborn’s Sorting this year,” Minerva scoffed.

Severus pretended to consider the notion for a moment. Really, it was too easy to manipulate his coworkers. “Who are my options?” he asked, trying to sound reluctant.
“Terry Boot, Kevin Entwhistle, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hermione Granger, and Dean Thomas. Take your pick.”
Severus pretended to consider once again. “Alright. One knut -”

“Severus, a legitimate bet!”

“Fine. Ten sickles -”

“At least over a galleon!”

Severus sighed in annoyance. “One galleon, one sickle, and one knut that Granger will be sorted into Slytherin.”

Minerva snorted. “You can say goodbye to your money. Everything about that girl screams Ravenclaw.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. Last time he checked, he was a far better judge of character than Minerva. “If you say so.” He stood to leave. “I have a potion that needs to be checked on. I will see you at the Sorting.”

He left the staff room and headed towards the dungeons as his thoughts slowly turned towards the bushy haired girl he met in Diagon Alley.

The bushy haired girl paused for a moment outside of Flourish and Blotts. A look of longing passed over her face, but it was quickly wiped away as she headed towards the secondhand bookstore. Severus took a quick stock of her person - faded but clean muggle clothes, a box from Ollivander’s sticking out from the second-hand robe shop bag, and no parents in sight.

What? Severus mentally backtracked. Clothing convincingly muggle. First purchases were a wand and robes. No parents in sight. Severus was uncomfortably reminded of his first trip to Diagon Alley - no, don’t think of that.

Severus followed the girl into Thorne’s Secondhand Bookshop, trying his best not to look like a creepy stalker.

“I’m looking for the Hogwarts first year textbooks,” the girl said quietly yet confidently. “I have my list right here -”

“You’ll find most of them over there,” Alastor Thorne grumbled, gesturing to the left side of the shop.”

“Thanks.” The girl scurried off.

Severus stepped forward, and Alastor’s grumpy face broke into a grin. “Severus! Long time, no see.”

“It’s that time of year again.”

“Ah yes, the start of school.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Don’t look so grim. I’m sure not all your students are complete dunderheads.”
“You’d be surprised.”

Alastor shrugged. Severus said the same things about his students each year. “There’s a couple of relatively new potions journals in the back, if you’re interested.”

Severus nodded his thanks, his mind clearly already occupied with potions. He walked over to the back corner of the shop, scanning the shelves as he went - and ooh, was that the May edition of *Potions Today*? Severus snapped up the (only slightly) battered copy. *And was that last year’s copy of the Mastery magazine?* Severus shuffled through the pile for a couple minutes before heading over towards the first year books - not because he was concerned about the girl or anything - he needed… a couple more extra copies of the first year potions textbooks - yes, that was it - he, Severus, was definitely not a caring, sentimental man. Absolutely not. He was sure of it.

The girl was standing facing one of the bookshelves and had a pile of books next to her. Severus recognized the distinctive black and gold binding of *The Standard Book of Spells* as well as the navy binding of *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration*. The green and gray book was *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and the plain gray one was clearly *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*, which left - Severus followed the girl’s gaze to the top shelf - *One Hundred Magical Herbs and Fungi*.

Severus sighed. *I suppose I ought to play the gentleman and help her get the book down. *He scoffed inwardly. *He, Severus Snape, was contemplating helping a student out of his own free will? Absurd! Maybe he really was going soft…*

Books shifted, and Severus was jerked from his musings. He looked up, expecting to see a collapsing bookshelf, or really anything that was more - no, not logical - but more *expected* than the sight of an old copy of *One Hundred Magical Herbs and Fungi* wiggling its way out from between its neighbors to land in the girl’s hands. Severus raised an eyebrow, which was the equivalent of an average person jumping up and down doing a jig. The wandless magic alone was impressive, but the control exerted was a clear indicator of the girl’s impressive raw magical talent. A look of satisfaction flitted over the girl’s face, then she sat down suddenly with a slight *oohp*.

Concern flashed through Severus’ mind as he hurried over. *Had she - no… “Are you alright?”*

The girl was very pale, but nodded slowly.

“A verbal answer, please,” Severus asked out of habit, mentally wincing as the words came out of his mouth. *The girl didn’t know him. She’d think him mad - or cruel - not that he should care -*

“I’m fine - I just get dizzy sometimes, that’s all. I’ve done this before. I’ll be okay in a couple minutes.”

“You’ve done this before.” Severus’ mind was spinning.

“Well, yes - but only with small objects.” The girl looked slightly uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier - what was it?”

*Smooth. “Professor Snape. I teach at Hogwarts. And your name is…?”*

“Hermione Granger,” the girl quickly supplied. “What subject do you teach?”

“Potions.”

“Oh, fantastic,” the girl - Granger - said as she straightened up, scooping her books into her arms. “I need to purchase my potions supplies - perhaps you could point me in the right direction?”
Severus responded in the affirmative, and they headed towards the register. Granger carefully counted out the necessary coins from a muggle change purse and started to heft the bag of books onto her shoulder.

“Wait one moment, Miss Granger,” Severus said. Granger looked at him in askance as he cast a Featherlight charm on her bag. “The charm will last a couple hours.” He handed the bag back to Granger, and her eyes widened slightly.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

Severus felt somewhat uncomfortable. It was only a Featherlight charm. “You’re welcome,” he managed.

Severus murmured the password to his private lab. That hadn’t been the only occasion Granger made him feel uncomfortable - the fact that the girl was using her own pocket money to pay for necessary school supplies didn’t sit well with him. When he pressed her for details, she had completely closed up, which disturbed him. In fact, the more he spoke with her, the more his concern grew - and it wasn’t because of the things she said, rather, it was what she left unsaid. Severus originally pegged the girl for Ravenclaw, but her practiced avoidance of his questions was a strong indicator of Slytherin.

Severus sat down heavily, mind flashing back to their parting words.

He had given her several books that would be useful in understanding wizarding culture- _Hogwarts, A History_; _Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century_; _Modern Magical History_; and _So You Just Found Out You’re A Wizard_. The girl had been slightly uncomfortable with the gift, but she had stowed the books carefully in her bag.

“Professor -” she began, “there was something someone said in a shop that confused me. It was something about” she paused, searching for the correct word “Houses at Hogwarts?”

Severus had sighed. “Yes, _Hogwarts, A History_ will explain them to you -”

“Oh, sorry, I can just read about them then -”

“Admittedly, the book is quite biased.” Severus wasn’t sure what made him interject. “Students are Sorted into one of four Houses when they arrive at Hogwarts based on their strengths. Gryffindor prizes bravery, Ravenclaw - intelligence, Hufflepuff - loyalty, and Slytherin - cleverness and ambition.”

“The person in the shop said something about Slytherin being... bad”

Severus scanned her face, looking for a sign of malice. Seeing none, he forged ahead. “I’m sure the individual said that in a far more - ah, expressive - manner. People tend to dislike those who are smarter, cleverer and more successful than they are.” Pain briefly flashed across the girl’s face. “Slytherin House has produced many successful witches and wizards. Unfortunately, the most recent Dark Lord was also a Slytherin, and people, being who people are, make generalizations that really do not apply.” Severus felt defensive. “There is nothing bad about being in Slytherin, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. One more thing before you go,” Severus paused, trying to word his advice properly. _Should_
I even tell her... “I advise that you don’t reveal your blood status to anyone. There are some wizards who do not take kindly to those of non-magical origins. If someone presses you, make something up and stick with it - allude to the fact one of your parents might be magical - maybe they refuse to talk about their past, so you have no idea of knowing if they are a wizard or not.

“Whatever you decide to say, make it believable. Every lie as a grain of truth at its center.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you for telling me.”

Severus brushed off her thank you. “I will see you at Hogwarts. Safe travels, Miss Granger.”

The girl had vanished into the bustle of the bus station, leaving Severus alone. *I hope she makes it back alright.*

Severus smirked at the memory. *Sentimental fool. You'll turn into Molly Weasley at this rate.* Severus shuddered at the thought. The Sorting will be interesting this year, that’s for certain.
Hermione fruitlessly tried to lift her heavy trunk. *Maybe this time it will move…?*

It didn’t budge.

She had barely been able to lift the dam thing onto the train, and now she was suppose to get it onto the bloody luggage rack. *Fat chance of that happening.* For the eleventy millionth time that day, Hermione wished for Professor Snape’s Featherlight charm. Unfortunately, said charm was *not* in the first year curriculum, and therefore far out of her reach. *Although…* Hermione closed her eyes and pictured page thirteen of the Charms textbook. *The Levitation Charm could work…* She pulled out her wand from her hoodie pocket. *Okay, Hermione. Swish and flick.* Hermione swished and flicked her wand.

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

Much to her delight, the trunk rose into the air and Hermione was able to stuff it onto the bottom shelf. *Phew. Now, to find a compartment.* Hermione turned around, hoping to find an empty compartment where she could catch up on sleep - she hadn’t slept well the night before because - no, don’t think of that.

She shook her head to clear it, and a round faced boy with wide eyes came into focus.

“What?” Hermione asked somewhat crossly. *I thought I wouldn’t be stared at for doing magic here.*

“You - you just levitated your trunk,” the boy managed.

“So?” Hermione didn’t see what was so special about performing one of the most basic charms in the textbook.

The boy looked taken aback. “Oh. Are you not a first year, then? I’m sorry, I just assumed…”

Hermione was feeling more confused by the second. “I am a first year…”

“But how do you know so much magic already?”

“Oh.” *Did their professors really expect them to know absolutely nothing before entering school?* “Well, erm, I just read through our textbooks, that’s all.”

“Oh.” The boy looked rather glum. “Well, I better get going - I lost my toad.”

Hermione hid a look of surprise. *Wizards still had toads as familiars?* “I’m sure there’s a spell we could use to find it,” she said, mentally sorting through the first year repertoire. *No, there wasn’t anything…although, there was a Summoning Charm Professor Snape had used in the shop. Now what was the incantation…right. “What’s your name?”* Hermione asked suddenly. “I need to be specific for the spell. Although, I don’t know if it’ll work, because I only saw someone do it once and -” Hermione realized she was starting to ramble.

The boy was gaping at her again. “I’m N-Neville Longbottom.” He seemed uncomfortable, almost as if he was waiting for her to snicker at his rather unfortunate surname.

“*Accio Neville Longbottom’s toad!*” For one awful second, Hermione thought the charm hadn’t
worked. Then, a fat brown toad came whizzing into view and landed in Hermione’s hand with a reproachful croak.

“Trevor!” Neville exclaimed delightedly, “Thank you so much - I better go put him in his toad tank before he hops away again. Bye!” He dashed away.

Hermione suddenly felt a bit lightheaded and was contemplating sitting on the corridor floor when the compartment door slid open. A pale blond boy with a pointed face stepped out, looking at her critically.

“Impressive bit of magic,” the blond drawled.

Hermione tensed, ready for the inevitable insults, ridicule and eventual shame such boys caused. She was completely flabbergasted by the boy’s next words.

“Would you like to come sit with us?”

What? Hermione scrutinized his face, searching for malice. Either he’s a supremely good actor or he’s being genuine. “Sure,” she managed. She followed the blond into the compartment where three other boys and two girls were sitting.

“I forgot to introduce myself - I’m Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. These are my friends -” he gestured to the gorilla-shaped duo “-that’s Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. The one with glasses is Theodore Nott, the girl in plaits is Pansy Parkinson, and the blonde is Daphne Greengrass.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Hermione said softly, feeling very nervous. “I’m Hermione Granger.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “So, you’re a half blood, then?”

Hermione gulped and remembered Professor Snape’s advice. Don’t let anyone know you’re muggleborn. Whatever you tell them, make it believable. “Well, you see, I don’t really know for certain,” she began slowly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, my parents don’t really talk about their past - I’ve never met any of my grandparents.” There. The best lies contain several grains of truth in them. “So, I don’t know what exactly my parents’ parentage was. Although,” Hermione added thoughtfully, “my parents weren’t terribly surprised to hear I was a witch.” Hermione carefully left out the rest of her parents’ reaction. “So I’d presume they had at least some experience with magic.”

“Fair enough,” Draco the de facto leader said. “So what House do you think you’ll be in? You clearly have the brains for Ravenclaw…”

Hermione was relieved the conversation was turning away from her parentage and toward the more comfortable waters of House selection. Thank goodness I asked Professor Snape about Houses - Hogwarts, A History had been terribly biased against Slytherin. Imagine if I’d gone in thinking all Slytherins were dark evil bastards in the making - that would have been quite embarrassing.

Draco was still prattling along. “…of course, my family has been in Slytherin for centuries. It’d be a shame if I went anywhere else - Ravenclaw, I suppose I could live with, but I think I’d leave if I got put in Hufflepuff or, even worse, Gryffindor…”

Privately, Hermione didn’t see anything terribly wrong with prizing hard work, but she did think bravery was highly overrated. Especially since it tends to land you in trouble more often than not.
“So, Granger, what House do you think you’ll be in?”

Careful, Hermione. “Erm, probably Ravenclaw or Slytherin. Although I’m not sure I’m actually smart or clever. And call me Hermione.”

“I’d say you’re fairly clever,” cut in the bookish boy - Theodore - “after all, you figured out those spells with just the textbook and no professor.”

Hermione blushed. “Oh. Well, that wasn’t really much.”

She was saved from more blushing when the compartment door slid open. A middle aged witch stuck her head in.

“Anything off the trolley, dears?”

Hermione was about to say she was all set (all her pocket money had been spent on school supplies) when Draco stood up.

“I’m paying for everyone, of course,” he drawled. “Anyone have any favorites?”

Bizarre names of sweets quickly filled the air.

“Ooh, make sure you get Chocolate Frogs!”

“And Pumpkin Pasties!”

“And Cauldron Cakes!”

“Oh, and don’t forget Licorice Wands-”

“-and Fizzing Whizbees!”

“And Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans!”

Draco held up his hand. “Okay, okay. Granger - er, Hermione - anything you want?”

Hermione’s mind went blank. She didn’t know what any of these sweets were. “Erm, anything’s good with me - as long as there’s chocolate, of course.”

Pansy flashed her a grin from across the compartment, and Hermione smiled back. Maybe she could fit in here.

Hermione happily spent the next couple hours talking with Draco and friends, who were more than happy to educate her on the wonders of Chocolate Frog cards (Theo) and the inherent dangers of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans (Pansy). Slowly, Hermione felt herself relaxing. Maybe this is what having friends feels like.

They changed into their Hogwarts uniforms, and the girls were shocked to see that Hermione preferred trousers over the more traditional skirt. She had almost frozen when Daphne had asked why, but she carefully stifled her emotions and simply explained that trousers were more practical.

“Hermione,” Pansy started. “Please tell me you’re going to do something with your hair.”

Hermione nervously touched her frizzy curls. “Erm…”

“I suppose not.” Pansy eyed her critically. “There’s not much I can do without my full hair care kit,
but I can plait it for you so you don’t look like a human Pygmy Puff - no offense intended, of course.” Pansy patted the seat next to her. “Come sit. I’ll see what I can do.”

Pansy’s sure fingers quickly worked through Hermione’s hair, pulling it back into a snug plait. Hermione touched it gingerly.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Chocolate fanatics have to help each other out, right?”

Hermione had to grin at that. “Of course.”

It seemed like almost no time had past since they disembarked the train and headed across the lake in a fleet of small boats. Even though Hermione had read through the Sorting section in *Hogwarts, A History* at least five times, she still felt nervous - although, not quite as nervous as the red head with the pasty-shaped face who was going on about battling a troll.

“It’s either that, or some sort of test,” the ginger said, whispering furiously to the black haired boy next to him. “Fred says it hurts a lot. I think he was only joking.

“Move along now,” interjected Professor McGonagall’s sharp voice. “The Sorting Ceremony is about to start.”

The first years nervously formed a line and followed the Deputy Headmistress into the Great Hall. Hermione had to suppress a gasp as her eyes widened with awe. It was one thing to read about the Great Hall in *Hogwarts, A History* but to see it in person… wow. Just wow.

Professor McGonagall put a four legged stool topped with a grubby old hat in front of the first years. Everyone stared at it expectantly as it began to sing:

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Oh you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head
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The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folks use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!
The hall burst into applause and Professor McGonagall stepped forward, this time holding a long scroll of parchment.

“When I call your name, you will sit on the stool and put on the Hat to be Sorted. Now then, first we have Abbott, Hannah!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Bones, Susan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Boot, Terry!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brocklehurst, Mandy!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brown, Lavender!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Hermione was feeling decidedly nervous now, and she watched as “Bulstrode, Millicent” became the first new Slytherin. Draco’s friend Crabbe also joined Slytherin, then, all too soon, Professor McGonagall called:

“Granger, Hermione!”

Hermione swallowed her nerves and walked over to the stool. The Hat slipped over her head and all she could see was black.

“Hmm,” said a small voice in her ear. “A brilliant mind! I have not seen one this sharp in many a year. Ah, and ambition, too. A strong thirst to prove yourself. But where to put you…” the Hat trailed off, and a lead brick seemed to have lodged itself in Hermione’s stomach. *What if the Hat was looking through all her memories - even the ones that Nobody Could Ever Find Out About Ever.*

“Get out of my head,” she told the Hat firmly.

“A bit touchy, are we? Well, I suppose you ought to be in - SLYTHERIN!”

Hermione took off the Hat and walked shakily over to the Slytherin table. She was so distracted by the loud cheers and words of welcome that she didn’t Severus Snape give a knowing smirk to his colleagues.

Yet again, he’d never lost a bet.
Severus took one look at the schedule and cursed Albus Dumbledore. Fluently. In several different languages. He had told Albus several times in a very direct manner that Slytherins and Gryffindors did not mix. Especially in first year Potions where one of them was bound to cause dangerous explosions at least once per lesson - and that was in a “normal” classroom environment on a very good day. Severus sipped his black coffee again, hoping it would help ward off the inevitable headache that was the Gryffindor/Slytherin first year Potions class.

It was a foolish thought, but one Severus indulged in at the start of each school year.

Each year, it was in vain.

Damn the old coot.

Severus drained his mug. Best freshen up the protection wards… again.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,” Severus began, fixing the idiotic first years with his best bat-of-the-dungeons stare. “As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. In fact, I do not expect any of you to truly understand the beauty of softly simmering cauldrons with their shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...But if you continue on in Potions, I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.” Severus swept his gaze around the classroom once again. Granger was clearly absorbing every word, and Malfoy at least was paying attention.

The Gryffindor contingent, on the other hand… Potter appeared to be doodling, Weasley was picking his nose, and Longbottom was on the verge of pissing his pants whenever Severus looked at him.

“Potter!” Severus barked.

The brat looked up, eyes wide.

“What would I get if I added a powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?” Severus folded his hands behind his back and stalked over to the Gryffindor side of the room.

Potter turned pink. “I don’t know, sir.”

A smug feeling of satisfaction lodged itself in Severus’ chest. “Tut, tut - clearly fame isn’t everything. Two points from Gryffindor.” He looked down at the idiot’s parchment, expecting to see inane doodles.

Potter had been taking notes.

Potter had been taking notes.
Damn.

The prat was trying.

_Fuck. Now I can’t grill him in front of the rest of the class. Dammit, Lily. Why did you have to pass an iota of your brains to your dim witted offspring?_

“Weasley!”

The hapless Gryffindor’s head snapped up. “Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

Weasley threw him a look of disgust. “I dunno. Sir”

“Though you wouldn’t open a book before coming, eh, Weasley? Two more points from Gryffindor.”

Weasley turned an unflattering shade of red as Severus turned to his next victim - er, student.

“Longbottom! What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

The round faced boy look confused and started stuttering.

“Do you need me to repeat the question, Longbottom,” Severus asked, voice daring Longbottom to say yes.

“Er, no, P-p-professor. I- I th-thought th-that -”

“Quit your stammering, Longbottom, and get to the point!”

Longbottom gulped. “A-aren’t m-monkshood and w-wolfsbane the s-same p-plant? Sir?”

Severus felt strangely disappointed. “Yes, and what is the name of said plant?”

“A-aconite? Sir?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“T-telling you, sir.” The boy was still trembling.

Severus suppressed the urge to roll his eyes to high heaven. “The name of the plant, Longbottom?”

“Aconite, sir.”

“Correct.” Severus turned to face the class. “Perhaps all of you, like Longbottom, should have endeavored to at least _look_ at the course material before coming to class. After all, it wasn’t as if all of this information could be found in the _first chapter of the assigned reading_. ”

He strode back towards his desk as the Gryffindor side of the room broke out in whispers.

“Can you believe -”

“ - the slimy git -”

“-totally unfair - didn’t even award points to Neville -”

Severus smirked and gathered up the parchments on his desk. Just this time he’d let the nasty
comments slide - although, if he was honest with himself, the only reason he was being so...benevolent... was because he didn’t want to spoil the effect. He flicked his wand, sending a parchment to each of the dunderheads and to his Slytherins.

“Listen carefully,” Snape sneered. “This is a formative assessment. For those of you who have simple minds, this means it isn’t graded. Technically. As an incentive - not that you should need one - House points will be awarded for correct answers. An assessment covering the same material will be given at the end of the year - this is supposed to show growth. Provided that you are not a complete idiot.” Severus looked at Potter, who gulped and Weasley, who turned a darker shade of pink “- you should get more answers correct at the end of the school year. You have the first half of the double period to complete the written portion. When we arrive at the second half of the class, you will take out your textbooks and brew the Cure for Boils found on page three. You may begin.”

Parchments flipped over and quills began scratching away. Approximately ninety minutes and one melted cauldron later, Severus’ classroom was once again a first year-free zone. He neatly levitated the parchments into his office and settled down to grade them. He had at least some time before the third year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws came in for Potions lecture.

Red ink in hand, Severus savagely marked all of the Gryffindors’ papers except Longbottom’s with ‘T’s. Surprisingly, the potions catastrophe-in-the-making had properly identified and explained all of the herbs and plants used. Severus would have been impressed had he not known that the Longbottoms made their family fortune through Herbsology.

When he moved on to the Slytherins, the results were largely expected - Crabbe and Goyle clearly inherited their fathers’ (lack of) intellect, Malfoy knew some of the answers as a result of the expensive tutoring Malfoy Senior insisted on, and Granger -

Severus pulled out a first year Potions textbook to verify an answer for the first time in his teaching career. His eyes darted between the textbook and the parchment, and his mouth tightened to a firm line.

Word-for-word, Granger’s answer was the same as the textbook. Coincidence? I think not. The question is, however, how did she cheat? Disappointment filled Severus. After I helped her in Diagon Alley, I would have assumed she would have the common decency not to cheat in my class. Although, he thought grimly, we all know what happens when one assumes - you make an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me’. Severus flipped through the rest of the parchment, and, sure enough, each answer was exactly the same as the textbook. This is not going to be a pleasant conversation for her.

“Silverweed,” Severus snapped. The door to the Slytherin common room slid open, and Severus billowed inside. He quickly located the first years sitting in a nook on the far side of the common room. Someone had once again tamed Granger’s hair into a plait, and by the looks of it, she was busy explaining something to the rest of the group.

“- see, if you grip your wand like-so, it’s much easier to execute the snap at the end of the movement sequence -” Granger demonstrated, and her matchstick turned into a shiny needle. The other Slytherins made impressed noises, and Granger blushed slightly.

“Excuse me, Miss Granger,” Severus cut in. “I need to speak with you.” Severus watch emotions play across her face - there was surprise, and a little bit of nervousness, but none of the guilt he was expecting. Odd. Perhaps Granger was better at hiding her emotions than he originally thought. “Follow me.” He led her down the corridor to his office. “Sit. Do you have any idea as to why you
are here?”

Granger twisted her hands in her lap. “No sir.”

Severus mentally sighed. *So this is the game we are going to play.* He took out Granger’s formative assessment and laid it on the desk between them. He raised an eyebrow, waiting for Granger to jump in. She remained silent.

“Any comment on this, Miss Granger?”

The girl looked uncertain. “I completed the assignment to the best of my ability…”

“Are you aware, Miss Granger, that each of your answers is quoted verbatim from the textbook?”

“Yes sir.”

*So she was admitting to cheating?* “Are you aware, Miss Granger, that cheating is not permissible at Hogwarts and you will face strict punishments for engaging in such a crime?”

The color drained from Granger’s face. “I didn’t cheat, sir,” she said quietly.

“You didn’t cheat.”

“Yes sir.”

“Yet your answers word-for-word matched those of the textbook?”

“Yes sir.”

Severus could feel a headache coming on. “Please explain.”

“I - I just have a good memory, sir.”

“Really.” Severus pulled out a copy of the first year textbook. “What does page 175 of the textbook explain about lacewings?”

Granger closed her eyes for a second, then quoted the text perfectly.

“What does the third paragraph on page 96 say?”

“Page 96 has no third paragraph, sir. It has a diagram of the innards of a horned toad as well as Schriftsteller’s Scales, which were historically used to measure Potions ingredients prior to the advent of the Messung Scale that we use today.”

Severus asked her another series of questions, all of which she answered perfectly. He sat back in his chair. “Miss Granger, has anyone ever told you that you have a photographic memory.”

“No sir - although I did surmise that myself.”

Severus nodded. “Yes, you most certainly have a photographic memory. Now, have you taken an IQ test?”

“No sir.”

Severus leaned back in his chair. *How had Granger’s former teachers missed her obvious intellect?* “That will... most likely change. There are several different aptitude tests I believe you should take. Once I have cleared them with Professor Dumbledore, I will notify you. Until then, continue to keep
up with your classes. You may return to the common room.”

“Alright. Thank you, sir, for believing me.”

“Miss Granger, there is no need to give thanks for seeing the truth.”

The girl blushed slightly and left.

Severus slid his elbows forward on the desk and rested his head in his hands. *Just who is Hermione Granger?*
Hermione’s brain hurt. She had never done so much thinking in her entire life. Professor Dumbledore had excused her from classes that day so she could take several different exams. She had already heard of the IQ test, but she had never heard of the slew of wizarding tests. First, there had been the TOAD (Terribly Outrageous Academic Decisions) test, which was written and covered basic theory across all of the first year subjects. Next, she took the SNAKE (Smooth Nearly Academic Konquest Exam), which had involved spell-casting. Last was the RAT (Rightfully Arduous Test), which required wandless magic. Needless to say, Hermione was quite exhausted and a bit dizzy.

Leaning back in her chair, Hermione swung her feet nervously. Worried thoughts ran through her mind in a loop - what if something was wrong with her? What if she got kicked out of Hogwarts? What if -

The inner door of Professor Dumbledore’s office opened, and Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape stepped out. Hermione anxiously examined their faces, searching for any clue, any expression, any emotion…

There was nothing.

*Deep breaths, Hermione, deep breaths.*

Professor Dumbledore steepled his fingers. “Miss Granger, we have your results.”

Hermione gulped, and Professor Dumbledore handed her a roll of parchment. She unfurled it with trembling fingers and read the following:

**IQ: 140**

**TOAD: 7**

**SNAKE: 7**

**RAT: 3**

Hermione felt herself begin to panic. She’d gotten a seven? Out of what? And the three - that had to be terrible! *Breathe, Hermione. Breathe. Put those emotions away.*

Hermione composed her features into a blank mask, “Do you mind explaining the scores, sir? I’m afraid I’m not overly familiar with the IQ exam or any of the wizarding standardized tests.”

To her surprise, Professor Snape was the one who spoke up, “As I’m sure you know, the IQ test was developed by muggles as a means to gauge intellectual capacity. The maximum score for written exams caps out around 162 -” Hermione’s heart sank. “- and an intellectually average person would score around 100. Your score of 140 ranks you in the top two percent of the population.

“The other three tests - TOAD, SNAKE, and RAT - are scored out of seven points.”
A cold fist wrapped itself around Hermione’s heart. She gotten a three out of seven? Oh no oh no oh no.

“There are several different versions of TOAD and SNAKE that correspond to your year in school. The tests you took were designed for students in their first year of formal magical schooling. Your scores indicate a certain... mastery of basic magic, although that is not terribly surprising given your IQ score.”

Hermione felt as if a lead weight had settled in the pit of her stomach. This was all too common of an occurrence - she’d hear a tantalizing amount of good news only to have her hopes crushed.

“Wandless magic is not a skill many witches and wizards possess -”

Great. Now she was a freak here as well.

“- therefore, there is not an age-specific exam. The ability to do wandless magic typically manifests after a witch or wizard hits the age of majority because it requires more magical energy and focus than magic with a wand. In most cases, a witch or wizard’s magical core must be fully developed before they can attempt wandless magic.” Professor Snape fixed Hermione with his piercing gaze. “You, Miss Granger, clearly are an exception to the rule.”

Hermione gulped. And here is where the wheels fall off the apple cart...

“Since the ability to do wandless magic so so rare, the scoring is curved. Most adult wizards score around a two, which generally translates to the ability to cast simple spells, such as Lumos, without a wand. They may also be able to summon small, nearby objects, but they have no true facility with the skill. Your score of three indicates that, given time and proper training, you may have some skill in wandless magic.”

Hermione could hardly believe her ears. “So a score of three isn’t bad?” she asked hesitantly.

Professor Dumbledore beamed at her. “Of course not!” he exclaimed, eyes twinkling, “My dear girl, you have a gift!”

Gifted? Her? “I appreciate your kind words, sir, but I do not believe I am nearly as intelligent as you’re making me out to be.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape snapped, “You clearly have a strong affinity for magic - both with and without a wand.” he turned to Professor Dumbledore. “Albus, what have you decided about Miss Granger’s classes?” he asked silkily.

Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall exchanged a meaningful glance.

“We have decided that Miss Granger should stay in the classes for her year group.”

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow. “Really. And will this truly challenge Miss Granger and allow reach her full magical potential?”

The headmaster fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, yes - we wouldn’t want Miss Granger to become ostracized from her peers, now would we, Severus? If she is moved up a year or more, as you advocate, Miss Granger would run the risk of cultivating the reputation of an insufferable know-it-all.”

Hermione flinched as a sick feeling spread through her. Professor Dumbledore had seemed so kind earlier, but now she could hear the darker implications his genial tones carried. Oh, stuff it,
“Very well then, Albus, Minerva,” Professor Snape said coldly. “I suppose if that is where you stand, then that is where you stand. Come along, Miss Granger.” The Potions master stood, and Hermione quickly followed him. The man was silent all the way down the spiral staircase, and it wasn’t until they were several corridors away that he finally spoke.

“I would never speak ill of my colleagues,” Professor Snape began, his mouth twisting in sarcasm, “But I want to make sure you are clear on a certain fact. You realize the Headmaster’s decision is utterly absurd, correct?”

Hermione started - she wasn’t expecting Professor Snape to ask her for input. “Erm, I suppose so,” she said carefully.

Professor Snape stopped in his tracks and whirled around to face her. “You ‘suppose so’, Miss Granger?” he asked, voice dangerously soft. “Do you not realize the implications of your scores?”

Hermione numbly shook her head.

“Listen closely as I am not going to repeat myself again. You are likely the brightest witch of your generation, and Professor Dumbledore -” he sneered the name, “- is insisting you stay in the regular classes with all the dunderheads who are struggling to learn material you mastered weeks ago. Does that not sound strange to you, Miss Granger?

“If your House had been anything but Slytherin, they would have done anything in their power to help you,” he said bitterly. “Instead, you made your home in the House of Snakes, and, ergo, you cannot be trusted.” His mouth contorted into a twisted facsimile of a smile. “The old coot,” he snarled under his breath, almost too quietly for Hermione to hear.

He turned and continued walking, “If Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall are not willing to place you in classes appropriate for your abilities, I will have to take matters into my own hands and endeavor to remedy the situation - I expect to see you in my office on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at seven.”

Hermione was touched that her Head of House was willing to dedicate some of his spare time towards helping her. “Thank you, sir.”

Professor Snape grimaced slightly. “You should not have to thank me.”

Hermione shrugged, “I would have thanked you anyways.” They had arrived at the common room door. “Have a pleasant evening, Professor.

“Boomslang,” she told the wall. The door slid open and Hermione hurried inside.

“Hermione!” Pansy called as she hurried over to their usual corner. “How are you doing? Were the tests hard? Did you do well? Oh, and did you hear that -”

Hermione held up a hand to stop the flurry of words. “Woah, slow down, Pansy.”

Her dark haired friend just grinned at her. “So…?”

Hermione shrugged. “The tests were kind of difficult, but I did alright. Do you have a copy of the Transfiguration notes?” she asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Er, I have my notes…”
“Do you mind if I make a copy?”

“Go ahead.”

Hermione tapped the parchment with her wand. “Gemino.” A perfect duplicate of Pansy’s notes appeared, and the other girl raised her eyebrows in appreciation.

“Neat. Where’d you learn that?”

“Oh, I saw a couple of upper years making copies in the library, and it seemed really useful so I watched them cast it a couple times. Works really well, huh?”

“Yeah,” Pansy flopped back dramatically onto the couch, “This Potions essay is killing me - what’s up with the porcupine quills and taking the cauldron off the heat?”

Hermione smiled, “Okay, so, here’s the deal with quills…”

It wasn’t until several hours later that she was finally able to curl up in her four poster bed and really think about what Professor Snape had said. If she was to be completely honest with herself, Professor Dumbledore’s actions really didn’t make sense - unless he truly is prejudiced against Slytherins.

That’s ridiculous, there must be some other reason, Hermione sighed and rolled over Whatever it is, I will figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the kudos and reviews! You guys are great <3
It was five minutes to seven when Hermione knocked on the door to Professor Snape’s office.

“Enter.”

Hermione nervously pushed the door open, not entirely certain as to what she should expect. The floor-to-ceiling shelves were filled with books, and the uppermost shelf contained various specimens floating in jars. Professor Snape was sitting behind a dark wood desk covered in neat rolls of parchment. An archway at the back of the room led to another corridor -

“Finished staring?”

Hermione blushed. “Sorry, Professor.”

The man gestured to the chair in front of his desk. “Take a seat.” Hermione sat. “We have much to discuss. I trust you haven’t told anyone why you are here.”

Hermione nodded.

“A verbal answer, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, sir, I haven’t told anyone.” Not that anyone had bothered to ask her.

“Good. See that it remains that way,” Professor Snape steepled his fingers, “Today, we will be working on refining your Potions technique. Your brewing skills are … satisfactory given your age, but your ingredient preparation needs improvement. You will also learn that our textbooks are … significantly less than satisfactory on certain aspects of potion making. While I do not expect you to be familiar with all the modifications I know, I do expect you to start learning some of the more basic ones.” Hermione nodded.

“We will work in my private Potions lab today. The wards are temporarily keyed in to admit you.

Follow me.” Professor Snape led her through the narrow corridor behind the archway. Halfway down he stopped, flicked his wand out of his sleeve, and tapped several of the bricks. They seemed to melt away before Hermione’s eyes - had it been an illusion? - revealing a narrow spiral staircase descending downwards into the gloom.

“Ignis.”

Hermione gasped. The stone walls were now emitting a soft glow, illuminating the stairs. “Professor, what was that spell?” she asked as she hurried down the stairs after him.

“The Ignis charm. It’s a rather… archaic charm developed before fire prevention wards. The walls in the older sections of the castle are spelled to respond to it.” They reached the bottom of the stairs and Professor Snape paused in the low-ceilinged passage. “This is one of the oldest parts of the castle. Do not stray from the main corridor, lest you wish to have a very unpleasant encounter.”

“Yes, sir.” Hermione had zero intentions of wandering off, the dark... the close walls… Focus, Hermione.

“...as I told you earlier, the wards are temporarily keyed in to your magical signature. You should
never,” his voice sharpened, “attempt to enter the lab without my express permission. The wards are extremely volatile in nature and have rather … unfortunate consequences for those who try to trespass.”

Hermione gulped. She did not want to find out what the mysterious unfortunate consequences were. Not in the slightest.

Professor Snape pushed the heavy wooden door open. “You may enter.”

Hermione’s skin tingled as she walked through the doorway, and her eyes widened as she took in the eclectic room. It was a bizarre mix of mad scientist’s lair mixed with a medieval alchemist’s chamber. The lab had several black-topped tables in the center, with spaces to insert cauldrons, as well as neat storage areas on the sides for Professor Snape’s various vials and flasks. Supply cabinets lined the far wall, and in the corner was what appeared to be a cauldron cleaning device.

Hermione stifled a smirk - if that indeed was a cauldron cleaning apparatus, then Professor Snape’s tendency to make the Gryffindors scrub cauldrons during detention was doubly cruel.

“Miss Granger, you can use this lab bench here,” Professor Snape said, gesturing to the leftmost table. “You should remember the Cure for Boils potion you brewed during the formative assessment. You will brew the potion again, only in two different batches. The first will follow the directions in your textbook, and the second will adhere these directions -” he flourished a small roll of parchment “- which I have adapted. When you have finished your potions, put them in stasis by making a circular motion with your wand like so and saying habitus. We will then discuss the differences between the preparation of the two potions and how that affected the final product. If you need any clarification, do not hesitate to ask for it.”

Professor Snape flicked his wand again, sending an array of ingredients and the parchment over to Hermione’s workspace. “That should be everything you require. You may start.”

Hermione walked over to the lab bench feeling somewhat nervous, but confident in her ability to brew the simple potion. The textbook’s directions were easy to follow, and Hermione quickly assembled her ingredients and brought the cauldron to a simmer. The snake fangs were added, then Hermione left the cauldron to brew while she prepared for the second potion. The snake fang base was the same, she noted, but Professor Snape’s revised formula called for crushed horned slugs rather than the whole horned slugs found in the original version. How interesting, I wonder how he figured that out.

Hermione made the base for the second potion, then left both cauldrons to simmer while she cleaned up her work station. By the time she was done cleaning, it was time to add the horned slugs. The cauldrons were allowed to stew for several minutes before she carefully removed the cauldrons from the flames to add the porcupine quills. Professor Snape’s version of the potion bubbled viciously for several seconds, and for a moment Hermione thought the cauldron would explode and she’d end up like poor Neville Longbottom. When the potion turned a deep shade of red, Hermione sighed in relief. Thank Merlin I didn’t mess that up. Now to put the potions in stasis… Hermione traced a circle over each cauldron. “Habitus.” A shimmery silver mist settled over each cauldron and Hermione grinned. I actually did it! “Professor Snape, I’ve finished.”

“One moment, Miss Granger.” Professor Snape put his cauldron in stasis and strode over to Hermione’s workspace. He examined the potions for a moment, “...they are adequate.”

From what she knew of Professor Snape, this was a huge compliment. “Thank you, sir.”

“Now, reiterate for me, what changes were made to the textbook’s directions and how did they
impact the potion?”

“The preparation of the horned slugs was different, sir. Instead of putting them in the cauldron whole, they were crushed. It made the potion a deeper red.”

“Why do you think that happened?”

Hermione thought for a second. “Did crushing the horned slugs…release more juice?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

Hermione felt sheepish. “Telling you, sir.”

Professor Snape quirked an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Crushing the horned slugs releases more juice, which makes the potion more potent, as indicated by the deep red color of the final product.”

“Precisely. Bottle the revised potion in these flasks here - it will be sent to the Hospital Wing.”

A happy balloon grew inside Hermione’s chest. Her potions - her potions were good enough for the Hospital Wing. Hermione happily bottled her potion and cleaned up her station.

Nothing, not even the dunderhead duo, could burst her bubble.
Hallowe'en

It was an understatement to say Hermione was pissed off at Ronald Weasley. *Of all the bigoted, idiotic morons I could be stuck with ...* Hermione took a deep breath and refocused her attention on Professor Flitwick.

“Swish and flick,” the diminutive professor was saying, “Remember, swish and flick. And saying the incantation properly is very important, too - never forget Wizard Baruffio who said ‘s’ instead of ‘f’ and found himself with a buffalo on his chest.”

Hermione inwardly smirked. Judging by the progress of his paper shredding, Weasley was cruising towards becoming Wizard Baruffio 2.0. *And what a satisfying mental image that would make.*

“Now all of you can try it!” Professor Flitwick exclaimed. “Remember, it’s *Wingardium Leviosa.*”

Hermione swished and flicked. The wand motion was quite easy - it was all in the wrist. *Wingardium Leviosa!* Hermione thought, picturing the feather floating up towards the ceiling. So far, she hadn’t mastered any non-verbal spells, but maybe, just maybe, this one would work out, even though Professor Snape had said most sixth years couldn’t do nonverbal spells.

*Don’t get discouraged,* Hermione remembered Professor Snape saying. *Most sixth years cannot successfully cast nonverbal spells. However, this does not mean that you cannot cast them. Nonverbal spells require more focus, finesse, and visualization than verbal spells. It will take time and practice for you to master them.*

Hermione closed her eyes and pictured the feather floating off the desk. She pictured her magic flowing fluidly from her core through her wand to the feather. She pictured the words of the charm in her mind and prepared to cast -

Weasley’s wand came two centimeters away from poking her eye out.

“Watch it, Weasley! You almost took my eye out!”

Weasley looked at her impetuously and imitated a windmill, “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

*Clearly Weasley didn’t listen to the lecture,* Hermione attempted the nonverbal spell again, *Wingardium Leviosa!*

Still nothing.

Weasley wound himself up for another windmill, “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

Wrong, wrong and wrong.

Was Weasley purposely trying to have a stupidity competition? With himself?

“You know, you’re saying the incantation completely wrong.”

Weasley glared at her, “Am not.”

*What an idiot.* “Yes, you are. It’s *Wingardium Leviosa.* You have to make the ‘gar’ nice and long.
otherwise the spell won’t work.”

Weasley’s face turned a nice shade of puce, “Fine. You do it if you’re so smart.”

Hermione didn’t think she was ‘so smart’, but the charm really was simple when one did it verbally. “Wingardium Leviosa!” The feather floated neatly off her desk and continued to rise above her head.

“Oh, look everyone!” Professor Flitwick shouted. “Miss Granger has done it! Five points to Slytherin!”

Hermione couldn’t help but give a small smile of triumph when she saw Weasley’s face. Take that, you Gryffindork.

Professor Flitwick glanced at the hourglass on his desk. “Oh my, look at the time! Don’t forget your foot long essay on the applications of the levitation charm. Class is dismissed.”

Hermione neatly packed her book, parchment, and quill into her bag and headed over to meet Pansy.

“Pansy! Draco!” She called over the throng.

No head turn.

*They probably can’t hear you over the Gryffindork lunch rush.*

“Pansy!”

The black haired girl was swallowed by the crowd. Hermione pushed forward, trying to get to her friend.

“- can’t believe anyone can stand her, honestly,” Weasley was saying hotly.

Hermione’s heart froze. *It’s not me. It’s not me. I’ve barely even spoken to him. It’s not me.*

“She’s such a vicious little know-it-all, and a disgusting slimy little Slytherin. I bet she doesn’t have any friends at all - I know if she was in our House I wouldn’t want to spend any time with her.”

Hermione’s nose began to tingle and her eyes began to prick. *Weasley is talking about me. He’s talking about me.*

Weasley was still talking. “I bet any ‘friends’ -” he sneered the word, “- that she does have only spend time with her because of her brain. She’s probably so desperate she’d let them copy her homework if it meant she didn’t have to be a lame little loser.”

Hermione fought her way through the crowd. *I’ll tell Weasley - I’ll tell him - I’ll tell him I heard what he said I don’t appreciate it.* She came level with Weasley, and the words choked in her throat. Tears threatened to leak out of the corners of her eyes. *Don’t give him the satisfaction of seeing you cry.* Hermione pushed past Weasley and his idiotic cronies.

“Ron - I think she -”

Hermione didn’t care. As soon as she was out of sight, she half-ran, half-jogged to the first floor girls’ toilet. *No one can see your tears. No one. Don’t let them see.*

Hermione locked the door of the farthest stall and cast a Silencing charm as tears flowed freely down her cheeks. It wasn’t until she felt the magic take hold that she sunk to the floor and dissolved into a
puddle of choking sobs.

_Pansy only spends time with me for my brain._

_No one._

_Vicious little know-it-all…_ Weasley’s words echoed through her skull, and another choked sob escaped her lips.

It was primary school all over again.

She couldn’t escape after all.

It was never going to end.

Never.

Memories from primary school raced towards her unbidden.

Hiding underneath the slide in the playpark.

Oscar White calling her a hideous bint.

Working up the courage to ask what a bint was.

Seeing the look of disgust on her mother’s face.

_You deserve_ everything.

Hermione dug her nails into her palms.

_Stop it. Just stop._

The memories kept coming.

Shoved in the hallways.

‘Accidentally’ locked in the storage closet Oscar White and Thomas Williams.

Last one in the playpark.

Walking home.

Alone.

In the dark.

Loneliness.

Lies.

_All my fault._

_Always my fault._
Dark red blood trickled down her palms.

Weak.

Always too weak.

A wave of self loathing swept over her.

Too emotional.

Always too emotional.

Stuff those emotions away.

In a black box.

You have no emotions.

Deep breaths.

Hermione shuddered.

Deep breaths.

You have no emotions.

Stuff them away.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Hermione gasped, curling in on herself.

It's been awhile since -

Shut that away.

You have no emotions.

Don't think about that.

You are a blank slate.

A pool of water.

A mask.

Shh.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Hermione leaned back against the wall and buried her face in her knees.
Breathe.

Just breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

Slowly Hermione’s breaths grew less shuddering. She wiped her eyes off on her robes and cast a quick Tempus spell. Her heart sank. It was nearly time for the feast.

Hermione unlocked the stall door and glanced in the mirror. Her face was slightly blotchy, but no one would notice if she took her hair down. She carefully unbraided her hair - don’t think about Pansy - and positioned it so her blotchy temples weren’t visible. Hermione splashed some cold water on her face, dried it, and poked her head out of the door.

Coast is clear.

Hermione walked down the corridor, painfully aware of the soft sounds her shoes made against the stone floors. She was about to head down to the dungeons when she heard the loud shuffling up ahead. And the smell… it smelled like something that had died a long time ago mixed with spoiled meat and sweaty socks. Hermione quickly ducked behind a suit of armour, heart beating a rapid tatoo in her chest. Every instinct screamed to run as fast as she could in the opposite direction, but all she could do was hide. And stare as a massive greyish creature shuffled into view. The stench was even worse now - like a public toilet that no one had cleaned in a very long time. The creature - Hermione was pretty sure it was a troll - had long arms that almost reached the floor and a massive club that was bigger than Hermione.

The troll lurched down the corridor, stopping to sniff the air.

Can it smell me?

The troll’s beady eyes turned towards her hiding place.

Hermione stifled a whimper.


Nothing.

The troll shambled closer, and its club collided with a suit of armour with a loud crash. The suit in front of her began to tumble, and she rapidly scooted out of the way.

A plan, Hermione. You need a plan.

Nothing.

The troll brought its club down again, and Hermione rolled out of the way and took off down the corridor at a dead sprint.

Maybe I can lose it...

The troll roared and charged after her. Hermione bounded up the stairs to the second floor.

I just need to find a narrow enough staircase - then it won’t be able to follow me -
A stitch was building in her side.
Breaths came in sharp gasps.

There!
One of the moving staircases had just swung over.

*Hopefully the troll will fall in the gap…*

Hermione nearly leapt onto the staircase, troll in hot pursuit.
The gap was widening.
She was going to make it.

The troll came to the edge and wobbled. A look of confusion crossed its face - clearly, this was too much thinking for its two brain cells. A howl of rage filled the air as the troll teetered over the edge, club swinging. Hermione quickly scrambled down the stairs, trying to will her legs to move fast enough to avoid the club.

*Crunch.*

Hermione looked down in horror.

*A trick step.*

*No.*

*No no no no no no no.*

Hermione frantically tried to pull her leg out of the stair.

*No no no no.*

She twisted.

There was a sickening thud.

A fire burning in her right shoulder.

Then nothing.

Nothing at all.
Tribulations

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck.

Severus broke out into a dead run.

Damn Quirrell.

Damn the fucking dog.

Damn the FUCKING idiot who let a FUCKING TROLL into the castle.

The solid animal reek of troll filled the air.

Troll in the dungeon, my arse.

Severus rounded the corner and his heart jumped into his mouth.

Granger was trying to outrun the troll.

What the fuck?

Severus watched in horror as the girl leapt onto a moving staircase. *Stupefy won’t work. Impedimenta won’t work. Petrificus Totalus won’t work. Shite.*

The troll reached the edge and stumbled, then teetered towards the edge.

Why isn’t Granger moving...fuck, she’s stuck.

Severus ran forward as fast as his bloody leg would let him, wand brandished. *There has to be something...*

The troll toppled over, club flailing.

Granger tried to scoot away.

Crunch.

Fuck.

Granger collapsed.

The club fell, and there was a second sickening crunch when it landed on its owner’s head. *Good riddance.*

The staircase swung back towards Severus and he limped over to Granger.

Shite.

The girl’s shoulder had been completely crushed by the club, and, mercifully, she had lost consciousness. Severus quickly conjured a stretcher and levitated Granger onto it.
Footsteps clattered down the corridor as Minerva and Quirinius came into view.

“Severus! Whatever happ- oh my!”

Severus sneered at her. “Clearly, the troll happened. Miss Granger was quite injured by it.”

Minerva opened her mouth, but Severus quickly cut her off, “If your questions are truly important, I will answer them later. Miss Granger’s shoulder has been literally pulverised by the troll’s club, and her health is my top priority,” Severus narrowed his eyes, “I suggest you and Quirinius go inspect the troll. After all, he has quite a... gift with them.” With that, Severus stalked down the stairs with Granger’s stretcher in tow, steadfastly ignoring the blood that was seeping into his socks.

A soft whimper jolted Severus awake.  *The Skele-Gro would be kicking in just about now.*

“*Lumos.*”

Severus rubbed the crick in his neck (this is why he never deliberately fell asleep in chairs) and stood up.

“Miss Granger. How are you feeling?”

“... I’m fine,” the girl managed, tears silently oozing out of the corners of her eyes.

“On a scale from 1-10, how bad is the pain?”

Granger’s voice trembled, “Six.”

Severus waited.

“Or an eight.” Pause. “It’s a nine. It just hurts so badly...”

“I know. I have also had experiences with Skele-Gro.” There. That was as close as he would get to admitting weakness to a student. *Or to anyone, for that matter.* “Unfortunately, you cannot take pain relieving potions with Skele-Gro as the ingredients interact with each other in decidedly unpleasant manners.”

The girl laid her head back as more tears silently rolled out of her eyes.

A sudden pang of pity hit Severus, and he felt like an awkward intruder for the first time in twenty years.

“Would you prefer if I left?” *Of course she will prefer that, you fool.*

There was a long pause, then the girl’s voice came, slightly tremulously, if Severus wasn’t mistaken. “Can you... stay?”

Severus swallowed his surprise, “Of course.” Long silence. “Miss Granger, why weren’t you at the feast?”

The girl’s eyes widened slightly, and if Severus wasn’t mistaken, there was fear there. *Why?*
“It was nothing.”

Severus quirked an eyebrow. “If you’re going to lie, you need to do a better job of it.”

“I’m not -”

“Truly, Miss Granger?”

“It’s nothing.”

“That only indicates to me that something is indeed wrong.”

“It was just... people being people.”

Severus waited.

“Sometimes... people say things and I - I take it too - the wrong way - and... I - I can’t talk about this -” the girl was clearly on the verge of tears.

Interesting.

“We can resume this conversation at a later date, Miss Granger, when you are less incapacitated. However, you will feel better if you tell someone about what is troubling you. If you feel uncomfortable talking to me, you can always speak to Madame Pomfrey, one of the prefects, or even Miss Parkinson -”

Pain flashed across the girl’s face, but Severus pretended not to notice.

“Just make sure to tell someone. Keeping everything bottled up will do you little good in the long run.”

Granger turned her face away, and Severus moved to go back to his chair.

“I shouldn’t have overreacted,” the girl murmured, almost too quietly for Severus to hear, “I should have ignored him... he’s just an idiot anyways.”

Severus froze, quickly going through a mental list of idiot “him”s.

“It’s just that -- ” her voice dropped down even quieter, and Severus wondered if the words were even meant for his ears, “ - it’s not the first time people have said things like this. Having a perfect memory... it’s a curse. Their words, always rattling around in my head…”

Sweet Merlin…

“What did they say?” Severus asked softly.

“They - they said that I had no friends. That no one liked me. That I was ugly and stupid. And a know-it-all,” her voice was almost inaudible, “Sometimes I would hide in the supply closet during recess... there was one kid and every day he would tell me I should ‘fucking kill myself’ because ‘no one gives a fuck about me.’ … then one day him and his friend locked me in the supply closet, and since then…” she trailed off.

Tread carefully, Severus. “And your parents...what did they think?”

Tears began to flow steadily, “They didn’t care... they - they said I was making everything up.”
Severus wanted to throw up. *Too many similarities. Far too many fucking similarities.*

“That is incredibly unfortunate.”

The tears flowed faster.

“I, on the other hand, do believe you.”

Granger sniffled, “You do?”

“Yes. And if you want me to do anything about it, I will need to know who the perpetrators were and what they did.”

“I can’t - it’ll get worse…”

“It will not. I guarantee it.”

Granger wiped at her tears with her good arm, “Are you sure?”

*There’s no goddamn way I’m allowing anyone to treat her the way I was treated.* “I am.”

“It was Weasley. He - he said that I was a ‘vicious little know-it-all’ and that I was disgusting. And that I had no friends, and people would only want to - to spend time with me because of my brain.” The floodgate opened, and she silently cried.

Severus stood there awkwardly. Crying children were not his specialty and he did not, under *any* circumstance, hug someone.

“I’m - I’m sorry.”

“Whatsoever for?”

Granger sniffed. “I - I just cause problems everywhere and -”

“Nonsense,” Severus said brusquely, feeling relieved that the crying had diminished, “Here, dry your eyes. You should try to rest now - the pain from the Skele-Gro should be diminishing.”

“O-okay.”

“Nox.”

Severus careful picked his way back over to his chair. Weasley had *no* idea what would be coming his way.
Decisions, Decisions

Severus couldn’t believe his ears, “Are you having a laugh?” *You thrice-damned barmy old coot.*

The Headmaster twinkled, “Certainly not, Severus. While I will admit that the situation was regrettable, I do not believe the boy should be punished.”


“Mr. Weasley’s actions were, indeed, rather unfortunate. However, as I am sure you know, boys his age are prone to uncensored emotional outbursts. There are no grounds for punishment here - especially not of the caliber you suggested.”

“You are going to let him off without any sort of repercussion?”

“Yes, Severus, I am. Now, if I may speak bluntly - I believe that incidents that happened almost twenty years ago are unduly influencing your perception of events,” The Headmaster smiled genially, “My boy, you need to let go of the past and start living in the present.”

Severus mentally recoiled, mind boiling behind Occlumency shields. *How dare he!? How dare he insinuate that.* Severus stood, face a blank mask, “If that is all, Headmaster, I must be going. There are House matters to which I must attend.” He strode over the threshold, then turned back, almost as an afterthought, “Oh, and Headmaster, I do believe that Hogwarts has never had a strong enough policy against bullying. Good day.” With that, Severus stalked down the stairs in a whirl of dark cloak.

*What will I tell Granger?*

The door to Albus Dumbledore’s office quietly closed and the old man sighed as he recalled the blank, hunted look in Severus’ eyes - a look that never seemed to have gone away. For the first time in almost twenty years, Albus wondered if perhaps he had made a mistake in the treatment of young Severus Snape.

Now that Albus thought about it, he realized he had never seen Severus smile. Even as a first year, the younger man had been serious and withdrawn. Lily had been the one bright aspect of Severus’ life, and even that had been ripped away from him. It was Severus’ own fault, of course, but perhaps Albus had been a little too harsh.

He shrugged and popped a Lemon Drop into his mouth. He hadn’t been mistaken. Everything, of course, had been for the Greater Good.

“Look, I’ll admit that Ron didn’t have the best of timing, but he didn’t really do anything wrong. He’s just a bit...loud spoken sometimes and things come out the wrong way.”

Neville Longbottom stared at him with a curious expression that Harry couldn’t quite read, “If that’s the case, then why is he holding court in the common room like he’s the saviour of the human race?”
Harry’s mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“Exactly, Harry. Don’t you get it?”

“Get what?”

Neville sighed. “Haven’t you ever been in a situation where everyone looked down on you and belittled you no matter what?”

Harry’s mind raced.

*Harry Hunting.*

*The cupboard.*

*Ripper.*

*That’s different though,* said a nasty little voice in the back of Harry’s brain. *That happened to stupid little Harry - if you had been just a little bit smarter or a little bit better, maybe the Dursleys would have loved you too. That was all your fault. You deserved it.*

Harry gulped. “No, Neville, I haven’t.”

The plump boy’s face closed off. “Right then,” he picked up his bag and walked towards the door, “I’d better be off then - got to study, you know. Weasley and his cronies - friends, I mean, are down in the common room. You should probably go and join them.”

“Neville - wait - it isn’t - ” The other boy was already gone.

Harry flopped back onto his bed. *Looks like you’re not really brave after all.*

For the first time in seven years, Harry Potter buried his face in his pillow and cried.

He had made the wrong choice.

Again.

---

Ron Weasley was the man of the hour - at least to Maddox McLaggen and his posse. Maddox’s younger brother Cormac had overhead Ron and Harry arguing over the stupid Granger “situation” and invited Ron to hang out with them. Seamus and Dean had wandered over a couple minutes later, and the first years were basking in the attention - as well as the food - that the fourth years had provided. Percy kept sending Ron nasty looks from across the common room, but Ron ignored them. What did Percy know, anyway? It was important that he, Ron, stood out from his brothers, and it was bloody well impossible because they had already done everything!

However - Ron took another swig of his butterbeer - he had to admit that *this* was a step in the right direction.

“Anyways,” Maddox was saying, “this was the bloke I was telling you about - Ron, Ron Weasley, that is.”

The raven haired boy looked at Ron critically. Ron gulped. Had he spilled butterbeer down his front?
“Nice to meet you, Ron,” the boy said genially, “I’m Sebastian Malaise. It’s great to meet yet another young Gryffindor who truly understands the importance of our cause.”

Ron was confused. “What cause?” he asked, oblivious to the meaningful look Maddox and Sebastian exchanged.

Sebastian slung an arm across Ron’s shoulders in a very companionable way. “Look, Ron - I know you’re a first year, but I’m sure you’ve heard about the Slytherins from those illustrious brothers of yours.”

Ron nodded. “‘course I have.”

“Well,” Sebastian lowered his voice conspiratorially, “We have a group of us - Gryffindors only, of course - that are dedicated to Remedying the Slytherin situation. They’ve won the House Cup for the past seven years, which is completely unacceptable. We need to put the snakes back in their proper place, if you know what I mean.”

Ron didn’t really know what Sebastian meant, “Yeah. I do know.”

“Good. Now, our group is pretty... exclusive, so you can’t go around blabbing about it to everyone - not, of course, that you would - clearly you’re too smart for that -”

Ron puffed out his chest. Someone (finally) recognized his talent!

“- anyways, one of us will let you know when we’re meeting - probably Cormac ‘cause he’s closer to your age - and then you can meet the rest of the squad.”

*Play it cool, Ron.* “Thanks, Sebastian. I, uh, look forward to meeting everyone.”

“Pas de problème, Ron. I’ll see you around,” clapping him on the shoulder, the lanky boy strode off.

Ron smirked. Percy had his grades, Fred and George had their pranks, and he, Ron, would help Gryffindor House seek justice against the Slytherins.

The light was dim in the Hospital Wing when Hermione woke up. The pain in her shoulder had receded to a dull ache instead of the blinding agony she felt when -

Oh Merlin.

She’d told him.

What had she done?

*Disgusting weak crybaby. You’re not fit to -*

Madame Pomfrey interrupted her whinging, “Miss Granger! How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright.”

“And soreness?”

“Erm, a little bit in my shoulder.”
The mediwitch swished her wand in a complicated pattern, “Everything appears to be healed properly. Sit up for a moment, please.”

Hermione sat up, and the mediwitch briskly stretched out her shoulder, “I’m going to give you a salve that you will need to apply to the shoulder twice a day for the next week. If your shoulder starts hurting again, you need to come back and check in with me. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione said meekly, eager to leave the Hospital Wing as soon as possible.

“Humph. Here’s the salve.” Madame Pomfrey passed her a small pot that Hermione carefully stowed in her book bag.

“Thanks.”

The mediwitch harrumphed again, “Think nothing of it. I’m just doing my job.”

On the way back to the common room, Hermione was still puzzling over the mediwitch’s words. It almost seemed as if she was imply that there were some people who weren’t doing their jobs... which made no sense whatsoever. Surely someone who wasn’t doing their job properly would be sacked.

Severus Snape sat with his head pooled in his hands. To think he had been so stupid. So naive.

Why the bloody hell would Albus fucking Dumbledore care about a Slytherin?

He never did and he never will.

You knew this.

Severus could feel himself spiraling down towards self pity, and he resolutely shoved those emotions aside. Then -

Guilt.

I should have fought harder.

Fuck that. I will fight harder.

No one - no one should have to experience that.

“I’m sorry,” Severus murmured into the darkness, “Miss Granger, I’m so, so sorry.”
“A word, Miss Granger.”

Hermione schooled her features into a blank mask and settled her bookbag back on the Potions bench. Professor Snape had been...different since the troll incident. Not a bad different, exactly, but a more watchful different.

It made Hermione nervous. *I really shouldn’t have opened my big fat mouth in the Hospital Wing.*

“How is everything going, Miss Granger?”

Hermione’s brain kicked into overdrive. *What is he trying to get at? What did he find out? How much does he know?* “I’m sorry?”

Professor Snape sighed (or maybe it was just her imagination). “Is everything alright with you, Miss Granger. You look tired.”

Hermione internally bristled. *Just because I’m getting five hours of broken sleep every night doesn’t mean I’m tired!* “I’m alright, sir. Just studying a lot.”

Professor Snape quirked an eyebrow. “ Really.”

“Yes, sir.” *Every lie has a grain of truth in it.*

“If that’s all…”

“It is, sir.”

“You may go to your next class.”

Hermione wasted no time heading out the door. *It’s not because I don’t want Professor Snape to discover anything. I don’t want to be late for class.*

She hurried upwards, shoes echoing hollowly on the stone steps of the dungeons. *Of course Transfiguration just has to be on the opposite side of the castle.* There were a couple stragglers in the corridors, and Hermione picked up the pace. *I really should have asked Professor Snape for a pass. Really should have.* She rounded the corner, paying little attention to where she was going when -

WHAM!

Something - or more accurately some *one* smashed into her, sending her bag flying.

“Dear me, I’m terribly sorry.”

Hermione craned her neck from her vantage point on the floor. A tall blond boy with a Gryffindor tie
stood above her.

“Didn’t see you there, snake. I was in such a hurry.” He turned on his heel. “It’s a shame your belongings spilled. It would truly be a pity if someone were to -”

His heel came down slowly on her ink bottle.

Crunch.

“-step on something.” He looked at his shoe. “Bother. I suppose I should clean it. Scourgify.” The ink on his shoe vanished. “I really must get going. Good day. Filth.” The last word was whispered, but Hermione had no doubt she was meant to hear it. The boy walked away, shoes clicking quietly on the stone corridor.

Hermione watched as the ink spread.

Why me?

Why is it always me?

Why?

Hermione didn’t go to Transfiguration that day.

Severus’ floo roared to life.

“What is it, Minerva,” he asked irritably. He had a large pile of essays to grade - all of them undoubtedly shite - and he certainly wasn’t in the mood to discuss certain idiotic Gryffindors. He’d tell Minerva where she could stuff it - those stupid, moronic, imbecilic -

“Hermione Granger wasn’t in class today.”

“What!?” Did I just say that aloud? Judging by Minerva’s shocked expression, he had, indeed, said that aloud.

“I’m sorry, Minerva, but could you repeat that?” Severus could feel a headache coming on.

“Hermione Granger wasn’t in Transfiguration today.”

Of all the Slytherins to miss class… “Why are you informing me of this? If I’m not terribly mistaken, standard procedure is to give students detention, not inform their Head of House.”

Minerva sighed. “That’s part of the problem. No one has seen Miss Granger since this morning.”

A rock settled in the pit of Severus’ stomach. “You’re having a laugh.”

“Severus!” Minerva sounded positively scandalized. “I would never joke about a student’s safety!”
“Of course you wouldn’t,” Severus muttered to himself. “You’d just ignore it and pretend it wasn’t a problem.”

Minerva looked at him expectantly, and, belatedly, Severus realized she was still waiting for an answer. Or an apology. *Fat chance of that happening.* “When was Miss Granger last seen?”

Minerva’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know, Severus. I was under the impression she was at her previous class, but didn’t bother coming to Transfiguration.”

Someone had Transfigured the rock in Severus’ stomach to a boulder. *Potions. Granger had Potions before Transfiguration.*

*Fuck.*

*Did I pry too much? Or too little?*

“-Severus?”

“Potions,” he heard himself say. “She had Potions before Transfiguration.”

“...and?” Minerva prompted.

“And nothing, Minerva,” Severus said testily. She’d never cared about Granger before. Why was she starting now? “I’m certain one of the other Slytherins knows where she is.” *Ha. And people don’t think I can be diplomatic.*

Minerva looked relieved. “Excellent. Have a nice evening, Severus.” The Floo connection closed, leaving Severus feeling very confused.

Was Minerva being genuine?

Severus internally shrugged. *I don’t think I really want to know.* He exited his office, when, on the way to the common room, another thought struck him, this one decidedly less pleasant: why hadn’t he been notified earlier? It was nearly evening, and Granger’s Transfiguration class had been in the early afternoon.

Severus grimaced. *This begs two questions - did they not realize Granger was missing, or they deliberately decide to not inform me? For her sake - and for my sanity - I hope it is the former... the consequences of the latter would be -*

“Professor!” Octavia Carrow’s sharp voice cut through Severus’ woolgathering. “I’ve been looking for you - Miss Parkinson is very distraught - she says Miss Granger charmed her curtains shut and won’t respond to anyone - I tried talking to her but she wouldn’t respond to me either - I don’t even know what to do -”

Severus heaved a mental sigh. *One question is answered, and a million more are created. “Take a deep breath, Miss Carrow. I cannot understand you if you are stumbling over your words.”* The harried prefect visibly steadied herself. “Miss Parkinson said that Miss Granger has been holed up in her bed all day - apparently she charmed her curtains shut and won’t answer anyone. I’m - I’m worried about her, sir.”

You’re not alone in that regard. “I appreciate you keeping me updated.” *What else do I tell her? “I believe Miss Granger simply needs a little time to herself - tell Miss Parkinson to leave her alone for the time being. If by tomorrow Miss Granger is still isolating herself, let me know, and I will re-*
evaluate our course of action.” There. Now she even feels included.

“Alright. I will, sir.” Carrow turned back towards the Slytherin common room.

Severus slowly headed to his own quarters and sat down heavily in his favorite armchair.

Merlin, I just hope I did the right thing.
Maddox McLaggen swaggered into the Gryffindor common room, and Ron couldn’t help but feel a slight pang of jealousy.

It just wasn’t fair.

Maddox got all of the glory, and he, Ron, was left by the wayside. He could tell, just tell that something was going on and nobody would tell him what!

Ron slumped back into the squashy arm chair and stared despondently at his Potions homework. He had absolutely no idea how horned slugs affected his potion - and he didn’t care either. It wasn’t like he was even going to get an ‘O’ in Potions. Stinkin’ Snape always favored his slimy snakes - especially Malfoy and Granger. Not a single Potions class went by without Snape complementing the pair.

Ron glared at his essay. It was so bloody unfair that he could never prove that he, Ron, was just as good as any of his brothers. Or anyone, for that matter.

A soft scratching noise interrupted Ron’s thoughts and he looked down to see a small scroll of parchment sitting onto of his essay. Ron frowned. That wasn’t there before. He gingerly opened the scroll to reveal Cormac’s sloped handwriting.

7:30.

*Behind the tapestry of Uric the Oddball on the fourth floor.*

*Make sure you’re not seen.*

Ron’s heart did an excited tap dance in his chest. Finally!

A small smirk made its way across Ron’s face as he attacked his Potions essay with new vigor. He would finally get the attention he deserved.

“Ron?” Harry called out hesitantly. He stepped through the dorm room door. “Ron, are you - oh, hullo, Neville. Have you seen Ron?”

The round faced boy looked up from his book. “No,” he said shortly.

Harry bit his lip. Neville couldn’t still be mad about last week, could he? The studious way Neville ignored him certainly suggested that he was mad at Harry, but Harry couldn’t quite fathom why. *Seems like everyone’s peeved at me these days*, he gloomily reflected. *Ron, Neville, Merlin knows who’s next.*

“Look, Neville, about last week -” Harry started tentatively.
“Forget it, Harry.”

“I -”

“I’ve got to study.” Neville’s face contorted into a twisted facsimile of a smile. “Not all of us can get by by being the Boy-Who-Lived.”

A cold weight dropped into the pit of Harry’s stomach.

“You have no bloody idea - my parents -”

“My parents -”

“-are dead - and -”

“-sitting in St. Mungo’s -”

“-you have no idea -”

“-don’t even know who I am anymore-”

“-how hard it was living with -” Harry stopped dead in his tracks. “Wait, what?”

Neville sniffled slightly. “My parents - they don’t even know who I am.”

“I - I never knew. I’m so sorry.” Harry’s problems with the Dursleys suddenly seemed less significant. It seemed...worse...somehow that Neville still had his parents, yet they didn’t know who he was.

“S’okay,” Neville mumbled.

Harry sat next to him on the bed. “What happened?” he asked softly.

Neville bit his lip. “Don’t wanna talk about it.”

Harry pulled his - dormmate? friend? - into an awkward one armed hug. “S’all good.”

I understand. The words weren’t spoken, but they hung in the air between them.


Harry smiled. “Sure, Neville. Mates.”

“Welcome,” Sebastian said smoothly. His smile didn’t reach his eyes, but Ron didn’t notice.

“Thanks - er, where should I -?”

“Next to Cormac is fine.”

Ron nervously sat down. This was his one big chance, and he didn’t want to mess it up.

“Now that everyone is present, we can call the meeting to order. Maddox - I believe you have something to tell us?”
The older McLaggen smirked. “Of course I do, Bast. I’m sure you all recall the illustrious exploits of our very own Ron Weasley-” Ron blushed “- with a certain slimy Slytherin. The other day, I’m proud to say, I encounter the same...individual.” Maddox paused, and Ron waited with bated breath. “Let’s just say she didn’t have the most...pleasant of afternoons.”

“What’d you do to her?” Cormac asked.

Maddox idly inspected his fingernails. “I didn’t do anything, naturally. She had the audacity to ram into me. It was truly a pity that all her belongings spilled, and it couldn’t be helped that her ink bottle just happened to roll underneath my shoe.” He smirked. “I certainly didn’t mean to crush it. It was just...serendipitous.” He shrugged elegantly. “Enough of this talk about me - I believe we need to make plans regarding a certain sneakin’ Slytherin. Bast?”

Sebastian’s smile was cold. “Certainly. We need to teach Slytherin a lesson. They think they’re so ambitious and so cunning with their seven year monopoly on the Quidditch and House Cups. We’ll show them that they couldn’t be more wrong. Both of those Cups rightfully belong to Gryffindor. Slytherin lied and cheated their way to the top. We’re going to put a stop to it. We’re going to show them that Gryffindor is the real champion. Those slimy snakes will have no idea what hit them - this is what we’re going to do -”

Ron shifted uncomfortably. Sure, everything Sebastian was saying about Gryffindors being winners sounded great to him, but some of the stuff in the plan - it just didn’t sit well with Ron. He just didn’t see why they had to go to such lengths - what would Mum think if she found out - wouldn’t it just be enough for them to win the Quidditch Cup? After all, Harry was obviously the best Seeker in the school.

Harry.

Ron felt as if a giant rock had dropped into his stomach. I’ve been a bit of a prat lately - completely ignoring Harry and the like. I should -

“Ron, are you even paying attention?” Sebastian sounded more than a bit peeved.

“Er, yes - just thinking about the look on the Slytherins’ faces when we take the Quidditch Cup right from under their noses,” Ron quickly fibbed.

“Focus, Weasley, this is important. We don’t want this to be traced back to us. This is why -” he said with a flourish “- I brought these.”

Ron stared in confusion. Are those...masks? And robes?

“My comrades,” Sebastian said dramatically. “We will be - pardon my pun - masquerading as Slytherins.”

There was a long pause as everyone processed the information.

“Cor, Bast. That’s bloody brilliant!” Maddox exclaimed.

“I know. With any luck, everyone will assume that the Slytherins attacked one of their own - unsurprising, of course, given the individual in question - and they will be punished accordingly while we will get off scot free.”

“Naturally,” Maddox smirked.

“Alright. Is everyone clear on the timing? The plan?” There were nods of agreement. “Excellent.
Remember, do not be seen, and if one of you breathes a word to anyone about this -” Sebastian drew his finger across his throat “- understood? Perfect.”

Ron gulped.

“For Gryffindor!” Sebastian cheered.

“For Gryffindor!”

Chapter End Notes

And we’re getting closer to the end! We have about 3-5 chapters left (as long as my characters don’t suddenly make plans). I love reading all of your reviews, so feel free to click that magical little button and let me know what you think! I have a couple ideas bouncing around in my head for what I should write next, but if you have any ideas I’d love to hear them!
Hermione nervously hurried through the corridors. She’d had to take the long way to Potions to avoid Draco and Pansy, and now she was going to be late.

Draco and Pansy.

A sharp pang went through her chest.

Draco and Pansy.

*I miss -* Hermione cut off the thought. *Don’t think about that. Put it away. Pull yourself together. Stuff it all away. You can do this.*

A shuddering breath escaped her. *Pull yourself together.*

*People like you don’t get luxuries.*

*Friends are a luxury.*

*Get over it. Just bloody get over it.*

*Be grateful it lasted as long as it did.*

*Breathe.*

*Just breathe.*

Hermione drew another shuddering breath.

*I can do this.*

She quickly wiped away the - they weren’t tears, her eyes just happened to be watering - and rounded the corner. There was a short cut up ahead somewhere -- if she could find it, she would get to Potions on time.

And - there! Hermione quickly ducked behind the tapestry -

Her eyes widened.

“*Oh! I didn’t mean to-*”

The hooded Slytherins turned around, and Hermione’s heart skipped a beat. “*I’ll just le-*”

The tall one advanced towards her. “*I don’t think so, Granger,*” it - he - said coldly.

Hermione took an involuntary step backwards, then another. Something about the entire situation screamed bad. “*I’m sorry, I - I-*” Hermione began, desperately playing for time. *If I can keep them talking...*
“Don’t be getting any ideas, Granger. We need to teach you a lesson to what happens to certain Slytherins who get ahead of themselves.”

The tone was off. Hermione was certain of it.

Another masked Slytherin stepped towards her. “You make us look like fools, filth.”

Hermione stepped backwards, turning to run.

“I don’t think so, filth.” The tall one lazily twirled his wand.

“Petrificus Totalus.”

Hermione’s arms and legs snapped together and she toppled forward with a sickening smack.

“Tut, tut, this won’t do.”

Hermione found herself suddenly flipped onto her back.

“So here we have the slimy Slytherin know-it-all,” sneered one. “Too bad your big brain -” he punctuated the statement with a kick to Hermione’s ribs “-won’t be too much help here.”

Familiar feelings of panic set in as Hermione fruitlessly tried to break free of the Body-Bind.

“Stupid swot.”

Another kick.

Dull pain flared across Hermione’s ribs as she fought to control her breathing.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

Don’t hyperventilate.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

“No wonder you don’t have friends, Granger.”

“It’s not a surprise that your own kind don’t even want to spend time with you.”

“You know, filth,” one said, the tone quickly changing to conversational. A shiver of fear traveled down Hermione’s spine.

No.

No no no no.

“This is fun and all, but all of us have places to be.”

Please, Hermione prayed. Let this all be over.

“Unfortunately,” the voice continued, “I don’t think we’ve taught you a lesson yet.” There was a flurry of movement, and pain flashed through her face as the coppery smell of blood flooded her
nose. "As fitting as it is to leave you here," the voice said casually, as if it had not just broken
Hermione’s nose, "I think we should find somewhere more … suitable. Like, oh, I don’t know,
perhaps, a broom cupboard?"

Hermione panicked.

No.

This can’t be happening.

Not again.

Not the cupboard.

Please.

No.

I can’t.

Breathe.

I can’t.

Just breathe.

I can’t.

NOT THE CUPBOARD I CAN’T.

I can’t.

Rough hands lifted her, then her shoulder slammed into something hard. Something - the door -

Not the door.

Don’t.

Don’t leave me.

- slammed shut, plunging the tiny space into darkness.

“Colloportus.”

“I hope you enjoy it, filth. No one knows you’re here except us. And no one will be able to hear
you. Silencio.”

The panic bubble in Hermione’s chest exploded.

This can’t be happening.

This can’t be happening.

Sound ripped its way out of Hermione’s throat. "LET ME OUT!” Somewhere in the back of her
brain she registered she could move again, but it barely seemed important.

“LET ME OUT!”
“LET ME OUT!”
“HELP! SOMEONE!”

“LET ME OUT!”

Hermione kicked the door as hard as she could, desperately trying to break it down. The walls were pressing in on her, darkness invading her eyes. The space was too small, too tight.

Air rasped harshly through her lungs.

*Breathe.*

*I can’t.*

*Breathe.*

*I can’t.*

*Breathe.*

She slid down the wall.

*No one knows you’re here.*

*No one is coming for you.*

*Not this time.*

Her head spun.

*Breathe.*

*I can’t.*

*Breathe.*

Hermione curled into a ball, tears leaking out from the corners of her eyes. Choking sobs wracked her body.

*Breathe.*

*I can’t.*

She felt suspended, somehow, floating above her body. The emotional-Hermione-on-the-ground rocked back and forth as tears mingled with blood on her face.

Floating-Hermione felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

“Today,” Severus sneered. “We will be brewing the Forgetfulness Potion. For those select few —”

Severus let his gaze travel to the Slytherin side of the class “- who were successful with last week’s Shrinking Solution, this potion should be a walk in a park as the primary and intermediate steps are very similar. For those of you who were not as successful —”

The classroom door banged open, and a very disheveled Ron Weasley ran in.
“Ten points from Gryffindor for tardiness, Mr. Weasley. And detention, I should think.”

The ginger fool opened his mouth as if to reply, but was quickly shut up as Thomas - another one of the (many) Gryffindor idiots - yanked him down onto the bench.

“As I was saying before Mr. Weasley graced us with his presence, those of you who were less than successful last week should take special care on this week’s potions lest you wish to accrue yet another ‘T’ in this class. Instructions are on the board. You may begin.”

Severus walked carefully through the class.

“Longbottom! The instructions clearly call for diced Valerian Sprigs not whole Valerian Sprigs. Do you wish to blow up the entire classroom?”

The tearful Longbottom shook his head as Severus strode away. *Imbeciles. All of them. Except for Granger who is conspicuously absent.*

Warning bells went off in Severus’ head. Granger would never miss class unless something was seriously wrong.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Severus said quietly. “Have you seen Miss Granger today?”

The young Slytherin looked up from adding Lethe Water to his cauldron. “I saw her at breakfast today, sir, but then she disappeared.”

“How do you mean?” Severus couldn’t help but feel the slightest tingle of worry.

“I think she’s avoiding us, sir. We must’ve done something to make her upset, because she hasn’t talked to us for weeks. Not since Hallowe’en.”

_Not since Hallowe’en...shite._ “Thank you, Mr. Malfoy.” Raising his voice, Severus added, “I would like everyone to pay attention to how Mr. Malfoy’s potion is progressing. If you have followed the instructions, your potion should be clear. If your potion is fuschia -” Severus glared pointedly at Weasley and Thomas who were whispering furtively “-you heated it too long before adding the diced Valerian Sprigs.”

Severus continued his rounds through the classroom.

“Nott, Zabini - well done. Parkinson and Greengrass - kindly remove your cauldron from the heat source before it explodes. Crabbe, Goyle -” Severus stared at their cauldron in confusion. “How in the name of Merlin did you manage to end up with a cyan potion? Clean up your station. Weasley, Thomas -” the whispering duo gulped. “You clearly did not listen when I explicitly told you to have the potion on the heating source for no more than twenty seconds. Five points from Gryffindor. Weasley - this is your second transgression today. Stay after class.” Severus swept away, ignoring the complaints from the red side of the classroom. As Minerva was wont to say, Gryffindors will be Gryffindors. In Severus’ (high esteemed) opinion, this simply meant that Gryffindors would be idiots in any given scenario.

“Time’s up. Please bottle your potions and clean up your stations. I expect a foot and a half essay from each of you on the similarities between the Forgetfulness Potion and the Shrinking Solution we brewed last week.” There was a mad rush as the Gryffindors hurried to leave the dungeon at the soonest possible moment.

At long last, the Slytherin vanished through the doorway and Weasley came forward, dragging his feet.
“Weasley -” Severus began.

“Look, er, Professor, I have something to tell you -”

*It better be a bloody good apology!* Severus seethed. “Go on.”

“I - I think I made a mistake.” Weasley studied his shoes. “It’s about Granger.”

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Chapter End Notes

I want to give a HUGE thank you to everyone who has left comments and/or kudos on this story. Your words are a big inspiration and they truly make my day. Thank you so much for your support :)'
“It’s about Granger.”

The words echoed hollowly in Severus’ mind.

“Get on with it,” Severus said irritably, vainly attempting to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Well, er, sir, you see, er, I -” Weasley looked up at Severus suspiciously. “I won’t get in trouble for telling you this, will I?”

“I have a feeling, Mr. Weasley, that you would be in more trouble by remaining silent.”

Weasley studied his shoes again. “I didn’t think it would turn out like this,” Weasley murmured. “I just wanted to get some recognition for once. Do something special. Be something other than be just another Weasley with ‘red hair, freckles, and a hand-me-down robe.’” Weasley sneered slightly at the last words, but it wasn’t malicious. Weasley smiled bitterly. “Turns out I should have stuck with being ‘just Ron’.”

Severus could feel his blood pressure rising. “As moving as this is, Weasley, I would greatly appreciate it if you would get to the point.”

Weasley started slightly. “Er, sorry, sir. I, er, well, that is to say that I-”

“Stop stalling, Weasley,” Severus bit out.

“I - IdidsomethingsthatwereverybadandIshouldn’tthavelistenedtothembutIdidanywaysand-”

“Slow down, Weasley. I could not understand a single word of that verbal spew.”

Weasley gulped, and Severus felt bad for the boy. Almost.

“Breathe, Weasley, then tell me that again. Slowly.”

Weasley noticeably steadied himself. “I did some things and listened to some people that I shouldn’t have, but I did anyways and I now I realize that it was a terrible idea and I don’t know what to do about it and I’m worried they’ll get mad at me and my Mum’s going to be so mad -”

Severus took a moment to digest the verbal garbage. “What did you do and who was involved?”

“...just some Gryffindors,” Weasley mumbled.

Severus resisted the urge to throttle the boy. “If you could manage to speak clearly, Weasley -”

“Just some other Gryffindors,” Weasley said somewhat irritably.
Severus took a calming breath. *You can always get the information from him later.* “And what did you say you did?”

Weasley shuffled uncomfortably. “Do I have to tell you, sir?” he whined.

Severus resisted the urge to throttle the boy for the second time. “Yes, Mr. Weasley, you do, unless you would like to risk expulsion…”

The color drained from Weasley’s face. “I could be expelled?”

Severus studied his fingernails. “If your transgression was severe enough, expulsion is highly likely. If you come forth with information, however…”

Weasley bit his lip. “What if the others get mad at me?” he whispered.

“Your identity will remain confidential.”

A look of confusion passed over Weasley’s face. *Damn the dunderheads and their limited vocabulary!* “No students will be told that you gave information.”

Weasley nodded. “Okay. Er, where should I start?”

“Names would be beneficial.”

Weasley nodded again. “Okay. Er, okay. So, er, it was me.” *Obviously.* “Cormac McLaggen, Maddox McLaggen, and Sebastian Malaise.”

Severus’ heart skipped a beat. There had always been something about Malaise that bothered him that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Albus, of course, had dismissed the situation out of hand on the basis of Severus’ ‘anti-Gryffindor tendencies’.

Weasley was still talking. “So then Sebastian came up with a plan to get revenge on the Slytherins and I didn’t really agree with some of the stuff he was saying because it seemed kinda bad but I didn’t think they’d actually be that mean and then they were so that’s why I decided to tell you.”

“And what exactly was Mr. Malaise’ plan?” Severus asked, his calm voice masking a whirlwind of emotions.

“Oh, er, we dressed up like Slytherins, but with hoods so they wouldn’t tell it was us, then we locked Granger in a closet.” Weasley grimaced. “That was the original plan. The others decided to knock Granger around a bit first - after they froze her! That’s just not fair!”

*Bloody hell.* “Four-on-one seldom is fair, Weasley.” Severus said coldly. *Don’t think of the Marauders, don’t think of that. You’re past that now.* Rage threatened to fill him, and he firmly clamped it down. *It wouldn’t do to be irrational.* “Show me where you left Miss Granger.” He felt strangely cold on the inside. Strangely empty. Numb.

Weasley was talking to him, making nervous chatter, but it seemed as if he was far away, on the other side of a tunnel.

They stopped in front of a small broom cupboard on an ill-frequently used corridor on the basement level of the castle.

“It’s here,” Weasley mumbled, half-heartedly gesturing at the cupboard.

*Here.*
The word echoed hollowly around Severus’ mind.

“Hominum Revelio,” Severus intoned flatly.

A small light pulsed into existence on the cupboard. Severus tried the handle, only to find it sealed. Sweet Merlin...

“Go, Weasley.”

“But I-”

“Go.”

Empty. So bloody empty.

Weasley hesitated for a second, then fled down the corridor.

“Reseranda.”

The door silently unsealed.

Sealing her in wasn’t enough - they had to silence the bloody cupboard as well.

There was no chance of her getting help.

No chance.

None at all.

Severus opened the door slowly, a feeling of trepidation building in the pit of his stomach. He, Severus Snape, who had survived innumerable Crucios at the hands of the Dark Lord, was scared of a girl in a cupboard. Not scared of the girl, he mentally corrected, but scared of what happened to her.

The door opened fully, and light flooded the cupboard - and the rocking, sobbing form of Hermione Granger.

“Miss Granger.”

The girl had her head buried in her knees and was muttering quietly to herself.

“Miss Granger,” Severus said, slightly louder.

“Breathe...don’t think don’t think don’t think don’t think don’t-”

Something inside Severus’ chest broke. “Hermione. It’s Professor Snape.”

She gave no sign of having heard him.

He reached out a hand - slowly, carefully as not to startle her. “Hermione.” He touched her arm and -

there was a dull thud as the girl scuttled backwards, head thumping against the back of the cupboard as her hands flew up to cover her face.
Severus froze. There was something horribly familiar about her reaction, something horribly wrong.

Silence hung in the air.

Brown eyes peeked through Hermione’s fingers as she slowly lowered her shaking hands. “P-p-professor S-snape?”

Dried blood clung her face, and one eye was puffy, swollen, and on its way to turning purple.

Severus was lost for words.

What could he say?

Hermione drew a shuddering breath. “I-I-h-hurts…” the sound came out as a whimper.

Severus’ medical training kicked in. “Where?”

“R-ribs. R-right side.” Her breathing hitched.

“Is the pain dull or sharp?”

“I d-don’t know-” her voice quickly descended into panic, breathing becoming more rapid.

Shite. Severus drew his wand, and Hermione flinched. Hard. Head ducking under a slightly raised arm. Protecting her face.

*What did she -*

*No.*

*Sweet Merlin no.*

“Hermione, I’m not going to hurt you. I just need to perform a diagnostic charm.”

The girl was still shaking slightly.

“Hermione…” Severus paused, “did you think I was going to strike you?”

She flinched again.

*Bloody hell.*

“Was it one of your peers?”

A head shake.

“A teacher or professor?”

Another head shake.

“A parent?”

Hermione’s head jerked upwards, eyes wide in fear.

Something inside Severus’ chest broke. “A verbal answer, please, Hermione.”

Tears leaked out of her eyes. “Can’t…tell…not suppose to talk about that…”
So a yes, then. His chest ached, and something pricked at the corners of his eyes - not tears, of course, because Severus Snape didn’t cry, Merlin be damned. “Let’s get you to the Hospital Wing,” Severus said gruffly.

The walk down to the Hospital Wing seemed oddly disjointed. One moment Severus was covertly casting a Notice-Me-Not charm on the two of them, and the next Poppy was fussing over Hermione. He could hear himself - it had to be him - his jaw was moving - tonelessly explaining the events that transpired. It was as if he was watching an old Muggle film - time passed, Poppy was saying something to him, only he couldn’t hear …

“…Severus. Severus! Are you alright? You should sit down -”

Severus sank listlessly into the proffered chair.

“…Severus, are you even listening to me? I called Albus down -”

The mention of his employer shocked Severus out of his stupor. “You what?”

Poppy looked flummoxed. “I called Albus down - it’s only protocol for incidents such as these -”

“Incident?” Severus all but hissed. “You’re calling this an incident? And you’re expecting Albus of all people to do something about it? Are you out of your bloody mind?”

Poppy attempted to start in, but Severus was having none of it.

“Did you have your eyes shut and your ears full of cotton wool for the entirety of my time at Hogwarts? Did you think I happened upon curse wounds all by my lonesome? You have no idea,” Severus seethed. “No bloody idea what it’s like to be bullied to the extent that I was - and how Miss Granger is being now.”

“I can empathize -”

“No. You can’t. Every time - especially when they set Lupin -” he sneered the name “-on me and I almost bloody well died, I hoped Albus would say or do something about it and make it end. He never did. The Marauders, because they were precious fucking Gryffindors, got away with a slap on the wrist and a month of detention for a near murder attempt.”

Poppy blanched, and Severus pressed on.

“I have no hope, none at all that Albus will do anything to help Miss Granger. In fact,” his sneer contorted into a twisted facsimile of a smile, “I’m nearly certain he will attempt to blame it on her.” Severus took a deep breath, steadying himself. “Hopefully you can at least attempt to understand my lack of faith in our ever-so-wonderful -”

The doors to the Hospital Wing swung open to reveal Albus Dumbledore in hideous fuschia splendor. “Good evening, Poppy, Severus,” he chirruped.

“Headmaster.” Severus acknowledged him with the barest tilt of his head.

“Poppy told me there was an -” Albus’ forehead furrowed minutely “-incident this afternoon.”

“‘Incident’ isn’t exactly the proper word,” Severus cut in sharply. “‘Bullying’ might convey the appropriate sentiment surrounding the event, but ‘attack’ would be a more accurate representation of what transpired. Four Gryffindor students accosted Miss Granger, put her in a full Body-Bind, kicked her around, then sealed her in a Silenced broom closet.”
Albus’ mouth opened, then closed.

“At a minimum, they should be suspended for the remainder of the school year. Personally, I would prefer to see them expelled.”

“Now Severus -”

“Don’t ‘now Severus’ me, Albus. This was a serious, premeditated attack against one of my students.”

“They’re just children, Severus, they can’t be expected to make good decisions all the time -”

“They can be expected to be decent human beings!”

“Now Severus -”

“What sort of decent, rational person beats up an twelve year old and locks her in a closet where no one can hear her screaming for help?”

“I admit that was a lapse of judgement on their part…”

“A lapse of judgement? ” Severus fumed. “What about a deliberate display of vicious, malicious behavior?”

“Severus,” Albus said delicately. “Just because, ah, ‘similar’ events transpired during your time at Hogwarts -”


“I’ll be on my way then, if that’s all on Miss Granger -” the Headmaster turned to leave.

Severus took several deep calming breaths. “That’s not all.”

Albus raised an eyebrow in askance. “Do go on.”

“You need to owl Wizarding Children’s Services.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Only one more chapter after this! I hope you guys have enjoyed the fic -- also, if anyone from the UK is interested in Brit-picking this, I’d love to have your input!

A huge thanks goes out to anyone who has commented, bookmarked, or subscribed to this fic - it means a lot to me and I’m incredibly grateful for your support.

[insert shameless plug for more reviews] so, if you’d like to let me know what you think of the fic… :)
“Wizarding Children’s Services?” Albus asked, his trademark twinkle replaced with confusion. “Whatever for? This -” he waved his hand airily “-has absolutely nothing to do with them.”

“That’s not why you need to contact them.”

“Then why?”

Severus quickly cast a silencing charm around Hermione - Miss Granger’s - bed, then took a deep breath. “I have reason to believe Miss Granger’s homelife is not acceptable,” he said delicately.

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Really, Severus?”

“Yes.”

“And do you have any...evidence?”

Severus resisted the urge to aggressively grind his teeth. “Nothing concrete, but I do have reasonable suspicion.”

Albus’ eyes twinkled. “Now, Severus, there’s no need to start a big fuss about nothing,” Albus said patronizingly. “You-”

Severus abruptly cut in. “As a professor, I am a mandated reporter. That means I am obligated by law to report any incidents I think are related to the mistreatment of a child by his or her guardians.”

Albus frowned. “Severus -”

Rage boiled in Severus’ gut. “As the headmaster of this institution, you should know better than anyone else that -”

Albus’ eyes blazed. “Severus! That is enough!”

“Albus - I will not -” Severus began furiously.

“Severus, I will not allow your paranoia to continue to impact this institution!”

A cold weight dropped into the pit of Severus’ stomach. “What did you just say?” he asked, voice low.

Albus looked at him in a pitying manner. “Severus, you have to let go of the past…”

“What -” his tone was more forceful “-are you insinuating, Albus?” he gritted out.

“Just because you had a less than satisfactory childhood-”

The blood drained from Severus’ face. “You knew?” It came out as a hoarse whisper. “You knew and you did nothing to get me out of that veritable hellhole?”
“Do you know what it was like,” Severus started venomously, “not knowing where your next meal was coming from?”

“Severus, there’s no need to be melodramatic -”

“Tell that to my eight-year-old self who hid in the cupboard under the stairs to avoid getting beaten by my drunken father,” Severus spat. “Or maybe my teenage self, hiding in my miserable excuse for a bedroom with cigarette burns down my spine. Or -”

Albus sighed. “Severus, I’ll admit that your upbringing was less than ideal -”

“Less than ideal? The bloody hell it wasn’t ‘ideal’ - you have no idea- no bloody idea -”

Albus raised a placating hand, and Severus had to resist the urge to flinch. Twenty years later, the reflex was still there. Albus looked puzzled. “Severus, did you think I was going to strike you?”

“Fifteen years of reflexes are hard to overcome, Headmaster,” he spat. “And if you payed any attention to Miss Granger, you’d find she reacts in the same way -”

“Severus -” Albus shook his head sadly “-you are simply overreacting -”

Severus took a calming breath and attempted to reign in his temper. “I most certainly am not overreacting, Headmaster. Either way, it would be more prudent to overreact and have nothing come out of the situation then to ignore and have something unpleasant manifest.”

Albus looked completely befuddled. Has the old coot finally gone senile?

”“Severus, there is no problem…”

Severus felt like pulling his hair out. “Headmaster, you’re being completely and utterly absurd -”

Albus’ eyes flashed angrily. “Severus, that is enough .”

“But -”

“Enough. I will not entertain any more of your ridiculous nonsense. Miss Granger looks to be in fine health and I will hear nothing more on the subject.”

“No, Severus.”

“You -”

“Enough.”

Hermione meticulously folded a jumper and laid it carefully in her trunk. Realistically, she knew that slowly packing wouldn’t increase the time before she got on the Hogwarts Express to go home for the winter hols, but a girl could dream.

Hermione bit her lip and folded another jumper. The last few weeks had passed in a daze. She’d spent a couple days in the Hospital Wing recuperating from - no, don’t think about that - then it had
been the rush of exams, and now - Hermione gazed at her half-packed trunk. *Don’t think about it.
Everything’s gonna be alright.*

*Keep telling yourself that.*

“Hermione?”

The girl jumped as Pansy came into view. “What?”

“Are you...alright?”

“...yeah. Of course I am.”

“It just seemed like...ever since, you know…”

*Ever since the Gryffindors got off with two weeks of detention? Ever since I got my face smashed into a pulp?*

“I’m fine, Pansy.” *It’s not like I jump out of my skin every time I hear a sudden noise.*

“You sure? Because it seems like -”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you really sure?” The other girl’s voice seemed to contain genuine concern.

*No.* “Yes, Pansy, really, I’m fine. I just need to pack.”

Pansy looked at her doubtfully. “Okay.” Pansy paused, turning to go. Hermione breathed a silent sigh of relief. *No one will know... “Hermione.”*

The girl in question jolted upwards.

“Look, are you sure you’re alright? You’re really jumpy and - well, erm, you know, if you ever need someone to talk to…” Pansy trailed off, and Hermione viciously stamped down the urge to rush over to the other girl and sob.

“I’m fine, Pansy. Really.” Hermione pasted on a smile and folded another jumper.

“If you say so.” Pansy’s voice was so quiet Hermione almost thought she imagined it. “Have fun packing then, I suppose.” She turned and left.

Hermione cast a quick Silencing charm and cried while a worried Pansy Parkinson sat in front of the fire.

For once in her life, Pansy was genuinely concerned. There’d been something a little off about Hermione ever since the troll incident, and she’d become even more withdrawn recently. Pansy knew there was something that happened with Gryffindors that landed them in detention and Hermione in the Hospital Wing, but Hermione refused to talk about it. And Hermione seemed to be avoiding her.

Pansy stood up and straightened her uniform officiously. Professor Snape would definitely know what to do.

Pansy knocked sharply on Snape’s door.
“Come in.” If the professor was surprised to see her, he didn’t show it. “Miss Parkinson. What can I do for you?”

If Pansy was more observant, she would have noticed the dark circles under Snape’s eyes and his nearly haggard countenance. She chewed her lip nervously. “I’m worried about Hermione, sir.”

There was a subtle shift in Snape’s features. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“She’s been really quiet lately and ignoring me and Draco…”

“Perhaps it’s simply the stress of end-of-term exams.”

Pansy shook her head. “No sir, I don’t think it’s that. Hermione’s brilliant, so she wouldn’t need to worry about not passing.”

“Then what do you think is causing her to become withdrawn.”

“I don’t know, sir. That’s why I’m worried. She’s been kind of off ever since Halloween. Even worse since that thing with the Gryffindors. She won’t tell me what happened.”

“Perhaps Miss Granger is homesick and eager to be reunited with her parents.”

Pansy looked at Snape as if he had suddenly declared that Gryffindor should win the House Cup. Didn’t he know these things? “Sir, I don’t think that Hermione really wants to go home for the winter hols.”

“Really.”

“I mean, I don’t know for sure, but she did mention that she wished she could stay here for the hols.”

“And why would that be?”

Pansy thought for a second, then it hit her. “She never gets any owls. Draco and I always share our stuff with her, but she never gets anything of her own - not even a letter!”

“I see. Thank you, Miss Parkinson.”

Pansy left, and as soon as the door closed Severus slumped forward in his chair, resting his head in his hands.

Why did there have to be so many damn parallels?

Severus straightened up and rubbed his temples. The worst part about it, the part that hurt him the most, was that he could do nothing. Absolutely nothing, other than sitting, waiting, and attempting to pick up the pieces. Severus glanced at his watch. In an hour, Hermione - Miss Granger - would be boarding the Hogwarts Express and be on her merry way back to whatever personal hell awaited her. There had to be something - anything he could do…

Four hours later found Severus more frustrated than ever. He’d tried talking to Albus again only to have the old coot continue to question his judgement. And his sanity. That was almost more than Severus could forgive. It was one thing for Albus to say he disagreed with his opinion of a matter and quite another to insinuate that he could no longer differentiate between his mind and reality.

It was too much.
Everything was just too much.

What if he, Severus, really was going ‘round the bend? He didn’t believe Albus, per say, but there was a little niggling voice in back of his mind claiming he was, in some way, damaged.

Severus shook his head sharply to clear it. You are not mad, he told himself firmly. You are completely justified in your actions. You have never been wrong about something like this before.

Severus strode down the front steps of the castle. There was one thing - one last thing - he could do - something that could assuage both his doubts about himself and Hermio- Granger.

“Somnium.” The strange sensation of the disillusion charm trickled over Severus’ head as he passed the gates and the Apparition boundary. With a slight pop, he vanished, reappearing in a defunct coffee shop several blocks from Kings Cross station. Hurrying - for he didn’t know when the train was scheduled to arrive - Severus made his way into the station, scanning the crowd for a familiar head of bushy brown hair. Minutes passed, and Severus worried he was too late - always too late - when he spotted her exiting the barrier. Hermio- Granger , he corrected sharply - toted her trunk over to the far edge of the station and sat on it to wait. After what seemed like an excessively long time - the girl had been nervously checking her watch, and Severus had started to feel concerned - not that he actually cared at all, of course, Hermione’s parents arrived.

The woman looked displeased - she was clearly berating the girl for something as Hermione’s shoulders slumped and her gaze fell to her worn trainers. Severus moved closer.

“-look at me when I’m speaking to you, young lady -”

“J-”

“Don’t talk back to me, Hermione Jean. And get that ungrateful look off your face.”

“But I -”

“You heard your mother, Hermione,” Mr. Granger spoke up. He was tall - taller than Severus - with broad shoulders and close cropped brown hair. “You should be appreciative that your mother and I took time out of our workday to come pick you up -”

“I didn’t even ask you to!” Hermione exclaimed. “I wanted to stay at Hog-”

“Don’t mention that name in public!” her mother hissed, and Hermione quailed under the weight of her glare.

“I’m sorr-”

“Apologizing won’t change anything. Don’t do it again.”

“But-”

“Hermione Jean, are you arguing with me?” the tone was soft and unmistakingly dangerous.

Hermione flinched almost imperceptibly. “No,” she said quietly, shoulders hunched in defeat.

“Come along, then. Your father and I have places to be.”

Hermione turned back to get her trunk, and roughly wiped away the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Something in Severus’ heart broke as she grabbed the trolley and slowly started pushing it toward her parents.
“Hurry up, Hermione, we don’t have all day.”

With one look back and a slight sniff, Hermione followed her parents out of the station.

Still under the cover of the disillusionment charm, Severus sunk to the ground.

He was definitely sane.

He was most certainly correct.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do.

Severus placed his head in his hands and cried for the first time in eleven years.

He cried for himself, and how he was never protected, but he cried more so for Hermione and the help he could not give her.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s a wrap! A huge thanks goes out to all those who have subscribed to, bookmarked, left kudos, and reviewed this fic. You guys are amazing -- thanks so much for your support!

I was planning on marking this fic as finished, but received a lot of reviews wanting me to continue. I have a couple plot ideas bouncing around in my head, so we’ll see what happens. :)

Also, if I continue, would y’all prefer that I continue in this fic or start another one? And if anyone is interested in beta-ing or Brit picking this (or any other of my works) let me know!

Thanks once again for all your support :) 

-Flye
The sour smell of rank unwashed bodies and cheap whiskey assaulted Severus’ nostrils -- not that he cared. Spiritus Bibet was cramped, filthy, and in an unsavory corner of Knockturn Alley, which was perfect for Severus as he planned on spending as few Galleons as possible to get as drunk as possible. And, he hoped as he pushed through the crowd to the bar, he didn’t want to be disturbed. The patrons - if you could call them that - of Spiritus Bibet tended to keep to themselves.

Several shots later, Severus was ensconced the corner of the bar in a considerably better mood...which, he noted sourly, was not fated to last.

“Snape.”

Severus was immediately on guard. The amount that I don’t want to deal with this right now… “Moody.”

“What are you doing here, Snape? Meeting up with your old Death Eater friends?”

Severus suddenly felt very tired.

He was done.

Done with the needless allegations.

Done with the constant questions of where he was and with whom.

“Does it even matter?”

A maniacal gleam made its way into Moody’s eye, “I knew you were hiding something, Snape, the moment I saw you sneak your way into this establishment. There ain’t no way someone like you’d be here just because they wanted to be. You can’t avoid the question, Snape, I can - ”

“Haul me in for investigation, I know. I am more than aware of your tactics.” I’ve heard this all before.

“Quit your stalling, Snape,” Moody growled, “Just because Albus cleared your name doesn’t mean you’re cleared in my book. Probably just wanted you for those infernal plans of his ,” he added in an undertone.

You are not wrong, Severus thought bitterly. “You have no idea, Moody.”

“Enlighten me, then,” the older man practically snarled, “Enlighten me about all your nasty little - ”
Moody had his wand pointed at Severus in less than a second, “What the bloody hell was that, Snape? Trying to curse me?”

Severus swallowed, attempting to ignore the adrenaline that was now pulsing through him. “It’s a silencing charm,” he sneered, “Wouldn’t want anyone overhearing our conversation now, would we?”

“You don’t want your dirty Death Eater laundry aired in public now, eh?”

“No, I - get your wand out of my face - look, if, hypothetically speaking of course, there was something - ” Severus searched for a Moody-appropriate word, “- unsavory going on at Hogwarts, what would you do?”

The old Auror frowned. “Hogwarts isn’t really in my domain. It’s under Albus’ jurisdiction.”

“So the Aurors and the DMLE have nothing to do with it.”

“What the bloody hell are you trying to get at, Snape,” Moody muttered, “Not exactly. If there is a situation at Hogwarts that merits legal investigation, then the Aurors will get involved.”

A sinking feeling of suspicion settled in Severus’ stomach. “And what constitutes a ‘situation that merits legal investigation’?”

Moody narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want to know? Planning illicit activities?”

Severus resisted the urge to smash his head into the table and quaff a tankard of firewhiskey. “Just humor me for a moment.”

Moody shrugged, “The Aurors haven’t been involved in Hogwarts in recent history, but any situation that involved the reckless endangerment of students, or any situation in which a student’s life was at risk would call for an Auror investigation.”

“But you did not investigate the troll.”

Moody looked at Severus suspiciously, “What troll?”

“The troll at Halloween - surely Albus told you about that?”

Moody’s eye bulged, and he started muttering furiously to himself.

“I will take that as a ‘no’, then.”

“It bloody well was a ‘no’!” Moody was clearly furious, “How the bloody hell did a class XXX dark creature make its way into Hogwarts!”

“I do not know.”

“I wasn’t bloody asking you, Snape!” Moody seemed fit to rip his (remaining) hair out, “Why wasn’t I informed? That was a security breach!” The man was positively fuming. “Constant vigilance, I say. I’m gonna find Albus bloody Dumbledore and rip him a new one! Merlin knows what else he’s gotten up to.”

“You would be surprised,” Severus muttered darkly.
“Alright, I’ll bite. What’d he do?” Moody’s tone was patronizing.

“Failure to report ‘incidents’, as he calls them.”

Moody’s eyes darted around, “What incidents?”

Severus shrugged, playing for time. The angrier the Auror became, the easier it would be for Severus to convince him, “The troll, among many other things.”

“Get on with it, Snape.”

“One of my students was violently attacked by a group of Gryffindors. She was stunned, beaten up, then sealed in a broom cupboard with a silencing charm on it. She had to stay overnight in the Hospital Wing due to her physical injuries, but she clearly is still hurting emotionally. The Gryffindor students, on the other hand, received detention.”

“DETENTION?” Moody was livid, “What the bloody hell was Albus thinking?”

“That is not all.”

“What do you mean, that’s not all?”

“It gets worse.”

“Why do I feel like I need a firewhiskey to hear this?” Moody muttered, “Go on.”

“The girl - the same one who was attacked - ” Severus could feel himself inexplicably choking up, “I do not think everything is alright at her home. I asked the Headmaster to report it to Wizarding Children’s Services, but he blatantly refused and even went so far as to question my sanity.”

Moody was gaping. “Snape, I never liked you, but - I mean, if it was a pureblood issue, I can understand Albus being leery about getting involved -”

Severus cut him off sharply. “The student involved is muggleborn.”

The older wizard was speechless, “A muggleborn in Slytherin…”

“Yes, and you can understand why she would want to keep that particular piece of information quiet. Life as a Slytherin student is difficult enough without blood status coming into play.”

Moody could understand that well enough, but there was one thing that was bothering him. “Why didn’t you report it yourself?”

“I - I don’t know. I just - I don’t know. I think, I was still in shock over what he said - ” Severus clutched his empty firewhiskey glass as if it were an anchor, “I don’t know.”

“Look, I’m not gonna pretend to like you. Hell, if I didn’t know you better, I’d dismiss everything out of hand. But this - this I can’t ignore.” Moody drummed his fingers on the table. “If you’re really serious about this, we can go over to WCS tomorrow morning to file the appropriate paperwork. Then we can head over to the DMLE - I have a mentee who could use some experience around muggles.”

Severus clamped down on the emotions that were rapidly spiraling out of his control, “That would be perfect,” he managed.

“I’ll meet you at nine am sharp outside the visitors’ entrance.”
With that, Moody left, leaving Severus and his firewhiskey in a contemplative mood. Perhaps everything would work out.

Nymphadora Tonks always had impeccably good or impeccably terrible timing, Alastor reflected as the trainee Auror tripped over her feet for the seventh time that day.

“Wotcher, Auror Moody!”

“Good morning, Trainee Tonks.”

The pink haired witch was practically bouncing with energy, “I got your owl last night - you said you had a special mission for me?”

Moody sighed, almost regretting giving Tonks the assignment as it was sure to spoil the witch’s chipper mood. “Come to my office - I will give you your briefing there.”

Tonks followed Moody as he clunked towards his office, shut the door, and sealed it shut. A slight feeling of apprehension filled the metamorphagus. Moody always briefed her in his office, but he never warded the door shut - at least not to that extent.

“Here’s the deal,” Moody growled as he laid a slim folder on the desk, “There’s a student of Snape’s he believes is being mistreated. Now, I don’t trust the bugger as far as I can throw him, but I don’t think he’d make something like this up. Apparently Dumbledore -” Moody spat the name “ - doesn’t believe old Snivellus either. Thinks he’s completely off his rocker. What I want you to do is investigate and try to figure out what’s really going on. Snape has already stopped by to fill out an incident report form, and if your reconnaissance corresponds with what he says, we’ll submit it to the DMLE for official investigation and also file charges against Dumbledore. If Snape lied to us, then we’ll drop the charges and instead investigate him.”

Tonks narrowed her eyes, all signs of her earlier happy mood gone. “So let me get this straight. Snape says his student is being mistreated at home. Dumbledore denies Snape and claims he’s crazy. Snape goes to you - how in the name of Merlin did that happen?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay. Er, so, then you get all this information from Snape, he fills out forms this morning, and now you want me to figure out who’s right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Er, I’ll read the dossier?”

“That would be procedure, would it not?”

“Erm, yes. Uh, I’ll get on that.”

Tonks opened the folder, and as she read, her hair grew darker in anger.

“A muggleborn in Slytherin!?” Tonks seethed, “No wonder Dumbledore doesn’t want to help!” Tonks’ now black eyes flashed, “I swear, if he’s wrong about this situation, I’ll -”

“Constant Vigilance!” Moody shouted, interrupting Tonks mid-rant.
“What?”

“You heard me.”

“But -”

“You need to make sure you go into this investigation with a clear and open mind. If you discover something unsavory, and we need to go to trial, you don’t want to have your recollection tainted with unnecessary emotion.

“So calm yourself down, make a plan and investigate. Remember, even though both the girl’s parents know about magic, the neighbors do not.”

“So I can use magic then.”

“Yes, but only where you cannot be seen by anyone outside the family.”

“Alrighty. Er, any tips?”

Moody scratched his chin thoughtfully, “You don’t have an animagus form, right?”

Tonks shook her head ruefully, “Nope. You’d think I’d be decent at human Transfiguration because I’m a metamorphmagus, but turning into an animal unfortunately is out of my abilities.”

Moody thought for a moment, and looked critically at Tonks’ 160 centimeter form. “How small can you make yourself?”

Tonks concentrated for a moment before shrinking down about five centimeters.

“That’ll do. Now, can you make yourself look like this?” Moody pulled out a picture from the folder of a girl with short black hair and a pug-like nose. A minute later an accurate copy of Pansy Parkinson stood in front of him in too big Auror robes. “There’s your disguise. Parkinson is decent friends with the Granger girl, so it won’t be overly strange for her to show up. You should be able to get some information in that form, and you can always change back into yourself.”

Tonks reverted back into her natural form and nodded, “Of course. I’ll find some appropriate clothes for ‘Pansy,’ then I’ll be off. I’ll report back to you here?”

Moody nodded.

“Alright.”

“Stay safe. Constant Vigilance!”

Her mentor’s catchphrase brought a weak smile to Tonks’ face, “Of course.”

She exited the office, leaving Moody fiddling with his Sneakoscope. He had expected the thing to go off the moment Snape had entered the office, but it had remained silent. Moody sighed and replaced the Sneakoscope on its stand. He had a feeling - and he was never wrong - that there was something fishy going on, and it wasn’t Snape that was at the center of it.
Tonks thumbed through the dossier on the Parkinson girl. The Auror office (unsurprisingly) had little information on her -- she was on the shorter side with dark bobbed hair and a pug-like nose. The girl was in Slytherin House, and her father was a suspected Death Eater sympathizer during the 1970s Wizarding War.

Taking another bite of her ice cream, Tonks surreptitiously glanced across Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor to where the girl was sitting with young Malfoy. In a different world, we’d be close cousins. Tonks shook her head sharply. She was here on a mission to find out enough about the Parkinson girl to play her convincingly - not to think about what-might-have-beens. Tonks drew her wand. To a casual observer, it would appear she was simply charming a hairclip to match her jumper. In actuality, however -

“...Father, of course, is throwing a large Yule party at the Manor,” Draco Malfoy’s voice sounded through the earpiece loud and clear. Tonks smiled to herself. Now all she had to do was sit and wait. “I’ve invited everyone in our year, of course. Did you receive your invitation?”

“You know I already got my invitation! I owled you back about it yesterday!”

“Right. Uh, well, do you think Hermione got hers? I mean, I haven’t heard back from her yet, and I think she’s still mad at me about something.”

Parkinson sighed. “Yeah. I feel like she’s avoiding me sometimes too. Like right before we left for the hols - I told you about that, right.”

Malfoy nodded, “Maybe she’s just homesick?”

Parkinson shook her head, “I don’t think so. She never talks about home.”

Alright, here we go. Stay on that line of conversation.

Malfoy shrugged. “Huh. That’s weird. Anyways, Mother said you could arrive early to the gala. Hermione can come early too - if she ever responds to her letter!”

“I’m sure she will.”

“I hope so. Can you imagine how awful it is for her?”

Tonks tensed involuntarily. What in the name of Merlin is going on in that home? And for it to be bad enough for her friends to worry...

Parkinson shuddered. “I couldn’t imagine it - living with muggles and all - urgh!”

What?

“...it’s definitely a pity,” Malfoy was saying. Damnit Tonks, pay attention. “A half-blood living with muggles like that.”

Tonks’ mind whirled. A half-blood? The girl’s file said she was muggleborn.

“...really a shame,” Parkinson said. “I can’t imagine growing up ignorant of everything - can you imagine not knowing about magic? And the fact that her parents knew and didn’t tell her! I bet they’re jealous of her - just because they’re stupid squibs shouldn’t mean Hermione had to suffer.”
I’m surprised her relatives didn’t take her in,” Malfoy commented. “She’s related to the Dagworth-Grangers, right? You know, the ones who established the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?”

“That’s what I’d guess. I don’t know of any other pureblood families named Granger.”

Tonks’ head spun. Is the whole file incorrect? How does an eleven year old have these sort of political connections? Tonks mentally replayed the conversation and reviewed the details of the file. Muggleborn. Slytherin. Something clicked, and Tonks had to bite back a snicker. The girl had duped everyone. Positively duped them! The girl was clearly brilliant - a possible future Auror - Moody would be pleased - focus Tonks. Moody will definitely not be pleased if you bungle this up! Tonks mentally reviewed the conversation. So she’s duped the purebloods. And they’re worried about her. So it’s highly probable she’s not in a good situation. Tonks sighed. It was time for reconnaissance part two.

Moody looked at document again. “You went to the -” he squinted at the unfamiliar word.

“Dentist?”

Tonks squirmed slightly under his gaze. “Er, yeah. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“And what the bloody hell is this dentist thing?”

“Erm, it’s a muggle tooth healer.”

Moody resisted the urge to pull out his remaining hair. “And how was this useful?”

“Well, uh, sir, it gave me a good opportunity to see the Granger girl’s parents in their natural environment. And get a baseline for how they act.”

“And?”

“And what, sir?” The Auror trainee looked exhausted.

“Your findings, you dunderhead!” Moody nearly shouted. Why wasn’t anyone in the department organized enough to give a coherent report. “What were they?”

Tonks winced. “I - it’s complicated - I don’t know -”

“Quit your stuttering and start somewhere!”

“The parents...I don’t know…”

“You don’t know what?” Moody sneered. He picked the girl because she seemed confident and not a complete and utterly dunderhead like the rest of the recruits. “Their names? Their occupations? Their personality baseline? Stop waffling, remember your training, and give me some answers.” The trainee wilted, and Moody almost felt bad. It’s a Grim eat wizard world out there. It’s better she hears it from me than from some jumped up moron in WR.

“Er, okay. Er, so, I didn’t see much of the girl’s mum the first time around. She looks young-ish, maybe 38 or so. Dark brown curly hair, petite, light eyes. First name is Helen. The husband, Jack, is older, I think. Probably somewhere around 42. Close cropped dark hair, tall, broad shoulders, dark eyes. Very stoic. Which was odd. You know, most people like to talk about their kids. He didn’t. It was odd. Very odd. Especially given that the girl is so high-achieving. It was very strange, now that I
think about it…” Tonks trailed off, and Moody tapped his fingers impatiently. Sure, it was important that she thought everything through, she could just do it a little bit faster.

“And what else did you determine?”

Tonks bit the corner of her lip. “He got real squirrely when I brought up Hogwarts - indirectly, of course, don’t worry - I wasn’t upfront about it - y’know -” Moody raised an eyebrow. “Er, yeah, so he asked me where I went to school and I mentioned I graduated from The Poudlard School - that’s the muggle name for - oh, right, of course you’d know that - and he completely shut down. I mean, he wouldn’t really talk to me after that, and then I made the mistake of mentioning that my cousin - look, I’m still related to the small Malfoy even though my lovely grandmother disowned my mum - went to school there and I believed he knew Granger’s daughter - oh boy oh boy was that a mistake.”

“Why?”

“He looked...angry almost. Then really closed off.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Er, yeah. Something along the lines of ‘we don’t talk about that.’”

“And did you end up using the Parkinson girl as a ruse?”

“No. I don’t think it’ll work.”

“Why?”

“She’s - I don’t know, I don’t want to ruin their friendship, I guess.” Moody was about to cut in, and Tonks quickly hurried along. “I don’t think it’d work, anyways. I’m not sure how well they even get along now, and I think it would be highly out of character for Parkinson, a wealthy pureblood to show up for an impromptu visit to a muggle neighborhood. That’s - that's just not done. I wasn’t raised a Black, but I do know a bit about how pureblood society works. And that would not be done. Absolutely not.”

Moody drummed his fingers on the desk. “Do you have an alternative action plan?”

Tonks shrugged. “I mean, I feel like I’ve exhausted most if not all of the legal options. WCS’s jurisdiction gets really shady when dealing with muggleborns because they don’t want to step on the toes of the muggle government’s equivalent. I don’t think there’s ever been a situation like this one before - at least not one in recent history, and there just aren’t any protocols for me to follow.

“I’ve already considered going the muggle route, but it turns out that would require a bunch of legal hoops given that we would have to fabricate a lot of information because the girl isn’t in school and the incident was reported by a professor. And then there’s also the fact that no one in the department really knows how the muggle system works. I mean, I’m a halfblood, so I can blend in fine in the muggle world, but navigate their legal system? Forget it. Whatever we end up doing, it’s going to have to be on the wizarding side of things.”

There was a brief pause as both Auror and trainee gathered their thoughts.

“You said you were related to the Malfoys,” Moody said suddenly.

Tonks jumped. “Er, yeah. Narcissa Malfoy is my mum’s sister - we don’t talk to them though,” she added hurriedly. “Not since my mum was blasted off the family tree.”
Moody scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Just how estranged are they?”

“Pretty bloody estranged. They haven’t spoken or owled for about twenty years.”

“Your cousin, young Malfoy. How close is he with the girl?”

Tonks shrugged. “To be honest, I’m not completely sure. I listened in on a conversation he had with Parkinson, and it seemed like the three of them were friends. Maybe not as close as Malfoy and Parkinson wanted, but they were definitely friends. Close enough friends that Malfoy invited Granger to the Malfoy Yuletide Gala. Parkinson was excited about seeing Granger, as was Malfoy, so they clearly enjoy her company. And they were concerned for her, too, so they have some degree of emotional investment in their friendship.”

“What were they concerned about?” Moody prompted.

“She wasn’t responding to her owls - probably because she’s a muggleborn and can’t receive owl post…”

Moody frowned. “Muggleborns can receive owl post.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have an owl?”

“That wouldn’t be a problem. An owl belonging to a family like the Malfoys would be trained to wait.”

Tonks paled. “You don’t think…”

“I don’t know. Remember, don’t jump to conclusions. Keep an open mind.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Don’t worry about the owls for now. That’ll be my problem. For now, you can worry about one thing -”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this,” Tonk muttered.

“Get your mum to contact Narcissa Malfoy. I don’t care if you have to bully her into it or even bloody do it yourself. Get those inroads made. I don’t like the Malfoys. I’m not going to pretend to like the Malfoys. They’re dark buggering bastards, the whole lot of them. But they might be the linchpin in this case, and we’re going to need every asset we can get.

“Will you do this?”

“Of course - I just don’t know how I can possibly convince -”

Moody cut her off. “Stop with all your waffling and think! Put your brain to use and figure out the problem.”

“Okay.”

“Dismissed.”

Mind whirling, Tonks left Moody’s office. How in the name of Merlin am I going to convince my mum to write to Narcissa Malfoy?
Narcissa,

I know I haven’t written, but something has changed …
Draco was pouting, and for once it wasn’t because Pansy had mussed his hair. “I just can’t believe she never even responded,” Draco said for the umptenth time.

“Maybe she didn’t get the invitation?” Pansy suggested doubtfully.

Draco shook his head. “The invitation was delivered - multiple times - Archimedes would have come back with it otherwise. She has to be ignoring it - I didn’t think we did anything to bother her that much-”

Pansy bit her lip. “If it makes you feel any better, she hasn’t responded to any of my owls either. So if she’s mad, she’s mad at the both of us.”

Draco frowned. “I just don’t get it! I’m a Malfoy! I should have at least gotten a thanks-but-no-thanks owl! And I’m her friend,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

“Look, I know you’re upset about this, but I’m here, the rest of our yearmates are here, and we can still have fun even though Hermione -” a hairbrush clattered to the floor, and Pansy continued on, blissfully unaware of the effect her words had on the Malfoy matriarch, “- isn’t here. C’mon, let’s go. I’m sure the ballroom looks amazing.”

The two exited the room as Narcissa Malfoy sank down onto a chair.

_Hermione - was that a common name? No, it wasn’t really, was it? And -_ Narcissa’s gaze rested briefly on the third drawer of her vanity - _it was too much of a coincidence, and there is no such thing as a coincidence._

Narcissa opened the drawer with trembling fingers, unlocked the hidden compartment in the back, and pulled out a heavily creased letter. She swallowed hard, unfolded it, and began to read:

_Narcissa,

I know I haven’t written, but something has changed. My mum - your sister Andromeda, would not owl you - she did not believe you would respond, so I decided to go against her wishes and contact you instead. I know you do not know me and have no reason to read my letter. Please read it. It is not for my sake, but for the sake of another.

Let me introduce myself - as well as I can over letter, at least. I am your niece, Nymphadora Tonks, and currently a trainee at the Auror Academy.

We are working on a case regarding a Hogwarts student and need the help of you and your family. I am not supposed to give this sort of information out over letter, and in fact I am breaking numerous protocols by telling you this much, but this is the scoop…
The letter went on to detail an increasingly concerning picture. Narcissa had initially dismissed it out of hand - her Draco would never associate with someone who was muggle-raised - but then -

The girl’s name had come up in conversation. *And it’s not as if Hermione is a common name.*

An immense feeling of guilt washed over Narcissa. Here, she had assumed that the letter was a typical guilt-trip to get her (and Lucius) to donate their time and effort to a case to which they had zero personal connections. It would not have been the first time an event of that nature occurred.

*I should have known.*

*I should have looked closer before turning it away.*

*I should have known that anyone close to Alastor Moody would view our family as a last resort.*

Narcissa stood up, placed the letter in a discreet pocket in her dress robes, and exited the room. *There’s only one thing to do now: play the perfect hostess, enjoy the gala, and speak to Lucius as soon as possible without arousing suspicion.*

Smile firmly in place, Narcissa descended the main stairwell.

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Ron clutched his chess set nervously. He and Harry were the only two Gryffindor first years staying over the winter holiday, and Ron was very bored. The twins were off on some sort of mischief-making adventure that he, Ron, hadn’t been included in.

It just wasn’t fair. He had messed up one time - just once, and it was something he completely regretted and apologized for - and now the twins wouldn’t include him in anything.

And now he was bored. Very bored.

Ron gazed down into the common room where Harry was curled up in an arm chair reading some sort of book. Ron shrugged. He had no idea why anyone would read a book for fun, but he was determined to overlook it. He missed his friendship with Harry - the black haired boy had been spending all his time with Neville recently, and Seamus and Dean were just not as fun to be around as Harry.

Ron descended the stairs and padded over to where Harry sat. “Hi Harry. Whatcha reading?”

Harry looked up from his book. “Sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

“Oh. Er, I was wondering what you’re reading. And if you wanted to play wizarding chess with me,” Ron added hurriedly.

Harry showed Ron the cover. “It’s *Breaking Ballycastle* - it’s all about the Ballycastle Bats and how they won the 1948 European Cup after a twenty year slump. They had an all new team, you see, the new coach, Filo Snatch, decided that the old players just weren’t making the cut anymore and that he was going to have an all new team,” Harry said excitedly. “They were ranked last in the league, so they knew they had nothing to lose. Snatch implemented all these new plays - the Hawkshead Chaser Formation, Diversionary Seeker Tactics, you name it. Everyone thought he was completely barmy, but then the team started winning. You know, now they’re second only to the Montrose
Magpies.”

“So are they your team then? The Ballycastle Bats?”

Harry shrugged. “I dunno, Neville gave me the book as an early Christmas gift, and it’s been a really fascinating read - I only learned about Quidditch this year though, and I’ve never been to a professional game before, so I can’t say I really have a favorite team. Do you have a favorite team?”

Ron perked up. “The Chudley Cannons, of course!”

Harry frowned. “Didn’t they -”

“Have a losing streak? Yeah. They’re gonna make a comeback though. I’m sure of it.”

“If you say so.”

Harry reopened his book.

“Er, did you want to play chess,” Ron said quickly.

Harry looked somewhat surprised. “Er, sure. I mean, I dunno how to play chess but -”

“I can teach you!” Ron interjected enthusiastically, “My great-uncle Bilius taught me, and it’s not terribly difficult - I don’t suppose you have a chess set, do you?” Harry shook his head. “That’s no problem - you can probably borrow Percy’s old set - and if he’s not around you can always use one of the spare ones from the common room. Won’t be as good as Percy’s - he’s pretty good at chess so his chessmen might actually give you some useful advice - but better than nothing, you know.”

Harry gaped at him. “Your chessmen talk?”

“Yours don’t?” Ron was baffled, “Honestly, next thing you’re going to tell me is that muggle chess pieces don’t fight each other.”

“Er, wizarding chess pieces fight?”

“Of course they do! How does muggle chess even work - never mind, I don’t want to know - let’s go get Percy’s old chess set!”

Ron darted off to the staircase, and Harry watched him go. “Magic is cool,” he murmured, then stood up to follow Ron.

“Percy!” Ron shouted, pounding loudly on the door. “Percy!”

The door opened, and Percy poked his head out grudgingly. “What is it, Ronald? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of OWL review? Exams are only months away - I’m already in danger of falling behind on my study schedule -”

“We were, er, wondering if we could borrow your old chess set -”

Percy sighed. “Fine. You better not bother me again though!” He summoned a wooden box and placed in Ron’s outstretched hands.

“Thanks Perce!”

“Thanks Percy!”
The prefect grumbled and shut the door.

“C’mon, let’s go back to the common room.”

Ron led the way back downstairs and set up the chess sets on a low table by the fire. “Alright,” he said, poking a pawn with his wand. “This is a pawn. They generally move one space directly forward like so. The exception are that on their first go, they can move two spaces forward, and when they take out other pieces they move one space forward on the diagonal. Got that?”

Harry nodded. “That’s a pawn, it goes forward one square unless it’s their first go or if they’re taking another piece out.”

“Right. So this one’s a knight…” Ron went on to explain the rest of the chess pieces and their moves while Harry nodded along. “So if you think you’ve got all the moves down, we can play a game - it’s really the best way to learn, and if you don’t remember where pieces go, you can just ask.”

“Okay. Who’s going first?”

“You have the white pieces - white always goes first in chess.”

“Okay. Er, how do I move?”

“Just say the piece’s name, then which square you want them to go to.”

“Er, alright. Pawn to f4.”

Ron smirked inwardly. He loved to play chess, especially with this particular opening. “Pawn to e6.”

Harry looked at the board, and Ron could practically see the wheels turning in his head. “Pawn to g4.”

“Queen to h4. That’s checkmate.”


“It’s a chess move I learned from my great-uncle - I fell for it too, the first time, so don’t feel bad. With chess, you have to get use to start thinking several moves ahead for both yourself and your opponent and not make split-second decisions.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Like in real-life?”

Ron’s ears burned. “Yeah. Uh, yeah. Um, I can’t say I’m proud of that. It - it was something that I really shouldn’t have done.”

Harry shrugged. “Everyone makes mistakes, you know. Just, ah, try not to make such, er - ” he hunted for the right word.

“Idiotic?”

“No, that’s not - well, kind of, you know.”

“I mean, it was bloody stupid thing to do, now that I think about it,” Ron said gloomily. Here I am, trying to be friendly, and Harry bloody Potter can’t forget that I made a dumb mistake!

“Yeah. Er, so how about another game?”
Ron looked at Harry hopefully. “Sure.” *Maybe he could be forgiven after all.*

Narcissa surveyed the grand ballroom. *The gala is proceeding quite nicely - just where in the name of Merlin is Lucius?* There was Draco, socializing nicely with his peers, especially that Parkinson girl, and Lucius - Lucius was stuck talking to the (incredibly idiotic) Minister of Magic. Narcissa internally winced with sympathy. Lucius’ generous donations to the Ministry had certainly helped them out of a couple rough patches, but speaking with Cornelius...well, that was akin to attempting a scintillating discussion with a flobberworm.

Narcissa suppressed a shudder - Cornelius was most certainly not on her list of favorite people, and picked her way over to Lucius.

“Good evening, Minister. I trust you are enjoying the gala?”

Cornelius smiled in what was clearly meant to be a jovial manner. “Of course I am! How could I not? You Malfoys always throw the most excellent events - really puts the Ministry to shame, I’ll have you know.”

Narcissa shrugged elegantly. “I would like to borrow Lucius for a moment. Do you mind?”

“Of course not!”

Narcissa made her way through the throng, Lucius following close behind her.

“Cissy, what - ”

Narcissa silenced him with a look and ducked into a nearby room, casting numerous privacy wards as she went.

“Cissy, what in the name of Merlin is going on?”

“I thought you would enjoy a break from conversing with Cornelius.” Narcissa paused, “There was a letter...”

Lucius immediately grew concerned. “Not a cursed one, I hope.”

“No. One from Nymphadora Tonks.”

“Your other sister’s spawn.”

“Yes.”

“Well, what does that have to do with us?”

Narcissa drew the worn piece of parchment out of her pocket. “It’s easier if you read it.”

Lucius’ eyes darted back and forth across the page, then he swore quietly. “Draco knows this girl?”

“She’s one of his friends at school. And in Slytherin.”

Lucius swore again. “I never wanted to get involved with the Auror department again but this - this is something else.” His silver eyes shone brightly in the dim room. “We will do something about this - it will be good for the girl - and our public image,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “You will
have to reconcile with Andromeda, or at least with her issue, you know.”

“I know. I just keep worrying about the girl -”

“I’m sure she is fine. After all, Yule is tomorrow - even muggles celebrate it - the entire case should clear up in the New Year.”

Narcissa sighed. “I know, I just - ”

“Don’t worry yourself about it. Relax and enjoy the gala.”

Narcissa lifted the charms on the room, and the pair swept back into the grand ballroom.

Meanwhile, over 100 kilometers away in Surrey, a tall man advanced on a small girl.

“I thought we taught you to be more respectful.”

The girl cowered. “I - ”

“It seems like being at that boarding school made you forget some things, eh? Most kids aren’t as lucky as you - we feed you, clothe you, and how do you repay us?” The man’s voice was rising, he was almost spitting out the words, “with blatant disrespect?”

The girl closed her eyes and mumbled something.

The man grew still.

“What did you just say?” he asked, voice suddenly low.

“Nothing.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing!”


“I said don’t talk to me like that. Don’t make me feel bad about myself.”

“I’ll talk to you however the bloody hell I want! I’m the parent, you’re the child, I make the rules! You have no say, you hear that young lady, no say at all. You need to remember your place in this household.”

The girl stared blankly ahead. “It hurts my feelings when you talk like that.”

“Too bloody bad!”

“Don’t tell me I won’t be as successful as you.” Her voice was detached.

The man leaned in close and grabbed the girl’s wrist hard enough for her to feel an odd crunch.

“Well you bloody well won’t. Let’s play a game, shall we? When you’re fifty years old, just like me, we’ll count up the number of toys you have and see who wins, eh?”

“Let go of me.” The girl started to struggle. “You can’t say those things, and you won’t intimidate
“I will do whatever the bloody hell I want.”

Tears were streaming down the girl’s face. “You’re hurting me - let go. Let go!” She struggled harder.

“You’re out of control. You’re a danger to yourself. I’m -”

There was a burst of light and the man fell to the floor. The girl took one look at the man and another look at her wrist and promptly threw up.

In London, Auror Bartleby looked at the chart in confusion. There had been a sudden burst of magical activity in Surrey, and there were only two magical children known to reside in that district, one of which was currently at Hogwarts. Oddly enough, the spike didn’t register as underaged wanded magic, but as something else. Bartleby shrugged and filled out a missive. He’d never seen anything like that before, but he’d also only been working for a month. Bartleby took a swig of his butterbeer. It wasn’t like he had to worry about it, anyway. It was now Moody’s problem.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you goes out to all of you who left comments or kudos on this work. You guys are great! Also a big thanks goes out to my betas, Scintilla of Myself and Delos-Solon. :)}
Severus started slightly when the unfamiliar fox patronus popped into existence in his sitting room.

“Snape,” Moody’s harsh voice growled. “The girl’s at the station. Your presence is required ASAP. Apparate to the Ministry Lobby and an Auror will escort you to the station.”

The patronus popped back out of existence, and Severus swore. Trust Moody to give as little information as possible.

Severus stopped briefly to summon his travel bag of potions and his cloak. First time it’s fortunate I’m at Spinner’s End instead of Hogwarts. The sharp crack of apparition filled the air, and Severus reappeared in the Ministry Lobby. It was empty, save a daft looking blond man near the Visitor’s Entrance.

“Mister Snape?”

Potions Master Snape, actually. “Correct. And I assume you are the Auror Moody sent?”

The man nodded eagerly. “Yes, that’s right. I’m Auror Bartleby, we’ll be headed right this way -”

They stepped into the lift. Bartleby flashed his badge and jabbed the button for the Auror department.

Bartleby cast a sidelong look at Severus. “You’re here for the Granger case?”

“Yes.”

Bartleby exhaled loudly. “Rough case, that one, eh?”

Severus resisted the urge to smack the idiot. If he’s going to fish for information, he could at least attempt to be subtle. “I suppose.”

“Y’know, I was the one that spotted it on the chart,” Bartleby prattled on proudly. “Forwarded it onto Moody, I did.”

More like you were lazy and incompetent and passed the information to someone who knows what they’re doing. “On the chart.” Merlin, what was Hermione getting herself into?

“Yeah, y’know, the one that monitors magic - underage magic usage. There was a big spike out in Surrey, y’see, and it didn’t register as underage wanded magic. Odd, right?”

“Quite,” Severus said reflexively, mind whirling. If it didn’t register as wanded, it was either wandless or accidental. His heart froze for a second. Sweet Merlin…

The lift dinged. “Level Seven: Auror Offices.”

“This way,” Bartleby said as he headed through a veritable maze of corridors. Severus followed, feeling more apprehensive by the second. What if something truly terrible happened to Hermione? No, it’s Granger, Granger. Severus shook his head slightly to clear it. Stop being a busybody. You aren’t Molly Weasley, after all. The mental image of the redhaired matron was more than enough for Severus to regain focus. Concentrate on the problem at hand. Merlin knows it’s serious enough.
They had arrived at a heavy door. Bartleby traced a complex pattern in the air with his wand, and the door swung open to reveal a common area with several sofas and an official looking desk blocking the way to several corridors beyond.

“Auror Moody should be waitin’ for you,” Bartleby said, stifling a yawn, “I’ll jus’ leave you ‘ere for now.”

Severus nodded in acknowledgement. Bartleby exited the room, leaving Severus to pace. It seemed like an age - or maybe just a few seconds - until Moody’s leg clunked down the corridor.

“Snape.” There was almost a grudging respect in the tone.

“Moody. The girl - ?”

“In Room A,” Moody growled, “I left Tonks to supervise her. She’s - ” the grizzled Auror seemed lost for words, “she’s not doing particularly well.”

Bloody hell. “What happened?”

Moody clunked down the hallway with Severus following closely behind. “To be perfectly honest with you, Snape, we don’t exactly know.”

“Then - ”

“Quit interrupting me. What we do know is that there was an aggressor - our information points to the muggle father as the most likely candidate - and there was a big spike on the chart. Either there was a massive display of wandless magic, which is highly unlikely given the age of the girl, or the aggressor did something that triggered the girl’s accidental magic, which is far more likely.”

Severus swore. “And the girl? Is she alright?” He wasn’t sure why he was feeling so concerned. Surely it is only natural to worry about one’s student.

“She’s in one piece,” Moody said gruffly, “Here.” Moody gestured to a wooden door set into the wall in front of them. He rapped sharply on the door.

“You may enter.” It’s a young woman’s voice. Right. Tonks. Nymphadora. Hufflepuff. She’d been in one of the first classes he taught - a veritable klutz and almost more of a menace in the Potions classroom than Longbottom.

The door swung open to reveal a hastily transfigured interrogation room. The usual rickety chairs had been transfigured into squashy armchairs. Tonks was nervously perched on the edge of hers while Hermione -

Something in Severus’ chest broke.

Hermione was curled up in a tiny ball, shaking slightly as she cried.

Tonks crossed the room. “She’s been like this since we got here,” she said quietly, “I haven’t been able to get a decent response out of her.”

“That’s not unusual.” The words slip out before Severus even realizes what he’s saying.

Tonks looks at him suspiciously. “And how would you know that?”

Severus can hear the implications in her voice, and he fixes her with a cold glare. “Personal experience.” He turns his back on Tonks and walks over to Hermione’s chair, potions bag in hand.
“Miss Granger, it’s Professor Snape.”

There’s no response. Just the same muted sobs.

Severus swallows hard. “Hermione. They said you were injured. Let me help you.”

It seems like an eternity when a pair of bloodshot brown eyes peek out from under the mass of hair. The rest of her face eventually emerges, and Severus sucks in a breath at the sight of the bruise marring the left side of her face.

“Professor?”

He’s prepared to be clinical, to gently question her, to offer her potions to make the pain go away, at least for a little while. To say he’s woefully unprepared when she launches herself at him is an understatement.

She clings to him like he’s a lifeline, burying her face in his shoulder as she sobs.

Severus doesn’t know what to do. For a moment, he freezes. Then, ever so slowly, he hugs the girl back as he desperately tries to hold on to the blank mask that is Severus Snape.

Moody placed a gnarled hand on his protegée’s shoulder. “Let’s give them a moment.”

Tonks looked at him, confusion evident, but followed him out of the room without a word. Tonks chewed her lip. “Are they going to be alright?”

Moody scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I reckon so. Snape’s got a lot more to him than I initially knew. You had him as a professor, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. He was a right bastard too. I mean, he was brilliant, but a complete arsehole to everyone.”

“What else do you know about him?”

Tonks’ brow furrowed. “How do you mean?”

“What do other people think of him? Is he married or have a girlfriend? Does he have kids? What sort of man is he? These are the sorts of questions that should be popping into your mind. You need to be constantly analyzing the data you have. Paint me a picture of this man. Start with the basics.”

“Well, his name is Severus Snape. He’s thirty-one years old. Single, far as I know. Youngest person to obtain the title of Potions Master,” Tonks listed out quickly. “He’s the Potions instructor at Hogwarts, and Head of Slytherin House. Most of the students find that he’s a bit of a git.”

“How so?”

“He very prickly, and quick to take points off. He also incessantly favors Slytherin.”

“Why?”

Tonks shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe he takes all the ‘your house is like your family’ and ‘take care of your own’ stuff really seriously.”

“Do you think so?”
Tonks shrugged again. “It’s just speculation,” She frowned, “What’s with all these questions?”

“The girl can’t exactly go back those muggles, now can she?”

“Well, no, but what does that - ” the image of the small girl holding onto Snape - Snape, of all people! - like he was the only thing keeping her together came to mind. “Oh.”

Moody quirked an eyebrow. “Now you get it.”

“Yeah. What are we going to do about it?”

Moody drummed his fingers on his walking stick. “Not sure yet. Any real decisions will have to run before the Wizengamot, but hopefully our friends - ” there was a slight twisting of his mouth “ - the Malfoys can help speed things up in that department. Right now, the concern is finding somewhere to put her tonight.”

It was a couple hours later when Moody and Severus reconvened in the Auror office common room. Hermione was safely ensconced in Tonks’ flat, and Severus had given the young Auror specific instructions to contact him if anything went amiss.

“Did she tell you what happened?”

Severus grimaced. “Yes. It was… less bad than it could have been. The father commenced arguing with the girl, and it kept escalating. He struck her across the face - fairly hard, I would estimate, based on the bruising - and continued to berate her. When she attempted to get him to stop, he seized her wrists hard enough to give her a contusion and continued to physically intimidate her. Somewhere around that point the girl’s magic lashed out, sending the equivalent of a stunning spell towards the father. Based on her account, it seems like accidental magic.”

Moody shook his head in disbelief. “And in your book, that isn’t bad.”

Severus clutched his empty coffee cup. “No. Had the father been intoxicated, it would have been far worse. The girl’s injuries were relatively minor, and the bruise paste I gave her should clear them up in the next couple days.”

“We should be in the Wizengamot by then. Tonks is writing another letter to those blasted Malfoys tonight, and with any luck Lucius - ” Moody spat the name, “ - will be able to pull the strings he has with the Minister.” Moody shook his head slightly. “It’s going to be a bloody messy case. There’s going to be havoc over a witch - even if she’s muggleborn - ” Severus started slightly, and Moody fixed him with a glare. “I know about the ruse that girl was running. Bloody clever too. Anyhow, no one is going to like that the girl was in a home that was at a minimum verbally abusive. I don’t think we’ll have any problem convincing the Wizengamot that she should be relocated. The problem will be with whom. The purebloods will want one of their families to take her in, the Light side will object to most of the proper pureblood families, and so on. And then there’s the issue with Dumbledore, which is whole ‘nother can of worms.”

Severus winced slightly. “You are not wrong there.”

“I will be sending in the documents tomorrow. Pensieve memories will most likely be required at the trial.”

“Understood.”
“I will keep you up to date via owl post.”

“Excellent. I suppose the next time I see you will be in the Wizengamot?”

“Yes.” Moody disapparated with a sharp crack, and Severus was left alone to walk up to the Ministry atrium.

*By Merlin, I am not looking forward to this whole legal endeavor.*
The trial date should be in the next two to three weeks depending on which strings are pulled. Girl is back at school. It was the best option.

M.

“So, Dora, how’s work been?”

Tonks jumped, spilling peas all over the table. “Er, it’s been alright. Stressful, a bit, but, er, good.”

Ted Tonks sent her a reproving look from across the table as he cleaned up the peas with a flick of his wand. “You sure? You seem a bit more stressed than usual.”

“I’m fine, Dad. It’s just been busy, that’s all.”

Tonks hastily took a bite of roast beef to (hopefully) avoid more questions. Andromeda and Ted exchanged The Look. Oh Merlin, what did I do now?

“Dora, I can tell something’s up.”

“Mum, I’m fine. Truly.”

“Dora - ”

“Dad, stop.” Tonks stabbed her roast beef with slightly more force than necessary. “I can deal with it. I’m fine.”

“Don’t look fine to me,” Ted muttered.

“Please stop nagging,” Tonks could hear the whine in her voice and hated herself for it. “Just let me eat in peace. Please.”

“Dora - ”

“What now, Mum?” At this rate I’m never going to finish my dinner.

“There is something we need to talk about.”

Oh bugger. “What?”

“Why are you owling with my sister?”

By Merlin’s saggy left - “Er, what now?” she asked hastily through a mouth full of peas.
“Why are you owling Narcissa Malfoy?”

_How in the name of Merlin did she find out about that?_ Tonks swallowed. “I was curious.”

“What do you mean, curious?”

Tonks shrugged uncomfortably. “You never talked about her, and whenever I asked questions, you’d ignore them. Bellatrix...I can understand not talking about her, but Narcissa? Sure, she’s married to Lucius Malfoy, but she was never a Death Eater or anything. I’ve got no cousins on Dad’s side of the family, but Narcissa and Lucius have a kid. I was curious, y’know. What it would have been like, growing up surrounded by family other than the two of you.”

Something in Andromeda’s face changed. “Our family is perfectly fine the way it is,” she said, voice cold. “You have no idea what it was like, growing up in that hellhole. You never met my mother. Narcissa and Bellatrix - they embraced every single twisted thing Mother told them. I - I pretended to go along with it. You have no idea - no idea - ” Andromeda paused, clearly trying to compose herself. “You had no business to go owling my sister.”

Tonks stifled the urge to shout. The double standards were ridiculously unfair! “I do, actually. I -”

“Stop lying, Dora. I know this wasn’t just ‘curiosity.’ What’s going on with the Malfoys?”

“I - it’s for work.”

Andromeda quirked an eyebrow. “For work.” Her voice was flat. Unbelieving.

“Yes.”

“How so?”

“Need to know.”

“Dora -”

“It’s Tonks, Mum. Not Dora,” Tonks gritted out. “And I can’t tell you because it’s strictly confidential.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that pile of thestral shit?”


“Now young lady -” Ted began.

“Don’t ‘young lady’ me! I’m training to become an Auror, remember? Remember how I explained to you twenty seven different times that half of my work is confidential? Which means I cannot and will not tell you about it?” Tonks was fuming. “You can’t expect it to be the way it was when I was in Hogwarts. I’m not a stupid little kid anymore. I have a job now. I have my own flat. I have my own life outside of these four walls. I have responsibilities because I’m a bloody grownup!”

“Dora -”

Tonks abruptly pushed her plate away. “I’m leaving. I don’t want this anymore.”

“Sweetheart, you can’t possibly -”

Tonks turned on the spot and apparated away with a sharp crack, re-appearing in a park about half a
kilometer from her flat. Sniffling slightly, she swiped a hand across her eyes. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* How had her mum figured out about the letters? How could she have been so careless as to leave evidence behind?

*Constant Vigilance!* Moody’s voice echoed in her mind.

Tonks shook her head. *So much for that.* She climbed the stairs of her flat, unlocked the door, and wandered over to the cold box. *Yes, tonight is the perfect night to drown my sorrows in yesterday’s Chinese takeaway.*

---

**M -**

*Right there, under his nose? Did you not listen to a thing I told you? Are you feeling right in the head?*

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**S.**

---

**S -**

*I understand your concerns. Trust that I have the situation under control.*

---

**M.**

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Severus viciously crumpled the letter and sent it into the fire. *Mad. He has to be completely and utterly stark raving mad.* The girl was right under Albus’ nose! He could easily -

Severus clamped down his Occlumency shields and took a deep breath. *Control yourself. Look at the situation rationally. Realistically, there’s nothing Albus can do. The details of the case are closed, and he spends most of his holiday sequestered in his office.*

GlaRing at the fire, Severus stood and stretched before heading down to his potions laboratory. While it wasn’t nearly as nice as the one he had at Hogwarts, the Spinner’s End lab was completely functional and would suit his purpose well enough.

A murmured word got him through the wards, and minutes later he was busy dicing valerian sprigs. Severus placed the sprigs in a stasis-charmed jar and labeled it with the date. There was a ding from the other side of the lab - *and that would be the latest batch of Forgetfulness Potion.* Severus strode over the cauldrons, grabbing his colorscope as he went. The potion made using the fresh valerian sprigs was the appropriate shade of deep orange, whereas the ones made with valerian sprigs from
stasis jars were more pale in color. *Interesting. The stasis charm isn’t an end all be all for freshness.*

Severus summoned parchment, a quill, and ink, and started calculating. *The fresh valerian sprigs result in the most potent potion, then there’s a sharp decline once the sprigs have been in stasis for over six months. Interesting. Now, if I assign values to the point, then take the inverse and plot it…*

Severus drummed his fingers idly. *I’m definitely onto something here.*

Dumbledore fiasco forgotten, Severus immersed himself in his research. It was always a good day when he proved the dunderhead editors of Potions Monthly wrong.

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*Dear Nymphadora,*

*We will do everything in our power to aid you in your endeavor. On an unrelated note, if you ever wish to have a spot of tea, there is a nice new tea shop in Diagon Alley. As pleasant as our correspondence is, I would love to meet you in person.*

*We wish you the best of luck.*

*Yours,*

*Narcissa*

---

Hermione woke up in a cold sweat. The nightmare was fading, leaving her with nothing but a jumble of images, a feeling of fear, and the sense of a hand clenched around her wrist. Shivering slightly, Hermione reached for her wand.

*“Tempus.”* The numbers flashed 3:30 am. *Bugger.*

Hermione slid her wand back onto the bureau and squashed her pillow into a better shape. Lying down, Hermione closed her eyes, only to see the jumble of images again.

*Breathe.*

Hermione shook her head to clear it. *Everything will be fine.* She rolled over in another fruitless attempt to fall asleep.

The fear was still there.

*Going for a walk might help.* Hermione sat up, pulled on her robe and searched around the room for her slippers. She tiptoed down the stairs into the common room, then out the door. With any luck there wouldn’t be any professors patrolling.

Hermione wandered aimlessly through the corridors as the cold night air slowly dissipated the remaining vestiges of her nightmare. Feeling better, Hermione turned to head back to the dungeons when she spotted an open classroom door. *Huh. That’s odd.* Perhaps against her better instincts,
Hermione snuck inside. The room clearly hadn’t been used for a while. The desks and chairs were covered in sheets, and there was a large mirror dominating the back end of the room.

Hermione did a double take. What is a giant free-standing mirror doing in an unused classroom? Walking closer, Hermione could make out an inscription etched into the gilded frame.

“Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi,” Hermione sounded out quietly. “What in the name of Merlin does that mean?” She shuffled closer to the mirror. Perhaps there were more clues - oh.

Hermione whirled around. “Professor Snape? Are you there?” There was nobody. Hermione bit her lip and gazed back into the mirror. Mirror-Hermione was dressed in a dark green set of flowing witches’ robes. She was smiling - and so was Mirror-Professor Snape. He was wearing his usual teaching robes, but the expression on his face - it was one Hermione had never seen him wear before. He looked happy.

Mirror-Hermione smiled and waved, twirling happily. Mirror-Professor Snape looked pleased and ruffled Mirror-Hermione’s hair before pulling her into a hug. She - I - look happy.

Hermione sank to the floor, watching the scene in the mirror with the laughing girl and the smiling man. They look like they belonged.

It could have been minutes, or perhaps it was hours, when a cold breeze swept the room, jerking Hermione back to the present. She shivered, and pulled her gaze away from the mirror. Pulling her robe closer to herself, Hermione walked out of the classroom and back to the Slytherin dorms.

Albus Dumbledore sat down heavily. He had never thought - no, he had never dreamed this would happen. The girl had looked so tired. So gaunt. And then the mirror...Albus shook his head, trying to clear the image of the girl’s elated face from his mind. The shock. Then the hope.

It was disturbing, to say the least. How could a student, a first year student, have experienced enough strife to make the Mirror Erised such a beacon of hope?

Could he have been wrong? The thought was troublesome, and Albus pushed it away.

But then why, said a nasty little voice in his mind, did she think Professor Snape was there? Wouldn’t she only say that if she saw him in the mirror?

And you know he said she had a less than ideal home situation, the nasty voice continued. What if it was worse than you thought? What if you, the mighty Albus Dumbledore, made a mistake? What if she is so starved for attention that she looks up to Severus - Severus, of all people! - for attention?

Stranger things have happened, Albus reasoned.

And stranger things have come back to haunt you, the nasty voice argued. And more mundane things as well.

I regret - Albus began.

Don’t make the girl another one of your regrets. Remember Ariana.

Albus froze. I -

Remember.
The girl isn’t Ariana! She’s -

You don’t need that weight on your conscience. Could you live with that?

Albus swallowed. I -

Think on it.

Albus stood and exited the classroom, ignoring the small girl who waved at him from the mirror.
Hermione nervously straightened her robes. The rich green flowy garment had been an early Christmas gift from Draco’s mum. Hermione wasn’t sure why Mrs. Malfoy had given her such a nice present, but she wasn’t about to protest. She twirled, watching the floaty fabric lift, then land back down by her calves where it stopped just short of her patent leather boots. Hermione grabbed her Hogwarts winter cloak from its hook and pulled it over her shoulders. It went well enough with the robes, and, anyways, it was the only cloak she had. Taking one last glance in the mirror, Hermione turned and head down to the common room.

“Good afternoon, Professor Snape.”

“Good afternoon to you as well, Miss Granger. Are you ready to depart?”

Hermione looked at her boots. Truth be told, she was very nervous. “I suppose so. How are we getting to the Ministry?”

“Apparition.”

Hermione shuddered. Apparition was not high on her list of favorite things to do. Wincing only slightly, Hermione followed Professor Snape out of the Slytherin common room, through the dungeons, and out onto the grounds past the Apparition boundary.

Professor Snape extended his forearm to her. “Grasp onto my forearm tightly, Miss Granger.”

Hermione did, and they turned on the spot, vanishing with a slight pop to reappear in the corner of a small tea shop.

“Apparition point,” Professor Snape explained when Hermione looked at him in confusion. “Follow me.”

They exited the tea shop onto a dingy street with shabby office buildings and overflowing dumpsters.

“Stay close,” Professor Snape warned. “As you may have deduced, this is not the nicest part of London.”

They walked briskly down the street before stopping in front of an old red telephone box, which was missing several panels and stood before a wall covered in graffiti.

“I present to you,” Professor Snape said drily, “the Visitor's Entrance to the Ministry of Magic.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Really?”

“Unfortunately.”

Hermione stepped inside the telephone box, followed by Professor Snape. He picked up the receiver. “Now, Miss Granger,” he said in a lecturing tone, “what I am going to do next, and you should make note of in case you need to do this in the future, is dial into the Ministry. The code is six...two...four...four...two.” The dial whirled back into place.
“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” said a cool female voice. Hermione jumped. The voice didn’t come out of the receiver, but sounded like there was an invisible woman right next to them. “Please state your name and purpose.”

“Professor Severus Snape, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, here to escort Hermione Granger to a hearing.”

“Thank you,” said the voice. “Visitors, please take the badge from the slot and attach it to the front of your robes.”

There was a rattle, then a clunk as two square silver badges slid into the coin return bin. Hermione picked them up. Hers said *Hermione Granger, Hearing* while Professor Snape’s read *Severus Snape, Hogwarts Professor*. She wordlessly passed the professor his badge.

“Visitors, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium.”

The floor of the telephone box shuddered, and for a moment, Hermione wondered if the whole thing was about to collapse. Then, it slowly began to sink into the ground, almost like an elevator. Hermione watched nervously as the pavement disappeared and darkness enclosed over their heads. Panic rose in her throat. She did not like dark, enclosed spaces. Really didn’t like them.

Finally, at long last, light filtered in from the bottom of the box. Hermione released a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. Light flooded the box, and Hermione blinked rapidly.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,” said the voice.

The door of the telephone box opened, and Hermione’s jaw dropped.

“Come along now, Miss Granger. Kindly do not gawk.”

Hermione followed Professor Snape out of the box, still staring at Ministry Atrium. It was elaborately decorated, and was an excellent distraction from her anxious thoughts.

The floors and the walls were made from a dark wood, and the ceiling was peacock-blue with gleaming gold symbols. Hermione made a mental note to ask Professor Snape about the symbols later. Fire places were sunk into the walls, with wizards exiting the ones on the left and waiting to enter the ones on the right. In the center of the hall stood a massive gold statue of a wizard, a witch, a centaur, a goblin, and another small creature Hermione didn’t know. She made a mental note to ask Professor Snape about that as well. Water flew up from the statues, landing in the pool below which was full of shining coins.

“This way, Miss Granger. Do not dawdle.”

They headed to a desk marked *Security*. “Step over here,” said the grumpy security wizard in a bored voice.

Hermione walked over, and the wizard passed a long golden rod over her front and back.

“Wand,” the wizard grunted.

Hermione looked nervously at Professor Snape, who nodded, then handed her wand to the wizard. He tipped it onto a strange brass instrument, which whirred for a moment before producing a thin strip of parchment.
“Ten and three-quarters inches, dragon heartstring core, in use for one year. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“I keep this,” the wizard said, putting the parchment on a small spike. “You get this back.” He handed Hermione her wand.

“Thanks.”

The wizard completed the same procedure for Professor Snape. It turned out his wand had a dragon heartstring core too.

Hermione and Professor Snape joined the stream of Ministry witches and wizards -- Hermione stifled the rising feeling of claustrophobia -- and soon found themselves in a small hall with about two dozen lifts. Professor Snape steered Hermione onto one.

“Level seven,” said the cool female voice from the telephone box, “Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office.”

One wizard stumbled out of the lift, and the doors closed again. Somewhere around level four -- Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures -- one of the wizards in the lift tried to strike up a conversation with Professor Snape. The professor shot the unfortunate wizard a glare, and he quickly gulped and shut up. A small smile crept onto Hermione’s face. It was always great to see Professor Snape in action.

“Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services.”

“This is our destination,” Professor Snape said quietly to Hermione. “Excuse us,” he muttered as heelbowed people aside to get out of the lift.

They walked through a corridor with sunlit windows.

“Professor Snape?”

“Yes?”

“Aren’t we underground?” Hermione asked, looking at the windows.

Professor Snape’s lips quirked upwards. “The windows are enchanted.”

“How?”

“I believe a combination of advanced Charms and Transfiguration would do the job, as well as Arithmancy to get all the elements to align.”

“What’s Arithmancy?”

“A branch of magic that involves a heavy use of mathematics.”

“Did you study Arithmancy?”

“Yes. I use it frequently when developing original potions. This way, Miss Granger,” he said, directing her towards the Wizengamot Administration Office. Inside was a room with a secretary’s desk, and several dark wood chairs that seemed out of place with the plush violet carpet.
“Severus Snape, here with Hermione Granger,” Professor Snape told the secretary. “We have a 10:30 appointment with Madam Bones.”

The secretary peered owlishly over the rims of her glasses, then ran a finger down an inky ledger. “Wait here,” she said, gesturing vaguely to the chairs. “I will let Madam Bones know you arrived.”

They sat in the chairs to wait, Hermione fidgeting nervously.

“Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m...I’m not nervous,” Hermione protested.

“You are. You’re fidgeting.”

The secretary was back. “They are ready for you in meeting room seven. It’s the last one on the right.”

Professor Snape stood and walked towards the hallway. Hermione followed him with a degree of trepidation. The nervous ball sitting in her chest tightened with each step. She couldn’t do this. Couldn’t.

They were at the door.

Hermione swallowed hard.

She couldn’t do this.

Couldn’t.

“Come along, Miss Granger.”

Hermione stepped through the door and was greeted by the sight of five people seated around a table.

“Please, both of you take a seat,” said a witch with a square jaw and iron grey hair. She flicked her wand at the door, closing it. “I believe everyone is present. My name is Amelia Bones, and I am Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department. I will be overseeing this hearing. With me today are Alastor Moody and Nymphadora Tonks of the Auror Department, Matilda Marchbanks of Wizarding Children’s Services, and Chloe Runcorn of the Welfare Department. We are joined by Professor Severus Snape, the Head of House of the child in question, along with the child herself, Hermione Granger.

“We have already reviewed Pensieve memories from Aurors Moody and Tonks, and from Miss Granger. Ms. Marchbanks and Ms. Runcorn have several questions to ask Miss Granger before we adjourn to make a final decision.”

The two women began asking questions. They started off mundane, and Hermione answered them easily. After rattling off basic information about herself and her family, they began asking the hard questions. The ones Hermione didn’t want to answer. The ones she had never answered.

“Do you feel safe at home?” Ms. Marchbanks asked.

Hermione looked around nervously. It was one thing to admit these things to herself or answer them in private, but with all the other people around...“Do I have to answer?”

“Yes, Miss Granger, you do. We wish to ameliorate the situation, and we cannot do so if you do not
“answer our questions.”

“No,” Hermione answered, voice small.

“No?” Ms. Marchbanks asked in confusion. “You will not answer the question?”

Hermione stared at her boots. “No, I don’t feel safe at home.”

The words hung in the air.

Ms. Marchbanks made a note on her clipboard. “In your Pensieve testimony, there was an incident when you were locked in your house’s water closet. How typical is that?”

“Whenever I misbehave.”

Ms. Marchbanks continued asking questions about Hermione’s Pensieve testimony. Hermione slowly answered each question, not wanting to divulge details, but at the same time, there wasn’t much they didn’t already know.

After what felt like hundreds of questions, Ms. Runcorn took over.

“Should relocation be necessary,” Ms. Runcorn began, “we would prefer to relocate you to a wizarding family to avoid compromising the Statute of Secrecy. That being said, if you have any muggle relatives who are close to your family, that would also be acceptable. Do you have any close relatives.”

Hermione shook her head.

“A verbal answer, please.”

“No. Both my parents were only children. My mother’s parents passed away two years ago, and my father’s parents live in an assisted living facility.”

“Assisted living facility?”

“It’s a place where old muggles go to live. It lets them stay somewhat independent but they have help really close by if they needed it.”

“And you have no wizarding relatives?”

“No.”

“That will be all, Miss Granger.”

“Does anyone else need to clarify information with Miss Granger?” Madam Bones asked. “Seeing everyone appears to be set, I am going to ask Professor Snape and Miss Granger to leave the room while we discuss. I will send someone to locate you when we are finished.”

Amelia watched Hermione and Severus exit the room. The door closed behind them, and Amelia cast a quick *Colloportus* on the door.

“Are we in agreement that Miss Granger should be relocated?” Amelia asked.
There was a chorus of yeses.

“Excellent. Now, we have three homes that volunteered to take in Miss Granger. If we determine none of them are suitable, she’ll end up going into the system, which I would like to avoid.”

“Who’s the candidates?” Moody rasped.

“The Dagworth-Grangers, the Malfoys, and Professor Snape.”

“I thought she had no wizarding relatives?” Tonks asked, looking confused.

“The Dagworth-Grangers are her fourth cousins. They’ve got a daughter two years older than her and one two years younger.”

“It would be nice for her to be around other girls,” Matilda cut in. “Especially since she would be right in between the two of them age-wise.”

“They’re complete strangers,” Chloe argued. “She might not feel comfortable moving in with them.”

“The Malfoys also have a kid in her year,” Matilda said. “They’re definitely wealthy enough to give her a comfortable lifestyle.”

“No Malfoys,” Moody said. “Don’t like them. Old Lucius was in league with the Dark Lord. I don’t trust that bugger.”

“Mr. Malfoy was under the Imperius curse…”

“Bullshit.”

“Alastor! Language! And what about Snape? Do you not trust him either?”

Surprisingly, Moody shook his head. “Don’t trust Snape. He’s a slippery bugger. I do trust him to do right by the girl, though.”

“But he’s a bachelor!” Matilda exclaimed. “He’s not married, doesn’t have children. He’s not particularly wealthy either. How could he provide for her?”

The debate continued. Moody was set against the Malfoys, while Matilda and Chloe were against Snape. Matilda thought the Dagworth-Grangers were the best option, but Chloe and Tonks disagreed. Over an hour later, they finally reached a decision.

“So we’ve decided?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Bring them back in.”

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter left! I’ve already decided where I want Hermione to go, but I’m interested to see what your predictions are! Thanks as usual to my betas and to those
who leave comments and kudos (hint hint)!
“They’re ready for you.”

Hermione’s heart dropped.

This was it.

The moment.

She --

“Miss Granger.”

Hermione started slightly. “I -- ”

“As I told you earlier, Miss Granger, don’t be nervous.”

Hermione nodded hesitantly, then stood. “That’s easier said than done, sir.”

Professor Snape inclined his head. “Indeed.”

Hermione took a deep breath. “I suppose I’m ready, then.”

The secretary escorted them back to the meeting room. With each step she took, the tiny ball of worry sitting in Hermione’s stomach grew. *What if I’m placed with someone I don’t know? Or someone completely horrible? What if they’re worse than...* 

A hand dropped lightly onto her shoulder. “Cease your worrying, Miss Granger.”

“I -- I’m trying.”

“Do, Miss Granger. There is no try.”


The door swung open, and the knot in her stomach tightened. There were too many possibilities, too many permutations. *Murphy’s Law*, she thought desperately, trying to hold onto something. *Whatever can go wrong will go wrong. Oh, Merlin. . .*

“Professor Snape,” Madam Bones was saying. “Miss Granger. Please take a seat.”

Hermione sat down shakily. This was it. The moment. The split second in time where her world could crumble at her feet.

“After a long discussion, we have finally reached a decision,” Madam Bones said, steepling her fingers.

Hermione scanned the table. Auror Moody was impossible to read while Ms. Marchbanks and Ms. Runcorn were subtly glaring at each other. Auror Tonks’ brow was slightly furrowed, but Hermione
couldn’t tell if she was annoyed at the other women or upset with what was said.

“We went through many deliberations, including familial history, personal interactions, and guardianship ability. We carefully considered each factor and are confident we made the best possible decision,” Madam Bones continued, “If you would, Miss Granger.” She pushed a thick parchment envelope across the table.

“Do I just -- ” Hermione asked, gesturing uselessly at the envelope.

“Go ahead, open it.”

Hermione slid trembling fingers through the thick parchment, carefully prying the envelope open. There was a single sheet inside, and Hermione took it out, heart beating sharply inside her chest.

Hermione read the short paragraph, eyes growing wide. She re-read it, making sure she hadn’t made a mistake, hadn’t read something incorrectly. It was too perfect. There was no way --

**Effective 20 December, 1991.**

*From this date forward, Hermione Jean Granger will be the ward of Severus Tobias Snape. Master Snape will be the guardian of Miss Granger for affairs both legal and mundane, and be responsible for her welfare until she reaches seventeen (17) years of age.*

More paragraphs detailed Professor Snape’s exact duties, but Hermione didn’t bother reading those. Her heart beat wildly in her chest, but this time it was a happy tap dance against her ribs. She was going to have a *home*, and it was going to be absolutely *wonderful*.

“Miss Granger,” Professor Snape remarked. “You appear shocked. Please, enlighten us.”

Hermione raised her eyes to meet his, and opened her mouth to respond, but she couldn’t quite get her feelings into words. She pushed the parchment towards him.

Severus’ stomach dropped to the floor. He couldn’t possibly have read correctly. There was no way they had chosen him, a former Death Eater with no true prospects. By Merlin, he wanted to raise Hermione, to give her the supportive childhood he’d never had. He’d never thought it was possible.

“Me?” he asked wonderingly.

Hermione turned the parchment back around. “Yes, it says it right here -- *From this date forward, Hermione Jean Granger will be the ward of Severus Tobias Snape.*”

For the first time in recent memory, Severus’ jaw dropped. He shot a look of askance at Moody. What had he, Severus, done to get this chance?

Moody offered him nothing by way of explanation, only giving him a slight nod.

“You do want me, right?” Hermione was asking, looking nervous.
Severus wanted to smack himself for his own stupidity. Of course the girl would assume the worst!

“Of course I do, Hermione!”

There was a flurry of movement, and Severus suddenly had a face full of bushy hair and an arm full of girl. Tentatively, he put his arms around her and hugged her close. “I’m glad too,” he murmured.

Some minutes later, Hermione decided she’d hugged him enough for the moment and sat back in her own chair.

Marchbanks brandished a sheaf of parchment. “These are your official duties, Mr. Snape. Everything is spelled out very clearly. If you have any questions, send an owl immediately to Wizarding Children’s Services.”

“There will be monthly inspections, during the summer months,” Runcorn added, “To ensure the home is suitable for a child to live and that the placement is a good fit. For the remainder of the scholastic year, we will send owls to both you and to Miss Granger. Direct any questions to the Welfare Department.”

“Do you have any questions now?” Marchbanks asked.

“No, I do not,” Severus said. “Hermione?”

The girl shook her head. “I’m all set.”

“If everyone is clear on everything, we can adjourn this meeting,” said Bones. “Anyone? No? Very well. Meeting adjourned.”

Chairs scraped against the floor.

Severus stood up. “Are you ready to back to Hogwarts, Hermione?”

The girl grinned at his use of her first name. “Yes! Do we have to Apparate?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Hermione frowned. “Darn.” There was a pause. “Does it get better when you Apparate yourself?”

Severus shrugged. “Not really.”

“When will I learn to Apparate?”

“When you turn seventeen.”

“Snape,” Moody growled as they headed out of the room.

Severus turned around. “What do you want?” he asked cagily. He was on infinitely better terms with the grizzled auror, but they weren’t friends by even the most ludicrous stretch of imagination.

“I need to talk to you about something. Send the girl ahead with Tonks.”

Hermione sent him a questioning look, but followed the pink haired woman without a word.

“The Dumbledore situation,” Moody began once Hermione was out of earshot.

Severus tensed imperceptibly.
“It’s not going to fly.”

“What!?”

“There’s not enough proof. You can’t prove anything against him.”

Severus’ mind spluttered. *What? How?* “How can you possibly say that? He acted negligently, and - -”

“There’s no hard evidence. Any case that goes against him will be shot down immediately.”

“But --”

“Sorry, Snape. It’s just not going to cut it this time.”

Severus took a deep breath in a vain effort to calm himself. “It’s bloody fucking awful. He just keeps getting away with --”

“Calm down, Snape. It is kind of a shite situation, but there’s nothing you can do about it. Go live your life. Raise the kid.”

Severus sighed, anger simmering just below the surface. He would hold his tongue now, but by Merlin, he was going to do it. He would collect evidence, take notes, and eventually, some day, delicious cold revenge would be served.

Moody sighed, looking Severus directly in the eye. “Look, Snape. . . damn, I’ve never been any good at this…That girl thinks the world of you. This is the one chance I’m giving you. Show you’re a decent enough bloke. Don’t toss it for somethin’ petty. I think…. I think she would have approved.” Moody grimaced -- perhaps he was smiling -- clapped Severus roughly on the shoulder, and clunked away.

Severus swallowed hard, and watched as Hermione explained something to Tonks. The auror nodded patiently at her enthusiastic gestures. Severus hadn’t seen Hermione that happy since. . . well, since he’d known her. It seemed there was already a huge weight off her shoulders.

It might not be perfect, Severus realized. It might not even be really good, but whatever he did would certainly be better.

*Finite Incantatem.*

---

Chapter End Notes

A/N: With that, my first fanfiction is complete! A special thanks goes out to both of my betas, Scintilla of Myself and Delos-Solon. They’ve helped make this story better!

Another huge thanks goes out to all of you readers. Your reviews and your
follow/favorite alerts make me smile. For those of you who have been here since day one, thanks so much for your continued support :)

A couple of people have asked me questions, and I’m answering them here:

Q: Is there going to be more chapters?
A: No, this is the last chapter of Mudsnake. This was a really fun project, but I have other stories I want to work on.

Q: Are you going to write a sequel?
A: As of now, I am not planning on a sequel. I might post an epilogue later. If there are any future installments, I will update this fic with a temporary author’s note as a chapter.

If you liked this fic, please leave me a review! Also, if you like Slytherin!Hermione, check out my latest fic, Chessmaster: Black Pawn.

Chessmaster Volume I. Harry Potter discovered that the local public library, not the local play park, was the perfect place to hide from Dudley. Clever and resourceful, Harry unwittingly breaks a centuries long trend, causing plans to whirl into motion. Rumors of a stone, a mirror, and a mysterious door float through the halls of Hogwarts. Meanwhile, two men fight a shadow war in a vain effort to control the Wizengamot...

Thanks again and happy reading!

-Flye

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!